



Girls Speak

July 2022

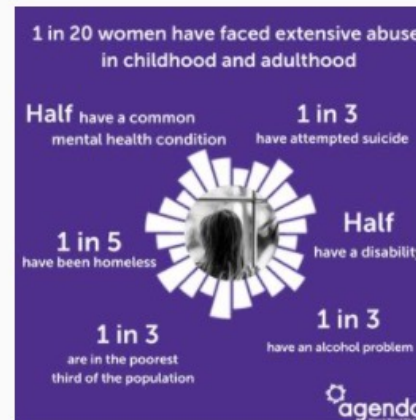
About Agenda

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk campaigns to:

- transform systems and services;
- raise awareness across sectors; and
- promote public and political understanding of the lives of women and girls facing multiple disadvantage.

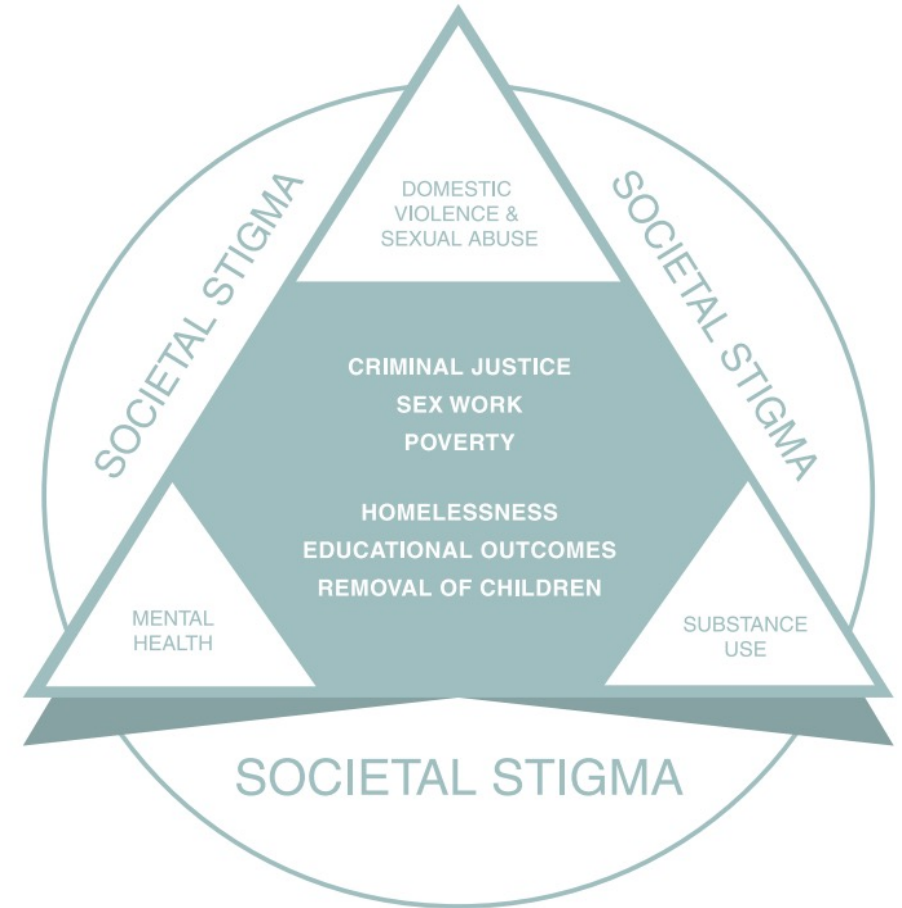
About Girls Speak

- Agenda's campaign shining a light on the experiences of the most marginalised girls and young women (14–24) facing inequality, poverty and violence
- Providing a platform to make the case for girls and young women's needs, nationally and locally
- Campaigning alongside girls and young women with lived experience
- Engaging with practitioners and experts in the field
- Young Women's Justice Project run in partnership with AYJ



Who are girls and young women at risk?

