

## Agenda Alliance – Written evidence (PSC0035)

### Written Evidence from Agenda for the House of Lords Select Committee on Public Services Inquiry into *The role of public services in addressing child vulnerability*

#### Summary

1. Agenda is an alliance of over 100 organisations working in England and Wales to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. Through our Girls Speak programme, Agenda campaigns for some of the most marginalised, misrepresented and misunderstood girls and young women (aged 14 to 24) – those who face multiple disadvantage.
2. Agenda welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry, and are encouraged to see attention given to children at the sharpest end of inequalities, with a focus on improving public services' ability to intervene early and tackle underlying causes of vulnerability.
3. Girls and young women (herein 'girls') facing multiple disadvantage have complex, overlapping needs stemming from experiences of violence, abuse and exploitation, poor mental health, substance use, experience of the care system, exclusion from education, contact with the youth justice system and poverty.
4. There are significant gendered differences in the rates at which girls and boys experience these vulnerabilities, the impact of these, and how public services respond. To address the underlying causes of girls' vulnerability and avoid missing opportunities to intervene, public services must be equipped to recognise and respond to girls' age- and gender-specific experiences of trauma, disadvantage and discrimination.
5. To ensure public services can address the growing problem of child vulnerability, Agenda recommends:
  - a. **A central government commitment to taking a cross-departmental and gendered approach** to addressing the social and economic challenges facing girls, with a focus on advancing equalities across all protected characteristics. This should be **overseen by a named Minister** to take responsibility for the social recovery for women and girls following the pandemic and development of a long-term strategy.
  - b. **All government departments take a gendered approach to future youth policy, education and mental health announcements with funding attached.** This should be supported by strengthened guidance for local authorities to invest in gender-specific youth services, include ring-fenced funding for specialist women and girls' services and equality monitoring frameworks to identify how policy outcomes impact girls.

- c. **The independent review of children’s social care Lead Reviewer to ensure that this work includes a focus on girls’ experiences and how gender-specific support for care-experienced girls can be developed** through the interaction of social care, public and statutory services, and the specialist women and girls’ sector.
- d. **The new Education Recovery Commissioner’s Action Plan to engage with the women and girls’ voluntary sector as experts on the needs of girls facing multiple disadvantage**, and advise the Department for Education on how best to support a gender- and trauma-informed return to the classroom, and engage most effectively with specialist services to do so.
- e. **The Home Office’s forthcoming Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy and Domestic Abuse Bill Statutory Guidance to ensure the mental health impacts of VAWG and the full range of ways in which girls experience VAWG are recognised** and responded to in a joined-up way across government departments.
- f. **Professionals in public services to be trained to recognise, ask about and respond to girls’ experiences of trauma**, accompanied by age-appropriate, gender-sensitive support and pathways into care as part of a trauma-informed approach to working with girls which prioritises prevention and early intervention.

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Full response

**Defining child vulnerability (question 1)**

- 6. Girls facing multiple disadvantage have complex, overlapping needs stemming from experiences of violence, abuse and exploitation, poor mental health, substance use, experience of the care system, exclusion from education, contact with the youth justice system and poverty.<sup>1</sup> The challenges they face are mutually reinforcing but are all too often overlooked by services, or considered in isolation.<sup>2</sup>
- 7. Whilst not experienced exclusively by girls, there are significant gendered differences in the rates at which girls and boys experience these forms of vulnerability, the impact of these, and how public services respond. For example, girls experience higher rates of violence and abuse<sup>3</sup> and, particularly as they approach adulthood, higher rates of mental ill-than boys.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> McNeish, D. and Scott, S. (2014) [Women and girls at risk: evidence across the life course](#). Barrow Cadbury Trust, LankellyChase and Pilgrim Trust.

<sup>2</sup> Agenda (2020) [Struggling Alone: Girls’ and young women’s mental health](#).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to living with domestic abuse in the home ([Guy et al., 2014](#)), girls experience high levels of coercion and abuse in their own relationships ([ONS, 2015](#)). They are at greater risk than boys of experiencing sexual abuse from family members ([Kelly and Karsna, 2018](#)) and child sexual exploitation is most frequently observed amongst girls aged 12–15 ([Department for Education, 2017](#)).

8. Even where girls are less visible in the statistics, they are no less at risk. Whilst less likely to be formally excluded from school, Agenda research shows that girls in Pupil Referral Units are at risk of sexual harassment and violence in these male-dominated settings, although many of these incidents go unrecorded.<sup>5</sup> Whilst girls are less likely than boys to spend time in care, those that do are more likely to become young parents and have their own children taken into care. Although a minority in the criminal justice system, girls and young women (16–21) in prison are more likely to have been in care,<sup>6</sup> and girls who die by suicide are more likely to have experiences of both the care and criminal justice system than boys who die this way.<sup>7</sup>
9. To identify and address the underlying causes of vulnerability for girls, public services must work from a definition of child vulnerability which makes explicit the role that gender plays in driving and determining their experiences of disadvantage. It is important that services also recognise that vulnerability can be further compounded by forms of inequality faced on the basis of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, migration status, sexual orientation, gender identity and dis/ability.

### **How well do public services address underlying causes of child vulnerability within families? (question 2)**

10. With all key youth funding announcements since 2018<sup>8</sup> and flagship COVID-19 youth recovery funds 'gender-neutral', services for children and young people are limited in their direction and ability to deliver gender-responsive support.<sup>9</sup> Rarely designed with girls age- and gender-specific needs in mind, public services and systems can fail to offer effective support for girls. Unseen and left without help, vulnerable girls often come to the attention of services once risk has escalated and harm has occurred.
11. Services working with adult women say the needs of the women they work with are increasing, becoming more complex and entrenched,<sup>10</sup> also suggesting that services are not getting things right at an early enough stage for girls.
12. Speaking with Agenda, one young woman with experience of the care system from a young age reflected on what she saw as a number of missed opportunities to identify and address the underlying causes of her vulnerability: "**They should have dealt with things properly. They**

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<sup>4</sup> Girls and young women aged 16–24 are three times more likely to have a common mental health problem than their male counterparts (NHS, 2016). This is concerning, with half of all mental health problems which persist throughout someone's life appearing before the age of 14, and three quarters appearing by the age of 24 (Kessler et al., 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Southgate, J. (2020) 'Have we forgotten about girls in PRUs?', Tes.

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Justice Committee (2016) [Young adults in the criminal justice system: Eighth Report of Session 2017–19](#).

<sup>7</sup> Rodway, C. et al. (2020) 'Children and young people who die by suicide: childhood-related antecedents, differences and service contact', BJPsych Open, 6 (3).

<sup>8</sup> Agenda (2020) [Struggling Alone: Girls' and young women's mental health](#).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Agenda Girls Speak roundtable with women and girls' services, May 2020.

***should have listened to what I had said... I wouldn't have gone through the things that I went through.*** – Anonymous, 19

13. Agenda research has identified responses to girls' mental ill-health as a key area of concern, with public services struggling to identify and address the underlying causes of their poor mental health – including experiences of abuse, poverty and other forms of disadvantage and discrimination.<sup>11</sup> This means the true extent of girls' problems are often overlooked, leaving many without the right support. Where risks are identified, they tend to be looked at in isolation and experiences of abuse and poverty may not always be identified as linked with girls' poor mental health.<sup>12</sup>
14. In statutory services, practitioners' lack of knowledge relating to identification of and responses to 'root causes' of poor mental health, particularly violence and abuse, has been identified as of concern.<sup>13</sup> This presents a challenge to the development of approaches prioritising prevention and early intervention, highlighting a need for professionals in mental health services to be trained to recognise, ask about and respond to these drivers of poor mental health for girls. This must be accompanied by age-appropriate, gender-sensitive support and pathways into care. Professionals in other public services girls come into contact with must also be trained to understand the links between girls' experiences of vulnerability, trauma and inequality.

## **Central Government responses to vulnerable children**

### ***Recovering from the effects of COVID-19 (question 3)***

15. Agenda's *Voices From Lockdown* research, which surveyed women and girls' organisations at three intervals over the first year of the pandemic, found that girls facing multiple disadvantage have been among the most adversely impacted groups by COVID-19 and the response to it.
16. Out of school and less visible to services, girls' existing vulnerabilities have been exacerbated and new concerns have developed, with heightened risk of violence, abuse and exploitation<sup>14</sup> and growing rates of child poverty<sup>15</sup> exacerbating the serious and growing rates of poor mental health for girls prior to the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> Of ten specialist girls' organisations consulted by Agenda, all agreed that the pandemic has made existing mental health problems worse for girls, with eight out of 10 citing a lack of access to appropriate mental health support as a cause for concern in the future as the UK emerges from the pandemic.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Agenda (2020) [Struggling Alone: Girls' and young women's mental health](#).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Horvath, M. et al. (2013) [Still not receiving the support they deserve... Final evaluation report for The Stella Project Young Women's Initiative](#), Forensic Psychological Services and AVA.

<sup>14</sup> Agenda (2020) [Voices From Lockdown: A chance for change – Interim findings report, August 2020](#).

<sup>15</sup> Office of the Children's Commissioner (2020) [Fact checking claims about child poverty](#).

<sup>16</sup> Agenda (2020) [Struggling Alone: Girls' and young women's mental health](#).

<sup>17</sup> Agenda (2021) *Voices From Lockdown: A way forward for women and girls. Forthcoming.*

17. As the UK enters the recovery phase of the coronavirus crisis, it is vital that central Government takes steps to ensure that the girls most affected by the pandemic are supported in relation to the social and economic challenges they and their families face.
18. This should include cross-departmental central Government coordination of public services to gather regional data on the impact of the pandemic on children, disaggregated by age and gender to support local and combined authorities to identify and respond to gaps in provision for girls facing at risk.

