

## Written evidence from Agenda Alliance for the House of Commons Education Select Committee Call for Evidence into *Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils*

February 2023

### Summary

---

1. [Agenda Alliance](https://www.agendaalliance.org/) exists to make a difference to the lives of women and girls who are at the sharpest end of inequality. We are an alliance of over 100 member organisations – from large, national bodies to smaller, specialist organisations – working in collaboration to influence public policy and practice to respond appropriately to women and girls with multiple, complex unmet needs: <https://www.agendaalliance.org/>
2. Our five-year strategy includes a focus on reducing the numbers of official and unofficial exclusions of **girls and young women** – considering both the structural reasons behind exclusions, as well as the impact of lack of support for those with multiple unmet needs. We welcome this enquiry, and the opportunity to provide this evidence.
3. Whilst persistent absences are a concern for all young people in education, we urge the committee to consider the specific challenges facing girls due to their gendered differences in the needs and experiences. Given that lower number of girls are persistently absent or excluded compared to boys, their needs are often overlooked in policy making and practice. Yet in doing this, research into why girls may be absent from school has not been systemically undertaken, appropriate data is not gathered and limited targeted support or policies have been developed to meet their needs.

### Full response

---

#### The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils

1. Girls experience unique and gendered harms that can lead to excessive absence from school. Pupils who disengage, and those excluded from education, often face considerable disadvantage such as poor mental health, violence, abuse and exploitation, poverty and discrimination.<sup>1</sup> These challenges are particularly acute for girls.
  - a. Girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse at home. Before the age of 16, 15-20% of girls are estimated to have experienced childhood sexual abuse, compared

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2015/16, 1 in 50 children in the general population was recognised as having a social, emotional and mental health need – this rose to 1 in 2 amongst children who were excluded from mainstream education ([Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017](#)). Research has identified that excluded children frequently discuss challenges in their home lives, often including reference to experience of violence and abuse ([Department for Education, 2019](#)) and children who are ‘children in need’ (children whose home lives have prompted interactions with social care) are permanently excluded from education at almost three times the rate of their peers ([Department for Education, 2020](#)) In 2020, 47% of children in pupil referral units were eligible for free school meals (the standard measure for poverty in schools) compared to 15% of the secondary school population at large. ([Department for Education, 2020](#))

- to 7-8% of boys.<sup>2</sup> In one study, one in three girls, aged 13 to 17, reported some form of sexual violence by their partner, compared to one in six boys.<sup>3</sup>
- b. Girls are more likely than boys to suffer from a mental health condition or to self-harm. In 2016, 65% of young people detained under the mental health act, were girls, and a larger proportion of those girls were under 16 compared to boys.<sup>4</sup>
  - c. It is common for girls to internalise their distress, meaning their challenges may go unnoticed by professionals until they have reached crisis point. This in turn can lead to absenteeism. These instances of mental health conditions resulting in absenteeism are even more prevalent for those girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>
  - d. Poverty can further exacerbate instances of girls missing school through 'period poverty' whereby girls cannot afford, and do not have access to, sanitary products.<sup>6</sup>
2. Many of the young women we interviewed as part of our Girls Speak project attributed their school exclusion to poor mental health, stemming from experiences of violence, abuse, and trauma.<sup>7</sup> These challenges are often compounded by discrimination and inequalities, such as gender-inequality and racism.
  3. Trauma can also display as disruptive behaviour, leading to a disciplinary response through official or unofficial exclusions, rather than addressing the root cause of the trauma.

### Exclusions and suspensions amongst girls

4. Despite being at the forefront of dealing with severe and complex problems, schools are not always equipped to identify and respond to the challenges facing girls who are responding to harmful and challenging circumstances. Official data indicates that "persistent disruptive behaviour" is the most cited reason for all exclusions. Practitioners we interviewed for Girls Speak warned that girls who 'misbehave' are often treated more punitively because they are seen to be contravening gender norms.<sup>8</sup>
5. This can create a harmful narrative where girls are blamed for the challenges they face and are labelled as 'risky' or 'hard to reach'. Girls can internalise these labels and feel further stigmatised and socially excluded as a result.

