



# Hidden Hurt

Violence, abuse and  
disadvantage in the lives of  
women

## Executive Summary

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**DMSS Research** conducts research and evaluation with a focus on gender, sexual violence, mental health and services for women, children and young people. [www.dmss.co.uk](http://www.dmss.co.uk)

## Introduction

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, commissioned this analysis of the experiences of women who face violence and abuse. Based on data from the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS)<sup>1</sup>, it provides new and important insights into the lives and life chances of women and girls who have experienced extensive violence and abuse.

The report provides evidence that women who experience the most extensive abuse and violence (both as children and adults) are more likely to face other adverse circumstances in their lives such as poor mental and physical health, disability, and substance misuse, poverty, debt, poor housing, and homelessness. It presents a picture of the scale of violence and abuse these women face, the nature of their experiences, and how their life chances differ from the rest of the population.

## About the analysis

This report builds on previous Department of Health funded latent class analysis of APMS data.<sup>2</sup> The analysis identified six groups in the population with different patterns of violent and abusive experiences in their lives. Further exploration of the characteristics of these groups has now been undertaken to understand the relationship between gender, abuse and a range of types of disadvantage.

## Findings

### Gender and experience of violence and abuse

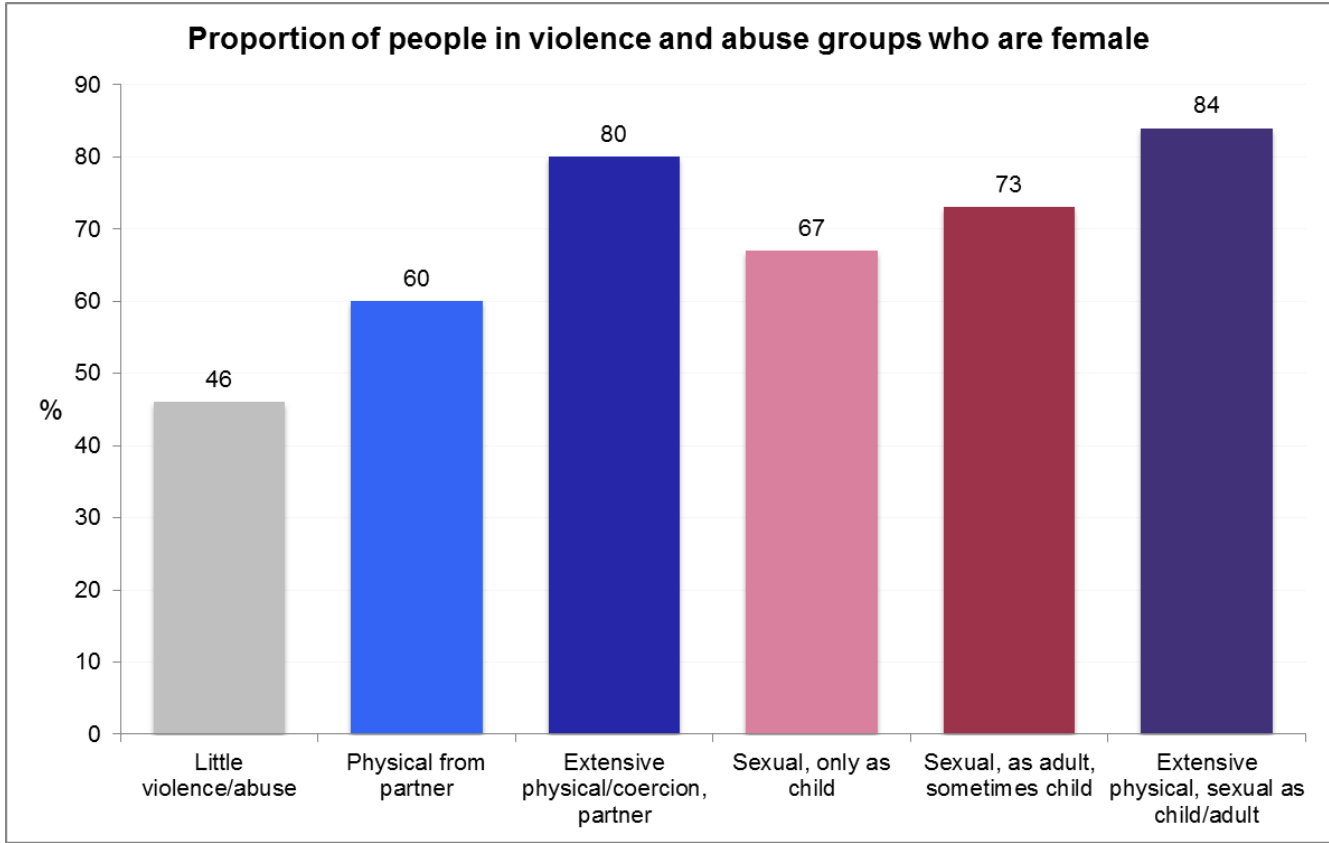
**Overall, women are twice as likely as men to experience interpersonal violence and abuse, and the more extensive the violence the more likely that it is experienced by women rather than men. About one in every 20 women in England has experienced extensive physical and sexual violence and abuse across their life course, compared to one in every 100 men. These 1.2 million women have been sexually abused in childhood or severely beaten by a parent or carer, many have been raped as adults and suffered severe abuse from a partner including being choked, strangled or threatened with a weapon.**

