

Joining the dots:

The combined burden of
violence, abuse and poverty
in the lives of women

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Foreword



Agenda exists to campaign for the most excluded women and girls: those who struggle with the combined burden of complex and interrelated needs. There are key themes which repeat time and time again through the lives of all of these women, but the two most ubiquitous are violence and poverty.

We have known for a long time that violence and poverty are linked in women's lives. Joining the Dots, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, outlines the strength of that link: women in poverty are more than twice as likely to experience almost every kind of abuse and violence as women not in poverty.

This report is one of the first to draw out what that combination of abuse and poverty looks like for women in England. It paints a stark picture of poor mental health; insecure housing and work; and disability, combined with high levels of caring responsibilities.

Our thanks go to the researchers at DMSS and Heriot Watt University for providing such a strong analysis of how these forms of disadvantage intertwine.

Poverty, abuse, and violence are gendered. Across our society it is women who disproportionately suffer them. It is unsurprising that each form of inequality reinforces the other, and breeds new forms – like higher rates of mental ill-health among women.

The findings are a clear reminder that offering women support for individual problems in isolation is not effective. These issues are complex and intertwined. Women in poverty have fewer resources and can find it harder to escape perpetrators of abuse, while experiencing abuse is often a factor in women's homelessness, substance misuse, poor mental health and poverty. Tackling this inequality must start at the very top. We are calling for a cross-government approach to improving life chances for women who face the most extensive abuse, poverty and disadvantage. We need leadership and strategic thinking to break the links between these issues.

It's also essential that services exist to provide the help needed. At the moment, we have some world-class specialist support in this country, but the services which provide it are few and far between and often struggle for funding. Central and local government must make sure specialist services providing holistic support are adequately funded and properly commissioned everywhere.

And we've got to start recognising these women. We hear stories time and time again from women about missed opportunities for support, with professionals unable to see the trauma that lay at the root of their problems. 'Routine enquiry' (asking women and girls whether they have experienced violence and abuse) needs to become standard practice across a range of health and support services and be accompanied by proper support for those who disclose past or present experiences of abuse. That way we'll stop missing the opportunities we have got to reach out to women.

If we want to ensure that women's life chances aren't narrowed by gender, that girls born today won't face the limitations and closing off of opportunities caused by the combination of poverty and abuse, we've got to start joining these dots.

Katharine Sacks-Jones
Director, Agenda

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This report was conceived and developed by Katharine Sacks-Jones at Agenda, she has been closely involved with the analyses and interpretation presented here.

We are also thankful to the **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** for providing funding and guidance.

DMSS Research conducts research and evaluation with a focus on gender, abuse, mental health and services for women, children and young people. www.dmss.co.uk

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Background

Agenda was established to draw attention to the needs of the most disadvantaged women and girls in our society: those who face a complex range of adversities in their lives and who are often overlooked in public debate and policy design. This study was commissioned by Agenda, with support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in order to provide statistics on the circumstances of such women in England.

Building on our previous report, *Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women*,¹ we describe the circumstances of women in England who live in poverty, examine the nature and extent of violence and abuse experienced by women in poverty, and profile the mental health and quality of life of women who experience both poverty and violence and abuse. This report provides a powerful statistical picture of the combined adversity of poverty and extensive violence and abuse in women's lives.

¹ Scott S and McManus S (2015) *Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women*. Agenda: London. <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Hidden-Hurt-full-report1.pdf>

² The Responding Effectively to Violence and Abuse study (REVA) was conducted by the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit, DMSS and NatCen Social Research. Scott S, Williams J, McNaughton Nicholls C, Lovett J, McManus S (2015) *Population patterns in violence, abuse and mental health in England* NatCen: London. http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/1057987/REVA_Brief-1_Population-patterns_FINAL_071015.pdf

³ Analysis was carried out drawing on the profile of poverty found in the Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) survey Lansley S and Mack J (2015) *Breadline Britain – the rise of mass poverty*. One World. https://oneworld-publications.com/breadline-britain-pb.html#VqzJA_mLS72

Data & Analysis

Our data source is the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS) which has a large representative sample of women and men of all ages and is the best available data on rates of mental illness in the general population. APMS also provides rich information about other aspects of people's lives: including their economic circumstances, social relationships and experiences of sexual and physical abuse, violence and coercive control in childhood or adulthood.

We have previously used APMS data to produce a typology of abuse and violence.² Here we draw on a modified version of that typology, where the population is divided into four broad groups reflecting their lifetime experience of different types of violence and abuse. These groups represent those who have experienced:

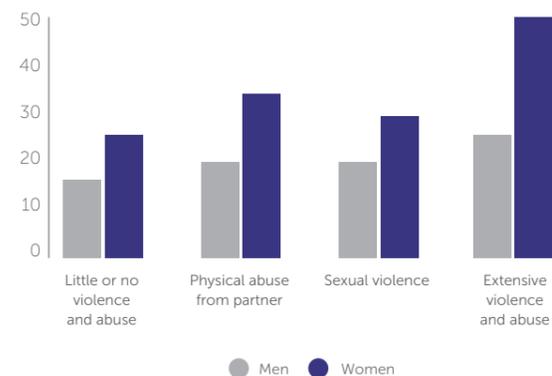
1. little or no violence and abuse in their lives
2. physical violence from a partner
3. sexual abuse or violence as children or adults
4. extensive sexual and/or physical abuse, often across the life-course.

