Understanding Sexual Violence Against Children as a Rights Violation:

engaging with the challenges

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children
unite

dignity | rights | influence

Contents

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a period of reflection for many of us connected to, or working in, the child protection sector which enabled the creation of this paper. However, both the pandemic and the subsequent economic turmoil paint a bleak picture for children. They have exacerbated existing inequalities and highlighted the likelihood of increasing rights violations against children.

At the community level it is clear that young people are impatient for change – the Black Lives Matter movement, the climate crisis movement, pro-democracy and #MeToo movements are all examples of young people taking a central role in challenging structural inequalities and fighting for democracy and sustainability.

But this momentum, energy, self-organising and innovation is less visible within the child protection sector which, particularly at the international level, still appears to be top-down rather than grounded in the realities children face every day. The field of sexual violence against children (SVAC) is similarly 'stuck' in a position where there is a disconnect between policy development and practice reality as well as significant competition for dwindling resources. Stigma dominates the SVAC sector and is not only a challenge for those of us personally affected by sexual violence, it stimies discussion and debate by those of us who are practitioners, policy makers and donors through the taboos it encompasses. We find it difficult enough to talk about 'sex', let alone 'children and sex'.

As a response to this backdrop the international community is taking stock and a number of initiatives have been developed that are re-imagining or re-constructing the child protection sector, promoting dialogue and reflection and addressing some of the challenges. This paper has been written in the same vein – targeting donors in particular - to prompt discussion, to identify and engage with the challenges and, we hope, to agree ways forward that will transform the sector working on SVAC.

Developing the paper

This paper aims to explore how a number of gaps and challenges in current SVAC programming might be addressed through learning from other fields and perspectives[1]. The purpose therefore was not to provide a comprehensive overview of the current field of SVAC - or the theories, debates and issues we identify in the paper - but to highlight some key issues and potential ways forward to address existing challenges.

The development of the paper was informed by the authors' experiences of working within, and alongside the international child protection sector and SVAC field, in activism, academia and practice over a combined 40+ years. This includes working directly with young people affected by sexual violence in a variety of countries and contexts. As authors, our perspectives have also been shaped through training in higher education in the disciplines of psychology, social anthropology and sociology of childhood. As white, middle class, women educated and living in the United Kingdom, in writing this paper we recognise how our positioning informs the paper and how this same positioning creates 'distance' from some of the important issues outlined in this paper. We therefore see this paper as a starting

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[1] This paper was commissioned by Ignite Philanthropy in 2021.

point for further discussion among others working within the SVAC sector to see if these same issues and reflections resonate and how different experiences, insights and positioning uncover other equally important challenges to confront and address.

In approaching this discussion paper, drawing on our knowledge of some of the practical challenges and 'blocks' we have witnessed in working in the field of SVAC - and being aware of some of the current debates within academia – we initially identified five key areas to explore in more depth. These included, 1) structural challenges and power inequalities faced by children who experience sexual violence; 2)children's agency, participation, and empowerment in contexts of sexual violence; 3)de-colonising SVAC; 4)adolescence and sexual violence, and 5)feminist approaches to SVAC. We undertook a limited initial review of the literature to identify key papers related to these areas complimented by earlier reviews of the literature that the authors had undertaken in previous projects. This was not a systematic review, the aim being to highlight key papers, debates and challenges across these different fields and topics that were deemed by the authors as significant and helpful in moving our thinking forward.

Following the initial reading, discussion and drafting of the paper, we approached four 'critical friends' with considerable international expertise across a number of the areas we were exploring who were able to direct us to other relevant papers and provide rich and insightful feedback as well as examples from their own experiences of working within the field. Our thanks go to Dr. Afua Twum Danso Imoh, Dr. Mike Wessells, Gerison Lansdown and Dr. Sarah Thomas de Benitez. However, we would like to stress that their involvement does not indicate an endorsement of our views.

Overview of the paper

In section one of this paper, we start by highlighting the four broad frameworks that we believe are continuing to influence SVAC from different perspectives – developmental psychology, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, sociology of childhood and feminism - and how the socio-ecological framework, as a practice model, fits into this broader picture. We do this to 'set the scene' and start to identify the 'theoretical gaps' in current practice.

In section two, through the review and analysis of literature, we identify three key debates that we feel have significantly influenced work to address SVAC: colonial constructions of childhood; the relationship between children and power; and the debate on protection versus participation rights.

Drilling down into these debates and drawing on experiences from the field, we identify potential ways to move forward and address the challenges facing the SVAC sector. These include increasing children's social power, recognising children's sexualities, acknowledging children's agency, decolonising approaches to SVAC, and valuing different forms of evidence.

In the final section, we outline questions for reflection and discussion that we believe are the first step in addressing the challenges.

Helen Veitch and Claire Cody

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Glossary

- **Sexual violence against children** (SVAC): refers to all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation against children.

- **Sexual violence against children sector** (SVAC sector): includes work under the disciplines of child protection and violence against children, gender-based violence and violence against women and girls.

- **Child protection sector:** this refers to the international children's rights sector, incorporating inter-governmental organisations such as UNICEF, International Labor Organization and World Health Organisation (WHO) as well as international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) working to address sexual violence against children in development and humanitarian settings.

- **Minority World**: is used to describe countries that have similar socio-economic and political characteristics, and which tend to determine the agenda of the child protection sector, roughly aligning with colonisation. The term 'Minority World' is preferred over 'global north' or 'developed countries' to highlight the domination of a small group of states over a larger group. Countries and regions in the Minority World include Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

- **Majority World:** describes countries that have previously been called developing countries or the 'third world' and frequently have a history of colonialism (by countries in the Minority World). Majority World is a term that actively counters the negative and marginalising connotations of previous descriptions and describes the fact that the majority of the world's population lives in these parts of the world[2].

- **Children**: refers to people aged up to 18 years old.

- **Young people**: refers to people aged up to 25 years old.

- **Lived experience**: refers to people who have experienced an issue (in this paper we are mainly referring to people who have lived experience of sexual violence - this is an alternative term to 'survivors').

- **Children and young people impacted or affected by sexual violence**: describes children and young people who have directly experienced a form of sexual violence. The terms 'impacted' or 'affected by' recognise that while every individual's experiences of sexual violence will be different, sexual violence is likely to impact children and young people's overall health and wellbeing.

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[2] Majority World and Minority World are terms coined and introduced by Shahidul Alam, a Bangladeshi photojournalist, teacher and activist.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The discussion paper is written by Helen Veitch and Claire Cody and was commissioned by Ignite Philanthropy to inform a re-framing exercise and explore, in more detail, the complexity behind violence against children and, more specifically, sexual violence against children (SVAC). Helen and Claire recognise that as white, middle class, women educated and living in the United Kingdom, our positioning informs the paper and creates 'distance' from some of the important issues outlined. We therefore see this paper as a starting point for further discussion among others working within the SVAC sector to see if these same issues and reflections resonate and how different experiences, insights and positioning uncover other equally important challenges to confront and address.

How sexual violence against children is currently framed

Although a number of theories and framings have informed and influenced SVAC, it is predominantly framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and interpreted as a 'child protection' issue rather than a 'child rights' issue. Interventions on SVAC are dominated by the socio-ecological practice model, consequently, policy and practice on SVAC does not appear to be adequately informed by a strong theoretical basis. This gap is most obvious when compared to the way that feminist theory informs work on sexual violence against women. Sociology of childhood, the most relevant theory for the 'children's rights' sector appears frustratingly absent from policy discussions on SVAC. Important and relevant issues to the SVAC sector, such as adultism, children's activism or children's sexuality, are therefore rarely explored outside academia. As a result, interventions on SVAC feel out of touch with both the progressions in theory that have taken place over the past twenty years and the current reality of children's lives.

There are three key debates:

1. A colonial, Euro-centric construction of childhood: Development psychology, the UN Convention and sociology of childhood have all been critiqued as having Eurocentric constructions of childhood and embedded colonial legacies. There is consequently a call for decolonisation of the child protection sector where interventions working with children in the Minority and Majority World contexts have been unduly influenced by colonialism, empire, race and white supremacy.

2. A lack of analysis of children and power: the issue of sexual violence was first raised by feminists who identified patriarchy as at the core. In comparison, the child protection sector does not analyse children and power. The breaking away of child sexual abuse from feminism resulted in essentially non-feminist analyses of child sexual abuse.

