

Young Women in the Justice System

Presentation for the Triangle Trust

www.agendaalliance.org

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About Agenda Alliance

Agenda Alliance, are bold, ambitious feminists, living in a world where women and girls with the most complex unmet needs are consistently overlooked and harmed.

We are a social movement, **campaigning** with courage and in solidarity with our Alliance members and women and girls, so that they can thrive.

We **advocate and campaign** for systems and services to respond appropriately to women and girls with unmet needs.

We want public services to respond better to the distinct and multiple unmet needs of women and girls, including appropriately responding to **gender, age, race and trauma**.

For the whole system to respond better, we stand in solidarity with the voluntary sector and advocate for them to be empowered.

What do we mean by multiple unmet needs?

- Women and girls with multiple unmet needs **grapple with interconnecting challenges**, including homelessness, unsupported parenthood, substance misuse, poor mental health, child removal, poverty, violence and abuse, and contact with the criminal justice system
- **Underscored by trauma and compounded by prejudicial treatment** based on age, ethnicity, sexuality, and other intersecting identities
- Statutory services often inaccessible - **barriers limiting access**, e.g. long waiting lists, thresholds that determine their eligibility or level of need/risk. Overstretched frontline professionals and disconnected services unable to provide joined-up support
- Women and girls can encounter **inappropriate and discriminatory** responses which can cause additional harm

Young Women's Justice Project

- Build a strong and credible **evidence base** on key themes in the lives of young women in contact with the CJS
- Influence government **policy and strategies** to take account of young women
- Enable the development of effective **practice** through more gender-, trauma-, age- and culturally-responsive policy
- Reach **wider audiences** with media, campaigning and communications, improving the narrative around young women in contact with the CJS
- Empower **young women as advocates** to safely share their experiences and use their voices to make change

Published reports

agenda Alliance for Youth Justice

YOUNG WOMEN'S JUSTICE PROJECT BRIEFING

FALLING THROUGH THE GAPS

Young women transitioning to the adult justice system

APRIL 2021

With thanks to LLOYDS BANK FOUNDATION England & Wales

agenda Alliance for Youth Justice

YOUNG WOMEN'S JUSTICE PROJECT BRIEFING

"I WANTED TO BE HEARD"

Young women in the criminal justice system at risk of violence, abuse and exploitation

September 2021

With thanks to LLOYDS BANK FOUNDATION England & Wales

agenda Alliance for Youth Justice

"WE'VE NOT GIVEN UP"

Young women surviving the criminal justice system

YOUNG WOMEN'S JUSTICE PROJECT FINAL REPORT

MARCH 2022

With thanks to LLOYDS BANK FOUNDATION England & Wales

Changing the narrative

NINE IN TEN FEMALE YOUNG OFFENDERS ARE VICTIMS OF ABUSE, RESEARCH FINDS

Joe Lepper
Friday, January 15, 2021

Almost all female young offenders are likely to have been abused by a family member or someone they trust, research has found.



Campaigners are calling for more support for female victims of trauma. Picture: [unreadable]

Opinion

The Policing Bill will criminalise young Black women who have already been abused

Instead of punishment and stigma, what they really need is care and



BBC
WOMAN'S
HOUR

WORK WITH
OFFENDERS

JOB'S NEWS CAREER GUIDANCE ROLES ABOUT

Young women in the CJS are vulnerable and traumatised

15/01/2021

Young women in the justice system

- A minority in the youth/criminal justice system on account of **both their age and gender**, overlooked in policy and practice
- By November 2023, the number of young women in custody aged 18 to 20 is projected to **increase by 50%**
- They face considerable disadvantage, with **high levels of needs**, including histories of violence and abuse, complex mental ill-health, and high rates of alcohol use
- Tend to be treated more harshly by the CJS than their male counterparts
- Greater levels of **ethnic disproportionality** amongst young women (18–24) in custody than amongst the adult women's prison population as a whole
- 52% of young women in custody in the year 2021-2022 had been in **local authority care** as children