- Complex combinations of problems, taking place in wider context of discrimination and inequality
- Systematically overlooked in policy and practice
- “Flying under the radar” or “dropping out of the system”
- Particularly vulnerable in crisis, e.g. during the pandemic



Girls' and young women's mental health

- Girls and young women have experienced the **highest levels of emotional distress** during the coronavirus crisis
- A **serious and growing problem** for girls and young women **prior to the pandemic**
- **Violence, abuse and exploitation, poverty** and other forms of disadvantage and **discrimination** are significant drivers of poor mental health for girls and young women
- Young women attribute their experience of other forms of disadvantage to poor mental health, stemming from **issues which went unaddressed**



Girls' and young women's exclusions

- Number of girls excluded from education is growing at a **significantly higher rate than boys**.
- **Black and minoritised girls more than twice as likely to be excluded from school** as their white counterparts.
- Girls' exclusion often stems from unaddressed experiences of **sexual harassment and abuse, poor mental health**, and experiences of **racism, with negative stereotypes attached to Black and minoritised girls and young women** playing a critical role.
- **Poor responses to experiences of violence and abuse** can stigmatise and isolate girls causing them to display challenging behaviour and subsequently lead to them being excluded.



In girls' and young women's words...

*“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*

*“They’re expecting me to go into a classroom full of boys... You just get eyeballed... It does feel like a piss-take sometimes... The teachers – they know. But they don’t care... It’s just so uncomfortable... **You feel like a hundred pair of eyes staring at you...**”
– Gemma, 15*

*“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*

In girls' and young women's words...

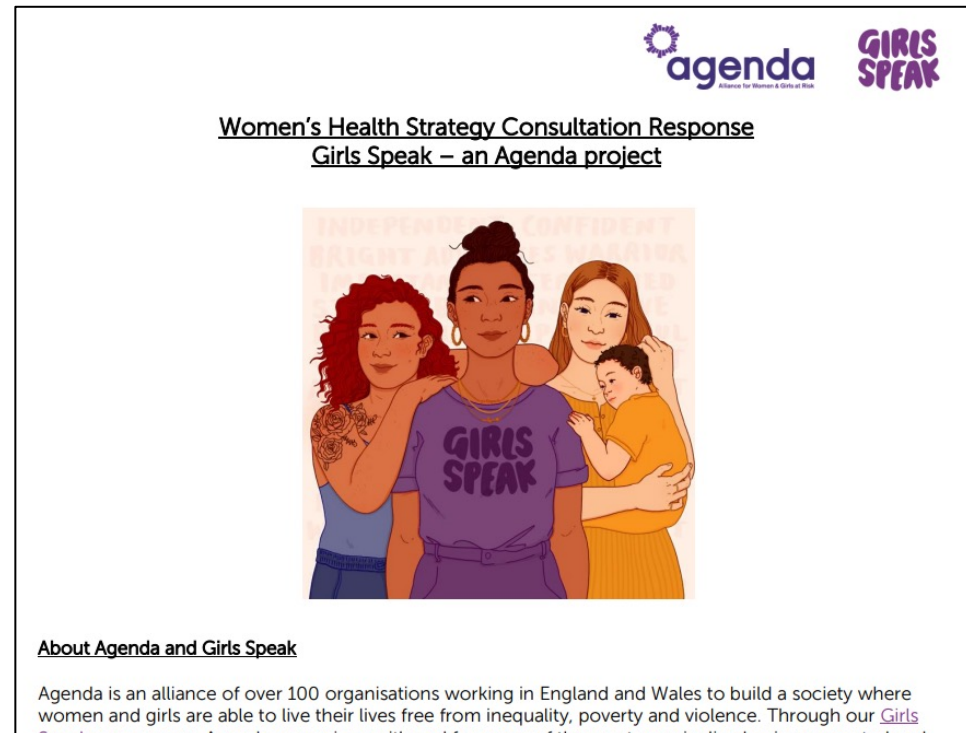
"I just felt like I gained a stereotype... Like loud, Black girl... And instead of being asked "What's going on... Are you okay?"... They asked me about school counselling once... It was a while after... It was just too late." –

Marie, 23

"You could just see the racism and you could see how you'd be treated differently compared to somebody else... When you try and explain it to people, they just can't really fathom it because they've never been through it themselves..." – Safia, 25

"That kind of otherness... something that a lot of Black girls just know and feel all the time."

What have we achieved so far?