3. Protection versus participation: although support for children's rights to participation has led to an acceptance that children have agency, the notion of 'agency' for those who are experiencing sexual violence has not been fully interrogated or understood

contextually. Therefore, there is a need for a deeper analysis of the concept of 'agency' to understand the 'dynamic, situated, and contextual' nature of agency in childhood[3].

These issues can be tackled by exploring how those within feminist research and practice, and those aligned to the field of sociology of childhood, have dealt with and responded to similar challenges relating to knowledge and power such as:

> • Acknowledging power differentials between actors at every level in efforts to address SVAC.

> • Recognising structural issues and how historical, cultural, economic and socio-political factors impact on the design and implementation of activities addressing SVAC.

> • Valuing and acting on local, 'lived' and contextual knowledge as a first step in designing research, programmes and advocacy efforts.

> • Engaging young people in all aspects of the fight against sexual violence as a violation of their rights – as activists and researchers, as well as designers and implementers of services for their peers.

Five ways forward are identified:

1.   Recognising and increasing children's social power: Apply learning from feminist scholars and activists who have addressed the issue of power to the children's rights sector by using theory from the sociology of childhood paradigm to explore the power and political issues constraining practice. This will help ensure broader structural issues on SVAC are addressed.

2.   Recognising children's sexualities: The lack of political will to address the sexuality of young people is increasingly acknowledged as having a negative effect on prevention efforts on sexual violence. Local, contextual understandings of children's lived experiences of sexual violence should be incorporated into the development of SVAC policies and interventions. This can be achieved by, for example, creating opportunities to explore sex and sexuality with children and young people that do not focus solely on risk and harmful experiences but also on healthy experiences and sexual agency.

3.   Acknowledging children's agency: There is a need to move beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood and agency, this exploration needs to be applied and contextualised to policy and practice. There are excellent existing examples from within the child protection sector of how children and young people can be more involved in identifying problems and solutions within their own communities when adults (including donors) allow them the space to do so.

4.   Decolonising approaches to SVAC: The 'decolonisation of childhood' involves confronting the power and privileging of Majority World actors in all aspects of work

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[3] Abede, 2019

addressing SVAC (donors, practitioners and academics). This could be achieved by recognising the value and richness of other knowledge systems (indigenous and children's knowledge) that can help the sector understand contexts, realities and influences that impact on addressing and responding to sexual violence.

5.   Recognising the value of different forms of evidence: Hierarchies of evidence that view qualitative data from children and young people as the least valid, and knowledge from large-scale quantitative studies as the most valid, should be challenged. Work should integrate intersectional and participatory research methods. This would help to ensure that particular issues, or communities of children that have traditionally been left out of the debate on sexual violence, are recognised and responded to. This could also enable children and young people with lived experience to be meaningfully and safely engaged in the research processes.

How sexual violence against children is currently framed

The sexual abuse of children and young people first came into mainstream public consciousness in the 1980s. At that time, developmental psychology was the leading paradigm for understanding children and childhood. In the 1980s and '90s research and theory building attempted to understand how different developmental changes increased victimisation and how different development processes affected children's responses to sexual abuse[4]. In 1989, the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN Convention) provided a legal framework to address child rights violations, including the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. The convention recognised children as rights-holders and acknowledged their rights to be free from victimisation as well as having rights to justice, care and support in the event of experiencing abuse or exploitation. It provided a platform for global advocacy and action on all issues related to 'child protection', including SVAC.

While the convention supported the development of a burgeoning child protection sector, programmes lacked a strong theoretical framework. However, at around the same time, the sociology of childhood was gaining credibility as an alternative theoretical approach to child developmental psychology for understanding childhood. Though it has been influential in academia, its core principles are often not applied in practice. Instead, many organisations tackling violence, including SVAC, have adopted the socio-ecological model, first conceptualised in the 1970s.

Currently, the socio-ecological model is the dominant model used by international child protection agencies to address the root causes of sexual violence. Work undertaken as part of gender-based violence initiatives, which has been heavily influenced by feminist theory, has also started to inform programmes tackling SVAC specifically.

Developmental psychology

In developmental psychology, childhood is presented as an evolutionary model where children develop through universal stages into adults. The biological development of children's bodies, such as dependence and immaturity, is connected to the social aspects of childhood. In the 20th century, developmental psychologists studied the mind of the child to improve education and learning for children [5]. Developmental psychologists used childhood to identify solutions to general psychological problems[6] and criminologists studied teenage delinquency framed by a concept of adolescence[7] as a time of turmoil attributed

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[4] Finkelhor, 1995

[5] McLeod, 2017

[6] Jenks, 1996

[7] Social work practice in the 1990s linked delinquency in boys to stubbornness, disorderly conduct and mental slowness, in girls delinquency was linked to their sexuality (see Finn, 2001 cited in Ansell, 2017)

to hormonal changes taking place at puberty [8]. Developmental psychology is highly influenced by psychologist Jean Piaget's work, where childhood is seen as universal and biological, i.e. all children move through the same stages of cognitive development until they reach adulthood.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Since 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has become the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world. It has been described as 'aspirational' and 'ambitious' and places a substantial duty and responsibility on governments to ensure that children are protected from all forms of neglect, violence, abuse and exploitation[9]. It has influenced national and international law, policy, research and practice concerning the rights and welfare of children in a variety of ways.

The convention's introduction was viewed as radical and transformative, providing a *'trigger to a revolutionary step in the recognition of children as "human beings" rather than as "human becomings"'*[10]. It signalled the recognition of an emerging autonomy for children who, are not only afforded protection and provision of services, but also the right to participate and be involved in decision-making in accordance with their evolving capacities[11]. The convention's key principles are non-discrimination (Article 2), children's best interests (Article 3), right to life, survival and development (Article 6) and the right to be heard (Article 12).

SVAC and the UN Convention: The issue of sexual violence is clearly articulated in the convention. Article 34 specifically focuses on children's right to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation. Sexual violence (which we consider a broader term - see glossary) is also referred to in Article 19, outlining children's rights to protection; Article 37 on torture, cruel and degrading treatment and; Article 39, focussing on measures to promote recovery and reintegration of victims of exploitation or abuse.

The convention has succeeded in redefining violence to the extent that, through its implementation, the world has admitted to the existence and scale of violence against children, including sexual violence. Prior to this, SVAC was virtually an invisible issue. It has given legitimacy and energy to child rights advocates and has resulted in huge legal reform globally, notably on sexual violence[12]. However, despite the convention's good intentions and progressive aspirations, critics outline a number of problems associated with its interpretation and implementation. Key among these is how the broad spectrum of children's rights it outlines has, in operational terms, been largely reduced to 'child protection'[13]. Furthermore, the issue of SVAC does not, in practice, exist as a sector. Instead, sexual violence is largely subsumed within the child protection sector.

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[8] Griffin, 2001
[9] Simon et al, 2020; Tobin and Cashmore, 2020
[10] Skelton, 2007:165
[11] Ibid
[12] Ibid
[13] Myers and Bourdillon, 2012 cited in Ansell, 2017

Sociology of childhood

Sociology of childhood emerged as a key theory at around the same time as the UN Convention and has established itself as the theoretical basis for studying childhood. As an emergent paradigm it was initially a reaction to developmental psychology, which it saw as justifying the supremacy of adulthood[14].

The sociology of childhood brings together three strands of existing social science[15] and a body of scholarship that provides a new lens through which to think about children and childhood as a distinctive field of inquiry[16]. Its central tenets are now commonly accepted in academia and include recognition that childhood is constructed - there is not one universal childhood, but multiple childhoods that are shaped by historical, cultural and socio-political factors. Therefore, a thorough understanding of these factors is required in order to build local, contextual, relevant and appropriate responses.

Children's competencies and agency, and the structural factors that impinge on their agency, are also important debates within the sociology of childhood. In efforts to understand children's lived realities, proponents of sociology of childhood argue for research methods that enable children and young people to be at the centre of knowledge production[17].

As a theory, sociology of childhood has not, however, had a huge influence on practice. Consequently, interventions on SVAC tend to be positioned as child protection initiatives (using the UN Convention as a frame), or as gender-based violence initiatives, using mainly feminist or socio-ecological framing.

The socio-ecological model

The socio-ecological model was first introduced in the late 1970s[18] and, as a practice model, underpins the majority of interventions on SVAC, largely due to its ability to encompass the complexity of sexual violence. This is achieved by focusing on individual factors and characteristics and the intertwined interactions between the different levels: individual and family, peer groups, institutions, community, and broader society.

