

## **About Agenda**

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Agenda is a growing alliance of more than 70 organisations 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 trauma, violence and abuse.

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.

We work with policy makers, commissioners, service providers and voluntary organisations. We campaign and carry out research. We share learning and best practice across sectors and we aim to influence and shape systems and service delivery. We ensure that women with complex needs and the projects that work with them are at the heart of all our campaigning and policy work.

## **Women and girls at risk-the evidence**

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Too many women and girls who have suffered violence and abuse are deeply traumatised and go on to face multiple problems like very low self-esteem, poor mental and physical health and turning to drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms.

For these women, sexual and physical abuse often starts in childhood and its impact continues to weave in and out of their lives. Many face lifelong problems and end up trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and abuse and many end up homeless or in prison.

Our Hidden Hurt report revealed that 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. Of these women;

- More than half have a common mental health condition
- More than half have a disability
- One in three have attempted suicide
- One in five have been homeless
- One in three have an alcohol problem

## **The impact**

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Women who have experienced violence and abuse are much more likely than those without these experiences to have multiple mental disorders; be dependent on drugs or alcohol and face homelessness.

For some of these women abuse, violence, and disadvantage combine meaning they have very complex, overlapping needs. Many end up in crisis situations, including

- Approximately 11,000 women in hostels
- Nearly 7000 women sent to prison each year
- 80,000 women involved in prostitution

But we know this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are likely to be thousands more not showing up in statistics.

Failing these women is costly not just on a personal level to women their children and families but also to the public purse. This is because it results in a range of knock on costs including children being taken into care, costs to NHS emergency services and other health and social care services, interactions with the police, with the criminal justice system and crisis housing support.

## **Our Women in Mind campaign**

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Women with mental health problems, especially those with experience of violence, abuse and trauma, struggle to get the vital support they need from mental health services. Our campaign, Women in Mind, calls for women's needs, and in particular their experience of abuse and violence, to be prioritised and taken seriously in policy, strategy and delivery.

### **Why do we need to keep women in mind?**

- Women and men have different mental health needs and experience mental health issues in different ways. Women are more likely to face conditions like eating disorders, anxiety and self-harm whilst men have higher rates of addiction and suicide
- Young women are at particular risk of mental health problems. Recent research showed one in five 16-to-24-year-olds have self-harmed and post-traumatic stress disorder in young women stands at 13%.<sup>1</sup>
- Sexual exploitation, abuse and violence are huge drivers of trauma and poor mental health in women. More than half of women who have mental health problems have experienced abuse.
- Women who have experienced violence and abuse need holistic support to tackle the underlying issues they face and the choice of female practitioners and women-only services.
- Without the right support these women can spiral from crisis to crisis, with huge resulting costs to them, their families and society as a whole.

A Freedom of Information request by Agenda to Mental Health Trusts in England last year showed that trusts were not adequately considering the needs of female mental health patients.<sup>2</sup> It found:

- Only one NHS Mental Health Trust, out of 35 who responded, had a women's mental health strategy. In every other trust, there was no strategy explicitly recognising women's mental health needs.
- Just over half of responding trusts (18) had no policy on 'routine enquiry' (the practice of routinely asking female patients about experience of abuse), which is contrary to NICE guidelines.
- The vast majority of trusts had no policies on offering proactive support to patients who disclose abuse beyond meeting their safeguarding responsibilities.
- Only five services reported having a policy on actively offering female patients a choice of female care worker.

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<sup>1</sup> NHS Digital (2014) *Mental Health and Wellbeing in England*. Available here: <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748/apms-2014-full-rpt.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Agenda (September 2016) *Women's needs in mental health services: A Response to an FOI Request*. Available here: <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Mental-health-briefing-FINAL.pdf>

Following on from that, our most recent research, based on an FOI request sent to trusts across England, focused on the use of physical restraint.<sup>3</sup> It showed that:

- Women and girls were regularly and repeatedly physically restrained in mental health settings, including in a face-down position. This is despite the fact that more than half of women who have mental health problems have experienced abuse.
- Huge regional variations existed in the use of restraint in both adult and child and adolescent mental health services, with some trusts using it very little while others used it on a regular basis.
- In some areas women were more likely to be restrained - and overall women were more likely to be restrained face-down repeatedly
- Girls were more likely to be physically restrained than boys, including face-down. The use of restraint against girls is particularly concerning - these are children who are both mentally and physically vulnerable.

### **What is Women in Mind calling for?**

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1. Women and girls' particular needs and experiences, including their history of trauma, to be taken into account in mental health services and support given to tackle the underlying issues they face. This should include frontline NHS workers receiving training to understand that women's mental health, trauma and abuse are often closely linked.
2. Women's needs to be explicitly considered in mental health policy and strategy including through the development of a national women's mental health strategy.
3. Every mental health trust to have a clinical lead for women's mental health and a women's mental health strategy. Every area should have dedicated, holistic women-only services to provide a safe, therapeutic space to address women's mental health needs and allow them to open up about their experiences.
4. '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.
5. The use of face-down restraint to be ended and other forms of physical restraint used only as a last resort.

To support our Women in Mind campaign or to find out more about our work please contact [azaan.akbar@weareagenda.org](mailto:azaan.akbar@weareagenda.org), go to [www.weareagenda.org](http://www.weareagenda.org) or follow us on Twitter @agenda\_alliance

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<sup>3</sup> Agenda (March 2017) *The use of restraint on women and girls in mental health units: a Response to an FOI Request*. Available here: <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Restraint-FOI-research-briefing-FINAL1.pdf>