

A CALL TO ACTION: DEVELOPING GENDER-SENSITIVE SUPPORT FOR CRIMINALISED YOUNG WOMEN

Young Women's Justice Project

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About this briefing

This briefing forms part of the Young Women’s Justice Project (YWJP), run in partnership by Agenda Alliance and the Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ) and funded by Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales. This project has provided a national platform to make the case for gender-responsive support for girls and young women aged 17-25 in contact with the criminal justice system, exemplified by our report “We’ve Not Given Up” published in March 2022.¹ This supplementary briefing, “A Call to Action: Responding to Young Women’s Needs”, provides **actionable recommendations to deliver change** for girls and young women either in contact with – or at-risk of contact with – the criminal justice system.

We have expanded upon the rich evidence base of the YWJP by convening a stakeholder discussion with women’s centres, youth/ justice practitioners, specialist “by-and-for” services,² and young women with lived experience of the justice system, further complemented by additional desk-based research and examples of good practice.³ This research outlines specific steps to develop **age- and gender-responsive support for young women**, and is intended as a vital resource for funders, commissioners, practitioners, service providers, and decision-makers to inform their practice and build sector understanding of how existing issues can be addressed.

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1. Agenda Alliance and AYJ (2022) [We’ve Not Given Up](#)
 2. Established in response to the exclusion and lack of understanding of Black and minoritised women’s experiences in generic services, specialist services for Black and minoritised women and girls are those led “by-and-for” Black and minoritised women and girls through leadership structures, recruitment and service delivery. National service standards developed by Imkaan – the umbrella women’s organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls – emphasise that these organisations work with an “understanding of the impact of racism and discrimination in the lives of women and girls within the context of violence.” For more information, see: Imkaan (2015) [Imkaan accredited quality standards: addressing violence against Black and minority ethnic women and girls](#)
 3. Agenda Alliance and AYJ also produced a [Young Women’s Justice Project Literature Review](#) (2021), as well as two briefing papers, with a focus on [young women’s experiences of the transition](#) from the youth to adult justice system (2021), and [young women in the criminal justice system’s experiences of violence, abuse and exploitation](#) (2021)

Introduction

Many young women in contact with the criminal justice system face multiple unmet needs, with their life histories underpinned by experiences of violence, abuse and exploitation, poor mental health, substance misuse, poverty, and having no safe place to call home. By the time a young woman encounters the criminal justice system, she has often been **failed by numerous public services**, finding herself caught up in a **damaging cycle of abuse, inequality, and offending**. Even though many of these young women are grappling with trauma, too often they are crudely labelled as perpetrators and criminalised.

Young women are a minority within the criminal justice system on account of both their age and gender, and are consequently an overlooked and disregarded group. Many young women describe feeling **unsafe, alienated, and re-traumatised** by services that have by default been designed around the needs of men and boys, or older adult women. Failing to meet their needs at an early stage means that opportunities to provide effective support are often missed, leading to an escalation of disadvantage and perpetuating a cycle of harm. Rather than receiving meaningful support, many young women are **driven into further harm**, with an increased risk of future contact with the criminal justice system and worsened life outcomes.

Young women with intersecting and marginalised identities are disproportionately impacted and criminalised by the criminal justice system, with their needs particularly neglected. Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised young women experience inequality on account of their ethnicity and immigration status, as well as their age and gender. In addition, many care-experienced young women encounter ingrained prejudice within the system, leading to disproportionate criminalisation.

The government must address the specific gendered needs of young adult women across all public services, but especially for those young women in contact with the criminal justice system who have already experienced significant disadvantage. In particular, this should include **developing age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive practice** across policing, probation, prisons, and courts. This briefing details the specific and tangible ways that young adult women (17-25) can be better supported earlier on, and as a result **diverted away from the criminal justice system**.

An overview: Gender, age, and unmet needs

Young women in contact with the criminal justice system are likely to have experienced multiple unmet needs, often underpinning their criminalisation; yet many lack access to appropriate support.

- 63% of young women serving sentences in the community have experienced rape or domestic abuse in an intimate partner relationship.⁴
- Between three quarters and 90% of girls in the youth justice system may have experienced abuse from a family member or someone they trusted.⁵
- 42% of young women in custody say they need help to address previous or ongoing trauma (e.g. domestic abuse). Only 13% report that they expect to receive support for previous or ongoing trauma upon release.⁶

Young women in contact with the criminal justice system are an invisible minority on account of their age and gender.

- In 2022, 9% of all women in custody were aged 18 to 24.⁷
- By November 2023, the number of young women in custody aged 18 to 20 is projected to increase by 50%.⁸
- In 2021-22, 14% of children that received a caution or sentence were girls.⁹
- In 2019, 2,709 young women were supervised by probation services under either a community order or a suspended sentence, compared to 21,004 young men of the same age.¹⁰

4. This refers to young women aged aged 16 to 24. Wong, K. et al. (2017) [T2A Final Process Evaluation Report](#), Policy Evaluation Research Unit.

5. Bateman, T. and Hazel, N. (2014) [Resettlement of girls and young women: research report](#), Beyond Youth Custody.

6. This refers to young women aged 25 and under, who responded to the HMIP survey between 2021 and 2022. Criminal Justice Inspectorates (2022) Prisoner survey responses. [Annual report year 2021-2022](#).

7. In 2022, there were 277 young women aged 18-24 in custody, representing 8.7% of all women in custody. Ministry of Justice (2023) [Prison Population Dashboard](#).

