

Agenda's response to the Education Committee inquiry into Foundation Years and the Government's life chances strategy

24 February 2016

Introduction

Agenda welcomes this inquiry and the recognition that children's early years are determined not just by the education they receive, but also by wider factors. These include children's wellbeing and the stability of the environments in which they grow up.

For children growing up in the most disadvantaged families, parental experiences of abuse, institutionalisation, poverty, ill-health and addiction are common and can shape children's life chances. Children from the 5% most disadvantaged households – those facing a combination of poverty, mental illness, substance misuse, abuse and violence, and other adverse situations - are more than 50 times more likely to have multiple problems at age 30 than those from the top 50% of households¹. Girls who spend time in care are more likely to become teenage mothers, and have their own children taken into care².

The life chances strategy provides an opportunity to bring forward measures to break these patterns and so improve the life chances of some of the most disadvantaged children. Agenda believes that a specific focus on the role of mothers, who are often the sole or primary carer of children, and giving them the support they need to parent well will be key to the strategy's success.

Agenda recommends:

- The Government should recognise the critical role of mothers to children's life chances and target support to help mothers, including those with complex needs, to parent as well as possible. This should include providing a central pot of funding for specialist support for women with complex needs and their children
- The Government should take a joined up, strategic, cross-departmental approach to responding to mothers with complex needs, and through them boosting their children's life chances.
- Public services should take a gender and trauma informed approach to working with mothers with complex needs and know where specialist services exist for referrals.
- Local areas should take a strategic approach to improving children's life chances, including by ensuring the right services are effectively commissioned and funded for women with complex needs and that there is effective coordination of different agencies and organisations coming into contact with them

¹Feinstein, L and Sabates, R (2006), Predicting adult life outcomes from earlier signals: Identifying those at risk, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London

² "Almost a quarter of girls in care become Teenage mothers", BBC, January 2015
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-30882105>

1. The importance of mothers to children's life chances

- 1.1 As the Prime Minister acknowledged in his life chances speech, children's experiences in the earliest years have a demonstrable impact on their development and future life chances. Good primary care is essential to giving children the foundation they need to build character and resilience and engage in education, as well as protecting them from poor mental health and the risks of addiction. Poor care, or a lack of it, can cause serious damage³.
- 1.2 Many of the families that the Government's life chances strategy seeks to reach are headed by women alone. Single parent families are the group most likely to be in persistent poverty⁴, and 92% of single parents with dependent children are mothers⁵. In many cases, the fathers of their children are absent, unwilling or unable to get involved in raising children, meaning that realistically many of these mothers will always be the sole engaged parent.
- 1.3 Where families are headed by a couple, mothers still provide the majority of childcare⁶. Evidence has shown that a mother's life experiences have a strong predictive impact on her children, for example a mother's level of education has more impact on a child's cognitive ability and the nature of their home learning environment, than a father's level of education or even than household income⁷. Their role is therefore critical in a child's formative years and putting them in a position to parent well is the best way to make sure their children have good life chances.
- 1.4 Sadly we know that in many of the most excluded families, women and children experience violence and coercion at the hands of fathers and step-fathers⁸. Abuse has serious negative impacts on children's life chances, but often there is insufficient support to mothers to cope with these situations⁹.
- 1.5 In many cases women are advised that they must leave a violent partner, or face the possibility of their children being taken into care. The safety of children must always be paramount, and in some circumstances, care will be the safest option. But it's important to recognise that mothers often

³ Shonkoff JP, Garner AS (2012) [The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress](#). Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health; Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care; Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. Pediatrics.

⁴ ONS (2015) [Persistent poverty in the UK and EU, 2008-2013](#).

⁵ ONS (2015) [Families and Households 2014](#)

⁶ [http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=DELSA/ELSA/WD/SEM\(2011\)1&doclanguage=en](http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=DELSA/ELSA/WD/SEM(2011)1&doclanguage=en)

⁷ Equality and human Rights Commission (2008), [Early Years, Life Chances and Equality: a literature review](#)

⁸ Evan Stark and Anne Flitcraft (1996), Women and Children at Risk: A Feminist Perspective on Child Abuse (From Women at Risk: Domestic Violence and Women's Health, P 73-98

⁹ Women's Aid, (2014) [SOS: Save Refugees, Save Lives](#)

have very good reasons for not leaving, many linked to the wellbeing of their children. Leaving a violent partner, or asking him to leave, can be very dangerous, and perpetrators often respond by increasing their violence¹⁰. Many women are financially dependent on abusive men which can put significant barriers in the way of them leaving¹¹. Careful planning and specialist support is often essential to help women create safe situations for themselves and their children.