As the social environment is a key determinant of children's wellbeing, the socio-ecological model has helped practitioners move beyond individualised approaches and has called attention to the importance of support at multiple societal levels and alignment across levels. By analysing a combination of risk and protective factors at institutional and structural levels, it is possible to understand the conditions in which violence is likely to occur[19]. When the

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[14] James et al, 1998

[15] Interactionist sociology: children as agents and actors in the social world, structural sociology: childhood as a permanent feature of social structure, and social constructionism: historically and culturally specific constitution of childhood in and through discourse – see Ansell, 2017.

[16] Notably see James and Prout,1997; Niewenhuys,1998; Panter-Brick, 2000; Jenks 1996; Mayall, 1994; Corsaro, 2018; and Qvortrup, 2009

[17] Brady et al, 2015

[18] Bronfenbrenner, 1979

[19] Maternowska et. al., 2018

framework is integrated and places children at the centre, it encourages a multi-sectoral and intersectional approach[20].

The socio-ecological model dominates the field of violence against children at an international level, acting as a framework for research and underpinning intervention models such as the INSPIRE framework[21] developed by the World Health Organization and other key global players in the violence against children sector[22]. The model stresses the importance of recognising and responding to risks and opportunities at the individual, close relationship, community, and societal levels[23]. It has helped practitioners and policy makers in the child protection sector move past an individual, psychology-focused approach by incorporating the social environment (social-ecology).

Subsequent work on social norms and drivers of violence against children has helped focus attention on institutional and societal levels of the socio-ecological model. This work has called for the adaptation of packages, such as the INSPIRE framework, to address a country's historical, cultural, political and economic contexts[24].

The influence of feminism and gender-based violence

Although there is a long history of feminist scholarship and action on sexual violence, when child sexual abuse was 'singled out' as a separate issue and absorbed within the child protection sector, feminist theorising on the issue to some extent subsided[25]. However, in the last ten years, work on sexual violence during adolescence has brought together two fields – the child protection sector focussing on violence against children, and the women's rights sector looking at violence against women. Its focus on adolescence has resulted in the re-emergence of SVAC being viewed from a feminist perspective. With a concentration on interventions directed at adolescent girls – this has been coined 'the girl effect'[26].

By comparing how sexual violence is conceptualised in the intersection of the fields of violence against women and violence against children, it is clear that there is a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice for feminists working to end violence against women. Feminist theory informs practice and feminist activism is supported by theory. In fact, feminist theory also appears to have more influence than the theory of sociology of childhood in interventions for tackling sexual violence during adolescence. In addition, feminism's dismantling of artificially imposed, simplistic and often binary boundaries, for example between women and children[27], has allowed a more nuanced understanding of power relations that embrace complexity and ambiguity[28] and are embedded in the issue of SVAC.

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[20] Ibid

[21] INSPIRE is a set of seven evidence-based strategies for countries and communities working to eliminate violence against children – See https://www.end-violence.org/inspire.

[22] CDC, End Violence Against Children Global Partnership, PEPFAR, Together for Girls, UNICEF, UNODC, USAID, PAHO and the World Bank.

[23] WHO, 2016

[24] Maternowska and Potts, 2017

[25] Whittier, 2009, see also Whittier's (2016) calls for a 'feminist sociological analysis of child sexual abuse'

[26] See Switzer, 2013

[27] Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016, cited in Rosen & Twamley, 2018

[28] Ibid

In conclusion, although a number of theories and framings have informed and influenced the field of SVAC, it is predominantly framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and interpreted as a 'child protection' issue rather than one of 'child rights'. In addition, interventions on SVAC are dominated by the socio-ecological practice model. Consequently, policy and practice do not appear to be adequately informed from a strong theoretical basis. This gap is most obvious when compared to the way feminist theory informs work on sexual violence against women and adolescent girls. Sociology of childhood, the most relevant theory for the children's rights sector, appears frustratingly absent from policy discussions on SVAC. Issues that are important and relevant to examining SVAC, such as adultism, children's activism or children's sexuality, are therefore rarely explored outside academia. As a result, interventions feel out of touch with both the progressions in theory that have taken place over the past ten years and the current reality of children's lives.

Key debates on sexual violence against children

In order to connect some of the key theoretical debates in our experience of working in the SVAC sector, we identified and explored literature in five key areas: 1) structural challenges and power inequalities faced by children who experience sexual violence, 2) children's agency, participation, and empowerment in addressing sexual violence, 3) de-colonising SVAC, 4) adolescence and sexual violence and 5) feminist approaches to SVAC. In practice, there was often overlap between these areas and we therefore identified three key debates that cut across the sectors of child protection and gender-based violence. In this section we explore the themes, tensions and critiques that surfaced from our reading and discussion.

1. A colonial, Eurocentric construction of childhood

The most current debate in the child protection sector concerns the Eurocentric nature of child protection and embedded colonial legacies, which has led to calls to decolonise the child protection sector (including the donors that fund child protection work)[29]. A Western model of childhood has been exported across the globe, initially through missionary activity and colonialism and latterly through development aid[30]. This debate links to a key critique of developmental psychology, that it uses Western ideals of adult competence and logic in education and medicine, to measure and test whether children and 'childhoods' can be classed as 'normal'[31]. In response to these critiques, there have been moves within psychology to adopt a more 'cultural approach' in exploring child development. Such an approach recognises that while children may share the same features of growth and have a core set of needs, these needs may be met at different times and in different ways depending on particular social, political and economic contexts[32].

Similar to critiques of developmental psychology, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has also been criticised for presenting a Eurocentric construction of childhood and entrenching colonial law[33]. Anthropologists, in particular, have challenged the universal notion of childhood presented in the convention arguing it is based on Minority World, middle class ideals[34]. Interestingly, despite the recognition that childhood is socially constructed, the field of sociology of childhood has also been critiqued for failing to emphasise or analyse the impact of colonialism and modernisation on non-western 'cultures' of childhood[35].

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[29] See Keshavarzian and Canevera, 2021; see Reconstructing Children's Rights Institute
[29] Bhambra et al., 2018 cited in Faulkner and Nyamutata, 2020
[30] Aitken et al. 2007; Tisdall and Punch, 2012
[31] James et al. 1998
[32] Woodhead, 1999
[33] Faulkner and Nyamutata, 2020
[34] Montgomery,2009; Boyden and Zharkevich, 2018
[35] Balagopalan, 2002

Consequently, it has been argued that all global policy frameworks are used as tools for oppression rather than the liberation of children and therefore serve to perpetuate the colonial legacy[36].

In the Minority World, the child's place is identified as inside the home with the nuclear family or in formal educational settings (rather than in work settings) - separated from the rest of society[37]. Within the international child protection sector, programming is often focused on specific 'at risk' groups of children who fall outside of this 'norm' of childhood (trafficked children, child labourers, street children, children in institutional care). This categorisation of 'at risk' children often neatly aligns to specific articles within the UN Convention[38]. Even when a socio-ecological model is applied - where equal attention should be paid to both 'risk' and 'protective' factors - it is acknowledged that, in practice, the focus remains on studying deficits and risks rather than identifying what is protective across these different levels. Additionally, the 'global child' is based on social work practice from relatively wealthy, stable societies in Minority World contexts and is presented similarly to the 'child' of the UN Convention as having no context and existing outside culture[39]. It is consequently claimed, that when this concept of childhood is exported to the Majority World, it does not fit with all local cultures or contexts regarding childhood[40]. For example, children operating outside the home or school environments, particularly those who are working, are often viewed as 'outside' childhood or 'abnormal'[41]. A colonial approach to children's life outside the home (children's work) can be seen in the SVAC sector which has, at times, prioritised the issue of child sexual exploitation (initially referred to as commercial sexual exploitation) over the issue of child sexual abuse – despite the well-known fact that sexual abuse (in the circle of trust) affects a much broader range of children and young people than sexual exploitation[42].

In many Minority World contexts, children do not see themselves as individuals, independent and distinct from their families and communities. Their wellbeing is associated with their family's wellbeing and therefore, many children work from an early age in order to contribute to the family unit. Research with children who work demonstrates how working is relational, allowing them to earn an income, maintain important social ties and relationships, and gain self-worth and dignity within the family and community[43]. These elements and connections are often disregarded in efforts aimed at preventing children from working.

The UN Convention, and interventions that have followed, have been criticised for romanticising childhood as a time free from responsibility. But equally, there is also recognition that in taking a local, contextual approach to child protection issues, this should not romanticise local beliefs, practices and contexts that are harmful and abusive for children[44].

