



Why Working with Girls and Young Women Matters

An Insights Briefing

Introduction

This insights briefing has been developed as a national resource to support girls and young women's services. It also contains insights and evidence for commissioners, service providers, funders and professionals about why working with girls and young women is vital, the values and principles that underpin the work and what is working.

“ *Empowerment of and investment in girls are the key in breaking the cycle of discrimination and in promoting the full and effective enjoyment of their human rights.*”

United Nations Resolution 66/170

'Why Working with Girls and Young Women Matters' is one output that has been produced as part of the Learning and Impact Services provided to projects funded under The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls initiative (WGI). The WGI was created by the Fund in 2016, using National Lottery funding, in order to invest in services for women and girls across England. This is the fourth publication produced as part of the Learning and Impact Services provided to projects funded through the WGI.

This insights briefing is the result of 12 WGI funded organisations coming together and bringing with them a wealth of experience, knowledge and expertise to enable them to share learning and insights about their WGI funded work with girls and young women. This learning was generated through the Girls and Young Women action learning set (ALS), which met regularly over a period of a year with members visiting each other's projects.





This insight briefing provides:

- Information and evidence from 12 WGI funded girls and young women's projects
- Details about the types of service provision being delivered
- Information on some of the issues affecting girls and young women
- Evidence on why provision of services for girls and young women is needed
- Evidence on how and why such provision works
- The voices of girls and young women who have received support and services

WGI projects contributing to this briefing tend to work with girls and young women in the age range 12-25 who have grown up experiencing stressful, adverse and traumatic events. These may include neglect, abuse, being looked after children (LAC), domestic abuse, experience of sexual violence and other forms of adversity. Although all girls and young women can, and do access projects, many come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have experienced poverty. Some girls and young women may have had limited access to a protective, supportive relationship in their lives. Many become marginalised and excluded. WGI projects provide a range of gender and trauma informed services to girls and young women across England.¹

“The Project gives us a space where we can be ourselves, tell people how we feel and we are able to get the support we need even if that’s just someone to talk to. It helps us make friends and build confidence. For a lot of people this is a safe space and somewhere where we can be free.”

Young woman

Support and services provided

The provision of services to girls and young women varies across WGI projects and can include:

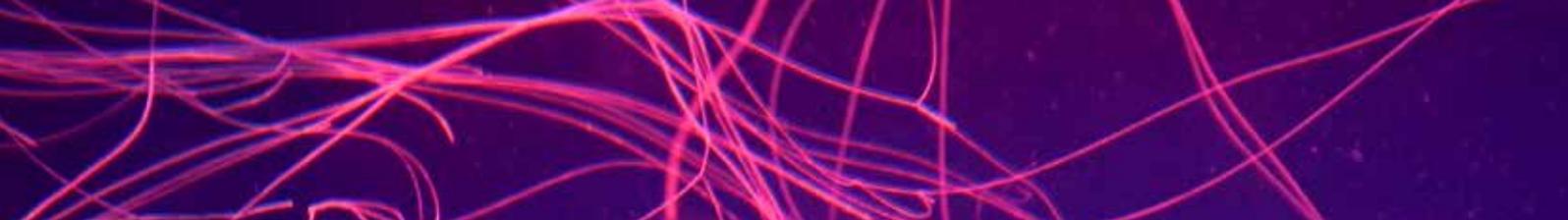
One-to-one support

Girls and young women can access support from a trained key worker, which is provided on a one to one basis. Support is usually driven by what the girl or young women needs, the challenges they are facing and the goals they seek to achieve, captured in a plan. The support of a trusted adult is a cornerstone of work with girls and young women.²

Group work

Girls and young women can really benefit from group-based support with their peers. Groups are usually facilitated by a skilled worker and provide opportunities for girls and young women to share their challenges, build relationships, problem solve, contribute to community initiatives and learn with other young people.

¹ See section on working with common values and principles.



Advocacy

Advocacy is about working with girls and young women and enabling them to have their voices heard and play an active part in decisions that affect their lives. It involves making sure their rights are respected, and their views and wishes are heard and acted upon by decision-makers.

