

Introduction

Agenda campaigns for some of the most socially excluded and marginalised women and girls in society: those who face multiple disadvantage. Women who have these experiences are often deeply traumatised, with extensive histories of violence and abuse, and face multiple problems like poor mental health, addiction and homelessness. These are women who have very complex, overlapping needs and are at the sharpest end of inequality. Women and men's experiences of multiple disadvantage are significantly different. For many women, 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 can experience particular issues related to motherhood and childcare, including stigma, social service contact, and removal of children from their care, piling trauma upon trauma.¹ Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women and girls often experience additional forms of inequality and discrimination based on race or religion, and can face additional practical, cultural and social barriers.

There is currently insufficient support available to this group of women. The challenges women face tend to be treated and responded to separately by mental health, substance use, criminal justice and housing or homelessness services. Experiencing such a range of complex issues can make navigating this siloed system of support extremely difficult, and a lack of join-up between services means many women fall through the cracks. Services, such as for homelessness or addiction, tend to be dominated by men and do not have the expertise to respond to the specific issues women face. They can even make bad situations worse, with women not listened to, blamed or treated as a problem. Services set up for women such as domestic and sexual abuse services often lack the capacity to work with women with the highest level of need. Policy makers, commissioners and service providers do not sufficiently prioritise this group.

Hidden Hurt

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 these women, sexual and physical abuse often starts in childhood and goes on to weave in and out of their lives. Many 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 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.² These women face very high rates of problems like mental ill-health, addiction, homelessness, and poverty:

- More than half have a common mental health condition
- More than half have a disability
- Nearly half 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

There is not enough appropriate and long-term support available to help women and girls turn their lives around. As a society we are failing women and girls by not providing protection or intervening early to stop problems escalating.

Case study: Thea's story

Thea was sexually abused as a child and went on to experience extensive abuse across her life course, facing mental health problems and addiction as a result. She had her children removed from her care and ended up homeless. Despite contact with several services throughout her life – her GP, social services, A&E, mental health support – sadly it wasn't until Thea attempted suicide that she received the help she needed.

"It's a shame that I am 44 and have had to go through all that. I had to be in a crisis to get any help, I had to nearly kill myself. It is like you've got to be in a crime scene. Hopefully you come out of it, but some people don't."

She wants to see pop up shops in communities where women can get the full range of support they need.

"Because you'll find it's not just one thing. Once you start pulling layers back, there's more, and sometimes they don't even realise themselves and they just carry on."

Service provision for women facing multiple disadvantage

There is good evidence that what works for women facing multiple disadvantage is holistic gender and trauma-informed support.ⁱⁱⁱ 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*,^{iv} 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 (such as 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;
- There is significant variation in support across England and Wales, with some areas having a wide spectrum of support while others appear to have no support at all for women facing multiple disadvantage;
- More than a quarter of all support for women facing multiple disadvantage is for pregnant women or those with a young baby;
- There are only a tiny number of services specifically for Black and Minority Ethnic women with multiple disadvantage and none identified for LBTQI, those with disabilities, or refugees and asylum seekers.

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 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. Some services – such as homelessness or substance misuse – are dominated by men and can be intimidating and unsafe places for women. This can give a misrepresentation of the level of need amongst women. Women are also less likely to show up in rough sleeping counts, and are more likely to be among the 'hidden homeless', sofa surfing or hidden to avoid abuse on the streets.^v

Recommendations

1. Political leadership and a cross-government approach to address the needs of women facing multiple disadvantage, which considers 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 services for women facing multiple disadvantage, including a network of women's centres across the country.
3. Central government to offer incentives to local areas to overcome challenges in joining up and pooling budgets to achieve shared goals in relation to women experiencing multiple disadvantage.
4. Routine enquiry into current and historic domestic and sexual violence should be standard practice across public services supporting women experiencing multiple disadvantage, accompanied by trauma-informed support and pathways into care.
5. Central and local government to drive improvements in data collection to build a clearer picture around women facing multiple disadvantage and their access to services.

About Agenda

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. We campaign for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness to get the support and protection they need. www.weareagenda.org

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ⁱ Mcneish, D & Scott, S. 2014 (DMSS) *Women and girls at risk: Evidence across the life course*

ⁱⁱ Scott, S. & McManus, S. 2016. (DMSS research for Agenda) *Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women*

ⁱⁱⁱ Agenda and AVA (2017), *Mapping the Maze: a review of the literature*

^{iv} Agenda and AVA (2017), *Mapping the Maze: services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in England and Wales*

^v University of York (2018), *Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology*