

Agenda's response to the Mental Health APPG inquiry into the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health

June 2018

Introduction

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. We welcome in particular the APPG's interest in the areas that were missed in the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health, and which could be a focus for mental health strategy post 2021. Agenda is concerned that, aside from a specific and important focus on women's perinatal services, the Five Year Forward View does not make reference to women's mental health needs more broadly, nor to the links between women's mental health and experiences of trauma linked to gender based violence. We would like to see a clear call from the APPG for Mental Health for a specific focus on women's mental health in the next Five Year Forward View for Mental Health.

Women's mental health

Mental ill health amongst women has increased, with women more likely than men to face mental health problems, particularly conditions like eating disorders, self-harm, anxiety and depression.¹ Whilst rates of suicide in men remain far higher, rates amongst young women have risen and are now the highest in two decades.² Young women are at the greatest risk of developing mental health problems: one in five 16-to-24-year-olds has self-harmed and 13% have post-traumatic stress disorder.³ Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women face additional inequalities and challenges to their mental health, such as racism and stigma, and black women are at increased risk of mental ill health.⁴

Experiences of abuse and trauma

Evidence shows that women's mental health is closely linked to gendered life experiences, including abuse and violence. Sexual exploitation, abuse and violence are huge drivers of trauma and poor mental health in women - more than half of women with mental health problems have experienced abuse⁵, a trend which is particularly pronounced for women who experience more severe mental health problems.

Women and girls who have suffered violence and abuse across their lives can be deeply traumatised and go on to face multiple problems like poor mental and physical health and turning to drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms. Agenda's Hidden Hurt report⁶ found one in 20 women have experienced extensive physical and sexual violence as both a child and an adult: that's 1.2million women in England alone. More than three quarters of these women will have experienced life-threatening trauma; half have a common mental health condition; one in three have an alcohol problem and one in five have been homeless. For some of these women abuse, violence, and disadvantage combine meaning they have very complex, overlapping needs. Poor mental health underpins many of the other issues they face. Without the right support women can spiral from crisis to crisis, with huge resulting costs to them, their families and society as a whole.

Mental health services

Women with more severe mental health problems, especially those who have experienced violence and abuse, need holistic support to tackle the underlying issues they face. Yet many struggle to get that support from mental health services. Agenda's research shows that mental health trusts are failing to take into account women's specific needs. Only one trust who responded to an FOI request by Agenda⁷ had a women's mental health strategy, while fewer than half had a policy on asking about

¹ NHS Digital, *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014*

² ONS, *Suicides in the UK: 2016*

³ NHS Digital, *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014*

⁴ Cabinet Office, *Race Disparity Audit, 2017*

⁵ Scott, S. & McManus, S. (2016), *Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women*. DMSS research for Agenda.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Agenda, *Women's needs in mental health services: a response to an FOI request, 2016*

experiences of violence and abuse. The vast majority of trusts had no policies on offering proactive support to women who disclose abuse, beyond meeting their basic safeguarding responsibilities.

Worryingly, women and girls are regularly and repeatedly physical restrained in mental health settings, including in a face-down position.⁸ Using physical restraint risks re-traumatising women who have experienced physical or sexual abuse and violence. Agenda is also concerned that women detained under the Mental Health Act are not receiving the support they need and may be put at risk of further traumatisation.⁹ Awareness of women's particular mental health needs, including their experiences of abuse is vital to promoting women's recovery.

Women with mental health problems report that they want gender-specific support, which works holistically to help them resolve their needs. Many women state that such an approach helps them to feel safe in services, to truly address the causes of their problems, and to build trusting relationships with practitioners.¹⁰ For women who have experienced abuse, a female-only space, including female staff, can help them feel physically safe enough to engage in treatment. Where mental health problems are linked to or rooted in gendered trauma, an awareness and understanding of that trauma and women's responses to it is essential for practitioners to deliver effective therapies.

What do we want to see?

Agenda would like to see women's particular needs, including their experiences of abuse and violence to be prioritised and taken seriously in policy, strategy and delivery. This includes:

1. The development of a national women's mental health strategy.
2. Every mental health trust having a clinical lead for women's mental health and a women's mental health strategy.
3. Women-only dedicated specialist services available in every area to provide a safe, therapeutic space and women being offered the choice of a female practitioner.
4. A trauma-informed approach to be standard across mental health services and frontline NHS workers being trained to understand that women's mental health, trauma and abuse are often closely linked.
5. 'Routine enquiry', where trained staff ask patients about women's experience of violence and abuse, to be standard practice across mental health services and be accompanied by proper support and pathways into care.
6. The use of face-down restraint to be ended and other forms of physical restraint used only as a last resort.

What can the Mental Health APPG do?

We urge the Mental Health APPG to call for the particular experiences of women and girls' with mental health problems to be made a priority in any refresh of the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health, as well as calling for women's needs to be recognised in all other mental health policy, strategy, and delivery.

Agenda is pleased to see that there have been some advancements in this area recently. Last year the Department for Health and Social Care set up the Women's Mental Health Taskforce, which will report in the autumn and which Agenda's Director Co-chairs. NHS England recently announced plans to offer lifetime therapy for survivors of sexual violence, and the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill currently going through parliament aims to significantly reduce the use of restraint in mental health settings, including by providing training on the impact of trauma on mental health patients.

However, despite some promising signs, women's particular mental health needs are yet to be fully integrated into mental health policy, strategy and delivery. Not only does the current Five Year Forward View for Mental Health not recognise the full range of women's needs, but the recent

⁸ Agenda, *The use of restraint on women and girls in mental health units: a response to an FOI request*, 2017

⁹ Agenda submission to the Independent Review of the Mental Health Act Call for Evidence, 2018

¹⁰ Department of Health, *Mainstreaming Gender and Women's Mental Health: Implementation Guidance*, 2004

Children and Young People's Mental Health Green Paper did not highlight or respond to the particular needs of girls and young women, the most at-risk group for mental health problems. The recently published Mental Health Act Review Interim Report did not focus on the particular needs of women either.

We would like to see the Mental Health APPG call for women's mental health needs to be recognised in Government mental health strategy following 2021, as well as in all mental health policy being considered and delivered before the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health ends.

About Agenda

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. We campaign for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness to get the support and protection they need. Our Women in Mind campaign is calling for women and girls' mental health to be made a priority and action taken to ensure they get the support they need, when they need it.

www.weareagenda.org/campaigns

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