- 1.6 For children of single mothers, or mothers with violent partners, a focus on relationships will often not be the answer to the instability they face. For many families, relationship support is inappropriate, or even potentially harmful. Instead, targeted support to help mothers be good parents can help provide the foundation children need to support their life chances in the early years.

2. Mothers of disadvantaged children

- 2.1 Mothers in the most vulnerable households, those where children stand to gain most from the Government's life chances strategy, often have particularly complex needs. Many have extensive experiences of abuse and violence, poor mental and physical health and sometimes drug or alcohol dependencies as well as problems with debt, low skills and unemployment. These experiences can have a significant impact on their children.
- 2.2 Agenda research reveals that 1.2million women in England have experienced extensive abuse and violence as both a child and an adult¹². Many of these women have grown up in poverty, witnessing and experiencing abuse as children, and feeling the impact of parental mental illness, substance misuse, and housing need themselves. These problems have taken a significant toll on their life chances, leaving them vulnerable to further abuse and disadvantage as adults.
- 2.3 Around 77% of these women have children, and one in five have four or more children¹³. Their childhoods too often mirror those of their mothers, creating a pattern of disadvantage which passes down through generations.
- 2.4 For many of these women, low self-esteem and a sense of worthlessness can act as barriers to seeking support. But children can provide a great motivating force: even when a woman does not feel she deserves help for herself, she wants life to be better for her children. Many women with mental health problems want to get better for their children, while children provide a powerful motivator for women to stop using substances or stop offending behaviour.

¹⁰ Ontario Domestic Violence Death Review Committee (2008). [Annual report to the Chief Coroner. Toronto, ON: Office of the Chief Coroner.](#)

¹¹ Women's Aid, (2015) [Unequal trapped and controlled: Women's experiences of financial abuse and the potential implications for Universal Credit](#)

¹² DMSS Research for Agenda (2016), [Hidden Hurt](#)

¹³ *ibid*

- 2.5 There is therefore a real opportunity when women with complex needs have children to provide support which will improve the life chances of both the child and the mother together. If support for women is targeted at helping them help their children, whether through improving their health, parenting, or living situations, women are more likely to engage and stay motivated. Children will benefit both through the provision of direct support, and because their primary carer is better able to provide them with the care they need.
- 2.6 Women with children come into contact with a range of public services (including midwives, GPs, health visitors and social workers), meaning that there are more opportunities for engagement of women who are pregnant or who have young children.
- 2.7 When a woman's children are in the early years there is thus a window with a combination of opportunities and potential motivating factors for a woman to transform her life and to ensure those children grow up in a positive environment. However, too often support which could help women with complex needs and their children isn't there.

3. Specialist services

- 3.1 Specialist women's services have a key role to play in supporting women with complex needs to ensure their children have the best start possible. Specialist, holistic, trauma and gender-informed support services which understand the complexity of women lives can be very successful at helping families build more secure futures. They can offer support in a range of areas including around abuse and violence, mental health and wellbeing, addiction, housing, financial and debt advice, employment and parenting in safe women-only spaces alongside childcare and work with children.
- 3.2 Many of these services offer dedicated support to children who have experienced abuse or who have developed difficulties as a result of problems in the very early years. By helping mother and child together, they can give women the tools and grounding they need to best care for their children.
- 3.3 But many of these specialist services struggle to access funding dispersed across a number of different funding pots. In many areas, no specialist support is available at all. The quality of services also varies from area to area, with no consistency over what support is provided, for whom, and for how long.
- 3.4 Such services are crucial and must be prioritised. Agenda recommends a central pot of funding be provided for specialist support for women with complex needs. This could be used to help leverage in additional funding at a local level, encourage area based approaches to commissioning which are more holistic and joined up, and encourage better multi agency working.