To identify which women in the APMS sample were in poverty, we used the following indicators:³ personal and equivalised income; fuel poverty and poor housing conditions; borrowing from friends and non-standard money lenders; and being seriously behind with utility, rent, mortgage and a range of other debt repayments. Surveys that focus specifically on poverty will include other measures, such as household income after housing costs, and generate better estimates of the prevalence of poverty (which was not a focus for this study).

Key Findings

- **Violence and abuse are associated with poverty:** people who are in poverty are more likely to have suffered violence and abuse than those who are not. This is true for both women and men. Among women in poverty 38% have experienced violence and abuse, compared with 27% of women not in poverty.
- **The association between abuse and poverty is somewhat stronger in women than men:** half of women with extensive experience of abuse are in poverty (51%) while this is the case for a quarter of women who have experienced little or no abuse in their lives (27%). The comparable figures for men are 27% and 17%.

Figure 1: Proportion in poverty by violence and abuse groups and sex

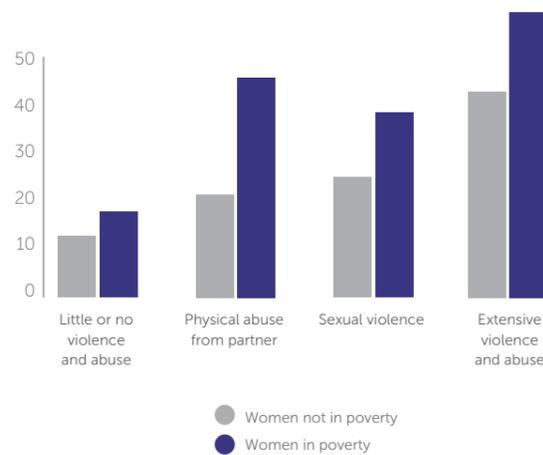


- About 4% of women are both in poverty and have experience of extensive violence and abuse in their lives: around one million women in England.
- Women in poverty are much more likely to experience almost every type of violence and abuse – at rates which are generally twice as high as those of other women. The difference is particularly pronounced for violence involving a weapon. One in twenty women in poverty (5%) have had a weapon used against them, compared with one in a hundred women not in poverty (1%). Women in poverty are twice as likely as other women to have been raped either as children or adults. The only kinds of abuse which are not significantly associated with poverty are nonconsensual sexual talk and touching.
- Women in poverty are particularly likely to experience the most extensive violence and abuse in their lives. 14% of women in poverty have faced extensive violence and abuse, which is more than twice the rate of women not in poverty (6%).
- The more extensive the violence and abuse experienced the more likely it is that women also face other adversities in their lives. These include poor general health, difficulties in finding work, major traumatic events or homelessness. This is true both for women in poverty and those who are not.

- **Mental illness is more strongly linked with violence and abuse than it is with poverty.** Over half of women who are both in poverty and have experience of extensive violence and abuse meet the diagnostic threshold for a common mental disorder. This rate is three times higher than for women in poverty who have little or no experience of violence. However, women who experience physical violence from a partner (without having suffered other abuse in their lives) are much more vulnerable to anxiety and depression if they are also dealing with poverty than if they are not.

- **Being abused and being in poverty are both associated with negative outcomes.** Experiencing both abuse and poverty is associated with the very poorest outcomes. Women who face both in their lives are likely to suffer a number of other adversities and are among the most disadvantaged people in society. A fifth of women in combined adversity have thought about suicide in the past year, more than a third have made a suicide attempt at some point, and a quarter have self-harmed. For this group of women, adversity often stretches across the life-course, with a fifth having run away from home, one in ten having been in local authority care and a fifth having experienced homelessness.

Figure 2: Proportion of women in violence and abuse groups with a common mental disorder



Recommendations

The enormous impact of sexual and physical abuse on victims is well established. It is also widely recognised that interpersonal violence and abuse is a gendered issue disproportionately affecting women and girls. It is an issue which looms particularly large in the lives of the most disadvantaged: women in prison, involved in prostitution, who are homeless or suffer mental ill health. However, this study is one of the first to focus on quantifying the association between economic and social disadvantage and experience of abuse. Our analysis confirms that the greatest disadvantage is experienced by those who endure the most extensive abuse across their life-course – and shows that it is women in poverty who are most likely to have such experiences.

There are implications for policy makers, services providers and practitioners. For further information on the changes Agenda believes we need to see, please visit <http://weareagenda.org/policy-research/agendas-reports>.

Based on this research Agenda recommends that:

1. **There is political leadership and a cross-government approach to improving the life chances of women who face the most extensive abuse, poverty and multiple disadvantage in their lives.** This should set out the changes needed across different policy areas and departmental responsibilities to bring

about systemic change for the most disadvantaged women and girls.

2. **Central and local government must make sure specialist services providing holistic support are adequately funded and properly commissioned.** These are crucial if the multiple difficulties faced by women and girls with the most extensive experience of violence and abuse are to be addressed.
3. **Services who encounter women in poverty (including for example mental health, housing, substance misuse or employment support) need to understand the impacts of violence and abuse on women's lives and be offering support around these issues. 'Routine enquiry' (asking women and girls whether they have experienced violence and abuse) should become standard practice** across a range of health and support services and be accompanied by proper support for those who disclose past or present experiences of abuse. Identifying that abuse is, or has been, experienced is an essential first step in providing appropriate referral or support.
4. **Services for survivors of violence and abuse need to be adequately resourced and able to respond to the fact that experiences of violence and abuse may be compounded by poverty.** Many survivors will have complex needs and require support around issues such as mental health, substance misuse and homelessness.

Agenda is a new alliance of organisations and individuals 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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