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[36] Montgomery, 2009; Faulkner and Nyamutata, 2020
[37] Wells, 2009 citing in Ansell, 2017
[38] Boyden and Zharkevich, 2018
[39] Hopkins & Sriprakash, 2015
[40] Boyden and Zharkevich, 2018
[41] Boyden,1990; Reynolds et al, 2006 cited in Ansell, 2017
[42] See the first monitoring report for the Council of Europe Lanzarote Committee, 2015
[43] Jijon, 2020
[44] Woodhead, 1999:20

With all this in mind, a process of decolonisation of the child protection sector is being called for [45] which critically examines colonialism, empire and racism *and "re-situates these phenomena as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view"* and offers "*alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis"* [46]. With the advent of the Black Lives Matter movement, and international scandals exposing sexual abuse and exploitation by humanitarian personnel, there is also a push to examine white supremacy culture (identified as defensiveness, perfectionism, paternalism, and a sense of urgency) in the child protection sector [47]. White supremacy culture, together with colonialism, racism and expansionism have unduly influenced policy and practice with children in both the Minority and Majority World contexts.

2. Children and power

One of the critiques levelled at the child protection sector is that Eurocentric models of child protection do not address structural issues, such as poverty or war, that may impact on a broad range of children and require social, political and economic change [48]. However, sociology of childhood's exploration of children as actors within social processes has gained widespread acceptance. Following a logic paralleled in feminist accounts of women, it explores the structural factors which constrain children's choices and links sociological study to a political agenda, which includes the concept of 'rights' [49].

Proponents of sociology of childhood claim that children are an oppressed minority group and that the key structural factor affecting them is adult power [50]. For children affected by sexual violence, particularly younger children, another societal factor is structural vulnerability, which is compounded by their lack of economic and political power and inability to exercise their rights [51]. The absence of terminology that describes these unequal power relations is indicative of the child rights sector's failure to focus on the importance of power as an issue. Although within academia, terms such as 'adultism' and 'generation' are used to name this power imbalance, these terms are not generally recognised by the child protection sector. This is possibly because activity within the child protection sector has focused on the development of technical resources and professionalisation of the industry, which has grown rapidly in the last 20 years. However, technocratic approaches do not generally consider informal structures or children's lived experiences and the communities they live in. Instead, children are approached as de-politicised, passive victims who are unaffected by politics and power [52] and consequently the sector is critiqued as being 'too

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[45] See Keshavarzian and Canevera, 2021 and the Reconstructing Children's Rights Institute
[46] Bhambra et al., 2018 cited in Faulkner and Nyamutata, 2020
[47] Keshavarzian and Canavera, 2021
[48] Lonne et. el., 2009 cited in Ansell, 2017
[49] Prout and James, 2015
[50] Mayall, 2000
[51] Lansdown, 1994
[52] Boyden and Zharkevich, 2018; Keshavarzian and Canavera, 2021

narrow' and attending 'insufficiently to issues of power'[53]. In contrast to this picture of a de-politicised childhood, progressive donors of the child protection field present evidence of children and child protection rhetoric being used by faith-based, gender restrictive groups to *'manufacture moral panic and mobilize it against human rights, particularly those related to gender justice'.*[54]

Despite being included in the socio-ecological model, institutional, structural or societal factors such as poverty are also not generally explored when considering children – a key criticism of the model[55]. It appears that in practice interventions get 'stuck' at the individual and family levels which results in initiatives that focus on parents or caregivers while broader structural issues affecting the family as a whole are overlooked. This may also be because, on a practical level, it is easier to target activities with individuals and families. One question worth exploring is whether the socio-ecological lens is better for understanding problems (for example, when undertaking research) than it is for framing interventions.

It has been argued that within the child protection sector, there is a strong focus on addressing 'episodic violence' – direct incidents of violence that are visible and relatively easy to identify[56]. Scholars contend that in order to effectively address all violence against children, 'structural violence' needs to be challenged[57]. 'Structural violence' is defined as the damage caused by institutionalised racism, sexism, classism and 'adultism'[58]. Structural violence is, however, often harder to address because it is *'embedded in social norms and is not attributable to an obvious single actor or set of actors, it can be highly challenging and resistant to change'*[59].

It is clear when comparing the fields of SVAC and violence against women, that feminist scholarship, which identifies patriarchy as at the core of sexual violence, incorporates power analysis. Feminists initially called for women and children to acquire more social power in order to address these forms of abuse[60]. It has been argued that over time, as other (non-feminist) political groups and movements became interested in child sexual abuse, feminist analysis of the issue moved to the periphery[61]. The breaking away of incest and child sexual abuse from feminism, unlike the issues of rape and sexual assault of women, has led to a gulf between feminist theory and research on sexual violence against women, and essentially non-feminist analyses of child sexual abuse[62]. This can be seen when comparing policy discourse between gender-based violence (GBV) and child sexual abuse. For example, online child sexual abuse is often talked about in sensationalised terms within the SVAC

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[53] See reference to Jason Hart, Project Details: Child Protection in Gaza and Jordan: Understanding and Addressing Neglect Through a Systematic Approach, University of Bath, Department of Social & Policy Sciences as cited in Keshavarzian and Canavera, 2021
[54] See a report by Elevate Children Funders Group, Global Philanthropy Project and Sentido (Martinez et al.; 2021) Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights
[55] Pells et. al., 2018
[56] Wessells and Kostelny, 2021
[57] Wessells and Kostelny, 2021. The term 'structural violence' was coined by Galtung (1969).
[58] See also John Wall's work on 'childism'
[59] Wessells and Kostelny, 2021:7
[60] Whittier, 2009
[61] ibid
[62] ibid

sector, referred to as a 'global threat'[63] whereas the same issue 'online and ICT facilitated violence against women and girls' is presented in more descriptive terms in the GBV sector[64].

3. Protection versus participation

Participation rights, which reaffirm the right for children to be engaged in informing and influencing decision-making that affects them, are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and therefore no other rationale or justification should be required for the child protection sector to prioritise children's participation[65]. However, despite the UN Convention giving children greater responsibilities in line with their capacities, this recognition is often overlooked in policy and practice in the Majority World, particularly in the field of sexual and reproductive health[66].

Participation rights are seen as the most controversial group of rights and highlight a central tension in the UN Convention concerning the dependency and powerlessness that characterise modern childhood[67]. As the focus of the child protection sector has historically been in response to humanitarian crises, arguments of children's vulnerability and dependency often dominate. This means that children's participation rights and participatory approaches, receive less attention and are seen as a luxury or an 'add on'[68].

The delineation drawn between participation and protection is, though, increasingly being challenged. Evidence shows that participation is critical to making protection more effective[69]. There are calls to broaden the child protection sector's understanding of what comprises protection so that participation rights are understood as being fundamental in the protection of children[70]. In fact, Latin American scholars already do this by using '*protagonismo*' to describe children and young people's pro-active role in different spaces and contexts and valuing children's autonomy and leadership[71].

In order to better understand the importance of participation rights in the context of SVAC, it is essential that the sector engages with critiques and debates surrounding the interpretation of children's participation. For example, there are well documented accounts of participatory practice being reduced to activities where children voice their views without necessarily influencing change. And, issues remain regarding which children are involved, when and how. It is worth noting that often children are involved once agendas have been set, funding secured and decisions taken[72]. In such circumstances, 'participation' can become manipulative and tokenistic. It is also widely noted that children are rarely invited

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[63] See WeProtect, 2019, on the sexual exploitation of children online
[64] https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19#view
[65] Lansdown, 2020
[66] Buller and Schute, 2018
[67] Okyere et al., 2014; Warrington and Larkins, 2019
[68] Brodie et al, 2016; Tisdall, 2017; Lefevre et al, 2019; Warrington and Larkins, 2019
[69] Moore, 2017; Hamilton et al, 2019; Warrington and Larkins, 2019; Lansdown, 2020
[70] Lansdown, 2020
[71] Collins et al., 2021
[72] Hart, 2008; Tisdall, 2017; Bessa, 2019; Johnson et al, 2020; McMellon and Tisdall, 2020

to explore or challenge more fundamental issues, such as the root causes of the problems children face[73].