#### **Coordination across Government departments (question 4)**

19. Girls are rarely recognised as a distinct group in key policy areas affecting their lives. This includes issues which they are disproportionately impacted by, such as mental health and domestic abuse, as well as those where policy responses appear to be gender neutral but are designed around the needs of boys and young men, such as exclusions and 'serious youth violence'. This means that – time and again – policies, strategies and reviews largely fail to recognise the needs of girls as distinct from those of boys.
20. A lack of central government 'ownership' of issues facing girls has contributed to the side-lining of girls' multiple and mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities over a number of government terms. Whilst a dedicated policy 'home' within Government would be beneficial in terms of raising the profile of girls facing multiple disadvantage, the range of challenges facing this group span a broad range of key policy areas. A gender-sensitive response to vulnerable girls is necessarily a joined-up one, involving collaborative working between a number of governmental departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care, Home Office, Department for Education, Ministry of Justice and Government Equalities Office.

#### **Working with public services (questions 5 and 9)**

21. This lack of attention to girls' needs in policy translates directly into what gets measured, who gets heard and what gets funded.
22. With models of support for children and young people regularly built around boys and young men's lives, youth services were already limited in their ability to deliver gender-responsive support. Having experienced a 70% reduction in funding between 2010/11 and 2018/19,<sup>18</sup> this has been exacerbated, with more specialist provision often the first to be cut when youth service budgets reduce.
23. Despite pockets of good practice, there is limited provision for girls tailored to their age- and gender-specific needs, and little specialist provision for girls with intersecting, marginalised identities, including Black and minoritised girls and LGBTQ+ girls. Girls and young women can report feeling alienated from both gender-neutral youth services and services for adult women, describing both as "**not for them**".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> YMCA (2020) [Out of Service: A report examining local authority expenditure on youth services in England & Wales](#).

<sup>19</sup> Agenda (2020) [Struggling Alone: Girls' and young women's mental health](#).

24. Specialist women and girls' services, including those led by and for minoritised groups, play a critical role in providing holistic, wraparound support for girls at risk, and are often best-placed to deliver preventative and early intervention work which is flexible and accessible over time. Girls who have experienced both gender-specific and gender-neutral youth support often report a strong preference for girl-only services, and where there are examples of age-appropriate, gender-specific local practice, girls tell us that these should be developed and maximised – ***"There should be more clubs for girls. I think there should be more youth centres for us women to open [up] and talk about our personal stuff... [T]his place has helped me, I'd be lost without it."*** – Anonymous, 17
25. This underscores the need for specialist, independent provision to become a core component of responses to vulnerable girls in a range of public service settings, and for gender- and age-informed practice to become embedded in statutory provision. Women's and girls' services report challenges developing the partnerships with education, social care and youth service partners needed to grow this area of work, however.
26. To facilitate this, central Government must recognise the critical role played by women and girls' services in future youth, education and mental health policy announcements with funding attached, requiring key public and statutory services to work together with the specialist women and girls' sector.

### **Levelling up and local responses to vulnerable children (questions 6, 7, 8 and 10)**

27. In 2013, an evaluation of specialist provision for girls and young women aged 14–25 drew attention to the "virtually non-existent" examples of policy and procedure addressing girls and young women with complex, overlapping needs at agency or borough level.<sup>20</sup> As outlined on page 4, this observation is also borne out at a national level.
28. Where specialist provision is available locally, evaluations frequently articulate concerns about the long-term sustainability of positive outcomes these services produce. This comes as a result of short-term funding cycles and a tendency for these services to 'hold' cases for longer than anticipated – working with girls beyond the timeframe or criteria set by commissioners due to a lack of alternative support available from statutory services for those deemed to have less urgent support needs.<sup>21</sup>
29. To address cross-cutting issues affecting girls, local and combined authorities should play a stronger convening role to ensure local systems and services work for girls facing multiple disadvantage, taking a 'helicopter view' of a whole system response, and encouraging collaboration between women and girls' and children and young people's services, including providing a platform for good practice.

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<sup>20</sup> Horvath, M. et al. (2013) [Still not receiving the support they deserve... Final evaluation report for The Stella Project Young Women's Initiative](#), Forensic Psychological Services and AVA.

<sup>21</sup> Agenda and Alliance for Youth Justice (2021) [Young Women's Justice Project Literature Review](#)

30. In addition to commissioning specialist girls' services to fill these gaps where needed, local and combined authorities should build incentives into commissioning processes to encourage mainstream services to work collaboratively with the women and girls' voluntary sector. The specialist women and girls' voluntary sector should be fully involved at key stages of the commissioning cycle, decision making, data collection and evaluation.
31. Central Government should support this by introducing requirements around collation of data relating to different forms of child vulnerability (including VAWG, looked after children, exclusions and youth justice) disaggregated by age, gender and ethnicity to ensure that gendered patterns and trends are not overlooked. Future youth policy announcements should include provision for evaluation of services and development of the core components of an age-, gender- and trauma-informed response to vulnerable children, sensitive to local need.

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