There are two groups of people who have experienced the most extensive violence and abuse. One group is made up of those who have been sexually and physically abused both as children and as adults, the other is those who have suffered extensive physical violence and coercive control by a partner. At least 80% of both of these groups are women.

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<sup>1</sup> McManus S, Meltzer H, Brugha T, Bebbington P, Jenkins R (eds) (2009). *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity in England 2007: results of a household survey*. The NHS Information Centre: Leeds. <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB02931/adul-psyc-morb-res-hou-sur-eng-2007-rep.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Responding Effectively to Violence and Abuse study (REVA) was conducted by the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit, DMSS and NatCen Social Research. Scott S, Williams J, McNaughton Nicholls C, Lovett J, McManus S (2015) [Population patterns in violence, abuse and mental health in England](#) NatCen: London.



5% of women in England experience extensive abuse across their life-course (compared with 1% of men), while a further 3% of women experience this extensive physical violence from a partner in adulthood (compared with a further 1% of men).

### Mental health and experience of violence and abuse

**Women in the overall population have higher rates of depression and anxiety disorders than men. This analysis suggests that women’s greater exposure to violence and abuse may go some way to explaining their higher rate of mental illness.**

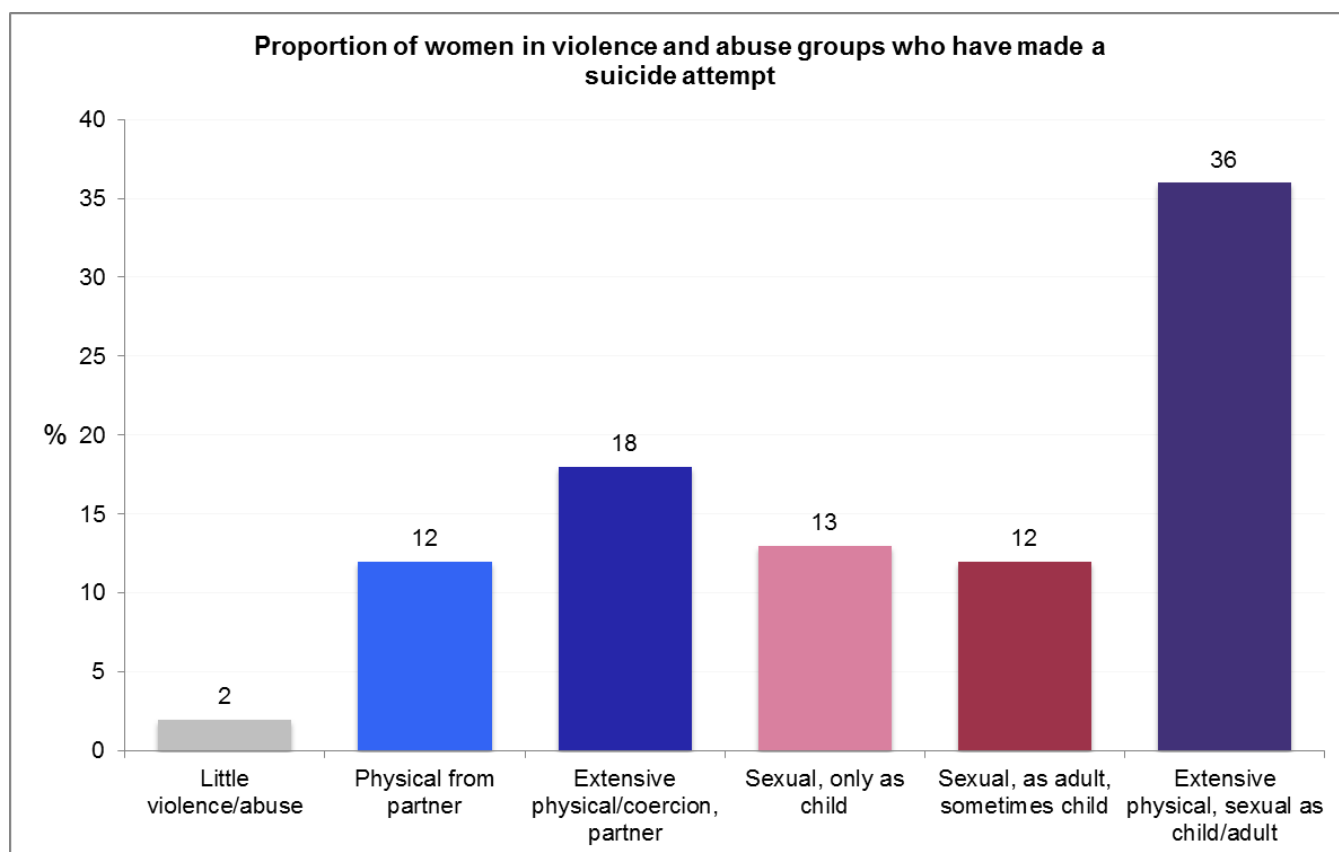
About three quarters of the population have little experience of violence and abuse. Among this group, levels of common mental disorder (CMD) are quite similar for women (13%) and men (10%). However, when those with experience of violence and abuse are included, this picture changes with CMD being much more common among women (20%) than men (12%) across the population.

Over half (54%) of women in the extensive physical and sexual violence group – and a third (36%) of women in the extensive physical violence group - meet the diagnostic criteria for at least one CMD.

Symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are strongly linked with experience of violence and abuse, with 78% of women in the extensive physical and sexual violence group having experienced life threatening trauma, and 16% screening positive for PTSD.

Experiences of violence and abuse are not just linked with certain types of mental disorder. The association pervades across all the types of mental disorder covered in the survey. Women in the extensive physical and sexual violence group are also more likely to have multiple conditions with about one in seven (15%) having three or more mental disorders.

Over a third (36%) of women in the extensive physical and sexual violence group have made a suicide attempt, and a fifth (22%) have self-harmed. One in ten (9%) have spent time on a mental health ward.



Despite all these indications of very high levels of mental ill health, three-quarters (75%) of women in the extensive physical and sexual violence were not receiving either medication or counselling for a mental health problem at the time of the survey.