Similarly, support for children's participatory rights has led to a general acceptance that children have agency. This idea of children being social actors with agency is a fundamental component in sociology of childhood and the UN Convention. Yet, there are also concerns that the notion of 'agency' has not been fully interrogated or understood contextually. Scholars note that the sector needs to examine what agency children have, how they acquire it and how it relates to others[74]. This includes recognising the difference between 'thick agency' where there are more choices and options available to children – often aligned to more favourable economic and social contexts and 'thin agency', where choices are limited by context[75]. It also requires an understanding of 'ambiguous agency', where children may be asked for their views by practitioners, but unless they align to the organisation's beliefs and position, will be disregarded[76]. For instance, 'morally right' strategies linked to the prevention of SVAC may promote or direct young people to abstain from sex, not send 'sexts'; not get married too young and stay in school[77]. Yet, depending on their relationships and realities, these strategies may not be realistic options for young people. Therefore, there is a need for a deeper analysis of the concept of 'agency' which should be 'dynamic, situated, and contextual[78]'.

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[73] Hart, 2008
[74] Mayall, 2003; Abede, 2019
[75] Klocker, 2007
[76] Bordonaro and Payne, 2012 See also Lansdown, 2005
[77] Corbett, 2014; Pincock, 2018; Bessa, 2019; Weston and Mythen, 2020
[78] Abede, 2019

How do we move forward?

Perhaps the reason why theory does not adequately inform practice in addressing SVAC is that it requires us to explore the taboo subjects of children, power and sex that are usually considered too sensitive, personal and challenging to engage with. Although providing a critique of the current situation is a necessary step, it is not enough if we are aiming for transformation of the sector.

In this section we identify five key areas which need more attention. Action is required to enhance current approaches to address SVAC. We also make suggestions for ways forward that we hope will help weave theory into practice and promote ongoing dialogue.

1. Recognising and increasing children's social power

Traditionally, work to tackle child sexual abuse has focussed on individual risks to children and on individual perpetrators rather than recognising social structures, inequalities and power differentials. For example, within efforts to address SVAC, there has been a long history of focusing on 'stranger danger' in the form of predatory paedophiles when, in reality, most children and young people are sexually abused by someone they know (in the circle of trust)[79]. Advocacy campaigns on sexual violence have followed a well-rehearsed narrative that typically focuses on a symbolically passive young girl who has been trafficked or tricked into prostitution.[80] It has been argued that such misleading and simplistic depictions lead to a denial of the existence of gendered power relations that occur in most societies and the systematic and structural abuse of adults over children[81].

When SVAC is seen as a public health issue there tends to be a stronger focus (and more funding available) for prevention and the need to address sexual violence in the long-term. Consequently, prevention activities have started to explore drivers and associated social norms, but the international child protection sector is not yet looking at unequal power relations between adults and children in the majority of its programming[82]. This is in contrast to feminists who studied the same norms and drivers of violence but who viewed their work as a 'political project', requiring the examination of power[83].

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[79] Rosemberg and Andrade, 1999

[80] Ansell, 2017

[81] O'Connell Davidson, 2005; Ansell, 2017

[82] However, there are examples of community-led child protection efforts that have been successful at addressing these power dynamics by enabling children and young people to identify the problem and develop solutions. For example, such programmes have been successful at developing community supported interventions to address early sex and marriage and improve parental support in Kenya (see Wessells, Kostelny, and Ondoro, 2014)

[83] Cislaghi and Heise, 2018

The unequal relationship between adults and children, where it is acknowledged, is presented as a given and mirrors the way male domination was presented as a natural phenomenon - until radical feminists challenged this power imbalance as 'constructed' rather than fixed[84].

Those acknowledging the problem of 'adultism' have highlighted how ingrained expectations of children's obedience to adult authority have implications for children's right to express their views[85]. This contributes to a silencing of children that enables sexual violence to flourish and negatively impacts on their overall health and wellbeing[86].

One example of the lack of focus on structural factors is the way successive governments (mainly in the Minority World) have demonised teenage motherhood as delinquency. The subsequent investment by government donors in girls' education as a way of postponing motherhood has been criticised for not recognising that the key structural problem facing teenage mothers is poverty rather than parenthood[87]. When transported to the Majority World, the lack of attention on wider economic, cultural, social and political structures that give rise to early marriage can result in girls being burdened with the responsibility to 'resist' marriage. This is despite the fact that, in some cases, publicly advocating against marriage may have damaging consequences for girls and their families[88].

In much feminist research and practice, survivors' narratives and their expertise has been central to challenging male dominance[89]. Survivors of sexual violence are involved in all areas of the feminist project; in activism, academia and in developing and delivering appropriate prevention and response initiatives. By comparison, there is a lack of self-advocacy and activism within the SVAC sector, which is worth exploring in more detail.

'Child participation' is closely aligned to advocacy and activism, yet there have been calls in the wider child protection sector to move beyond the term 'child participation'. Too often in these initiatives and activities children's roles are tokenistic. It is important to think more politically about children's agency, empowerment and activism[90]. Participation is political as it requires social and structural change confronting racism, sexism, classism and adultism[91]. Despite the implications of this, within the SVAC field, there are several practical reasons why there may be hesitations to actively support children and young people's advocacy and activism on the issue of sexual violence.

Chief among these barriers is safeguarding and child protection concerns along with broader ethical considerations. Fears of triggering or re-traumatising young people with lived experience of sexual violence prevent many adults and adult-led organisations from engaging children and young people in activism on rights violations or facilitating young

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84 Mackay, 2015 in Grosser and Tyler, 2020
85 Twum-Danso, 2009
86 Buller and Schulte, 2018
87 Switzer, 2013
88 Bessa, 2019
89 See MacKinnon, 1989 in Grosser & Tyler, 2020
90 Johnson et al., 2020 ; McMellon and Tisdall, 2020 ; Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2020
91 Johnson et al., 2020

people to organise and challenge inequalities publicly[92]. While these, along with other ethical considerations, need to be carefully thought through, they should not automatically preclude organisations working with children and young people to explore opportunities for self-advocacy and activism[93].

Alongside this, when traditional 'safeguarding' policy and practice is rigidly applied to children's activism, it can be disempowering and impede action[94]. In response to these concerns, adaptations to policy and practice, in the form of 'feminist safeguarding', are being developed that incorporate feminist principles and concepts of shared responsibility between adults and children towards risk management[95]. The most recent developments in safeguarding of adult and youth survivors (of childhood sexual abuse) for the activism, advocacy or campaigning environment use trauma-informed approaches and incorporate self-care practices so that survivor's engagement in activism, advocacy or campaigning can contribute to their own healing process[96].

Within this exploration of power in the SVAC sector, the positioning of donors and the funding of activities to address it cannot be ignored. In many countries in the Majority World both prevention strategies and response services on sexual violence are predominantly led by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Many of these NGOs have to restrict their activities to short-term, results-based projects due to donor requirements. As a result, they are not able to address the broader, structural factors at the heart of this issue without core costs being covered and the availability of long-term (10+ years) funding. Some donors have started to explore the power they hold and identify ways of de-centralising or shifting that power to the communities their funding supports, for example through participatory funding mechanisms[97].

Ways forward

If we could learn from feminist scholars and activists who have addressed the issue of power and apply theory from the sociology of childhood to practice, this would ensure that broader structural issues on SVAC are addressed. This however would require:

- Thinking about power at every level of our work. For donors this could include shifting decision-making power on funding to locally based organisations by introducing participatory grant-making mechanisms or exploring *how* (fund allocation processes and structures) and *what* (specific areas for intervention)

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[92] From a blogpost by Helen Veitch and Saadat Baigazieva, 2021

[93] See Bovarnick and Cody, 2020

[94] From a blogpost by Veitch and Baigazieva, 2021

[95] See FRIDA | Young Feminist Fund

[96] In 2023-2024 Ignite Philanthropy is piloting an approach called 'Survivor Informed Safeguarding' in their ThriveTogether grants programme for survivor groups. This approach has been developed by Children Unite.

[97] See Reconstructing Children's Rights Institute, Conversation #3: Confronting Colonialism, Racism and Patriarchy in Funding and the development of the Children's Rights Innovation Fund Also, see Lessons from the Tar Kura Initiative by Raveneau & Kabia, Fund for Global Human Rights, March 2021

to fund[98]. For international NGOs and inter-governmental organisations this could include exploring consultative approaches that involve community based organisations, and children and young people themselves in decision-making mechanisms.

- Approaching work on SVAC as a political project with the ultimate aim of uncovering and disrupting power dynamics.

- Recognising the existence of adultism.

- Tracing how, and why, feminist theory has so successfully informed gender-based violence work to understand how sociology of childhood theory could be more applied and influential in policy and practice. Is there such a thing as 'age-based violence' perpetrated against children?