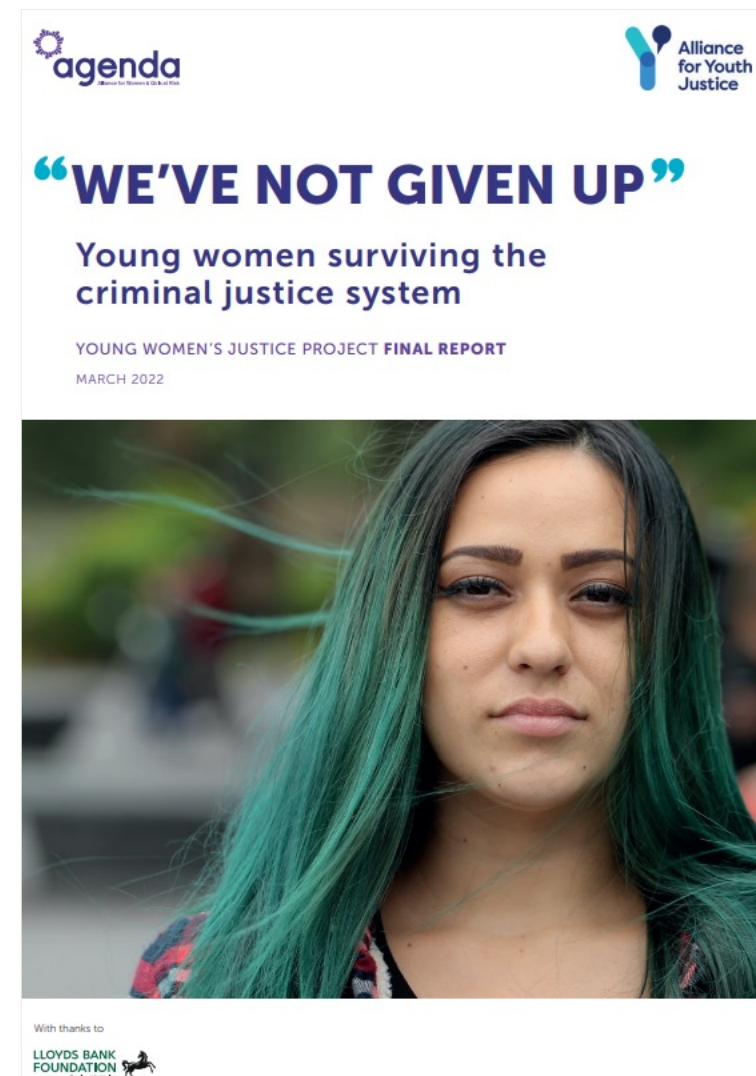
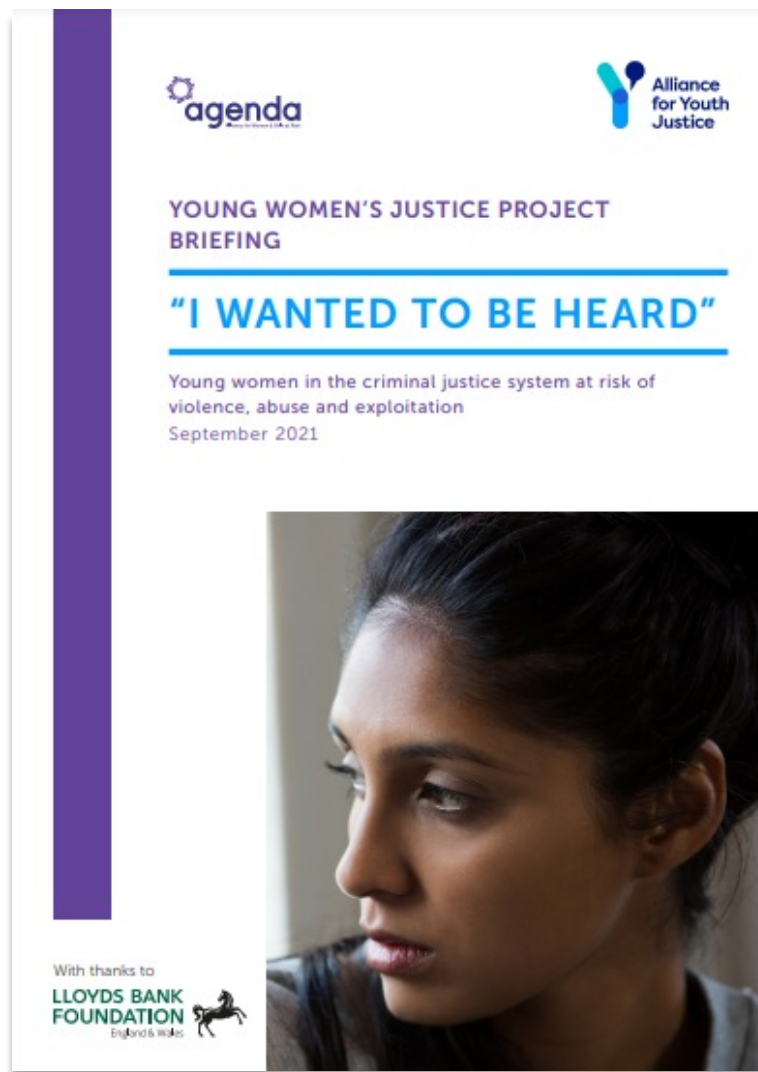