4. Coordination of support

- 4.1 At the moment, the provision of support for this group of women and their children is frequently uncoordinated. Too often women and their children fall between the gaps in services or find they cannot access help because their needs are overlapping and support is not joined up. Services must work together to provide support to both mother and children, so that efforts to improve one aspect of a family's life are supported and enhanced by work on other issues.
- 4.2 The Government's commitment to tackling mental ill-health and substance abuse among parents, as well as to providing parenting support, is very welcome and we look forward to seeing further details. It will be important that these different support services are well co-ordinated and are gender and trauma informed and tailored to the particular needs of mothers.
- 4.3 The 'Troubled Families' approach is showing some signs of success in providing the kind of comprehensive multi-agency wraparound support needed, but there are still many families headed by women with complex needs not reached by the programme or whom the programme is not able to engage. The life chances strategy presents the opportunity to build a similar model, targeting mothers with the most complex needs, considering different ways to engage them and new models of support and delivery.

5. Public services

- 5.1 A cross-departmental approach is essential. All relevant government departments and agencies need to recognise and respond to the needs of this group in other areas, for example when devising and implementing homelessness, policing or health policies and strategies.
- 5.2 Public services likely to come into contact with mothers with complex needs need to be equipped to recognise them. Many of these women have been failed so many times by public services, both as a child and an adult, that they do not trust professionals, and may fear losing their children into care if they try to get help. Services need to be gender and trauma aware, so they can provide support or referral in ways which maximise the likelihood that women will feel safe to engage.
- 5.3 One area which needs particular consideration is child protection and the care system. We know the outcomes for children in care are very poor, with high rates of imprisonment, mental ill-health, and homelessness for children who leave care. Where it is possible, it will often be better for the life chances of both the mother and children and for the public purse to support women to keep their children with them safely. Interventions should clearly communicate to the mother what is expected of her and why, and support should be provided for her to meet these expectations, for example mental health or parenting help.
- 5.4 In cases where a child cannot safely remain with their mother, support must be available to help women cope with that loss. Having children removed into care, particularly when they are permanently removed, can be deeply traumatic for women. It can prompt or exacerbate mental health

or substance misuse problems. Without support, many women go on to have multiple successive pregnancies, with children taken into care each time.

5.5 For the small group of women who are offenders, the criminal justice system has a particularly important role to play in ensuring that the life chances of their children aren't unduly restricted. The Prime Minister's announcement on reducing the number of mothers with babies in prison is very welcome. But we believe this focus should be expanded to include mothers with older children as well as those with newborns. 17,000 children are separated from their mothers by imprisonment every year¹⁴ and the effects on these children can be devastating¹⁵. Children affected by parental imprisonment are more likely to develop mental health problems, more likely to have poor educational outcomes, and more likely to be unemployed as adults¹⁶. A woman's role as a mother must be taken into account in sentencing and alternatives to custody pursued wherever possible, as well as support around parenting offered.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Mothers are essential to children's early years. Supporting mothers into secure situations where they can parent as well as possible is fundamental to ensuring young children's life chances.

6.2 Mothers in the most vulnerable households often have very complex needs, including experiences of trauma and abuse from an early age right into adulthood, compounded by mental ill-health, substance misuse, offending, poverty, financial insecurity and debt.

6.3 Having children can motivate mothers to get help and provides opportunities for support services to reach mothers. But too little support is available and what is there is often uncoordinated.

6.4 Public services need to do a much better job of identifying mothers with complex needs and their children, and connecting them to support which can benefit both mother and child.

6.5 Specialist holistic support services are essential to address the complexity of women's needs. Such services are currently insecurely and inefficiently funded and quality and provision varies from area to area.

6.6 National Government should take the lead in providing a central pot of funding and national leadership through a cross departmental life chances strategy to deliver support for mothers with complex needs and their children.

¹⁴ The Independent, *Mothers & prison: Imprisonment separates around 17,000 children from their mothers every year* (2012) - <http://ind.pn/1Sb2Fkh>

¹⁵ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/effects-parental-incarceration-young-children>

¹⁶ *ibid*

About Agenda

Agenda is a new alliance of organisations and individuals who have come together to campaign for change for women and girls at risk. We believe society is failing to adequately protect and support women and girls who face the most extensive violence, abuse, trauma and extreme inequality. We are calling for systems and services to be redesigned with women and girls at their heart so that they can access the support they need to rebuild their lives and reach their full potential.

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