

## Introduction

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Women and girls facing multiple disadvantage experience a combination of complex and overlapping problems including homelessness, substance misuse, mental ill health, poverty, and contact with the criminal justice system. But women often find themselves bounced between services or excluded because of the complexity of issues they face. Too many fall through the cracks. Without support problems can spiral with devastating consequences for them, their families and the community.

Women and girls' experiences of multiple disadvantage are significantly different to men and boys' experiences. For many women and girls, their experiences of disadvantage are underpinned by a history of extensive violence and abuse. Women also face particularly high rates of mental health problems and experience particular issues related to motherhood and childcare, including stigma, social service contact, and removal of children from their care, piling trauma upon trauma<sup>i</sup>. Black and minority ethnic (BAME) women and girls often experience additional forms of inequality and discrimination based on race or religion, and face particular practical, cultural and social barriers.

There is currently insufficient support available to this group of women. Services, such as for homelessness or addiction, tend to be dominated by men and do not have the expertise or capacity to respond to the specific issues women and girls face. Agenda research shows that women experiencing multiple disadvantage do not typically present at special domestic and sexual violence services. These services can even make bad situations worse, with women not listened to, blamed or treated as a problem, or turned away because their needs are considered too complex. Policy makers, commissioners and service providers do not sufficiently prioritise this group.

## Hidden Hurt

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Too many women and girls who have suffered violence and abuse are deeply traumatised and go on to face multiple problems like very low self-esteem, poor mental and physical health and turning to drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms. For women and girls who have faced extensive violence and abuse, sexual and physical abuse often starts in childhood and goes on to weave in and out of their lives. Many go on to face lifelong problems and end up trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and abuse. Too many who have been abused as children end up homeless or in prison.

Agenda research<sup>ii</sup> reveals one in 20 women have experienced extensive physical and sexual violence as both a child and an adult: that's 1.2 million women in England. These women face very high rates of problems like mental ill-health, addiction, homelessness, and poverty:

- **54%** have a common mental health condition
- **52%** have a disability
- **35%** are in the lowest income tertile
- **One in three** have attempted suicide
- **One in five** have been homeless
- **One in three** have an alcohol problem

Women's disproportionate experiences of multiple disadvantage are hidden in gender neutral statistics. Women are made further invisible by outreach and services that do not take account of the gendered barriers to accessing support, such as women's fear of child removal. As a society we are failing women and girls by not providing protection or intervening early to stop problems escalating. There is not enough appropriate and long term support available to help women and girls turn their lives around.

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### Case Study: Alison's Story

Alison was placed in care aged 13, becoming pregnant aged 16 and traumatically losing her baby shortly before her 18th birthday. *"So I think that just affected me, I got into bad relationships. [...] One day he proper battered me, he had a knife, he was slashing me. I had to run out in my dressing gown and shoes. I ran into town and that's how I became homeless".*

## Provision of services

**There is good evidence<sup>iii</sup> that what works for women facing multiple disadvantage is holistic gender and trauma-informed support.** Agenda's *A Sense of Safety*<sup>iv</sup> report found that women who have accessed both mixed- and single-sex provision routinely express a preference for gender-specific, single-sex services. One woman in a prison-based programme reflected that this kind of support "...has helped us to recognise why we feel like how we do; we can understand ourselves more, trust people more and be more open".

However, **services which offer this, such as women's centres, are few and far between**, struggle for funding and many are currently under threat. *Mapping the Maze*<sup>v</sup>, a report by Agenda and AVA found that:

- In only 19 areas of England and Wales (out of 173) are there services for women that address all of the following issues: substance misuse, mental health, homelessness, offending and complex needs;
- Most services address single issues (e.g. substance misuse or mental health) which can see women being passed around services and unable to access holistic support addressing the range of needs they have;
- More than a quarter of all support for women facing multiple disadvantage is for pregnant women or those with a young baby.

**Failing to understand the gendered, complex needs of women and girls who face multiple disadvantage can make services re-traumatising.** The *Women's Mental Health Taskforce*<sup>vi</sup>, led by Agenda and the Department for Health and Social Care, heard alarming cases of women who had experienced trauma (often through childhood, domestic or sexual abuse) who then experienced further trauma in mental health services through restraint, assault and/or disturbing experiences of one-to-one observations. Agenda's *Breaking Down the Barriers*<sup>vii</sup> report found that the removal of children as a result of domestic abuse can be a major barrier to women making a meaningful recovery.

**Funding for holistic services presents a further challenge.** 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.

## Gaps in the evidence base

There is currently no data collected on the number of women facing a multiple disadvantage in the UK. Data collected on the number of women accessing services for people facing multiple disadvantage is likely to be a significant underestimate of the level of need.

**Women and girls are hidden in official statistics.** For example, women are less likely to show up in rough sleeping counts, and more likely to be among the 'hidden homeless', sofa surfing or hidden to avoid abuse on the streets<sup>viii</sup>. Lankelly Chase's *Gender Matters*<sup>ix</sup> report shows that women make up 70% of people experiencing homelessness, substance misuse, poor mental health and interpersonal violence and abuse simultaneously.

**Women also fear coming forward to ask for help.** Many women who are mothers are prevented from seeking support for fear that their children will be removed from their care. Some services – such as homelessness or substance misuse – are dominated by men, and can be intimidating and unsafe places for women.

**Women with intersecting experiences of multiple disadvantage face additional barriers** to being represented in data and accessing services. There are only a tiny number of specialist services for Black and minority ethnic women, LGBTQI women, disabled women, and refugee and migrant women. Imkaan's report *From Survival to Sustainability*<sup>x</sup> found BME women and girls often report dissatisfaction with the responses from statutory services, and report an overwhelming preference for specialist, BAME led women's services.

## Recommendations

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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. Secretary of State for Women and Equalities must be appointed to develop a cross-government approach to drive positive change across departments and improve the national response to women and girls facing multiple disadvantage. This approach must consider how policies and services including around mental health, violence against women and girls, criminal justice, addiction and homelessness impact on this group.
2. The creation of a single focused fund, drawn from the budgets of a number of government departments, to ensure properly funded and commissioned gender-specific and trauma-informed services for women facing multiple disadvantage, including a network of women's centres across the country. This should include provision of specialist services for BME, migrant, LGBQ+ and disabled women.
3. Central government should offer incentives to local authorities to encourage mainstream services to pool budgeting and work collaboratively, and ensure they are responsive to the most disadvantaged women.
4. A statutory duty on public authorities to ensure frontline staff make trained enquiries into domestic abuse, and respond appropriately with proper pathways into support that takes into account the trauma they have experienced. This duty must be backed by sufficient funding to make it a reality.
5. The expertise of women with lived experience should be valued and prioritised through meaningful involvement and coproduction in policy development as well as prioritised within the recruitment of staff in service delivery.
6. Alternatives must be found to the current care system, which fails to support mothers and rushes to institutionalise children.

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<sup>i</sup> Mcneish, D & Scott, S. 2014 (DMSS) [Women and girls at risk: Evidence across the life course](#)

<sup>ii</sup> Scott, S. & McManus, S. 2016. (DMSS research for Agenda) [Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women](#)

<sup>iii</sup> Agenda and AVA (2017) [Mapping the Maze: a review of the literature](#)

<sup>iv</sup> Agenda (2019) [A Sense of Safety: Trauma-informed approaches for women](#)

<sup>v</sup> Agenda and AVA (2017) [Mapping the Maze: services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in England and Wales](#)

<sup>vi</sup> Agenda and the Department for Health and Social Care (2018) [The Women's Mental Health Taskforce](#)

<sup>vii</sup> Agenda and AVA (2019) [Breaking Down the Barriers: Findings of the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage](#)

<sup>viii</sup> University of York (2018) [Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology](#)

<sup>ix</sup> Lankelly Chase (2020) [Gender Matters: New conversations about severe & multiple disadvantage](#)

<sup>x</sup> Imkaan (2018) [From Survival To Sustainability](#)