## Multiple disadvantage among women experiencing violence and abuse

Women with extensive experience of physical and sexual violence are far more likely to experience disadvantage in many other areas of their lives, including disability and ill health, substance dependence, poverty and debt, poor living conditions, homelessness and discrimination.

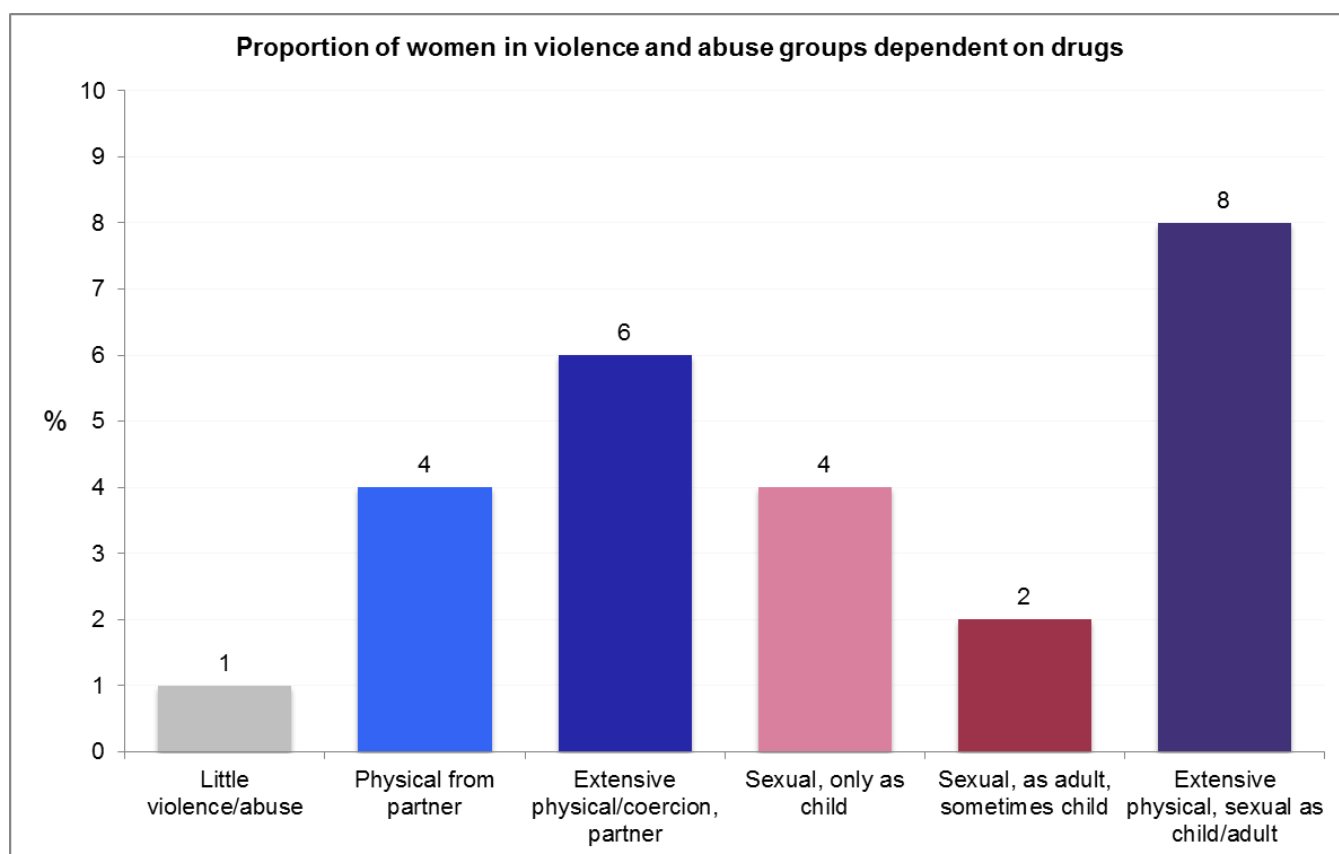
## Disability, ill health and dependency

Just 6% of women with experience of extensive physical and sexual violence described their general health as excellent, and 14% describe their health as poor compared with 5% of women with little experience of violence and abuse.

Women in this extensive violence and abuse group are also more likely to have a range of different physical health conditions, including stomach, bowel and bladder problems; asthma, allergies, migraine and skin problems; and back, joint and muscle problems.

Half (52%) of the women in the extensive sexual and physical violence group have a disability that means they need help with everyday activities. Yet 40% of women in this group are also care providers for people who are sick or disabled and three-quarters (74%) are mothers (a fifth (19%) of whom have at least four children).

Women in the extensive physical and sexual violence group are more than twice as likely to have an alcohol problem (31% do so) and are eight times more likely to be drug dependent than women in the group with little experience of violence and abuse.



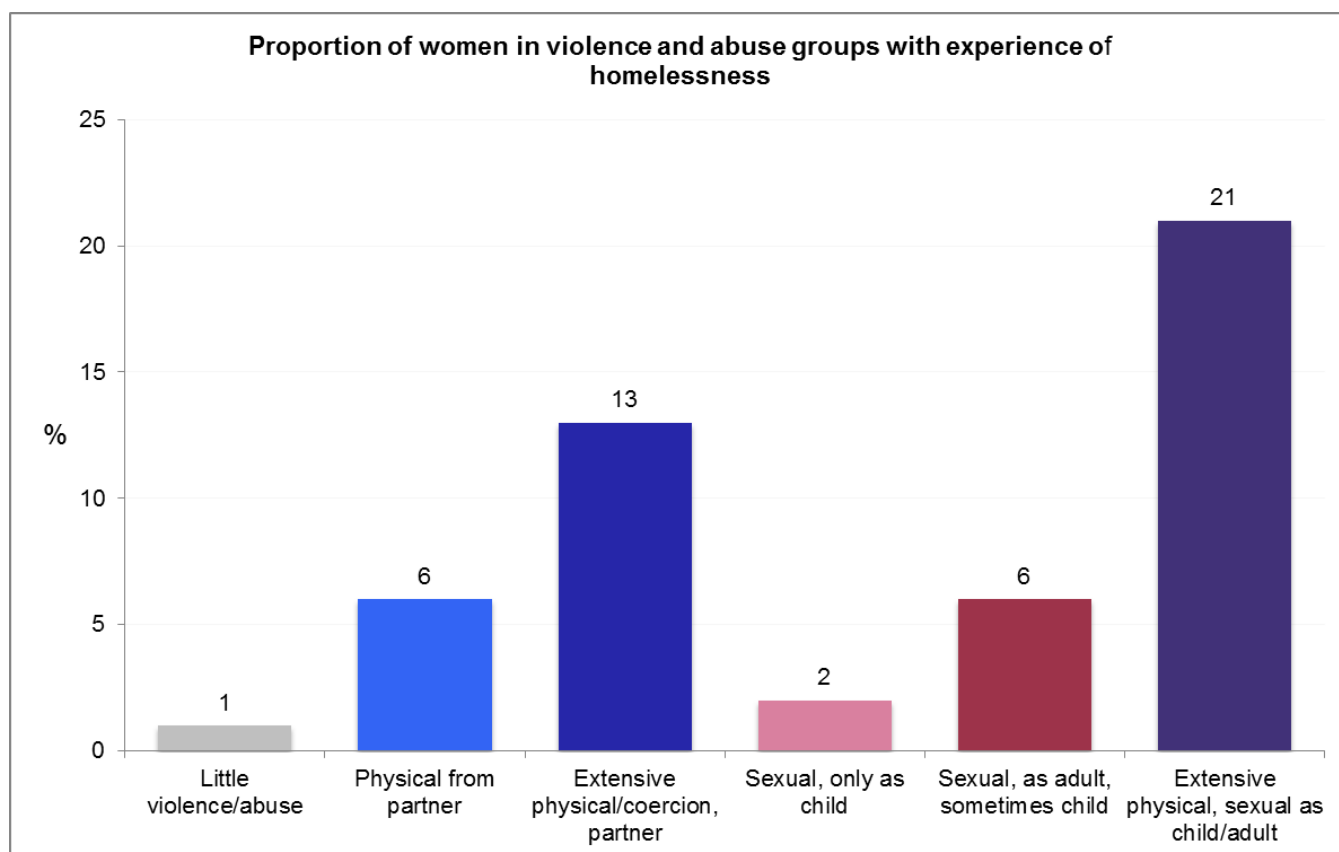
## Poverty, housing and work

The socioeconomic circumstances of women differ between the groups in this analysis. Women who have experienced extensive physical violence from a partner are far more likely than women without such

experiences to live in rented accommodation and have lower household incomes. Among men, the data did not show a significant link between these indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage and their experience of partner violence. Women reporting experience of sexual abuse alone (whether in childhood or adulthood) were no more likely than other women to be socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Half of the women in the two extensive violence and abuse groups live in rented accommodation, compared with a quarter of those with little experience of violence and abuse. The homes that they are living in are also more likely to be in a poor state of repair, with a quarter living in properties with mould.

One in five women (21%) in the extensive physical and sexual violence group reported having been homeless at some point in their lives.