Young women's experiences of the criminal justice system

- Limited specialist services for girls and young women, with wider services lacking **gender-specific approaches and often male-dominated**
- Failure to address the needs of young adult women in custody **"a consistent feature"** of inspection reports
- Punitive and re-traumatising responses:
"They wouldn't take the time out to actually sit down and find out what the problem was... It was, 'well, if you're not going to comply then we'll restrain you'..."
- Sexual harassment, violence and exploitation in male-dominated spaces:
"I was there with 24 boys, which was a struggle... I had a lot of problems, I had a lot of assaults that I'd made... because I had to put these boys in their place and I couldn't walk through the unit in like a pair of leggings and stuff..."
- Systemic racism, inequality and discrimination:
"You could just see the racism and you could see how you'd be treated differently compared to somebody else..."

Spotlight: Exclusion and criminalisation

- During the school year 2020-21 girls from a dual heritage, mixed white and Black Caribbean background **were excluded at three times the rate** for white British female pupils
- During 2020-21 Gypsy and Roma girls **were suspended at over three times the rate** of their white British counterparts

"Once you get kicked out of school... They don't care about you after that... I went to a PRU [Pupil Referral Unit]... 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

"Being kicked out of school made my life a hundred times worse... I felt misunderstood and alone... Not understanding mixed black and black girls is a choice that impacts us for the rest of our lives."

- J

Themes in young women's lives

- Exclusions from education plays a significant role in driving the spiral of disadvantage which can lead to contact with the criminal justice system
- Care-experienced young women are frequently let down, stigmatised and miss out on support
- Police and custody officers using physical restraint can be extremely distressing for young women, particularly those who have experienced trauma, abuse and violence.
- Expert practitioners highlighted the need for policy makers to take a 'birds-eye' view of the multiple systems and services young women are enmeshed in.
- The need for gender-, age-, trauma-, and culturally-responsive training and practice across CJS



In their own words

"I've seen the worst in prison. **I get flashbacks all the time.** I see people trying to kill themselves, I see babies that have died in prison, pregnant women... **And they don't care, the system do not care...**"
– Sarah, 22

"**I didn't know who had my best interests at heart...** I didn't know who I could speak to... My trust has been shattered... **I was just constantly thinking – is it going to be used against me if I open up?** Are they going to sit and just talk about me?" – Razia, 23

"The system's kind of built to suppress certain people... It doesn't really cater to **vulnerable young women...** If that system were to change, it would help a lot of women, and possibly **prevent them from being in the same situation that I'm in.**"

- Safia



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Gaps in provision

Local authority
provision

60%

local authorities
provide no
gender-specialist
support

Local
Safeguarding
Partnerships

70%

have no gender-
specialist
representation for
girls

Joint Strategic
Needs Assessments

56%

JSNAs refer to
girls' needs

Analysis from Agenda Alliance's Girls Speak project,
funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation



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Value of gender-specialist services

- Women and girls' specialist services provide vital front-line support, **often best placed to understand the challenges** facing their communities, and to reach those most 'at-risk'
- Gender, trauma and culturally responsive - **aim to prevent harm and re-traumatization**
- **Recognise realities of girls' lives** - work holistically to meet all needs and centre their voices/experiences
- **Significant under-investment:** less than 2% total value of grants in 2021 went to women and girls' orgs - 51% of these grants <£10,000

“There should be more clubs for girls... More youth centres for us women. This place has helped me, I'd be lost without it.”

– Riley, 19

Another way is possible

- **Age-, gender-, trauma- and culturally responsive** support with an **intersectional** approach
- **Accessible, dedicated, multi-year funding** for gender-specific support, promoting practice development, preventing harm
- Support designed around **outcomes that make a difference** to young women's lives, focusing on **tackling issues preventatively**
- **Transitions based on need rather than age**, including flexibility of transition from youth to adult support
- **Supporting partnership** with the women and girls' voluntary sector
- **Re-building young women's trust** in systems and services – focusing on relationships, peer support and lived experience
- Celebrating strengths, coproduction and **amplifying young women's voices**
- **Promising signs in policy and practice** – local and national – sustained attention required



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Thank you