

Agenda Alliance's response to the call for evidence on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill January 2025

Summary

- 1.1** [Agenda Alliance](https://www.agendaalliance.org/) exists to make a difference to the lives of women and girls who are at the sharpest end of inequality. We are an alliance of over 100 member organisations – from large, national bodies to smaller, specialist organisations – working in collaboration to influence public policy and practice to respond appropriately to women and girls with multiple, complex unmet needs: <https://www.agendaalliance.org/>
- 1.2** Our strategy includes a focus on reducing the numbers of official and unofficial exclusions of girls and young women - considering both the structural reasons behind exclusions, as well as the impact of lack of support for those with multiple unmet needs. We welcome this Bill, and the opportunity to provide this evidence.
- 1.3** Whilst persistent absences are a concern for all young people in education, we urge the committee to consider the specific challenges facing girls due to their gendered differences in the needs and experiences.

Executive Summary

2.1 In section 26 (2, 436I, 2) School Attendance Orders, the Bill sets out that parents can be served a school attendance order under:

For the purpose of determining whether an order must be served under this section in respect of a child, the local authority—

(a) must consider all of the settings where the child is being educated and where the child lives,

(b) must consider how the child is being educated and what the child is learning, so far as is relevant in the particular case,

and (c) may request the child's parent on whom the preliminary notice has been served under section 436H to allow the local authority to visit the child inside any of the homes in which the child lives.

2.2 We have heard from our members that women are being increasingly and unduly criminalised for their children missing school. We have supported our member organisation Advance's campaign #NotGoingBackToSchool, which aims to end the criminalisation of parents for their children not attending school. This is also an inherently gendered issue. Advance found that, in 2023, there were over 21,000 prosecutions and 18,000 convictions for truancy, and 70% were against women.¹

2.3 Here, the Bill should make provisions for Local Authorities to ensure consideration is given, prior to a parent receiving a School Attendance Order, as to whether girls are receiving the appropriate additional trauma- and gender-responsive support they may need to return to school, particularly in regard to their mental health, sexual harassment, racism, poverty, substance misuse, and insecure housing.

2.4 In respect of our evidence below, we view that there is an opportunity for the Bill to be enhanced here, to increase the chances of girls and young women returning to school after a period of persistent (10% of classes missed) or severe (50% of classes missed) absence, by putting in preventative measures to support girls and young women's multiple unmet needs, as well as reducing the number of women who are criminalised for their child's non-attendance.

Overview of girls and young women's attendance

3.1 Historically a lower number of girls have been persistently absent or excluded compared to boys, meaning their needs have often been overlooked in policy making and practice. Yet research into why girls may be absent from school has not been systemically undertaken, appropriate data is not gathered and limited targeted support or policies have been developed to meet their needs. As such, girls who are severely absent from school now surpass the number of boys who are severely absent from school.²

3.2 The number of girls who are persistently or severely absent has dramatically increased over the last four years.³ Addressing the root causes of their multiple unmet needs, such as issues of mental health, sexual harassment, poverty, and racism, and providing parenting support, rather than criminalising parents, could provide a beneficial and supportive pathway in ensuring girls return to school.

3.3 In the below sections we have included evidence of the multiple unmet needs some girls' experience both inside and outside school, and the impact this can have on their attendance at school.

The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils

4.1 Girls experience unique and gendered harms that can lead to excessive absence from school. Pupils who disengage, and those excluded from education, often face considerable disadvantage such as poor mental health, violence, abuse and exploitation, poverty and discrimination.⁴ These challenges are particularly acute for girls.

- Girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse at home. Before the age of 16, 15-20% of girls are estimated to have experienced childhood sexual abuse, compared to 7-8% of boys.⁵ In one study, one in three girls, aged 13 to 17, reported some form of sexual violence by their partner, compared to one in six boys.⁶

- Girls' experience of school absence has been linked to long-term mental health needs, with the mental health of girls excluded after the age of 16 described as being on a 'deteriorating trajectory' compared to that of boys. On a larger scale, girls are also more likely than boys to suffer from a mental health condition or to self-harm. In 2016, 65% of young people detained under the mental health act, were girls, and a larger proportion of those girls were under 16 compared to boys.⁷
- It is common for girls to internalise their distress, meaning their challenges may go unnoticed by professionals until they have reached crisis point. This in turn can lead to absenteeism. These instances of mental health conditions resulting in absenteeism are even more prevalent for those girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.⁸
- Poverty can further exacerbate instances of girls missing school through 'period poverty' whereby girls cannot afford, and do not have access to, sanitary products.⁹

4.2 Many of the young women we interviewed as part of our Girls Speak project attributed their school exclusion to poor mental health, stemming from experiences of violence, abuse, and trauma.¹⁰ These challenges are often compounded by discrimination and inequalities, such as gender-inequality and racism.

