

Agenda response to the Department for Education Exclusions Review

July 2018

Background

1. Whilst boys are more likely to be permanently excluded than girls, there are specific issues facing girls who disengage from education which may not be captured within these statistics. Research and data suggests that the way problems and disadvantage manifest for girls and boys looks quite different, so without considering these specific and gendered challenges, the discussion around improvements in education for pupils at risk of disengagement is likely to overlook girls' experiences.

Girls and young women at risk

2. Early adolescence is a critical transition point for girls where issues can come to a head, as they move from primary to secondary school and experience the changes associated with puberty. Evidence suggests that girls who already have a number of risk factors in their lives reach a 'breaking point' in early adolescence. It is then that underlying vulnerabilities (such as poverty, childhood abuse or neglect, domestic violence, parental mental ill health and substance use) meet other risk factors associated with the teenage years.¹
3. There are specific risks that girls face at this age that often go unseen. Girls are at greater risk of sexual abuse and exploitation than boys, for example.² A study of intimate teenage relationships found that a third of teenage girls suffered an unwanted sexual act and 25% of girls had experienced some form of physical partner violence.³ Many girls also experience sexual harassment and abuse in schools; 59% of girls and young women aged 13–21 had faced some form of sexual harassment at school or college in the past year (2014).⁴ The impacts of this can include post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm, isolation and withdrawal, substance use, and lack of attendance.⁵
4. Mental health issues can also manifest during adolescence, and there has been a significant rise in mental health problems amongst young women in recent years. Today, young women are three times more likely than men to experience common mental health problems, compared to 1993, when they were twice as likely.⁶
5. Teenage girls are also more likely to be reported as missing from home or care than boys, between the ages of 13 and 17 years old.⁷ This is the age at which girls may face other challenges including meeting adults involved in drugs and crime, getting involved in offending or being drawn into gangs – with gang-involvement raised as a particular risk by the Children's Commissioner for England for young people who are taken 'off-roll' without being formally excluded.⁸
6. Research with young adult women who are 'economically inactive' shows that, despite negative experiences in education, many did go on to post-16 education, where they tended to 'churn' between Level 1 and Level 2 courses. Girls who leave education by the age of 16 report having done so because of mental or physical health problems, caring for parents or children of their own, drug and alcohol dependence and homelessness.⁹

¹ McNeish, D & Scott, S. (2014) [Women and girls at risk: Evidence across the life course](#)

² Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) (2011) [Out of mind, out of sight: breaking down the barriers to child sexual exploitation: executive summary \(PDF\)](#). London: CEOP.

³ Barter C et al. (2009) Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships, London, UK: NSPCC.

⁴ Girlguiding UK (2014) Girls' Attitudes Survey 2014. Published December 2014

⁵ Women & Equalities Commission (2016) Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools

⁶ Mental Health Foundation (2017) While Your Back was Turned: how mental health policy makers stopped paying attention to the specific needs of women and girls

⁷ Missing Children and Young People, [information sheet](#)

⁸ Tapper, J (2018) [School exclusions 'put children at risk of gang grooming'](#), The Observer, 15 July 2018

⁹ Young Women's Trust (2016) Young Female and Forgotten?

Available support

7. Despite these risks, teenage girls are an overlooked and poorly served group. Girls' needs are frequently overlooked due to the gendered ways in which young people typically manifest distress. Boys often demonstrate "externalising" behaviours (such as hostility and aggression) whereas girls are more likely to "internalise" problems (such as developing anxiety or depression, or self-harming). The way in which this may play out in education means that boys are at greater risk of being excluded from school and entering Pupil Referral Units, where, by contrast, girls may be more likely to develop patterns of nonattendance.¹⁰
8. Approaches to children and youth work are frequently gender neutral, meaning that girls' needs are rarely taken into account and as a result many services are developed primarily in response to boys'. As girls are generally thought to be performing better in education than boys, they are also often overlooked in provision to address underachievement in school. For girls from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans* or Intersex (LBTI) backgrounds there is even less support available.
9. Some girls may fall out of contact with services only to come back to attention when they themselves are pregnant and social services' interest is in their children. Whilst conception rates have decreased considerably over the last decade, the estimated number of pregnancies amongst young women aged under 18 was 18,076 in 2016, and 2,821 for those under 16.¹¹ Despite this, there has been an increase in recent years of care proceedings¹², with younger mothers making up a significant proportion of those subject to proceedings.

Lack of data

10. Official data on school exclusions does not break down by gender the reasons why young people are excluded, or allow you to see whether girls have any form of statement or receive Free School Meals (FSM). This does not allow for an analysis of girls different experiences of education or their routes through the system.

Conclusion

11. Because of the typically internalising nature of girls' distress, it may be that they are more hidden and less visible. They may be missing from or underrepresented in some data sets and less likely to come to the attention of some services. There are also likely to be gendered differences in how our support systems – whether school, social services, the police or other services – respond to girls and boys.
12. The Department for Education must take these differences into account when it develops responses to young people's at risk of exclusion, and in work to improve alternative provision. Data must also be made available that is broken down by gender, as well as across ethnicity and other characteristics, to understand girls journeys through the education system and develop appropriate responses.

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.

For further information, please contact: Jessica Southgate, Policy Manager,
jessica@weareagenda.org, 0208 7094 819

www.weareagenda.org

¹⁰ Girls & Exclusion: Rethinking the Agenda (Osler and Vincent, 2003)

¹¹ ONS (2018) [Conceptions in England and Wales: 2014](#)

¹² CAFCASS Care Demand Statistics <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/leaflets-resources/organisational-material/care-and-private-law-demand-statistics/care-demand-statistics.aspx>