Mentoring

Mentoring is the provision of a type of relationship designed to work with girls and young women and build confidence, skills and inspire them. Older peers or adults are often mentors and may typically have shared backgrounds or experiences in common with girls and young women. The mentoring relationship is negotiated and involves commitment from both parties over a period of time.

Access to therapeutic/mental health provision

Therapeutic/mental health provision may be provided by WGI projects themselves, or can be accessed through referring girls and young women to other services (where they exist). Some projects provide trained counsellors giving girls and young women space to talk about their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment and share any worries or problems. Therapy usually involves activities and talking.

Some projects offer:

Supported or specialist accommodation

One participating WGI project in the ALS provides specialist refuge accommodation for young women, aged 16-25, who have experienced violence and supports them to transition and re-settle in the community. Many girls and young women accessing WGI projects need housing support and help with obtaining settled accommodation, managing and maintaining a home, benefits advice and assistance and money/debt management.

Educational and up-skilling opportunities

Many WGI projects offer girls and young women the opportunity to develop skills, qualifications and support around accessing education and work. The provision of positive experiences for girls and young women, and the ability to achieve, reduces isolation and rebuilds confidence.

Girls and young women are referred to projects by:

- Schools
- Social services
- Health providers
- Parents
- Police
- Other voluntary projects
- Many girls and young women self-refer

² See section on key dimensions of the work.

The evidence: Why are girls and young women's projects needed?

Put simply, growing up young and female is mediated by gender discrimination, norms and practices. This means that girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to sexual and domestic abuse, stress, anxiety and depression, with rising levels of body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and self-harm (Kelly and Karsna, 2017; Scott and McManus, 2016; ONS, 2018; NHS Digital, 2018). Class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, culture, geographical location and community intersect with being female and shape life experiences and outcomes for girls and young women. When compounded by disproportionate experiences of violence and abuse and other disadvantages, outcomes for girls and young women can be negative and severe through the course of their lives (McNeish and Scott, 2014).

Girls and young women are not adults and often do not think or behave in the same way. Working with girls and young women means trying to see the world through their eyes as it is experienced and responding in the ways they want and need.³ This also means understanding their individual stories, histories and experiences. Research clearly indicates the importance of understanding the individual young person, their family and/or home circumstances and environments (schools, colleges, neighbourhoods, communities, including online). This allows a holistic approach where young people are understood within their relationships, social, environmental and economic contexts. It avoids a focus upon 'problems' and refocuses upon the whole young person (Batsleer, 2016; Firmin, 2017).

We know that not responding to girls and young women's needs, in ways that work for them, can have far reaching consequences for their lives and families. Some of the most socially excluded and marginalised women in society, those who face violence, abuse, poverty and inequality, were multiply abused as girls and young women (Scott and McManus, 2016). Recent Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2016) data confirms this.

The points of transition in girls and young women's lives are critical to their wellbeing and offering the right support, in the right way at the right time is crucial in effecting positive change. Earlier intervention is needed in order to avoid the long-term cumulative impact of adversity and abuse, and negative outcomes affecting women's lives.

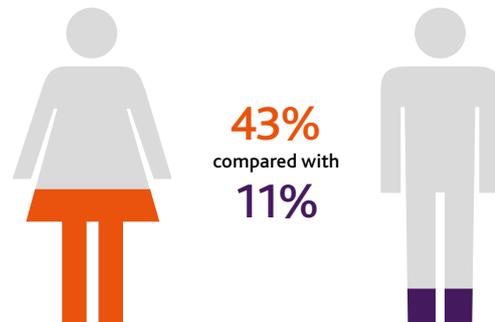
“Project 1325 has helped me to cope and manage better whilst at home. I got help with housing and support to apply for university, which I got in! I feel so much better about things and now I have hope for the future.”

