

# Agenda Alliance's response to the Department of Health and Social Care's Call for Evidence on the Major Conditions Strategy

July 2023

## About Agenda Alliance

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[Agenda Alliance](https://www.agendaalliance.org/) exists to make a difference to the lives of women and girls who are at the sharpest end of inequality. We are an alliance of over 100 member organisations – from large, national bodies to smaller, specialist organisations – working in collaboration to influence public policy and practice to respond appropriately to women and girls with multiple, complex unmet needs: <https://www.agendaalliance.org/>. As part of this submission, we spoke with women with lived experience. Their quotes are used in our two answered questions, focused on mental health.

## How can we support people to tackle these risk factors?

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Women and girls face distinct challenges with their mental health; both in terms of the drivers of poor mental health and in their ability to access accessible and appropriate services and support. Women are also at greater risk of developing common mental health problems at a one in five ratio (19%), compared with one in eight (12%) for men. Exacerbated by this, women and girls with multiple unmet needs, are often labelled as 'hard to reach' by services, and repeatedly fall through the gaps between services and systems. Many have experienced forms of violence, abuse and trauma, which can impact their capacity to engage with and attend services – many of which fail to respond to the trauma they have faced.

*"Especially when you're a young mum you get shoved off or ignored. When I said I was struggling I was told it was part and parcel of being a mother. Not just mental health, but in terms of things like finances and loneliness for young mums, there is no support. I felt lonely because I had anxiety and had anxiety because I was lonely, it was a revolving door." – K*

Women and girls with multiple unmet needs experience various challenges concurrently, including mental health problems, and the service provision for the wider determinants of poor mental health span across many services. Our research shows that one in every 20 women have experienced extensive physical or sexual violence and abuse across their life course from childhood, and many face very high rates of mental ill-health, addiction, homelessness and poverty (Agenda Alliance, 2016: Hidden Hurt).

Young women aged 16-24 are at particular risk, as they report the highest rates of domestic abuse experienced by any age group (SafeLives, 2017: Safe Young Lives), and experience mental health conditions at a higher rate than older women (NHS, 2016: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey). These risks can be exacerbated by other factors, including systemic disadvantages associated with ethnicity, disability, and immigration status (Agenda Alliance, 2022: Underexamined and Underreported).

As a result, Agenda Alliance recommends the Strategy:

- Commits to providing gender-, age-, trauma-, and culturally- responsive mental health care across a range of public services, and to the develop policies and strategies to support this provision.
- Include clear steps to tackle racism throughout health and social care and address unequal treatment throughout the health and social care system, including the disproportionate detention of Black and minoritised women and girls under the Mental Health Act.

### How can we better support those with mental ill health?

We urge the Department of Health and Social Care to give mental health its own policy vehicle. Within this there should be a clear focus on gendered inequalities. This recommendation follows the Government's decision to scrap the Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan, a cross-departmental 10-year plan, which received tens of thousands of responses when it opened for evidence last year. Any less than a strategy of this clarity and dedication to mental health is regressive and equates to a huge step backwards in mental health support in the country.

Given the breadth of policy contained within the Major Conditions Strategy, spanning many different health services, the Major Conditions Strategy cannot fully meet the needs of the most disadvantaged women and girls. Mental health warrants its own specific strategy to cover the distinct challenges and barriers to support women and girls experiencing mental health needs and multiple unmet needs face.

*"A lot of women are scared to even mention or talk about their mental health because a lot of them have children, and they are scared of them being taken away. They used my mental health in court to take away my two children." – Nici*

As well as the intersecting needs of women and girls, there is a cliff edge in support during the transition from children's mental health services to adult mental health services - acutely felt by girls and young women.

Our new report (Agenda Alliance, 2023: Dismantling Disadvantage) highlights the difficulties women face when accessing a range of services, all of which play a role in underpinning their mental health. Of women with multiple unmet needs we surveyed, two-thirds have felt judged or blamed by a practitioner, and many reported having to navigate a 'maze of services'.

Aside from core mental health services, these include domestic and sexual abuse; drug and alcohol; homelessness; criminal justice; and the removal of children into social care. Investing in gender-, age-, trauma-, and culturally- responsive care in these services not only benefits the person accessing the services but would also reduce the overall cost of mental health care.

*"Once you've been discharged from CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] there is no support." – K*

Whilst mental health should have its own Strategy to fully accommodate the needs of mental health patients, any policy document addressing the wider determinants of poor mental health (e.g. measures to reduce poverty; prevent gender-based violence) must be trauma informed, as well as gender-, age-, and culturally- responsive.

Agenda Alliance recommends that:

- Mental health is given its own policy vehicle, with a specific focus on the needs of women and girls with multiple unmet needs and an emphasis on prevention.
- Should the Major Conditions Strategy be the only policy document for mental health, it must ensure all mental health trusts develop a Women and Girls' Mental Health Strategy, overseen by a clinical lead with responsibility for women and girls' mental health, drawing upon the gender and trauma-informed principles set out in the Women's Mental Health Taskforce (DHSC, 2018) report.