8. According to MoJ projections, the number of young women 18 to 20 in custody will increase from 49 to 100 between November 2022 and November 2023. See Table A2, Ministry of Justice (2023) [Prison population projections: 2022 to 2027](#)

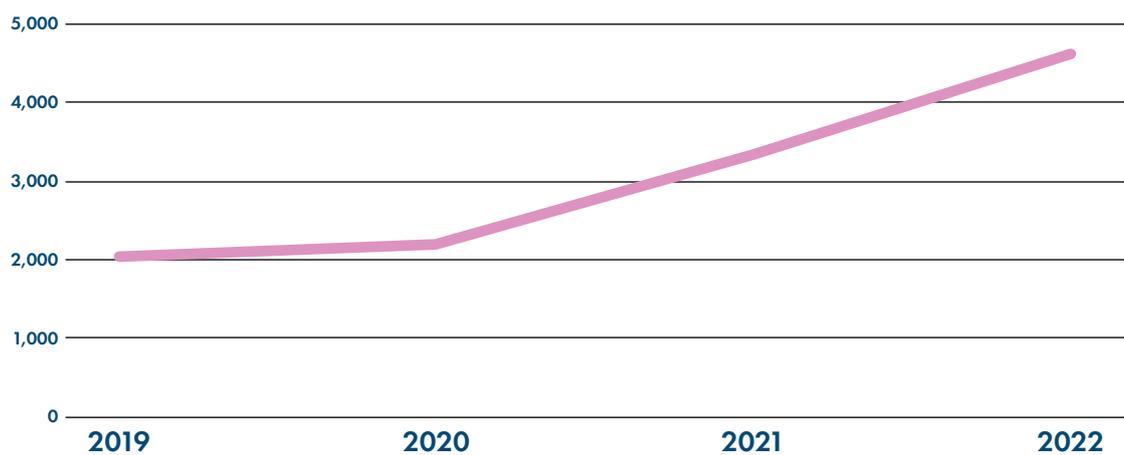
9. This refers to girls aged 10 to 17. Youth Justice Board (2023) [Youth Justice Statistics: 2021 to 22 Supplementary Tables](#)

10. This refers to young women aged 18-24, compared to their male counterparts. Ministry of Justice (2021) Women in the CJS: Local Data Tool 2019.

Young women in custody are more likely to self-harm compared to other demographic groups.

- In 2022, the number of self-harm incidents in custody amongst 21 to 24-year-old women surpassed all other female age groups. This number has been rising consistently over the past four years.¹¹
- In 2022, 138 young women aged 21 to 24 self-harmed while in prison. On average, these young women self-harmed 34 times during the year.¹²
- 80% of young women in custody report having mental health problems. Of these young women, less than one third said that they felt cared for by prison staff.¹³

Annual number of self-harm incidents in custody among young women (21-24)



11. In 2018, there were 1,832 incidents of self-harm annually amongst women aged 21 to 24. In 2022, this climbed to 4,626. Please note that the latest published statistics for 2023 do not yet include self-harm incidents disaggregated by gender and age; however, they do reveal a significant increase in the number of self-harm incidents in women's prisons. Office for National Statistics (2023) [Safety in Custody quarterly: update to March 2023](#).

12. There were 4,626 incidents of self-harm over the year amongst 138 women, aged 21-24. Office for National Statistics (2023) [Safety in Custody quarterly: update to March 2023](#).

13. This refers to young women aged 25 and under, who responded to the HMIP survey between 2021 and 2022. See Criminal Justice Inspectorates (2022) Prisoner survey responses. [Annual report year 2021-2022](#)

There are disproportionate numbers of Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised young women and care-experienced young women in the justice system.

- Black women are twice as likely as their white counterparts to be subject to force from a police officer.¹⁴
- There are greater levels of ethnic disproportionality among young women in custody than amongst the adult women's prison population as a whole. In 2018, 22% of young women in custody were from Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised groups, compared to 17% of all adult women prisoners.^{15,16}
- 15% of young women in custody identify as Muslim,¹⁷ compared to 6.5% of the general population.¹⁸
- Research indicates that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller young women are significantly overrepresented in custody; however, data on their prevalence and experiences is limited.¹⁹
- 52% of young women in custody have been in local authority care as children.²⁰

14. This refers to Black women aged 18-34 years old in 2021-22 according to the number of incidents/ rate per 1,000 population. In 2021-2022, 8 white women (per 1,000) were subject to police force, compared to 16 Black (or Black British) women. See Table 18, Home Office (2022) [Police use of force statistics, England and Wales: April 2021 to March 2022](#).

15. This refers to young women aged 18 to 24 in June 2018. Ministry of Justice (2019) [Race and the criminal justice system statistics 2018](#), Chapter 6: Offender Management tables.

16. The Prison Reform Trust have unpacked the ways in which the disadvantages faced by women in the criminal justice system are compounded for Black, Asian and minority ethnic women. Prison Reform Trust (2017) [Counted Out: Black, Asian and minority ethnic women in the criminal justice system](#)

17. This refers to young women aged 25 and under, who responded to the HMIP survey between 2021-2022. Criminal Justice Inspectorates (2022) Prisoner survey responses. [Annual report year 2021-2022](#)

18. ONS (2023) Census 2021: [Religion by age and sex in England and Wales](#).

19. The literature has highlighted the overrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller women and young people in the justice system. A report from HMIP noted that the proportion of prisoners self-identifying as Gypsy in women's prisons and amongst 12- to 18-year-olds (girls and boys) in secure training centres was "strikingly high" at 7% and 12% respectively, despite only 0.1% of the general population identifying themselves as Gypsy or Traveller in the 2011 Census for England and Wales. Criminal Justice Inspectorates (2014) [People in prison: Gypsies, Romany and Travellers](#)

20. This refers to young women aged 25 and under, who responded to the HMIP survey between 2021-2022. Criminal Justice Inspectorates (2022) Prisoner survey responses. [Annual report year 2021-2022](#). In 2016, nearly two thirds of young women (16-21) in custody were estimated to have recently been in statutory care (compared to just under half of boys). House of Commons Justice Committee (2016) [Young adults in the criminal justice system. Eighth Report of Session 2017-19](#)

Many young women receive repeat short sentences, often for non-violent offences.

- In 2021, women had an average custodial sentence of 15 months compared to 24 months for men.²¹ Consequently, many of these young women do not receive meaningful and rehabilitative support.
- Young women continue to enter custody to serve short sentences for repeated non-violent offences, driven by a combination of needs which often stem from complex trauma and economic disadvantage.²²

Age- and gender-specific data specific is not routinely gathered, making it hard to capture the realities of young women's experiences.

- There is a lack of gender-specific reporting and monitoring of outcomes for young women in the criminal justice system, which makes it challenging to obtain and analyse data relating to their needs and experiences.

21. See p.5 Ministry of Justice (2021) [Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System](#)

22. Revolving Doors Agency (2020) [New Generation: Preventing young adults being caught in the revolving door.](#)



Government policy timeline

Female Offender Strategy, Ministry of Justice

June 2018

An approach encouraging working in a trauma-responsive way with women in touch with the criminal justice system was included in government policy; however, no explicit mention of young women was given, and the Strategy was not accompanied by clear outcome metrics to ensure accountability or measurement.

Inquiry into deaths of babies born in custody

September 2019

An 18-year-old woman lost her baby at HMP Bronzefield in Surrey in September 2019. A coroner said that the baby died after her “vulnerable” mother gave birth alone in a jail cell following “systemic failings” by state agencies. The Prison Ombudsman is also reviewing another death of a baby at HMP Styal in 2020, indicating that there are patterns of system failures for pregnant girls and young women in prison.

HM Inspectorate of Prisons thematic report on Young Adults in Custody

January 2021

This report identifies specific needs for young adults in custody, but omitted recommendations about how a gender-informed approach could address these.

Prisons Strategy White Paper, Ministry of Justice

December 2021

This paper acknowledged for the first time the need to develop a specific Young Women’s Strategy to cater for the unique needs of girls and young women in touch with the criminal justice system.

Female Offenders Strategy Delivery Plan, Ministry of Justice

January 2022

Building on the priorities of the 2018 original policy document, the Delivery Plan committed to develop and publish a Young Women's Strategy (18–25) that spans the whole of the criminal justice system, including best practice guidance to support young women in custody'. To date, this strategy has not yet been published.

HM Inspectorate of Prisons thematic report on Outcomes for girls in custody

September 2022

In this report, HM Inspectorate of Prisons focused for the first time on girls in custody and highlighted the need for gender- and trauma-informed practice. Yet, the review also noted that support on offer was often not appropriate for girls with complex needs, particularly during the transition from youth to adult services.

Police and Crime Commissioner elections

2024

Our 2023 review of Police and Crime plans found that nearly all the plans mentioned violence against women and girls (VAWG,) but **just two plans referenced a wider strategic approach to the needs of girls and young women who are criminalised.** The upcoming Police and Crime Commissioner elections are a key opportunity for candidates to commit to diverting girls and young women away from the criminal justice system, and addressing their experiences of abuse and violence, as a priority.

General Election

Projected as Spring/Autumn 2024

Renewed party manifestos for the 2024 general election are an opportunity to make strategic commitments to introducing trauma-informed approaches to working with girls and young women in touch with the criminal justice system, and to develop and publish a Young Women's Strategy.

Developing systems and services to prioritise young women's needs

The Government's Prisons Strategy White Paper (2021) acknowledges that young women "are more likely to have experienced traumatic histories" than any other group of women in custody.²³ In recognition of this level of unmet need, the Ministry of Justice has committed to producing a Young Women's Strategy, bringing together best practice and evidence about how to support young women and provide the right services at every stage of their journey. The development of this strategy marks an **important and timely opportunity to provide focus and respond to the needs of young women**, who have long been a neglected group across policymaking, leading to many missing out on support.

This Young Women's Strategy should **underpin wholesale systems-change** that transforms the ways in which decision-making, planning, and commissioning processes support young women in contact with – or at risk of being in contact with – the criminal justice system. This requires a cross-cutting and collaborative approach that requires the involvement of a broad range of policy and practice areas, including violence against women and girls; mental health; exclusions; children's safeguarding (including transitional safeguarding) and social care; poverty and economic inequality; and racial injustice. It must further take account of the relationship between age and gender, as well as other concepts of identity, including ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion, or belief.

Throughout the Young Women's Justice Project, young women **have consistently emphasised the inadequacy and harmfulness of the current criminal justice system** – which perpetuates disadvantage and drives criminalisation – and identified improvements and opportunities for diversion and support. The lived experience and expertise of young women must underpin the design and development of the forthcoming Young Women's Strategy, as well as all services intended to support them.

23. Ministry of Justice (2021) [Prisons Strategy White Paper](#)

Approaches must shift towards preventative support that is age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive, and away from those that are inherently punitive. Young women tell us that they need greater support that responds to their experiences of violence and abuse, mental-ill health, substance use, poverty, racism, discrimination, and social exclusion – which often underpin their criminalised behaviour.

The commitment to develop a Young Women's Strategy, alongside Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2024, marks an important opportunity to provide focus and respond to the needs and expertise of young women. True systems-change will require practitioners, funders, commissioners, and local/ regional/ national decision-makers to work closely with experts by experience, in order to develop age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive approaches that prioritise:

- 1. Co-production with young women**
- 2. Prevention, early intervention, and diversion**
- 3. Community-based support and specialist responses**
- 4. Transitions, silo-busting, and navigating systems**
- 5. Long term and sustainable funding and commissioning**

The following chapter addresses each of these areas in greater detail.

Implementing systems-change for young women



1 Co-production with young women



There needs to be more education coming from the people with lived experience and the organisations and the decision makers actually sitting down and listening and then taking action.

Casey, 22

Co-production refers to a process of planned collaboration that intentionally brings together key stakeholders. This involves incorporating the expertise of those with lived experience and blending it with learnt experience. Co-production and participatory methods can lead to more effective and person-centered systems and services.

Throughout the Young Women's Justice Project, young women with lived experience have emphasised that they want to be central to the design, development, and evaluation of programmes and strategies relevant to them. They have the greatest expertise when it comes to deciding how to meet their needs. It follows that collaborating with young women is a vital component of providing age-, gender-, trauma- and culturally-informed support during their journey – before, during, and after – the criminal justice system. As such, decision-makers must routinely embed engagement with young women with lived experience; above all, they must engage those from over-represented groups in the criminal justice system, including young women who have experienced the harms of racism and prejudice.

Making coproduction work for young women

All co-production with young women should be conducted meaningfully and consider the needs of young women, without causing further harm, by adhering to the following guidelines:

- All co-production must be age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive, so that it takes account of young women's needs and does not cause further harm.
- Organisations should invest in staff training, learning how to support young women in appropriate and accessible ways that are age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive.
- Young women should always be compensated for their expertise and time and provided with support for expenses, including travel, childcare, or support from a trusted adult.
- Time and resources should be spent to develop trust between organisations and young women. This should include consistent communication and transparency.
- Organisations should encourage feedback and foster an environment within which young women feel able to challenge without fearing repercussions.²⁴
- Young women must be given the option to access follow-on support following involvement with coproduction activities.

24. A useful guide on how to involve young people's values can be found here: Esmee Fairbairn [Values for co-production between young people and organisations](#). When working with young women in particular, this should be gender-informed.

2 Prevention, early intervention, and diversion



By the time a young woman is known to the police then by definition it's not prevention.

Participant in stakeholder discussion



If I had identified or anybody else identified, [those] vulnerabilities and risks exceedingly early on, would I have been here? Who knows? My priority's always been prevention...

Razia, 23

Many young women tell us that they have felt judged by services and labelled as “difficult to engage with”. As a result of negative experiences with services, young women can quickly lose trust in agencies and professionals, including those intended to help them, such as teachers, youth workers and nurses. For many, a cycle of harm begins in school and culminates in exclusion, too often leading to further disadvantage and trauma, including contact with the criminal justice system.²⁵

We know that many have experienced one or more risk factors, including poverty, poor mental health, homelessness, substance misuse, violence and abuse, and exclusion from education. However, the pathway that leads many young women from contact with the police through to prison and then probation often fails to account for the context behind young women’s “offending” behaviours. Young women should have access to services, projects, and opportunities that allow them to receive support for multiple unmet needs before they are criminalised.

²⁵ Concerningly, Agenda Alliance research shows how exclusion from school can lead to further psychological distress and traumatic experiences – including sexual harassment and abuse in male-dominated Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) – and increase risks of criminal and sexual exploitation. Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls at risk of exclusion](#)

Preventative approaches in practice

Positive change for young women not only necessitates a shift in the culture of individual organisations but also requires transformation across public services and systems to take a **fundamentally preventative and person-centred approach**. To achieve this:

- Education, training and employment services, youth services, healthcare and mental health services must take account of young women's life experiences and become age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive, ensuring problems are identified and responded to before escalation. Adequate resources need to be invested to allow practitioners the time and capacity to develop trusting and supportive relationships with young women.
- Police and Crime Commissioners must prioritise violence against women and girls (VAWG) alongside reducing the criminalisation of young women, many of whom are victims/survivors themselves.
- Local policing strategies should provide robust training for officers, delivered by charities with expertise in domestic abuse and VAWG, ensuring they can enquire about violence and abuse with effective policies in place to respond.
- Local Liaison and Diversion services should ensure that young women receive support for a range of psycho-social needs, diverting them away from the criminal justice system by referring them to more appropriate statutory and non-statutory services.²⁶



Once you get kicked out of school... They don't care about you after that.... I went to a PRU (Pupil Referral Unit) since I was in Year 9... When you go in [to a PRU] you get searched before coming in by a police officer... You're getting searched coming out... In my head, it was just preparing me for prison.

Sarah, 22

²⁶ Liaison and Diversion (L&D) services identify people who have mental health, learning disability, substance misuse or other vulnerabilities when they first come into contact with the criminal justice system. They are able to refer to them to appropriate health or social care, allowing people to be diverted away from the criminal justice system to a more appropriate setting. An evaluation of L&D found that the likelihood of service users receiving a custodial sentence is halved following involvement with L&D services. RAND Corporation [Evaluation of Liaison and Diversion services in England](#)

Implementing systems-change for young women

3 Community-based support and specialist services

Specialist and gender-specific voluntary sector organisations – including those delivered “by-and-for” the communities they support – are often best placed to address the multiple needs of girls and young women. These services can develop supportive and nurturing relationships between professionals and young women, working to strengthen the community ties upon which young women often rely. Many young women tell us that they feel alienated from youth provision that does not offer specialist and gender-specific support, as well as from adult women’s services, which they describe feeling as if they are **“not for them.”**²⁷

Where specialist services do exist, young women say that they would like to see provision developed and expanded. Gender-responsive support is not uniformly available, causing many girls and young women to face a postcode lottery.

In 2022, Agenda Alliance submitted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all local authorities in England and Wales which found:

60% of local authorities do not provide any gender-specialist services for girls and young women.²⁸

90% of local authorities do not provide any gender-specialist support for Black, Asian, and minoritised girls and young women.²⁹

27. Agenda Alliance and AYJ (2022) [We've Not Given Up](#)

28. Agenda Alliance (2022) [Pushed Out, Left Out](#)

29. *Ibid*

Specialist services provide young women with activities which support their development by adopting strengths-based approaches and providing practical and therapeutic support. Young women tell us that they want access to safe spaces for activities that recognise their skills, strengths, and capacity for joy, despite the hardships they may have faced. Specialist “by-and-for” services that support Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised women are both effective in delivering the right support and particularly valued by the girls and women with whom they work.³⁰ These services cultivate relationships of trust between women and practitioners, who bring an understanding of the lived experience and social realities of the lives of those who are racially minoritised.

30. Our research based on interviews with young women with lived experience shows that they value “safe, girl-only environments that are run by gender-specialist services with expertise surrounding the challenges faced by young women with intersecting and marginalised identities, including for Black, Asian, and minoritised and/or LGBTQ+ young women.” For an overview, see p.49, Agenda Alliance (2022) [Pushed Out, Left Out](#)



Why young women respond well to specialist services:³¹

Gender-specialist services delivered by trained professionals in a safe space allow young women to receive support that responds to their gendered experiences, such as the impact of trauma, violence, abuse, and discrimination.

- Specialist services adopt approaches that are age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive. They can therefore take into account the specific risks that many young women face, which can underpin and drive criminalised behaviours.
- Young women with intersecting and marginalised identities can receive support that responds to their lived experience from “by-and-for” organisations. Young women tell us that they feel more comfortable around professionals with shared identities and lived experiences.
- Young women benefit from consistent support delivered by specialist workers, who have small caseloads and can work with them over an extended period. This enables them to develop trusting relationships and conduct intensive supportive work, through understanding young women’s individual needs. This trusted point of contact can also help young women navigate systems during the transition to adulthood, and when navigating a variety of other public services.
- Specialist services embed lived experience and expertise into the design of their programmes, engaging and co-designing support that is effective and meets the gendered needs of young women.
- Young women can benefit from peer support that is managed by experts, developing positive and trusting relationships with both peers and professionals.

31. For an overview of why young women respond well to specialist services, see p.53 Agenda Alliance and AYJ (2022) [We’ve Not Given Up](#)

4 Transitions, silo-busting, and navigating systems



There's no one-size-fits all when it comes to good practice – floating support, assertive outreach and community-based models should be considered. But someone needs to help young women navigate support, preventing multiple people being involved.

Participant in stakeholder discussion

Young women often encounter fragmented systems and siloed services, which makes navigating services and especially the criminal justice system challenging. Furthermore, young women experiencing interrelated and complex needs are likely to be in contact with numerous services simultaneously. There are often numerous professionals involved in their lives; a process young women liken to being on a **“conveyor belt.”** Even when age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive support is available – often delivered by the voluntary sector – it can be challenging for young women to find and access this.³²



We work with young people who have been through the care system, who have had inconsistencies in their life and a lot of professionals... We made sure there was a professional that a young person could trust, who would then outsource other support and signpost to specialists.

Participant in stakeholder discussion

³². Agenda Alliance research shows that 70% of local authorities do not have representation of gender-specialist services for girls and young women as part of their Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Agenda Alliance (2022) [Pushed Out, Left Out](#)

When young women transition from childhood to legal adulthood, limitations are often placed upon their access to services and they may be required to transition into a range of adult systems. As such, they are often confronted with an arbitrary cliff-edge in access to support, which can lead to an increased risk of exploitation. There are stark differences between youth and adult services; for instance, youth offending teams (YOTs) assume a more flexible approach towards any “non-compliance” with the terms of a sentence, while probation services have a greater focus on punishment and public protection, including enforcing sanctions.³³

Supporting young women to navigate systems:

Both practitioners and young women underline the importance of providing ongoing and consistent support to navigate the complexity of the system and the challenge of transitions. To achieve this:

- “Specialist young women’s outreach workers” who can intensively work with young women, while supporting them to navigate services, should be available across the country. This would allow young women to receive ongoing support from independent professionals during the transition to adulthood, who are then able to liaise with the agencies newly responsible for working with the young women as adults.

33. Agenda Alliance and AYJ (2021) [Falling through the gaps](#)

Implementing systems-change for young women

5 Long term and sustainable funding and commissioning



We can't turn out an outcome in six months or a year. The timelines of these funding pots are unrealistic.

Participant in stakeholder discussion

As a result of the extent of harms young women have faced, trusting relationships and consistency are essential to disrupt the cycle of harm. However, commissioning of services often takes a short-term view, with a lack of consideration about the interaction between agencies, preventing them from addressing problems holistically. Whilst many commissioners are conscious of this, they are often bound by national funding pathways and timelines determined by central government. Given the narrow and exclusive focus of some policy initiatives and funding streams, which are often short-term and fragmented, many local areas struggle to provide support to young women experiencing multiple disadvantage, or to focus on systems-change.

There is a clear need to address the barriers that both services and commissioners face in order to provide long-term and sustainable support for young women. Following years of austerity, local authorities have had to make difficult decisions about how to allocate increasingly scarce resources, leading to a reduction in funding for services that do not help authorities meet their statutory requirements, such as youth, specialist, and "by-and-for" services. There is a glaring disparity between the extent of need amongst young women at-risk, and the specialist services and support available to them.

Local and national funders and commissioners must ensure that gender-specific youth services are commissioned, and designed with a long-term view to addressing issues preventatively in order to have a lasting impact on girls' lives. They must ensure that age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive provision for girls and young women is embedded in future funding attached to criminal justice, violence against women and girls (VAWG), youth, education, support for young people in care, mental health, anti-racism, and poverty prevention programmes.