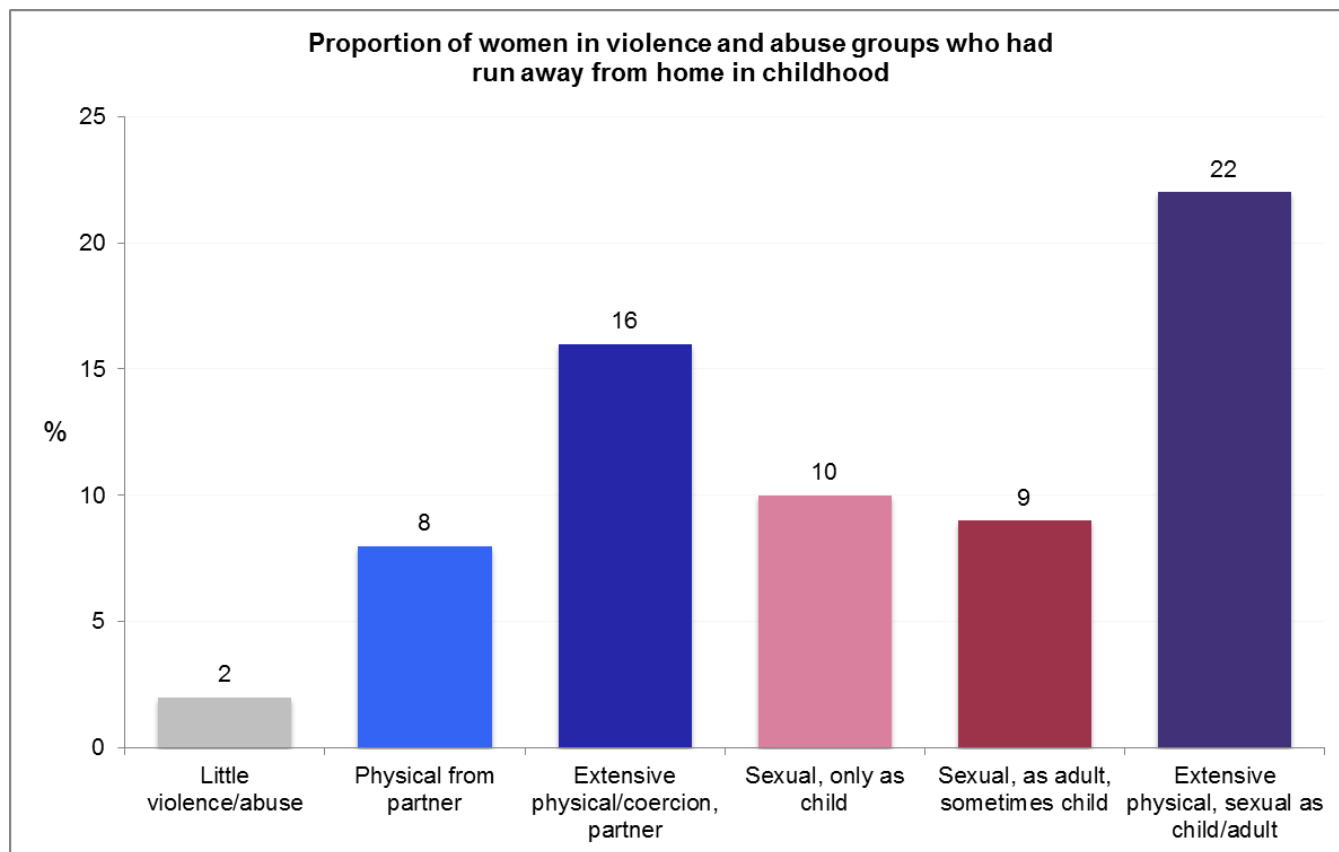


A quarter (27%) of those in the extensive physical and sexual group had experienced a major financial crisis in their lives, compared with 4% of women with little experience of violence and abuse. 33% of women in this group had borrowed money in the last year (from family, friends or money lenders) compared with 6% of women with little experience of violence and abuse.

Women with extensive experience of violence and abuse are more likely than women with little experience to describe their job as insecure (16% of those who were employed strongly agreed this was the case); to have been made redundant or sacked from their job (28%); and to have struggled to find new work (31% searched without success for a month or more).

## Childhood adversity

Those women who had experienced extensive abuse starting in childhood and extending into their adult lives were the least likely to have grown up with both natural parents and the most likely to have spent part of their childhood in institutional care – 8% had done so compared with 1% of women with little experience of violence and abuse. More than a fifth (22%) had run away from home in childhood (compared to 2% of women who had suffered little violence or abuse) and 4% had been expelled from school.



## Conclusion and recommendations

It is well established that all sexual and physical abuse takes a significant toll on victim's lives. What this analysis makes clear is that the greatest disadvantage is experienced by those who endure a range of types of extensive abuse across their life-course - and that over 80% of this group are women.

Many of the most negative outcomes that can result from abuse - and from attempts to escape it - increase the risk of further victimisation. For example, girls who run away from home and women who become homeless, misuse drugs or are exposed to criminality are highly likely to experience further violence in their lives.



There are some major implications of this analysis for policy makers, services providers and practitioners. The key message is that women with extensive experience of violence and abuse in their lives should constitute a priority group across many different areas of policy and service delivery. In particular, we recommend that:

- Women and girls with extensive experience of violence and abuse often have multiple difficulties in their lives. These are more likely to require specialist services which provide holistic support, including the opportunity to address the trauma of violent and abusive experiences. Central and local government must make sure such services are adequately funded and properly commissioned.
- ‘Gender neutral’ services often fail to respond to the different experiences of violence, abuse and other disadvantages in the lives of women and men and as such are far less likely to meet women’s needs. Greater priority must be given to commissioning gender specific services and to ensuring that public services which women come into contact with are gender responsive.
- Staff in public services (including for example mental health, housing, substance misuse or employment support) need to have ongoing training and support that gives them insight into the impacts of inequalities, violence and abuse on women’s lives. This should be supported by a culture that encourages and enables them to work with women at risk in ways that are helpful and empowering.
- ‘Routine enquiry’ (asking women whether they have experienced violence and abuse) should become standard practice across a whole range of services and be accompanied by proper support for those women who disclose past or present experiences of abuse.







**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. [www.weareagenda.org](http://www.weareagenda.org).

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