- Paying more attention to the intersections between direct and structural violence and taking a more holistic approach in efforts to end SVAC.

- Exploring together with children and young people with lived experience of sexual violence, key barriers to their self-advocacy and activism – such as concerns around ethics and safeguarding.

- Exploring the complementary roles of adult 'survivors' of childhood sexual violence and children with lived experience of sexual violence in activism, academia and in developing and implementing prevention and response activities.

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[98] See recommendations on HOW and WHAT from a report by Elevate Children Funders Group, Global Philanthropy Project and Sentido (Martinez et al.; 2021)

2. Recognising children's sexualities

Sexual violence is often discussed as distinct from broader understandings of sexuality. However, there is increasing recognition that there are links and connections between sexual violence and sexuality that require more attention[99].

Central to middle class and Minority World conceptions of childhood, is that children are 'asexual' or sexually innocent[100]. This is particularly noticeable in the UN Convention which, in attempting to straddle the needs and experiences of both young children and adolescents, fails to differentiate between the sexual maturation of five-year-olds as compared to fifteen-year-olds. This means that the only mention of 'sex' in the Convention relates to the crime of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Consequently, within the child protection sector, discussion of sexual consent, sexuality, sexual agency and the sexual activity of adolescents tends to be ignored, denied or seen as a problem[101]. This has led to a number of challenges in addressing young people's sexual experiences.

First, children and young people are denied access to comprehensive knowledge on sex and relationships in many parts of the world as this is viewed as 'morally inappropriate' and believed to challenge certain religious teachings. Where children and young people do receive sex education in the classroom, research consistently highlights the limitations and problems with the curriculum[102].

Second, apart from school-based sex education initiatives, interventions that focus on young people's sexuality tend to be targeted at children and young people who are deemed at risk of sexual exploitation or violence – mainly adolescent girls. Those working with adolescent girls rarely have the opportunity to discuss positive sexual agency associated with pleasure and protection[103]. In addition, as these interventions tend to focus on 'reducing risk' and persuading girls and young women to change their behaviour, they rarely acknowledge or challenge the impact of harmful myths and negative assumptions surrounding female sexualities (as opposed to male sexualities, which are recognised in many programmes) that prescribe how girls should respond, behave and feel[104]. Within feminist theory, there are also claims that society uses fear to control, confine and contain girls' and women's behaviour (e.g. it's not safe to walk alone at night) thereby limiting their participation in society, thus enabling men to maintain their status and control over women[105].

Third, society often delineates victims and survivors of sexual violence as either innocent, passive, sexually pure, vulnerable victims or 'deviant' young people who make their own

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[99] Gavey and Senn, 2014
[100] Montgomery, 2009; Kitzinger 2015; Collins, 2017
[101] Melrose, 2013
[102] Kantor and Lindberg, 2020
[103] Bay-Cheng and Fava, 2013
[104] Bay-Cheng and Fava, 2013
[105] Meyer and Post, 2006

'choices' and are therefore complicit in their abuse and exploitation[106]. Such limited binary narratives (where one young person may be viewed as a victim of sexual exploitation and the other as a criminal engaging in the 'sex trade') makes it challenging to understand the complexity involved in young people's realities. For example, research with children and young people illustrates how they can be both 'victims' of exploitation but also demonstrate 'thin agency', making constrained choices in order to protect and provide for themselves and family members[107]. While it is important to recognise and understand these complexities, this does not mean that the young person who demonstrates some form of agency has not been exploited and does not require care and support. What it does mean, is that without a recognition of the social, economic and cultural conditions that constrain young people's choices - particularly regarding ideas of obligation, reciprocity norms, kinship connections, filial duty, and the influence of modernity and globalisation - interventions will have a limited impact[108].

The Minority World's preoccupation with online child sexual abuse has highlighted how it is important to understand the nuances and complexities involved in young people's sexual lives. For example, there are increasing calls for self-generated sexual content - such as sexting by children and young people with their peers (consensually making and sharing images) - to be recognised as a normal part of sexual development rather than being classed as 'sexual extortion' where children are coerced into producing and sharing sexual content as part of a grooming process by abusers[109]. It is important to note that extremely abusive and exploitative acts do occur online; but framing all sexual image sharing as equally harmful and damaging may close off conversations about other online activities young people engage in[110].

When prevention efforts fail to recognise that adolescents are sexual beings and instead focus on instructing young people to 'abstain' from sending sexual images and highlight the legal repercussions for young people who get caught making or sharing these images, preventative messaging will fail to resonate. Such messaging also fails to recognise how sexting may be seen as protective by some young people, acting as a holding stage for those who are not ready to engage in a physical sexual relationship[111].

The lack of political will to acknowledge young people's sexuality is increasingly recognised as having a negative effect on efforts to prevent sexual violence as it is not based on young people's realities and real lives[112]. This is compounded by the lack of organisational support for practitioners to engage in discussions around these difficult conversations with young people.

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[106] Beckett, 2019
[107] Kamndaya et al, 2016
[108] See Julia O'Connell Davidson's call for more 'complicated stories' in discussion of children in the global sex trade, 2005
[109] ECPAT, 2020
[110] Lloyd, 2018
[111] Weston and Mythen, 2020
[112] Ibid

Ways forward

Feminist scholars and activists, and sociology of childhood scholars have argued for the need for local, contextual understandings of women and children's lived experiences. We can learn from these approaches when considering the development of SVAC policies and interventions by:

- Valuing and seeking to understand lived experience in order to comprehend the complexities of experience surrounding sexuality and sexual violence. This includes understanding norms and power dynamics that shape sexualities more generally - not just 'normative' (hetero)sexualities.
- Creating opportunities to explore sex and sexuality with children and young people that do not focus solely on risk and harmful experiences, but also on healthy experiences and sexual agency.
- Recognising the social, economic and cultural conditions that constrain young people's choices and shape their level of agency when it comes to sexual relationships more generally. Focusing on adolescent sexuality (young people rather than children) and expand this to look past the accepted 'cut-off' for childhood at age 18.
- Enabling children and young people to share how they navigate and respond to relationships and situations that are potentially threatening and harmful – recognising both their agency and vulnerability within these contexts.
- Jointly creating with children and young people the tools and resources necessary to help others facilitate age appropriate, contextually based discussions around sex and sexuality.
- Learning from those working with young people in the sexual and reproductive health rights field who have developed tools and strategies to facilitate open conversations around consent and sexual relationships.
- Making use of young people's skills and their familiarity in using the online space to create safe spaces for discussion. For example, explore how the anonymity of the digital world can be used to facilitate positive, open, non-judgemental discussions about sex and relationships between young people.

3. Acknowledging children's agency

In addition to adults' discomfort, and that of the wider child protection sector, in acknowledging and working with young people's sexualities and sexual agency, there is also a sense of unease in recognising other forms of agency. This is particularly true for children and young people who are labelled as vulnerable or at risk of sexual violence. Overall, childhood has been constructed as inherently vulnerable and adulthood as inherently invulnerable. This results in a construction of society where adults hold the power[113]. Scholars argue that the label of vulnerability is not only paternalistic and potentially stigmatising, but provides a justification for more control over people's lives and an excuse to constrain their rights in decision-making[114]. Where vulnerability is the given, this understandably limits children and young people's agency. As the child protection field still works primarily with adults – either parents or practitioners - in their efforts to protect children[115] , there is consequently a lack of recognition that these concepts of 'invulnerability' and 'adult power' are themselves routinely part of the problem[116].

In contrast, feminist approaches actively challenge power relationships and do not see women as a social group that is inherently vulnerable or believe that women are 'putting themselves at risk' when impacted by sexual violence[117]. Instead, gender and structural inequality is recognised to be at the heart of the problem[118]. It has been argued that, if the concept of children's inherent vulnerability was challenged, more opportunities for children's participation and empowerment in decision-making would become available[119].

It is well documented that in the context of sexual exploitation, it can be challenging for practitioners to reconcile 'victimhood' and 'agency'. There is a belief that, due to their experiences, children with lived experience of sexual violence are either too vulnerable, 'too risky' or too untrustworthy to be engaged in formal decision-making processes[120]. As a result, their perspectives, needs and wishes about their care often lose out to decisions that are taken by adults on their behalf, in their 'best interests'[121]. This also means that these children and young people are rarely asked to inform the development of interventions and activities aimed at preventing or responding to sexual violence more generally[122].