---

<sup>2</sup> McNeish and Scott (2018) Key messages from research on intra-familial child sexual abuse. Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

<sup>3</sup> Barter, C et al (2009) Partner Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships.

<sup>4</sup> Hales, H. et al. (2018) Census of young people in secure settings on 14 September 2016: characteristics, needs and pathways of care

<sup>5</sup> Klein, M, Sosu, E M., Dare, S (2020) Mapping inequalities in school attendance: The relationship between dimensions of socioeconomic status and forms of school absence.

<sup>6</sup> Plan International UK. (2017) [Plan International UK's Research on Period Poverty and Stigma.](#)

<sup>7</sup> Agenda Alliance (2022) Girls Speak 'Pushed Out, Left Out'

<sup>8</sup> Department for Education (2022) Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England.

## Pupils from racially minoritised backgrounds

6. This response to 'disruptive behaviour' can be compounded for Black young women, with restraint disproportionately used on all Black and minoritised young people, including in education, but inconsistently recorded.<sup>9</sup>
7. A Freedom of information (FOI) request submitted by Agenda Alliance in August 2022 found that – while the overall number of permanent exclusions fell as a result of the pandemic – the rate of exclusions for mixed white and Black Caribbean girls in 2020-2021 remained three times the rate of their white British counterparts, the same rate as the previous year. Furthermore, in 2020-2021, Gypsy Roma girls were suspended from school at over three times the rate of their white British counterparts.<sup>10</sup>
8. Black girls are also more likely to experience 'adultification' by professionals - a process "whereby children are perceived as more adult-like, responded to through a lens of 'deviancy', not acknowledged as 'deserving' victims".<sup>11</sup> This can lead to professionals assuming Black girls have greater levels of maturity and less 'innocence' than their white peers,<sup>12</sup> and downplaying their safeguarding responsibilities as practitioners. This may result in Black girls receiving less support and services to address their needs, as when they present in the education system they can be seen as primarily posing a risk to others, rather than as vulnerable children in their own right. This was seen very clearly in the case of the teenager known as Child Q, who was strip-searched by female police officers after being wrongly suspected of carrying cannabis at school.<sup>13</sup>

## Sexual harassment and violence in education

9. Sexual abuse and harassment experienced within mainstream education settings can also be a driver of persistent absences amongst girls.<sup>14</sup> When girls disclose this kind of abuse, they are not always believed by teaching staff or public service staff, suggesting a clear lack of gender, age, trauma, and culturally responsive awareness and training amongst education professionals. An Agenda Alliance FOI request revealed that only a handful of local authorities have specific policies on sexual harassment and violence in education.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2021) [Restraint in schools inquiry: using meaningful data to protect children's rights](#).

<sup>10</sup> Agenda (2022) [Serious concerns about racial disparity among girls 'kicked out' of school](#).

<sup>11</sup> Jahnine Davis (2022) [Adultification bias of black children: Q&A with Jahnine Davis](#)

<sup>12</sup> Davis, J. (2019) [Where are the Black girls in our CSA services, studies and statistics?!](#), Community Care.

Davis, J (2022) [Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding](#)

<sup>13</sup> The Guardian (2022) [Child Q: four Met police officers facing investigation over strip-search](#)

<sup>14</sup> Agenda Alliance (2022) [Girls Speak 'Pushed Out, Left Out'](#)

<sup>15</sup> In 2019, Agenda submitted Freedom of Information requests to 159 local authorities to explore the number and nature of incidents of violence and sexual violence that had been recorded in pupil referral units in the academic year 2018/19, as well as the availability of gender-specific provision available locally for girls excluded from mainstream education. Our research found significant geographical variation in what data was collected on violent and sexual incidents. Some local authorities only recorded incidents worthy of expulsion, while many incidents were grouped under "sexual misconduct". There was one recorded incident of alleged rape. These inconsistencies may be symptomatic of the fact that, of those we asked, only a handful of local authorities had specific policies on sexual harassment and violence in education. Only 5 local authorities reported having specific provision for girls.