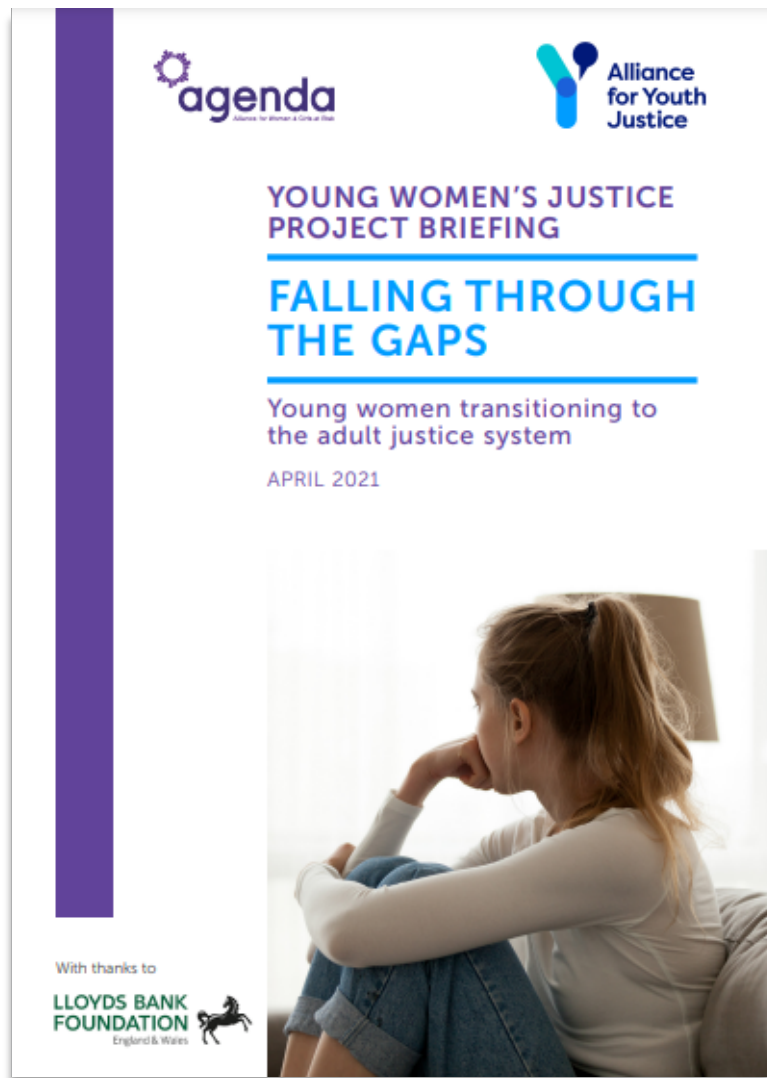
the guardian