There are of course ethical challenges and risks involved in engaging children and young people impacted by sexual violence in efforts to inform research, policy and practice. However, the risks should not preclude their engagement or overshadow the potential benefits[123] . Participatory approaches can ensure legislation, policy and practice are

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[113] See Mayall (1994) on children's inherent and structural vulnerability.
[114] Tisdall, 2017
[115] ibid
[116] ibid
[117] Tisdall, 2017; Johnson et al, 2020
[118] Tisdall, 2017
[119] ibid
[120] Fisher et al, 2018; Beckett, 2019
[121] Ensor and Reinke, 2014; Lansdown, 2020; Warrington and Larkins, 2019; Johnson et al 2020
[122] Cody, 2017
[123] Bovarnick and Cody, 2021

informed by children and young people's lived experience and insights. Furthermore, being listened to, and influencing decisions can also be intrinsically beneficial for the children and young people directly involved - as evidenced in evaluations of participatory practice with children and young people[124].

Finally, the lack of participatory practice may also be explained through the concept of 'ambiguous agency' - where children and young people's wishes and perspectives may be ignored and dismissed by service providers, particularly if they do not want to be 'rescued' and are 'not ready' to leave exploitative situations and relationships. If their views are not taken seriously, their realities not understood, or their choices dismissed, young people may resist support and refuse to engage or run away[125]. This may lead to further efforts to control and contain young people[126].

Making the necessary changes requires a shift in organisational culture along with time and space for practitioners to consider, reflect and feel confident to adopt more participatory approaches. For this to happen, the sector as a whole needs support to imagine how such approaches may lead to positive outcomes.

Ways forward

Feminist and sociology of childhood scholars have argued for the need to move beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood and agency and there are excellent examples of how this can be achieved from within the child protection sector such as[127]:

- Recognising children as subjects and agents.
- Challenging inequality at every level by developing relationships with children and young people that respect and value their expertise.
- Exploring and building the evidence base to better understand how and why involving children and young people (including those with lived experience) can improve the child protection sector as a whole.
- Providing children and young people with the space they need to identify what is of greatest harm to them and their peers[128].
- Adapting safeguarding policy and practices to incorporate youth activism and self-advocacy.[129]
- Exploring how children demonstrate agency when they consider and navigate their circumstances; how and what they do to resist further abuse and how their specific circumstances dictate the choices they have.
- Challenging the concepts of vulnerability and victimhood and how they influence prevention messaging on SVAC.

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[124] Bovarnick and Cody, 2020
[125] Coy, 2009, Johnson et al, 2018
[126] Lefevre et al, 2019
[127] See work by Wessells, Kostelny, and Ondoro, 2014
[128] See Wessells, Kostelny and Ondoro, 2014
[129] See FRIDA | Young Feminist Fund for an example of feminist safeguarding and Children Unite for an example of survivor-informed safeguarding

4. Decolonising approaches to sexual violence against children

A colonial approach to SVAC is particularly evident in the policy discourse on trafficking where Western based law enforcers are presented as flying in (to Majority World countries) on rescue missions to 'save' trafficked victims[130]. In the 1990s, radical feminists claimed the trafficking and rape of women in the Balkans was used to justify the US and allies' military and political intervention in the region[131]. It is also argued that mechanisms on trafficking such as the Palermo Protocol[132] build on colonial legacies that restrict those seen as 'vulnerable' (women and children) from moving[133].

Another area where it can be argued that a colonial approach continues to exist is through the prolonged institutionalisation of children 'rescued' from child sexual exploitation. Although often framed as being in their best interests, it can result in negative outcomes. For example, research with trafficked children and young people who have been placed in shelter homes report how certain religions were 'forced' upon them or that their beliefs and ability to engage in religious or spiritual rituals and celebrations were not supported or respected by shelter staff[134]. Furthermore, if children convert to a different religion while receiving support, this may impact on their ability to reintegrate if and when they return to their family of origin[135].

In addition, there are increasing reports of widespread abuse in, and by, institutions designed to protect children, such as in schools, children's homes, religious institutions and in the context of humanitarian settings. The numerous cases of abuse have resulted in a lack of trust in child protection mechanisms[136] and claims that this approach to protection could in fact increase children's vulnerability[137]. In academia, the concepts of 'refusal' and 'resistance' are being explored as strategies employed by children and young people who refuse to accept categorisation based on colonial interpretations of childhood, which often depict children from the Majority World as 'damaged'[138].

Approaches designed in the Minority World that tend to ignore, or intentionally bypass and subjugate, indigenous protection measures[139] can lead to communities being marginalised and ineffective protection services being put in place[140]. As is increasingly recognised in other sectors, where local culture is viewed as part of the problem, effective local protective measures are commonly overlooked. Both potentially protective and harmful norms can co-

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[130] Rosemberg and Andrade 1999 cited in Ansell, 2017

[131] Enloe 2001; Enloe and Cohen, 2003 cited in Harrington, 2016

[132] Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

[133] Sharma, 2017 in Faulkner and Nyamutata, 2020

[134] Cody, 2017

[135] ibid

[136] Simon, 2020

[137] Simon, 2020 and Whittier, 2009

[138] See Virtual Event: Reimagining Childhood Studies: childhood's refusals? 3 March 2021, contribution from Valeria Llobet, Universidad Nacional de San Martín.

[139] Keshavarzian and Canavera, 2021

[140] Buller and Schute, 2018; Collins, 2017: Cislaghi and Heise, 2018; Kostelny, Wessells, and Ondoro, 2020

exist within the same culture [141]. Consequently, recommendations from much of the prevention programming on gender norms and sexual violence advise taking account of local understandings of norms through greater engagement of community members[142].

Ways forward

We can learn from feminists who have challenged how knowledge about women and the family was traditionally constructed through white males. Similarly, sociology of childhood scholars have argued for the 'decolonisation of childhood'[143]. To apply these lessons to the child protection sector requires:

- Recognising the colonial past and how it continues to impact children's experiences of childhood in the Majority World.
- Confronting the power and privileging of Minority World actors in all aspects of work addressing SVAC (donors, practitioners and academics).
- Decolonising knowledge surrounding SVAC by recognising the value and richness of other knowledge systems that can help the sector understand contexts, realities and influences that impact on addressing and responding to sexual violence.
- Working collaboratively with, and being led by, local scholars, activists and practitioners rather than being guided primarily by professionals based and educated in the Minority World - particularly when designing interventions addressing norms or drivers of sexual violence.
- Exploring the potential to strengthen intervention models that have been developed in the Minority World by adapting and contextualising them with indigenous concepts and knowledge.

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[141] Cislaghi and Heise, 2018
[142] Buller and Schute, 2018
[143] Liebel, 2020

5. Recognising the value of different forms of evidence

There is mounting agreement in the child protection sector that the focus on evidence-based policy and practice has skewed our understanding of what constitutes the best evidence[144]. The prioritisation of systematic and rapid reviews of peer reviewed journal articles have become the preferred source of evidence and this results in a partial view[145]. For a start, such processes often only take account of articles written in English. They also tend to prioritise articles that use quantitative, survey-based methodologies. Often these methods fail to include practitioners' expertise, discount the voices of service-users, children and young people and underplay the processes and relationships that are, in many cases, essential components of any work in the child protection field[146].

However, change is already taking place in a number of fields in the Minority World, such as in mental health and disability studies. In this field, efforts are being made to dismantle hierarchies of evidence that prioritise positivist paradigms[147] and position randomised control trials as the best form of evidence, and knowledge from service-users as the least valid[148]. In the mental health and disability fields, it is now widely recognised that service-users must have a greater role in setting research agendas, identifying research questions and undertaking, analysing and disseminating research[149].

In other fields there have also been calls for participatory and collaborative research methods where those with lived experience of the issue being studied inform and influence research[150]. This is largely absent in the field of SVAC[151] although there are examples of participatory action research with young people identified as 'trading sex', or affected by adversity for other reasons (e.g. young mothers formerly associated with armed groups) who are not solely identified as 'victims'[152]. Even when this research exists, the findings may not be written up in journal articles and therefore are not included in systematic reviews. In addition, co-produced or peer research may struggle to meet the thresholds of quality, rigour and validity expected in evidence guidelines and will therefore be disregarded by policymakers[153]. There is also very little understanding of how to adequately address the ethics of peer or co-produced research which can result in difficulties in obtaining ethical approval for participatory research projects.