Toolkit for service providers

Considerations for service providers:

Alongside strategic policy change at local and national levels, service providers should urgently reflect on current provision and its suitability for girls and young women. The following list includes questions that should be considered:

- How accessible is your service? Have you considered where you can deliver your service from, so that it is experienced as accessible and safe by young women? Can young women access your service as frequently as they need?
- Are you considering how young women's intersecting identities – including race, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, and gender identity – can compound disadvantage? Do you recognise the ways in which this leads to barriers in engagement and taking steps to dismantle these?
- Can young women receive support to meet basic needs, including the cost of travel to your service and support with childcare?
- Have you developed effective partnerships with other experts? Are you in contact with relevant colleagues across both statutory and voluntary services, giving consideration to which service is best placed to meet young women's needs?
- Do you provide regular age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive training for your staff?
- Have you centred co-production? How could you develop feedback loops to receive insights from young women?
- Does your evaluation model allow you to learn from others and develop your practice?
- During the transition to legal adulthood, are young women supported to deal with the cliff-edge in support they face from statutory services?
- Are you clear and transparent with young women about the limits of confidentiality, involving them fully in decisions about their lives and making clear when information is being shared between agencies?

Toolkit for funders and commissioners

Considerations for funders and commissioners:

Funders and commissioners have the opportunity to empower providers to deliver services which meet the needs of girls and young women. The following question should be prioritised: Are you ensuring that funding pots are designed in ways that nurture and build specialist provision for girls and young women? To achieve this, consider:

- Building in funding for organisational capacity building and relationship development between services as a proportion of any pot to adapt support for girls and young women.
- Funding to train at least one member of staff to deliver specialist girls and young women support, supporting organisations to consider how to sustainably embed this learning across their service.
- Ensuring basic costs such as travel, childcare and food are factored into service costings.
- Building co-production costs into funding pots to ensure service design and evaluation involves girls and young women.
- Building evaluation costs into funding pots to empower organisations to continually learn and develop and be prepared to listen and learn from what they discover.
- Asking all applicants to identify the ways in which their services are age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive, including ensuring their safeguarding policies and processes respond to these needs.
- Ensuring all applicants consider the ways in which they are making their services accessible to the most at-risk girls and young women.

Examples of gender-responsive practice

Throughout the YWJP, we have worked closely with specialist organisations, learning about effective practice from them and hearing directly from the women they support. The following spotlights showcase some of the targeted and preventative work being done across the country, delivered in an age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive way.



Spotlight on peer support: Getaway Girls

Getaway Girls works in Leeds to empower girls and young women to support each other to build confidence, resilience, raise aspirations, develop new skills, and take positive risks in an environment that offers co-operation and support. Young women are supported through difficult experiences which can lead to criminal justice involvement, including trauma, discrimination, and poverty. Within their team, specialists hold expertise in child sexual exploitation, complex needs, and youth work.

The organisation provides support to young women by adopting strengths-based approaches, recognising their strengths, abilities, talents, and lived experience. This includes offering peer support groups in which young women with lived experience can support each other in a safe, creative spaces. Examples include the “proud to be mums” group, the “She writes” creative writing group, and “Sisters-Eritrean/ Ethiopian” young women’s group. Getaway Girls provides a balance of support, challenge and opportunities, but also fun.



Spotlight on culturally-informed responses: Muslim Women in Prison

Muslim Women in Prison (MWIP) project supports Muslim women prison-leavers on their return to the community, and also aims to educate the criminal justice system, allied providers, and the community on the needs of Muslim women both in custody and on-release.³⁴ They document and research the experiences of Muslim women coming through the criminal justice system.

MWIP has also developed a community-based culturally appropriate desistance model for Muslim women returning to communities while continuing to strengthen its research and evidence base. The project provides tailored support that responds to cultural and religious sensitivities, including the stigma that some women may face from their family and community, as well as systematic inequalities. They aim to demonstrate to other providers what a culturally sensitive model looks like and develop community-owned and led best practice.



Spotlight on whole-systems approaches: Advance

Advance is a women's organisation, which delivers trauma and gender-informed, community-based support for women and girls affected by domestic abuse, including those in contact with the criminal justice system. Advance's Minerva Approach Model offers women and young women in contact with the criminal justice system holistic and consistent support through keyworkers, groups, and activities in women-only safe spaces, meeting their individual needs. This includes specialist support for young women, recognising that this group have often experienced trauma and abuse. Through this model, young women have increased safety, improved self-confidence, self-esteem, and life skills.

34. The MWIP project was launched by a community organisation, Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance in 2013 but since 2016 has been based at the Khidmat Centres in Bradford.

In Newham, Advance are also working to provide gender-responsive support to young women on probation as part of the Youth to Adult hub pilot which aims to reduce reoffending and improve life outcomes for young adults on probation. The pilot is a partnership between the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), London Probation, and the Ministry of Justice. Young women can attend their probation appointments and access a range of other services at a women's centre to receive wrap-around support from Advance for up to 12 to 18 months in a safe, secure space. Working closely with probation officers, social workers and other statutory and non-statutory services, Advance delivers a coordinated community and gendered response that dismantles siloes and supports young women to rebuild their lives and engage positively in their communities.



Spotlight on building healthy relationships: Daddyless Daughters

The Daddyless Daughters Project CIC provides physical and emotional safe spaces for girls and young women (aged 11 to 25) who have been affected by family breakdown, abuse, and adversity. They support girls and young women at-risk to go on to build and sustain healthy relationships with themselves and within their communities in aid of preventing criminal and sexual exploitation. Their work is centred on research, lived experiences and trauma-informed practices providing one-to-one group mentoring programs, creative expression projects, community events and educational workshops.

The Daddyless Daughters Project, addresses critical gaps within social care, providing much-needed support and intervention for disadvantaged young women and empowering them to build positive and fulfilling lives free from trauma and complex behaviour patterns. Daddyless Daughters also develops films, documentaries and podcasts to platform the stories of their communities and advocate for the needs of marginalised young women to influence decision and policy making.