Children & Young People Now

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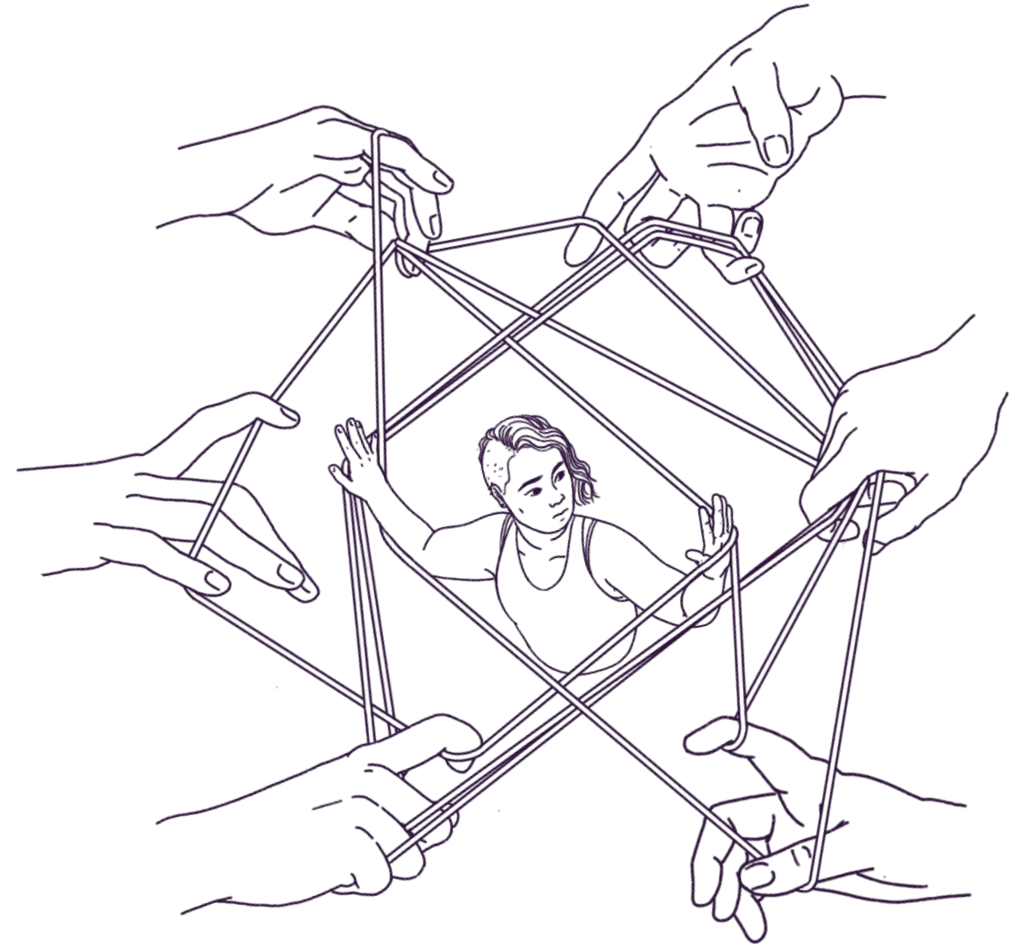


Young Women's Justice Project



Research findings

- Inaccessible and inadequate statutory services
- Lack of gender-, trauma-, age- or culturally responsive services
- Poor responses leading to a cycle of disadvantage
- Young women internalise stigma and shame, face re-traumatization, and distrust services
- Significant cost to society and individual girls and young women



The policy context

- **Gender inequality** does not begin in adulthood
- Key areas of youth policy - safeguarding, school exclusion, serious violence - often presented with a **gender-neutral lens**
- Risks tend to be considered in isolation and **little join-up** between departments
- Girls get **lost in public debate** and in funding and commissioning decisions
- **Overall youth spending** reduced significantly, with patchy specialist girls and young women's provision

Another way is possible

- Ensuring girls are not overlooked in policy and funding
- Promoting inclusive and trauma-informed practice
- Preventing harm and early intervention
- Identifying need and improving services
- Tackling inequality and discrimination

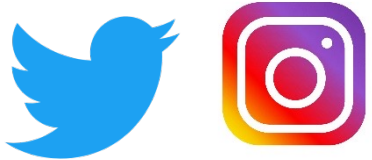
*“I think [young women] need safety... Less exclusionary responses... Less zero tolerance approaches... **Less situations where they’re being traumatised and treated so badly...**”*

– Young women’s service practitioner

Get in touch

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