In addition, unlike the women's sector where researchers or practitioners may identify themselves in a number of way (for example as feminist researchers, activists and survivors of trauma and violence); researchers in the field of children's rights rarely see themselves as

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[144] Frost and Dolan, 2021
[145] Ibid.
[146] Wessells and Kostelny, 2021; Frost and Dolan, 2021
[147] A positivist paradigm is based on a belief that there is one true reality and therefore this can be seen and measured through observation and experimentation
[148] Rose et al, 2006; Smith-Merry (2020); Beresford (2020)
[149] Oude Breuil and Gerasimov, 2021
[150] Bovarnick et al, 2018; Hamilton et al, 2019 ; Ritterbusch et al, 2020
[151] Bovarnick et al, 2018
[152] See for example: Mckay et al, 2011; Iman et al, 2009; Schaffner et al 2016; Ritterbusch, et al 2020
[153] Smith-Merry (2020); Beresford (2020)

being 'activists' in the same way. This also means that they may demonstrate less reflexivity or transparency about what informs and influences their research and practice, whether that is based on the discipline they were educated in, their religious beliefs, lived experience, or use of one theory over another, etc.

Where participatory research with children and young people, including those affected by sexual exploitation, has been undertaken, researchers have reflected on the importance of such processes to enable young people to accurately represent their lives and needs. For example, researchers using participatory research methods with young people in Uganda, reflected on how the national Violence Against Children Survey's final report for Uganda downplayed the need to explore child driven and community-based responses that focussed on the interpersonal level – something that young people in the study identified as being important[154]. Instead, it focussed on the need to promote 'state-driven responses to violence against children'[155], which included calling for more policing and the use of institutional based interventions. Such findings have led to calls for more engagement of children in research and policy, particularly in influencing global development initiatives and policy implementation, and has been identified as the 'missing element' in current dominant evidence-based programmes, such as INSPIRE and the Global Partnership to End Violence[156].

Ways forward

Feminist researchers have, to some extent, successfully applied methods and approaches that are committed to social justice. They recognise and aim to reduce power differentials between the researcher and the people who are the focus of their research. In a similar vein, due to the emergence of the sociology of childhood paradigm, there has been increasing focus within this field on developing and applying research methods that are more participatory, or that adapt traditional research methods to provide young people with more power in the process[157]. In learning from these approaches, and applying them to knowledge generation informing work on SVAC, there needs to be increasing attention on:

- Challenging hierarchies of evidence that view qualitative data from children and young people as the least valid and knowledge from large-scale quantitative studies as the most valid.

- Recognising the value of applied research and participatory action research with children and young people. Enabling their voices and realities to influence change and for appropriate, locally owned actions to follow.

- Making policy makers and practitioners aware of how and why involving children and young people with lived experience in research processes can lead to benefits for the child protection sector as a whole.

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[154]Ritterbusch et al, 2020
[155] Ibid
[156] Ibid
[157] Fargas et al, 2010

- Generating evidence on the use of participatory methods.

- Working with children and young people to: identify research questions that matter to them; shape and influence methods; undertake analysis and; engage in dissemination.

- Using an intersectional approach in research to ensure that issues or communities of children that have traditionally been left out of the sexual violence debate are recognised and responded to. These include children with disabilities, boys, and children who identify as a LGBTQ+.

- Identifying, acknowledging and exploring collaboratively with children and young people, local practitioners and researchers how to meaningfully, ethically and safely provide spaces for children and young people with lived experience to engage in research processes.

- Developing guidance for ethics committees, Independent Review Boards (IRB) and researchers on research ethics for participatory studies (co-produced/peer research) that is informed by evidence.

In conclusion

The issue of SVAC is one of intricately intertwined taboos of sex and power. This requires particularly careful navigation when the concept of childhood is added to the mix. It requires acknowledging and addressing a power dynamic of adults having power over children that, although not a taboo, is seen as a 'given' in most societies, so is hard to deconstruct. It also requires the exploration of an extremely uncomfortable issue for many adults, which contravenes a key marker of adulthood for many societies – that of children's sexuality. And, to take the level of discomfort one stage further, preventing and responding to the sexual abuse of children requires a nuanced examination of a complex situation - children's agency and constrained choices within their experience of sexual violence.

We could start to tackle these issues by exploring how those within feminist research and practice and those aligned to the field of sociology of childhood have dealt with, and responded to, similar challenges relating to knowledge and power. This involves:

- Acknowledging power differentials between the actors at every level in order to address SVAC. This includes between men and women, donors and grantees, adults and children, those in the Minority World and those in the Majority World and researchers and those researched.

- Recognising structural issues and how historical, cultural, economic and socio-political factors impact on the design and implementation of activities addressing SVAC.

- Valuing and acting on local, 'lived' and contextual knowledge held by children and young people, community members, local practitioners and scholars as a first step in designing research, programmes and advocacy efforts.

- Engaging young people in all aspects of the fight against sexual violence as a violation of their rights: as activists and researchers, as well as designers and implementers of services for their peers.

Issues for discussion

Although many of the issues outlined in section two and three are recognised by scholars and practitioners, they continue to pose problems and challenges for the child protection sector as a whole. Ultimately, this impacts the effectiveness of interventions designed to address SVAC. A more reflective practice is required for how we engage with children and young people affected by sexual violence [158]. To do this we must create safe, non-judgemental spaces for open discussion and reflection among the different groups involved in funding and implementing SVAC interventions – where it is possible to reflect on organisational cultures and our own individual thoughts and actions. Consequently, in this section of the paper, we outline a number of questions that can be used to start discussion and dialogue on SVAC.

It should be noted that our discussion questions focus primarily on teenage or adolescent children and young people.

Children and power

- Do we recognise adults' power over children (adultism) in our work on sexual violence? To what extent does our work address children and young people's general lack of power in society?

- Do we need to address our organisational culture? How does our culture impact on how we view and engage with children and young people?

- To what extent do our programmes deal with broader structural issues and how do these impact on children, families and young people?

- How can SVAC be 'de-colonised'? For example, how are indigenous understandings of sexuality, sexual violence, childhood, or protective norms and practices incorporated into prevention strategies on sexual violence?

- What are the different ways that children and young people affected by sexual violence can inform and influence our work and are we ready to make space for them and resource this properly?

- How can we support youth activism on sexual violence? What are the different roles of survivor groups and groups of children with lived experience of sexual violence? How can this work be practically funded or supported by adult-led organisations?

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[158] Warrington, 2020

- How can we collect data to better understand the process and outcomes linked to children and young people's participation in decision-making in this field?

- What is the impact of patriarchy and masculinity on the sexual abuse of both boys and girls?

- How do our programmes address the social conditions, power imbalances and unequal access to resources for children, young people and their families?

Shifting our thinking on children, sexuality and violence

- Given that we are increasingly defining almost all teenage sexual activity as abusive and harmful should we re-examine how we define sexual violence in adolescence? How do our conclusions compare to what young people say constitutes sexual violence for them?

- How can feminism's exploration of sexual violence in social and political terms - as gender-based violence - be transferred to the children's rights space? Is it possible to discuss 'age-motivated' violence against children or see sexual abuse in broader terms as a rights violation?[159]

- Similarly, how might our thinking change if we take 'moral outrage' out of sexual abuse - and see some forms of sexual violence as an intergenerational abuse of power? What support might we need to shift our thinking in this direction?

- What roles do patriarchy and masculinity play in the development of problematic or harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people?

- How can we address the unease we feel in the child protection sector about acknowledging young people's sexualities and sexual agency?

- How can we reveal children and young people's competences and agency in managing risks to sexual violence without seeing them as being 'complicit in' or 'responsible for' their abuse?

- How can young people learn how to make informed sexual decisions?

Making theory, evidence and practice an interdependent relationship

- Thinking about feminism's reciprocal relationship between practice and theory, how is our work informed by theory? What theories of childhood are we using to develop our programmes and why are we using them?

- How can we challenge the dominant notion of what is 'good evidence'? And what are the challenges encountered when we consider using evidence that is based on other

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[159] At the same time recognising that sexual abuse of children includes abuse by peers.

methods such as qualitative, participatory or creative? Can we identify any merit to these methods for our own work?

- Do current research methods enable us to effectively understand children and young people's lived experiences of sexual violence and the conditions and intersections that contribute to SVAC?

- How do we incorporate contextual understandings of trauma, healing, community and belonging into our response activities so that children can seek help without feeling they will be judged?

- What are we learning from practice about how children and young people experience, navigate, resist or refuse services and why?

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