

Agenda policy briefing: Women and girls facing multiple disadvantage

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Agenda campaigns for some of the most socially excluded and marginalised women and girls in society, those who face violence, abuse, poverty and inequality. Women who have these experiences are often deeply traumatised and face multiple problems like poor mental health, addiction and homelessness. These are women who have very complex, overlapping needs and are at the sharpest end of inequality.

At the moment there is insufficient support available to this group of women. Services – such as for homelessness or addiction - are often dominated by men and do not have the expertise to respond to the specific issues women face. Sometimes they can even make bad situations worse, with women not listened to, blamed or treated as a problem.

Services set up for women such as domestic and sexual abuse services often lack the capacity to work with women with the highest level of need. Policy makers and commissioners and providers of services do not sufficiently prioritise this group.

Women, abuse and multiple disadvantage

One in 20 women have experienced physical and sexual violence as both a child and an adult: that's **1.2 million women** in England alone.ⁱ More than half (54%) have a diagnosable mental condition, 21% have been homeless, 31% have an alcohol problem and 8% are dependent on drugs.ⁱⁱ

Many end up in very difficult situations, for example there are more than 8,500 women sent to prison each yearⁱⁱⁱ and 80,000 women involved in prostitution^{iv}.

Without proper support, women move from one expensive crisis to the next at a great cost to themselves, their families and society as a whole.

Many are mothers, and their children can go on to face the same issues of abuse and marginalisation. Nearly a quarter of girls in care become teenage mothers^v, and their children are much more likely to be taken into care in turn.

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women facing multiple disadvantage often face particular obstacles. Gender and racial discrimination combine to make these women invisible in public discussion and policy debates.

Women's mental health

Poor mental health underpins many other issues women face. Mental ill health amongst women has increased, with women more likely than men to face mental health problems. More than half of women with mental health problems have experienced abuse.^{vi}

But research for Agenda's *Women in Mind* campaign has shown that mental health services are failing to take women's needs into account; the vast majority lacking basic policies and strategies to address the specific issues women face.^{vii}

Physical restraint against women and girls in mental health settings continues to be widespread, despite the risk of re-traumatisation to those who have suffered abuse.^{viii}

Lack of appropriate service provision and policy development

There is good evidence that what works for women facing multiple disadvantage is holistic gender and trauma-informed support.^{ix} However, services which offer this, such as women's centres, are few and far between, struggle for funding and many are currently under threat. Often funding streams are dispersed across a number of different pots – such as housing, health, addiction and criminal justice - making it difficult for services to fund joined up approaches.

Policies designed to address issues such as mental health, substance misuse or homelessness rarely consider the particular impact on women. In practice, this means policies and services do not recognise women's experiences or address their needs.

Recommendations

Commissioning specialist services for this group of women must be a priority. However, all systems and services which women come into contact with should ensure they are taking women's needs into account.

We are calling for:

1. Political leadership and a cross-government approach to addressing the complex needs of multiply disadvantaged women which considers how policies and services including around abuse, mental health, addiction and homelessness impact on this group
2. Properly funded and commissioned services for women facing multiple disadvantage, including a network of women's centres across the country. This should be supported by the creation of a central funding pot drawn from different budgets as well as better gender specific commissioning at a local level.
3. Women and girls' needs taken into account in mental health services including:
 - A national women's mental health strategy and every mental health trust having their own local strategy and a clinical lead for women's mental health
 - Mental health services taking a trauma informed approach and frontline NHS workers being trained to understand that women's mental health, trauma and abuse are closely linked

About Agenda

Agenda is an alliance of voluntary sector organisations working to ensure that women and girls at risk of abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness get the support and protection they need. We campaign for systems and services to be transformed; to raise awareness across sectors; and to promote public and political understanding of the lives of women and girls facing multiple disadvantage. www.weareagenda.org

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ⁱ Scott, S. & McManus, S. 2016. (DMSS research for Agenda) *Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women*. Available here: <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Hidden-Hurt-full-report1.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Prison Reform Trust, 2016. *Bromley Briefing*. Available here: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Autumn%202016%20Factfile.pdf>, p30

^{iv} Home Office, 2004. *Paying the Price: A Consultation Paper on Prostitution*. Available here: http://prostitution.procon.org/sourcefiles/paying_the_price.pdf

^v Centre for Social Justice, 2015. *Finding Their Feet*. Available here: <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/press-releases/nearly-a-quarter-of-girls-in-care-become-teenage-mothers-reveals-csj>

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

^{vii} Agenda, 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>

^{viii} Agenda, 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>

^{ix} Covington, S. et al. 2008. Evaluation of a trauma-informed and gender-responsive intervention for women in drug treatment. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, SARC Supplement*. Available here: <http://stephaniecovington.com/assets/files/Covington%20%20Burke%20%20Keaton%20%20and%20Norcott%20SARC.pdf>