

# GANGBUSTER DEMANDS ACTION ON PREDATORS

# IT IS TIME TO SAY ENOUGH

## Film-maker calls for better protection for girls at risk of grooming

■ Lesley Roberts

**Film-maker Anna Hall produces the kind of documentaries that leave parents with sleepless nights.**

And as a mum-of-three, she's spent hours worrying about how to equip her own kids with the skills to stay safe without frightening the life out of them.

It was Anna's dogged research and meticulous investigation which first exposed the activities of organised sex gangs who groomed, raped and trafficked young girls in British cities.

Now she is urging the authorities to do more to protect girls at risk from exploitation by the ruthless predators.

The series of documentaries she made for Channel 4 - *The Hunt For Britain's Sex Gangs* - revealed harrowing details of systematic abuse and resulted in the convictions of nine men in Derby and a further seven in Telford, Shropshire.

For award-winning director Anna, 44 - who grew up in Dunblane - it was the culmination of more than a decade of building relationships and earning the trust of victims, their families and agencies who were trying to help.

Although she was often emotionally drained and sometimes traumatised by what she heard, the harrowing work was worth it.

She said: "I remember coming home after spending about five hours with a victim and I was so deeply troubled. For two or three days, I had all these terrible images running through my head.

"What drives me is the fact that I've got three kids. My girls are 12 and 13 - exactly the same age as girls targeted by these men.

"Look at my daughters and think they are mature and savvy because I've talked about a lot of this stuff with them. They think they understand - but they're just kids.

"Their vulnerability - and the vulnerability of the girls targeted - is because they're just kids. They're reaching puberty but they know nothing about the adult sexual world.

"I tell my kids not to give out their phone numbers, not to get into a car with strangers, the usual stuff that parents say. We don't allow mobile phones or electronic devices in the bedrooms at night, for instance, and I'm careful about who is listed on their phones.

"The mother of one victim told me that she was horrified when she checked her daughter's phone and found numbers for men that she had never heard of.

"Also tell them to be aware that while people may appear to be one thing, they might be something else altogether. They need to be really careful about who they trust because the groomers that we uncovered all managed to convince their victims to trust them."

Anna added: "There's a perception that the girls who have been victims in these cases are problem kids, nuisances, even slags. I saw one school report which described a 13-year-old girl as 'willing to partake in prostitution'. She was a 13-year-old child.

"I have met lots of kids who come from completely normal two-parent families. The parents are powerless to stop it because the kids are so terrified that something will happen, that their parents

or siblings will be attacked. These guys very quickly drive a wedge between the child and their family so that it appears the only one who cares for them is the abuser.

"No one really understood, until now, the level of psychological manipulation these men were exploiting. They would offer these girls a lift in their cars, and the girls would feel very grown up and flattered by their attention. They believed these men were their boyfriends. It was a false sense of security.

"Then they would start raping them and girls of 12, 13 or 14 just didn't understand. I've spoken to young girls who didn't realise what a normal, loving sexual relationship was. They thought

sex was violent and degrading because that's all they had experienced."

Anna is now passionate about child protection and is calling for special classes in early high school, teaching kids about the dangers of grooming and about appropriate contact between adults and children.

She said: "Every local authority in the country has to take action. We should be targeting kids in school and teaching them about healthy relationships.

"ChildLine are doing great work going into primary schools to talk about abuse and tell kids how to get help but there needs to be a more co-ordinated approach by the authorities.

"If an adult lies on your bed, when is

that okay and when is it not? If an adult kisses you, when is that okay and when is it wrong?"

"Unfortunately, there are so many types of child exploitation. We've had two years listening to the Jimmy Savile grooming scandal and people are now saying enough is enough.

"We've got to get to grips with this, be better at detecting it, better at protecting our children and better at listening to them."

**FILM** Anna exposed the rape gangs

## Targets Scottish teens

Anna is convinced that the organised grooming, raping and trafficking of young girls is happening in Scottish cities.

Last month, seven Asian men in Oxford were jailed for offences against girls as young as 11, including rape, sexual activity with a child and trafficking.

The pattern was familiar to Anna - older men befriending young girls, flattering and grooming them, plying them with alcohol and isolating them from family and friends.

They would rape the girls and pass them around other friends, beating and threatening them to maintain their silence.

Anna, who is based in Leeds, said: "It's a case of lift the stone and you will find it.

"Look for 11 to 14-year-olds, who regularly go missing for short periods and you're probably looking at kids at risk of being exploited.

"The Oxford sex gang started in 2004 - the year our first documentary was broadcast. So you can't say no one knew these things were happening.

"It makes me angry and sad when I think of the victims who have suffered since then because no one was doing anything about it. Even when girls were brave enough to speak out, they weren't believed."



**DANGER** Members of the Oxford sex gang and, main, a scene from Anna's bombshell documentary



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