Spotlight on creative co-production: Art Against Knives

Art Against Knives engages with young people (10 to 25) in Barnet, London. Their vision is a city in which every young person can build the life they want through creativity, free from violence. To achieve this, they co-design creative spaces with young people that are deeply embedded in the community. They provide training and specialist support, establishing trusting relationships, amplifying voices, and creating change in the systems around them. By building upon young people's skills, they empower young people to make positive choices and put them in control of their own futures, while breaking down barriers and inequalities that lead to violence.

Their work with young people is co-produced and underpinned by a gender- and psychologically-informed approach to ensure girls and young women with histories of trauma can have their needs met. Their "In Our Hands" programme – co-designed with young women, girls, trans- and non-binary young people – upskills participants with creative activities, starting with nail art, and leading to a range of skills relevant to the creative industries. In these community nail bars, the team of creative professionals bring skills training, mentoring and specialist support to the young people. This includes access to a Young Person's Violence Advisor, who engages with the participants to explore issues like violence and abuse and gender equality, while responding to high-risk disclosures and supporting them to stay safe.

Opportunities for change: our recommendations

To date, there have been a number of promising policy announcements which demonstrate a commitment to change; however, meaningful progress is yet to be made in these areas. The upcoming Police and Crime Commissioner elections and the promised Young Women’s Strategy are key opportunities for stakeholders to come together and implement the recommendations we outline below:

1. CO-PRODUCTION WITH YOUNG WOMEN

Effective co-production with young women who have lived experience, to ensure that resources are invested in the most impactful policies, programmes, and services.

Policy-makers and service providers must **embed co-production as an overarching principle** in the design and delivery solutions for young women in contact with the criminal justice system. This co-production should adhere to the following guidelines:

- All young women, and services supporting them, should be **remunerated for their time**, including compensation for travel, childcare, and any follow-on support.
- All young women should be **reached and supported through specialist services**, including “by-and-for” organisations, and services should also be appropriately remunerated for their time and expertise.
- Consideration should be given to the ways in which young women’s intersecting identities – including ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, and gender identity – can compound disadvantage and actively **dismantle any barriers in engagement** in response to this.

The Ministry of Justice must appoint a **Young Women's Advisory Board** that brings together young women with lived experience of contact with the criminal justice system, and **develop the Young Women's Strategy in partnership with them.**

- To form this advisory board, the MoJ must ensure representation from young women that have lived experience of
 - i. being excluded from school, and/or**
 - ii. living under local authority care.**
- The advisory board must also be ethnically diverse, including representation from Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised girls and young women.

All Police and Crime Commissioners should appoint girls and young women with lived experience as **Young Women Advisors** in **the development and delivery of their Police and Crime plans**, including making plans for the commissioning of relevant local services.

2. PREVENTION, EARLY INTERVENTION AND DIVERSION

Investment in prevention, early intervention, and diversion for young women will reduce pressure on public services and minimise the personal, social, and economic costs associated with contact with the criminal justice system.

A **“Preventing Young Women from Harm Funder Collective”** should be established by relevant trusts and foundations. This includes, but should not be limited to, funders that support women and girls experiencing multiple unmet needs – including poverty – and those working on social and criminal justice issues.

- This collective should develop **shared funder priorities and principles centred around prevention, early intervention, and diversion** for young women, with a goal of ultimately reducing the number of young women in contact with, or at-risk of contact with, the criminal justice system.
- The collective should establish a **new funding stream that awards multi-year grants** to specialist and gender-informed services that support girls and young women at-risk of school-exclusion (given the evidence on the impact of exclusion) and contact with the criminal justice system.

The Ministry of Justice’s forthcoming Young Women’s Strategy must **improve responses to girls and young women facing multiple unmet needs** by:

- Outlining steps to **address the unmet needs driving young women’s experiences of criminalisation**, including experiences of violence and abuse, exploitation, contact with the care system, and exclusion from school.

- Including a **focus on the impact of structural inequalities**, such as gender-inequality, poverty, and systemic racism. This includes addressing discrimination underlying the overrepresentation of Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised young women, and young women with experience of the care system.
- **Taking steps to support transitions** and prevent girls turning 18 – particularly those who are care leavers – from falling through the gaps in systems and services at a critical time in their lives.
- **Directing resources to community-based responses** and support that can prevent young women from ever having contact with the criminal justice system.

The Home Office and National Police Chiefs' Council must take steps **to improve responses to young women with multiple unmet needs** across the country. This should include:

- Release guidance to all UK police forces supporting them to **review their VAWG Action Plans** and ensure inclusion of objectives to train police officers about the ways in which experiences of violence and abuse can drive young women's "offending behaviours" and experiences of criminalisation.
- Establish corresponding reporting mechanisms for every UK police force to use when communicating progress made against their VAWG Action Plan. These reporting structures should include desired outcomes, "Key Performance Questions" and corresponding "Key Performance Indicators" focused on **improving responses to criminalised girls and young women with multiple unmet needs**.
- The data should be collected annually and progress should be measured nationally. **Performance reports should be public and published annually with full breakdowns of the data with a national overview**, demarcating areas for improvement.

The Home Office should issue guidance around the development of Police and Crime Plans ahead of the 2024 election of Police and Crime Commissioners to ensure that they achieve the following.

- Set out plans and funding streams for all UK police forces to receive training **delivered by charities with expertise in domestic abuse and VAWG**, supporting them to understand the complex needs of girls and young women. This training should develop police understanding of local services to improve referral pathways away from the criminal justice system and onto appropriate support.

3. COMMUNITY-BASED AND SPECIALIST RESPONSES

For young women to receive effective support, age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive services that are based in their community should be available nationwide.

HM Government should establish a “UK Specialist Women’s Services Fund” that **pools new cross-governmental budgets** from the Ministry of Justice, Home Office, Department for Education, and Department for Health and Social Care.

