

Jugendgewaltprävention auf lokaler Ebene

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More than a men's game: Gangs, violence and the role of women and girls

Gangsterism and gang violence are often perceived to be exclusively dominated by men. The reason for this as highlighted in previous research is that women are rarely involved during gang shootings or perpetuating gang violence. However, new research increasingly shows that female gang members are active participants in violent and criminal acts. Not only do they participate in these acts, they may even lure rival gang members to be killed.

As it is commonly known, the 'gendered' perspective on gangs and gangsterism has had little to no presence in academic literature in South Africa. When literature attempts to address the topic of females within the gangs, it is rarely based on interviews with female gangsters themselves. The reason for this is because of the difficulty of accessing female gangsters. This is due to the fact that male members act as their "gatekeepers" and gang culture generally prevents gang members from easily engaging with outsiders.

Financed by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), commissioned by the GIZ Sector Programme Peace and Security, DRM the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (<http://globalinitiative.net/about/>) in cooperation with the University of Cape Town conducted a study on gang members in Cape Town and produced a Policy Note focusing on the role of women and girls in gangs. This has presented an opportunity to examine whether a more "gendered" response to the phenomenon of gangsterism could have success. The case study for the research was the gangs of Cape Town, a city not only with a historical problem of gangs, but one where recent trends have showed a dramatic upswing in violence, both within and between gangs.

Since gangsterism is typically known as a *men's game*, the interviews reflected in the Policy Note with female gang members highlight the important role that women play in this masculated phenomenon. However, amidst their perceived importance in the gangs, much like their male counterparts, leaving the gangs is not necessarily an easy task.

Based on the interviews conducted with female gang members from Cape Town, seven themes emerged:

- Women and girls seek "belonging" within gangs
- Sex is a common currency in gang interactions involving women
- Female gang members have a history of abuse (and are quite literally giving birth to a new generation of gang members)
- Female gang participants become enmeshed in gangs and are often under considerable control and surveillance
- Female gang members participate in criminal and violent acts
- Women and girls, while being members and confidants of male gangsters, are largely excluded from leadership positions
- Female gang members often suffer (sexual) abuse by the criminal justice system

Joining a gang for many young people is as a result of poverty, lack of resources and opportunities and filling a void that their families do not fill. As a result of the above, females who join gangs tend to do so in search of belonging. Unlike their male counterparts, they are generally not coerced into joining gangs and do so of their own volition.

However, sexual encounters (most often coerced sexual activity) are critical rites of passage for many female gang members, as opposed to their male counterparts who are instructed to commit petty crimes or stab someone in order to be recruited into the gangs. Women barter their bodies to secure wider membership and/or acceptance in the gang, but at the same time they are also targeted for sexual violence.

The interviews conducted with the female gang members shed light on the role that women and girls play in gangs. Even though they may become key role players in the functionality of the gangs, there is no evidence of women occupying any leadership positions in any of the prominent gangs. This supports the argument that the gang system is very patriarchal as it remains structured around, and controlled by male gangsters.

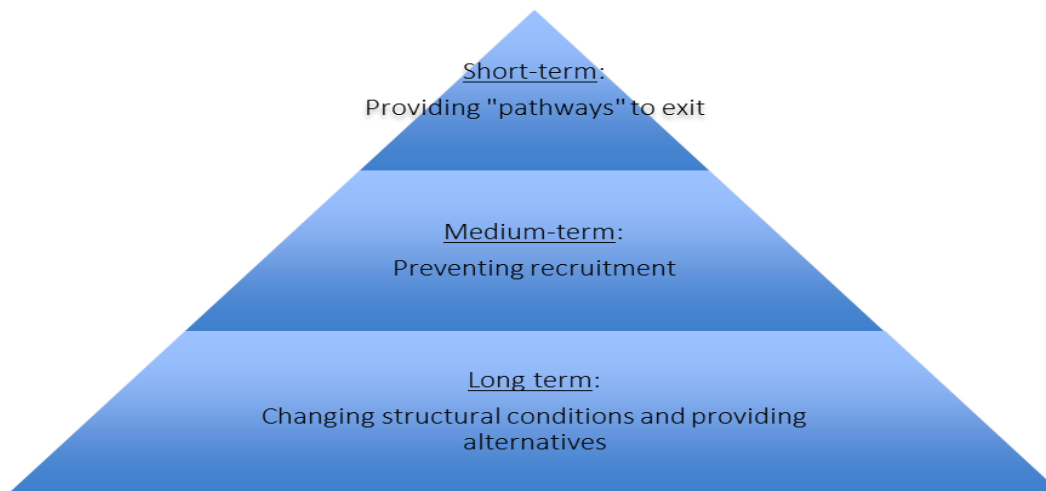
Also the notion that females are not involved during gang wars is contradicted, as it is reported that they are involved in robberies, drug dealing and murder. Although they seldom go out and commit the murders, they often act as “lures”. They are also used to collect “intelligence” on gangs and wider income-generating activities (fraud, extortion and robbery). It was also reported that women commit crimes because police are unlikely to believe that women would commit certain crimes. Very often female gang members offer sexual favours to the police to prevent their arrest.

As a result, when removed from the gang milieu, female gang members become vulnerable and are not treated respectfully by law enforcement officials. They find it difficult to report crimes of sexual abuse against gang members due to the fact that male law enforcement officials often appear to act in sexually predatory ways. This may in part be an established behaviour given that gangs sometimes ‘offer up’ female members to provide sexual services to placate police.

Pyramid of interventions

The seven themes mentioned above shed light on the recruitment, life and abuse faced by female gangsters. Many females are angry at “the system” (justice system). Therefore programmes that attempt to address the issue of female gangsters need to be very sensitive to this, as the target participants may be resistant to participating in any programmes that are offered to them.

In an effort to develop gang prevention and reintegration programmes, the Policy Note introduces a *Pyramid of Interventions*:



The short-term interventions include:

1. Reducing surveillance that male gang members have on female gang members
2. Identifying girls/young women that are abused and/or looking for a pathway out of gangsterism
3. Working with the police and justice system to end abuse when female gang members report crime (particularly sexual abuse) and immediately provide alternative "pathways"
4. The isolation that prison provides should be used to provide exit routes

The medium-term interventions include:

1. Providing "systems of belonging" for girls at school in gang areas
2. Focusing on drug demand reduction and sexual awareness education
3. Promoting positive female role models drawn from communities where gangs are present, including ex-gang members
4. Building positive relations with the police – including female police officers – at schools

The long-term interventions include:

1. Developing effective care for the children of female gang members
2. Reducing gender based violence within families and communities
3. Introducing accessible and effective drug treatment facilities in gang areas
4. Providing employment alternatives for young female gangsters

Conclusion

The gangs of Cape Town, and the violence associated with them, are a product of deep-rooted structural inequalities and a criminal justice system. Girls and young women are pulled into gangs through their lives and exposure in areas where gangs provide the principal forms of social organisation for young people. Other alternatives are few and where they exist, are either not sustained or lack the "glamour" and resources that gangs provide.

Essentially, any sustainable interventions must be long-term in nature and must confront the driving factors, and cycle of violence and exclusion, that ensure gang recruitment.