Young woman

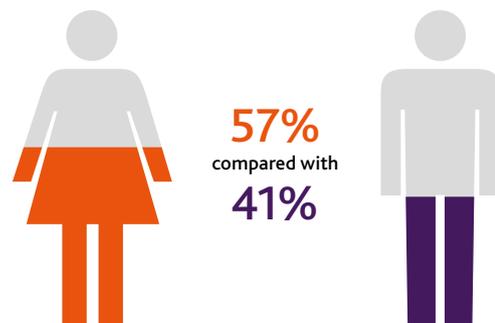
³ See sections on key dimensions of the work.

The impact of abuse

Women who are survivors of child abuse are more likely than men to experience abuse as an adult. They are around four times more likely to experience sexual assault after the age of 16 than male survivors (43% compared with 11% ONS, 2016).



More than half (57%) of women who were survivors of child abuse experienced domestic abuse as an adult, compared with 41% of men (ONS, 2016).



Prevalence studies in England and Wales suggest that some 15% of girls and 5% of boys experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16. (Parke and Karsna, 2019)

Estimates vary because of the methods and questions asked. International estimates of child sexual abuse prevalence can reach 30% for girls and 23% for boys (Parke and Karsna, 2019).

In another study, 31% of young women aged 18-24 reported having experienced sexual abuse in childhood; 90% were abused by someone they knew and 66% were abused by other children or young people under 18. (NSPCC, 2011). Girls and young women with learning disabilities are more likely to be sexually abused than their non-disabled peers (Scott and McNeish, 2018).

There is growing recognition of young women's experiences of domestic abuse, both in their own intimate relationships and in the context of 'honour'-based violence and forced marriage. 25% of young women (aged over 13) experienced physical violence and 72% experienced emotional abuse in their own relationships (NSPCC, 2009).

According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) year ending March 2018, an estimated 1.3 million women aged 16-59 experienced domestic abuse in the previous year. 22.5% were aged 16-24. Of the estimated 695,000 men aged 16-59 who reported domestic abuse in the previous year, 11.4% were 16-24 year olds (ONS, 2018).

⁴It should be noted that many statistical sources do not collect data by gender and age, nor report findings by these categories if they do. This is often the case for young people under 16. Prevalence rates may show absolute rates but can also indicate how hidden some issues are, or how difficult it is for people to disclose some of them. There is also likely to be under-reporting of some issues by groups who are seldom heard. This briefing uses some of the best available data by gender and age.



Mental health concerns

Experiences of violence and abuse in childhood and adolescence are strongly correlated to subsequent mental health problems (including self-harm and suicide). Rates of stress, anxiety and depression are rising sharply among teenage girls in a trend that is far less pronounced among boys of the same age, with rising levels of body dissatisfaction, insecurity and low self-esteem. In 2018, NHS research consisting of a sample of 2 to 19 year olds in England confirmed that young women (aged 17-19) are a high-risk group for mental health.⁵

In the same study, nearly one in four young women (aged 17-19) has a mental disorder, with emotional problems such as depression and anxiety being the most common, figures for England show (NHS Digital, 2018).⁶ The NHS report also found young women aged 17 to 19 were more than twice as likely as young men to have these problems, with 23.9% reporting a *mental* disorder compared to 10.3% of young men aged 17-19. The report goes on to show that 22.4% of young women compared to 7.9% of young men (aged 17-19 years old) had an *emotional* disorder⁷.

Furthermore one in 18 (5.6%) young women compared to 0.8% young men (aged 17-19) were identified with Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD).⁸ Half with a mental disorder at the time of the survey interview reported having self-harmed or attempted suicide (NHS Digital, 2018).