A recent study showed that 80% of girls think schools need to do more to support young people's sex and relationships education, and to tackle sexual harassment in schools.<sup>16</sup>

10. One young woman told us:

*"I went to a professional and opened up that I was sexually harassed and was continuing to be harassed on school property. All they did was laugh. Then, [the teacher] went..."Why do you even care? Why are you even letting it bother you?" [When a police officer came into school to take a statement], he said, "Tell me, from your point of view, what was going on?" I told him everything. I just laid it all out. I was sobbing and sobbing and sobbing. Then, he said, "Well, to be honest with you, you just need to stop bitching and lying."*

– Millie, 18, who was being sexually harassed by a male student at her school<sup>17</sup>

### Pupils in alternative provision

11. As a result of being male dominated and primarily set up to meet the needs of young men excluded from education, Pupil referral units (PRUs) are not equipped to offer the support or care that girls need.<sup>18</sup> National figures from England showed that in 2020/21, girls made up 27% of pupils registered to attend PRUs. Yet our FOI found only a handful of local authorities have specialist support available for girls who have been excluded.

12. Girls within PRUs told us that they feel unsafe and uncomfortable, and often withdraw as a result.

*"I think I'm the only girl in today. I've actually complained about this before... They did move more girls into my form, but they're never in... And you just get boys everywhere and it ain't nice"*

– Gemma, 15<sup>19</sup>

13. Girls who are formally excluded or referred to alternative education settings go on to face further problems.

*"In alternative provision settings... As a young person in that environment, you feel like the bottom of the barrel sometimes. There were times when I'd go missing for months and months and nobody made a phone call... That creates a real sense of unimportant-ness. To know that you're supposed to be somewhere by law, but no one actually cares if you're there or not..."*

– Laila, 19<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> End Violence Against Women (2023) [Schools: It's about time things changed](#)

<sup>17</sup> Agenda Alliance (2022) [Girls Speak 'Pushed Out, Left Out'](#)

<sup>18</sup> Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls at Risk of Exclusion briefing](#)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## Self-exclusion and disengagement from education

14. Without support to respond to the challenges they face, girls can also 'self-exclude' - whereby they disengage from education and do not attend school. A 2020 local research study conducted in Cheshire West and Chester, found girls were more likely than boys to experience 'functional exclusion' from school. This included persistent absence (when pupils miss more than 10% of school days), school change<sup>21</sup> or 'early exit'<sup>22</sup> (including as a result of off-rolling, whereby students are removed from the school roll without use of a permanent exclusion).<sup>23</sup>
15. Once outside of education, either through exclusion, suspension, or not attending school, girls are more susceptible to experience child sexual exploitation, as they are more likely to be targeted by exploitative adults.<sup>24</sup>

*"I would never be at school – I would walk around the area until school finished. One time, I bumped into a couple of people that were a bit older. Like grown men. I started spending time with them...To be honest, I had nowhere else to go. They had a house – there was shelter, food... That's all anyone wants really. They wanted me to do stuff for them, like sell drugs, and other stuff like that..."*

– Amelia, 18<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion and recommendations

---

16. Girls with multiple unmet needs experience a range of issues that contribute to instances of persistent absence. On top of this, these unmet needs can contribute to education professionals labelling girls as difficult or disruptive, leading to formal or informal exclusion.
17. Once excluded, girls face a series of escalating risks and negative outcomes. In alternative provision, they may face further harassment and abuse in a male-dominated environment. It is also clear that there are lasting mental health impacts associated with exclusion<sup>26</sup>, as well as clear links to child criminal and sexual exploitation. Seventy-four percent of girls in youth custody have previously been permanently excluded, compared to 63% of boys.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> School change or a school move occurs when a pupil is moved between one mainstream schools to another, between school censuses. Research shows a significant overlap between pupils who 'self-exclude' through persistent absence, and pupils who experience a school move or fixed-term exclusions. Social Finance (2020) [Who's at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester](#).