- A majority proportion of this funding should be ring-fenced for specialist and community-based women and girls’ services.
- This must include further ring-fenced funding for services led “by-and-for” Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised women and girls, and other specialist services.

The Ministry of Justice, Home Office, Department for Education, and Department for Health and Social Care must ensure that:

- Future strategies and funding attached to criminal justice, violence against women and girls (VAWG), youth, education, support for young people in care, mental health, anti-racism, and poverty prevention programmes **include ring-fenced funding for age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive provision for girls and young women**, ensuring community organisations can successfully access this funding without undue barriers and complex bureaucracy.

Local authorities should be required to develop clear, publicly available, and fully **resourced strategic plans for addressing the needs of girls and young women.**

- This should include specific reference to the needs of Black, Asian, and minoritised and care-experienced girls and young women.
 - In doing this, local authorities should bring together a range of partners across the combined authority area, including voluntary and community partners, and women with lived experience, who should be given meaningful advisory and decision-making roles.
 - All local authorities should ensure representation from gender-specialist services, including “by-and-for” organisations, as part of their Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships.
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4. TRANSITIONS, SILO-BUSTING AND NAVIGATING SYSTEMS

Tackling transitions and silo-busting to ensure young women are better able to navigate systems and access support.

The Young Women's Strategy should reflect the value and approach of the Concordat on Women in or at Risk of Contact with the Criminal Justice System, and the vision behind the Whole Systems Approach, by placing a **strong emphasis on joining-up public services and being age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive.**

The Young Women's Strategy must be **cross-cutting and commit to overcoming silos** and supporting transitions. To achieve this,

- Delivery of the strategy should be overseen and prioritised by the Ministry of Justice with the full involvement of Department for Education, the Department for Health and Social Care, the Home Office, and the Cabinet Office to centre diversion and focus on reducing the number of young women at-risk of criminalisation.
- Specialist women and girls' services, Police and Crime Commissioners, and a Young Women's Advisory Board must inform the development of the strategy.
- It must foster flexibility by planning for coordinated, gender-responsive approaches to the transitions of girls turning 18 in the community and in custody, including a focus on those with experience of care.

The Young Women's Strategy should commit to launching a national pilot that funds "**specialist young women's outreach workers**", located within specialist women and girls' organisations, to support young women in contact with and at-risk of contact with the criminal justice system through holistic coordination of services.

- The Strategy should commit to fully funding "specialist young women's outreach workers" in 15 areas across England and Wales. Areas should be selected to give priority to areas in which girls and young women make up the highest proportion of custody receptions and arrests. Consideration should also be given to the diversity of these areas to ensure pilots are set up to better meet the needs of Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised young women.
- All caseworkers should have small caseloads and work with young women over an extended period to develop trusting relationships and navigate transitions.
- These pilots should run for a minimum of three years to ensure trusted relationships can be built so needs are better understood, and support packages are properly developed;
- The Strategy should commit to independently evaluate the impacts of these pilot "specialist young women's outreach workers". Evaluation must be published in advance of the project end date, to allow projects to grow and continue, alongside a timeline for national rollout of the successes of the approach.

5. LONG-TERM AND SUSTAINABLE FUNDING AND COMMISSIONING

By re-imagining processes to plan, assess needs and set priorities, funding and commissioning can ensure support for young women is targeted and responsive.

Funders and commissioners must ensure that all funding pots for specialist services to support girls and young women are designed and commissioned around the outcomes which will **make a substantive difference to girls and young women's lives**. This will help ensure commissioned services take a long-term view and address issues preventatively. This work should include:

- Setting all outcomes and goals through meaningful co-production with girls and young women.
- Set aside money within all contracts for continued co-production, capacity building and staff training.
- Set aside money within all contracts for data collection and reporting, to ensure impacts and learning from this style of commissioning can be captured and shared.

The Procurement Bill (2024) guidance should inform contracting local authorities about the mechanisms available within the Act to recognise the **social value of the specialist voluntary and community sector**, to ensure the expertise of existing specialist services for girls and young women is embedded in public service procurement.

- This should include guidance on how to reach and engage organisations delivering age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive services for girls and young women in commissioning processes.
- Guidance should also cover how commissioners can make funding accessible to smaller and specialist “by-and-for” organisations through a range of mechanisms including use of grants, subcontracting arrangements and incentives for larger organisations to submit shared bids with smaller, specialist and “by-and-for” organisations.

The Ministry of Justice must publish **gender- and age-specific data** across all datasets. This must be made public and, where possible, disaggregated by other characteristics, including ethnicity and care experience across all published measures and datasets.

Local authorities must gather gender- and age-specific data across all of their data-sets, where possible **disaggregated by other characteristics, including ethnicity and care experience**. When commissioning services and reviewing contact terms, they should ensure that services are responding to the multiple needs of service users, providing targeted support to the most at-risk girls and young women.

Data collected by the Office for National Statistics by public sector organisations needs to be adjusted to include **more readily available service data, expenditure data and outcome data**. This should include data segregated by gender, ethnicity and local authority. It should also include asking service users which other needs they have, and which other services they are in contact with. This would allow for better monitoring and evaluation of services.

Too often, young women are blamed, criminalised, and driven further into the system, while simultaneously being denied access to meaningful support. Consequently, they face escalating risk. Taking a long-term view to addressing issues preventatively is essential to end this spiral of disadvantage, criminalisation, and imprisonment.

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- Advance
- Art Against Knives
- Daddyless Daughters
- Getaway Girls
- Muslim Women in Prison, Khidmat Centres

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During the course of writing this briefing, we consulted with Nicola Drinkwater and Caroline Gentile, colleagues at AYJ, and women with lived experience. We are grateful for their generous feedback and reflections.



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