

Written evidence submitted by Agenda to the Women and Equalities Committee's inquiry into the Government's plans for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5)

1st December 2016

Executive summary

- Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, welcomes this inquiry **into the Government's plans for achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5)**. Women in the UK still face considerable economic, social and political inequality and discrimination including poverty, gender based violence and wider disadvantage. We believe that much more needs to be done to embed and promote SDG5 in UK government strategy and policy.
- Agenda campaigns for the most socially excluded and marginalised women in society: the large but hidden group of women for whom inequality, abuse and wider disadvantage are experienced across the life course. These are women and girls who have suffered extensive violence and abuse, are deeply traumatised and face multiple problems like severe poverty, very low self-esteem, poor mental and physical health and turning to drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms. For these women, 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. These women are at the sharpest end of gender inequality.
- One in 20 women in England has experienced extensive physical and sexual violence as both a child and as an adult¹. Women who have these experiences often face very difficult lives: more than half have a diagnosable mental health condition, 21% have been homeless, 31% have an alcohol problem and 8% are dependent on drugs. The combination of trauma, lack of access to resources and poor mental and physical health can prevent them from building better lives for themselves.
- The fact that gender is not consistently thought about in policy development and service design and delivery across different government departments disadvantages these women further. 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 which do not recognise women's experiences or address their needs.
- To achieve SDG5, women's specific experiences and needs must be considered by all relevant government departments in policy design and service development. Further, addressing the complex needs of marginalised women who have suffered extensive violence and abuse and extreme inequality requires national leadership and a cross-government approach, coordinating the work of the range of Government departments whose policies impact on these women's lives.

¹ Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women (Sara Scott and Sally McManus DMSS Research for Agenda, January 2016)

Agenda recommends:

- Gender and the particular experiences and needs of women should be considered in policy development and service design across all relevant government departments. Equality impact assessments should not be an after-thought but rather part of the process of decision making. There must be a ministerial and civil service lead within government for advancing gender equality, part of whose responsibility is to ensure all departments are taking steps towards this. Additionally, each government department should have an individual lead for gender equality. There should be clarity, transparency and accountability about what government departments are doing to work towards gender equality.
- Public policy and service design must take into account the impact on women, including multiply disadvantaged women. Policies across a range of areas (including for example mental health, housing, substance misuse or employment support) need to recognise and respond to women's particular experiences and needs including the impacts of violence and abuse in their lives and their role as mothers or carers.
- There must be clear leadership and a cross-government approach to addressing the complex needs of multiply disadvantaged women which cut across departmental responsibilities. This should include ensuring specialist services providing holistic support to women with complex needs are adequately funded and properly commissioned including through a central funding pot to encourage joined up working in local areas.

What action is the UK Government taking to implement Goal 5 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls in the UK by 2030? What more can the UK Government do to achieve this?**What more do individual government departments need to do to prioritise Goal 5 targets? What practical steps need to be taken?**

1. Women with complex needs are at the sharpest end of gender inequality. They suffer from extensive gender based violence, social inequalities and discrimination including in many public services particularly those which tend to be dominated by men.
2. The links between domestic and sexual abuse, mental ill health and substance abuse are well documented, yet the complexity of the lives of women affected are poorly understood and responded to by many public services. Women with this complexity of need often face additional problems like poor physical health, homelessness, prison and involvement in prostitution.
3. Despite the high level of need, both the domestic and sexual abuse sector and other public services are limited in their ability to support these women. Research by Kings College London shows that only around 10-30% of women who have experienced sexual and physical abuse are identified by mental health services². Many refuges operate blanket bans regarding some forms of substance misuse and mental health problems³. Only 16.7% of referrals to refuge for women with substance use support needs were successful, compared with 38.9% of referrals for other women⁴. When women are unable to access

² Howard LM, Trevillion K, Agnew-Davies R (2010) Domestic violence and mental health. *International Review of Psychiatry* 22: 525–34.

³ AVA & Solace Women's Aid, 2013, Case by Case

⁴ Women's Aid Annual Survey 2015

support or accommodation not only do their needs go unmet but they can be trapped in abusive relationships or in other insecure and precarious situations at risk of further abuse.

4. Without resolving these issues, we will not end violence against women and tackle gender inequality. Yet policy design and service and programme development in many areas fails to consider the particular needs and experiences of women and the abuse they may have faced and this can have a particularly damaging impact on the most marginalised women.
5. For example, research for Agenda found that only one mental health trust, out of the 35 who responded to an FOI request, had a women's mental health strategy⁵. In homeless or drug and alcohol services, women are in a minority which can mean their needs are not considered in either service design or policy development. Services which are predominantly male can be unsuitable, intimidating and sometimes unsafe places for vulnerable women. The well-established links with women's experiences of abuse and violence can be overlooked including that perpetrators of abuse are using the same services; and their needs as women and mothers not addressed.
6. Change is needed across government departments to ensure that women's needs are considered in policy and service design. For example, 'routine enquiry' into experiences of abuse and violence should be standard practice in mental health services and accompanied by proper support, and policy around education, social services, housing and the criminal justice system should understand the particular issues that women face, including around abuse and trauma and respond to these. Policies to address homelessness need to think about the particular needs of vulnerable women who might not be safe in a male dominated hostel, and drug strategies must make the links between abuse, mental ill-health, and addiction for women.
7. In order to end discrimination against women and girls, all government departments need to consider the experiences and needs of women in policy development and service design. Gender mainstreaming is the concept of assessing the different implications for women and men of any planned policy action including legislation and programmes. Whilst this is commonplace at an international level (a resolution to this effect was adopted by the UN in 2001) it does not happen consistently in public policy development in the UK.
8. Instead gender equality appears only to be thought about in isolated pockets, for example, around gender based violence or political participation, rather than across the piece. There must be a recognition that public policy is likely to impact on men and women differently in a wide range of areas and that a great number of policy tools across government departments could be used to advance gender equality.
9. We would like to see a ministerial and civil service lead within government for advancing gender equality, part of whose responsibility should be to ensure all departments are taking steps towards this. They must have the power and resources to ensure other government departments are playing their part in advancing gender inequality.
10. Additionally, each government department should have an individual lead for gender equality. There should be clarity and accountability about how well all government departments are doing in working towards gender equality.

⁵Women's needs in mental health services: A Response to an FOI Request, Agenda, September 2016
<http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Mental-health-briefing-FINAL.pdf>

11. Equality impact assessments are too often an after-thought rather than part of the process of policy development and decision making. They must be used to better effect and inform decisions and approach.

What resourcing is in place for the implementation of Goal 5? Is further resourcing required?

12. Specialist services providing holistic support to women with complex needs are few and far between and increasingly struggling for funding. These are safe spaces for women where they are treated as individuals and their needs addressed holistically. They often provide a wide range of services such as support around abuse and violence, counselling and mental health services, drug treatment, employment skills, health and well-being activities, child care and support with parenting, and housing assistance. They are crucial if the multiple difficulties and lack of opportunities faced by too many women and girls are to be addressed and they must be adequately funded and properly commissioned.
13. Government departments, including the Department of Health, Department for Communities and Local Government, Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education and Ministry of Justice, need to work together to ensure that such services, including women's centres, are properly funded and commissioned, and available to women with complex needs across the country. We would like to see a central funding stream joining up different budgets nationally which could encourage a similarly joined up approach to commissioning at a local level.
14. Tackling these issues and advancing gender inequality has a clear economic benefit to the country in terms of increased economic activity and savings to public services. Research has estimated that investing £18million per year in services for women in the criminal justice system alone could mean potential savings to the public purse of nearly £1 billion in five years⁶.

How effective is coordination and leadership across UK government departments on implementing Goal 5? Is a single point of responsibility preferable to delegated responsibility across departments, and who should lead?

15. Issues facing women, especially the most disadvantaged women, are complex and cut across departmental responsibilities. As well as individual departmental responsibility, a cross-government approach and coordinated action is therefore necessary.
16. We believe that there should be a single lead across government with overall responsibility for advancing gender equality coordinating activity and reporting directly to the Prime Minister and with a Cabinet seat. Additionally each government department should also have an individual ministerial lead with a focus on about how that department's policies can best promote equality.
17. There should be a cross-government approach to addressing the complex needs of marginalised women. These are complicated issues and solutions do not sit with any one government department, so cross-departmental coordination and action is essential.

⁶ Revolving Doors, 2011, Counting the Cost

What role do the private and third sector have to play in achieving Goal 5 in the UK and how effectively are these roles supported by the Government?

18. The third sector has a clear role to play in supporting the most marginalised women who will often have had negative experiences and have significant mistrust in public services. The culture and approach of third sector organisations which put women at their heart can be critical in building trust with marginalised women and empowering them to turn their lives around after experiences of extensive abuse and inequality.
19. Currently funding for voluntary organisations working with the most disadvantaged is patchy, short term and draws from multiple funding streams. A longer term and more strategic and joined up approach to commissioning these services is vital.

About Agenda

Agenda is a growing alliance of over 70 voluntary organisations 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.

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