<sup>22</sup> An early exit occurs when a pupil leaves a mainstream secondary school prior to the final census return in Year 11 and does not move to a special school or pupil referral unit. This could occur for several reasons, including attending an educational setting out of area, being home educated, or off-rolling. Social Finance (2020) [Who's at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester](#).

<sup>23</sup> Social Finance (2020) [Who's at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester](#).

<sup>24</sup> Sharp-Jeffs, N. et al. (2017) [Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Professionals in school settings](#).

<sup>25</sup> Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls at Risk of Exclusion briefing](#)

<sup>26</sup> Agenda Alliance (2022) Young Women's Justice Project 'We've Not Given Up'

<sup>27</sup> Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2016), [Education in Youth Custody](#).

For many girls, exclusion becomes part of a spiral, which can see them criminalised and further marginalised.

18. To respond to these challenges, we recommend the following to begin to tackle the root causes of persistent absences in girls in schools and education setting:
  - a. The Department for Education (DfE) must update specific guidance on school suspensions and permanent exclusions, to encourage a gender-specific approach in schools and colleges and to take into account racial inequalities for Black and minoritised girls.
  - b. The Department for Education must improve data collection by:
    - i. routinely publishing suspensions and exclusions data in a way that enables analysis by age, sex and ethnicity; and
    - ii. collecting and publish data on the on the numbers, types and drivers of school exclusions for girls and the characteristics of girls experiencing formal and informal exclusion - disaggregated across all protected characteristics.
  - c. The Women and Equalities Select Committee (WESC) and Education Select Committee should launch a joint inquiry into girls at-risk in education settings, including alternative provision, building on this enquiry from the Education Select Committee and the WESC inquiry into “Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings” (2022). The purpose of this review should be to understand the drivers behind girls’ official and unofficial exclusions, and assess the level of support available to girls excluded from education and at-risk of exclusion. The review should identify appropriate solutions to drive gender-specific inclusion measures.
  - d. The Department for Education and local authorities must fund trauma-informed, gender- and culturally-specific alternative provision for girls which supports them in, and outside, school in order to address the underlying causes of challenges they face. This should be developed and delivered in partnership with the women and girls’ sector, including “by and for” services and girls and young women with lived experience of multiple unmet needs.
  - e. Department for Education should fund and incentivise education settings to invest in training and accompanying practical guidance on how to work with girls and young women in a gender-, age-, trauma-, and culturally- responsive way. This should:
    - i. Support education professionals to develop reflective approaches embedded in daily practice with a focus on anti-oppressive ways of working with marginalised groups of girls.
    - ii. Include standalone adultification training, designed and delivered by specialist “by and for” services that work with Black women and girls that are fully remunerated for their time.
  - f. To address the underlying issues which lead to girls disengaging from education, the Government Equalities Office (GEO), Department for Education (DfE), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) should jointly lead on a cross-departmental and gendered national strategy to address the social and economic challenges facing girls and

young women at-risk, including barriers to and exclusion from support with a focus on advancing equalities across all protected characteristics. This strategy should:

- i. Include clear cross-departmental targets for reducing the number of girls and young women with experience of (i) poor mental health, (ii) violence, abuse, and exploitation, (iii) poverty, (iv) contact with the criminal justice system, and (v) school exclusions and (vi) homelessness. The strategy should be supported by sufficient cross-departmental resources to meet these targets.
- ii. Include ring-fenced multi-year, core, and unrestricted funding for gender-specialist and community-based services to reach the most marginalised girls and young women, including “by and for” services, and the critical role of advocates that support girls and young women to navigate systems and services.
- iii. Require local authorities to develop clear, publicly available, and fully resourced strategic plans for addressing the needs of girls and young women with specific reference to the needs of Black, Asian, and minoritised girls and young women.

**For more information please contact:**

Tara Harris, Policy and Public Affairs Officer

[Tara@agendaalliance.org](mailto:Tara@agendaalliance.org)