4.3 Trauma can also display as disruptive behaviour, leading to a disciplinary response through official or unofficial exclusions, rather than addressing the root cause of the trauma.

4.4 Without support to respond to the challenges they face, an increasing number of girls 'self-exclude' - whereby they disengage from education and do not attend school. A 2020 local research study conducted in Cheshire West and Chester, found girls were more likely than boys to experience 'functional exclusion' from school. This included persistent absence (when pupils miss more than 10% of school days), school change¹¹ or 'early exit'¹² (including as a result of off-rolling, whereby students are removed from the school roll without use of a permanent exclusion).¹³

4.5 Because they often internalise, rather than externalise their problems, girls are also likely to 'fly under the radar' and to go unnoticed, dropping out of school and adding to the growing number of girls who are 'self-excluding'. In 2022/23 75,630 girls were severely absent from school (50% or more school days missed), compared with 74,626 boys. This number has also drastically increased since 2018/19 when 27,062 girls were severely absent from school.¹⁴

4.6 Once outside of education, either through exclusion, suspension, or not attending school, girls are more susceptible to experience child sexual exploitation, as they are more likely to be targeted by exploitative adults.¹⁵

"I would never be at school – I would walk around the area until school finished. One time, I bumped into a couple of people that were a bit older. Like grown men. I started spending time with them...To be honest, I had nowhere else to go. They had a house – there was shelter, food..."

That's all anyone wants really. They wanted me to do stuff for them, like sell drugs, and other stuff like that..."

– Amelia, 18¹⁶

Data analysis of girls' exclusions

5.1 Over the last four years we have sent FOI requests for Government exclusions and suspensions data to track and analyse certain characteristics of girls exclusion, including ethnicity data.¹⁷

5.2 This has revealed some concerning trends. We've found that:

- Over the last four years of data (2018- 22), mixed white and Black Caribbean girls have been **excluded** at either double the rate or three times the rate of white British girls.
- Over the same period (2018-22), Gypsy/Roma girls have been consistently **suspended** at three or four times the rate of white British girls.

5.3 We include suspensions in our analysis, as being suspended is a key driver of absenteeism in girls who have been found to be most at risk of staying away from school.

5.4 The most recent data on exclusions (2022/23) shows that girls exclusions have increased by over 50%, and suspensions have increased by just under 100,000. Girls' exclusions 2022/23 were 2,895 (up from 1,818 the previous year 2021/22) and suspensions were 285,270 (up from 195,868 the previous year 2021/22).

Sustaining harm: racism and adultification

6.1 As we've shown, certain groups of Black girls are over-represented in exclusions rates, just as they are over-represented in the criminal justice system. This is likely to be linked to adultification, a process "whereby children are perceived as more adult-like, responded to through a lens of 'deviancy', not acknowledged as 'deserving' victims".¹⁸ This can lead to professionals assuming Black girls have greater levels of maturity and less 'innocence' than their white peers,¹⁹ and downplaying their safeguarding responsibilities as practitioners. This may result in Black girls receiving less support and services to address their needs, as when they present in the education system they can be seen as primarily posing a risk to others, rather than as vulnerable children in their own right.

6.2 The preconditions of adultification are based on various biases which intersect, such as systemic inequalities and where certain communities, and particularly those from Black communities are pathologized, and considered an "other", and therefore not necessarily seen through a lens of safeguarding.

6.3 This is clearly seen in the case of Child Q, a young Black girl in Hackney who was wrongly accused of carrying illegal drugs, and was strip searched by two Metropolitan police officers, whilst on her period. No appropriate adult was present.²⁰

Gaps in existing support

7.1 We know that across statutory services and the criminal justice system, there are large gaps in support and provision for girls and young women. This is particularly important when considering the role prevention can play in helping girls and young women avoid exclusions, and stay out of the touch with the CJS.

7.2 As part of our Girls Speak Project, Agenda submitted FOI requests to 157 local authorities in England and Wales in July 2022 with a response rate of 83%, to ascertain what gender-specialist services are being provided at the local level.

- 60% of LAs do not provide gender-specialist support and 90% do not provide gender-specialist support for Black, Asian, and minoritised girls.

7.3 Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) are the key policy vehicle for Local Authorities to ascertain the needs of their local population. Our analysis of all JSNAs in England shows that:

- Only 56% of JSNAs refer to the needs of girls and young women.
- Only 8% of JSNAs refer to the needs of Black, Asian, and minoritised girls and young women.

Recommendation

8.1 We recommend the Bill committee considers the opportunities the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill presents to direct local authorities to provide preventative gendered alternative education provision to girls and young women who are persistently or severely absent from school.

8.2 We also recommend that the Bills' section 26 (436B) 'Duty to register children not in school' provides a basis for Local Authorities to use the provisions within the Bill to inform development of gendered provision through better disaggregated data collection about children who are absent from school.

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