The criminal justice system

Young women are also more likely than adult women to be affected by gang association, which may also include involvement with the youth justice system (AVA, 2013). The Prison Reform Trust (2017) states that more than half of women in prison (53%) reported having experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse as a child compared to 27% of men.⁹

Using social media

The media and social media can be a source of inspiration and strength to girls and young women, but there is increasing evidence that girls and young women are more likely than boys to use social media and are prone to *comparing* themselves unfavourably to others through it, which can adversely affect their happiness and wellbeing (Twenge et al., 2017; Booker et al., 2018). In a recent study (Kelly, et al., 2018), evidence shows that teenage girls are twice as likely to show depressive symptoms linked to social media than their male counterparts. In addition to comparing themselves unfavourably, findings were connected to the length of time spent on social media, harassment, bullying and sleep. Two fifths of 14-year-old females used it for more than three hours per day compared with one fifth of boys. Social media use was related to less sleep, taking more time to fall asleep and more disruptions during sleep. In turn, depressive symptom scores were higher for girls and boys experiencing poor sleep. The study also found that 40 % girls and 25% boys had experienced online harassment or cyberbullying.¹⁰

⁵ Information was collected on 9,117 children and young people aged 2 to 19 between January and October 2017 registered with a GP.

⁶ Specific mental disorders were grouped into four broad categories: emotional, behavioural, hyperactivity and other less common disorders.

⁷ Emotional disorders include anxiety, depression, phobias, PTSD and others.

⁸ BDD is an anxiety disorder characterised by the obsessive idea that some aspect of one's body part or appearance is severely flawed and warrants exceptional measures to hide or fix.

⁹ Sample of 1435 in a longitudinal study for the Ministry of Justice into prisoner childhoods and family backgrounds.

¹⁰ Participants completed the Mood and Feelings Questionnaire – short version (SMFQ) comprising 13 symptoms in the last two weeks, for example, felt miserable or unhappy; didn't enjoy anything at all.

What helps young women and girls to make progress?

There is evidence of numerous factors that act as barriers to girls and young women accessing services (AVA, 2017; Young Women's Trust, 2018; Holmes and Eaton, 2017; Scott and Botcherby, 2017):

- The overwhelming number of professionals and agencies that often focus upon single issues.
- The division of provision into child and adult provision that does not recognise the crucial phase of adolescence and transition.
- Fear of lack of confidentiality, being judged and the consequences of disclosing abuse and harm.
- Being let down and lack of trust in professionals and services to listen, understand and meet needs.
- Not feeling safe because of abuse and harm as girls and young women.
- Lack of supported or specialist accommodation.
- The impact of trauma related to finding it difficult to plan and take action.

Working with common values and principles

The following values and principles underpin the work of girls and young women projects to open access, remove barriers and enable them to make progress.

Young women only

Many girls and young women would not engage in, or have their specific needs met, in the 'gender neutral' provision that many services offer. Staff in services designed and delivered for young women and girls offer specialist support that they need to start to recover from what has happened to them.

Empowerment

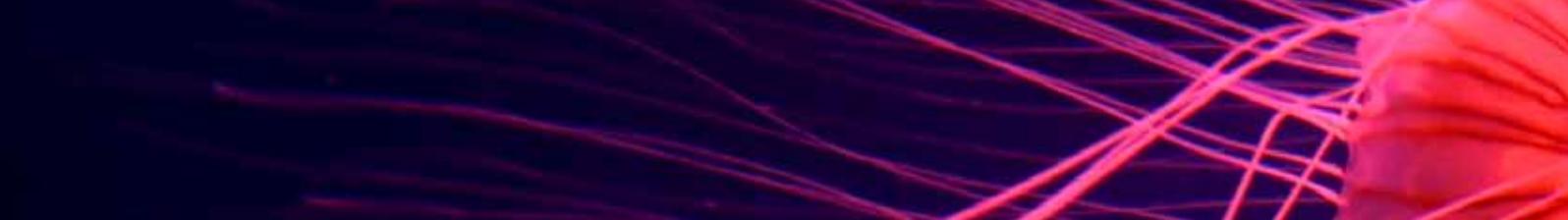
All projects contributing to this briefing work with an empowerment model that says that girls and young women can manage the issues affecting them, and can survive and achieve, with the right help and support. Girls and young women are empowered to claim their rights in specialist projects, and without this provision can face a lifetime of inequality.

“ I thought my anxiety and learning disability would make me a bad mum, but I'm doing alright, she (daughter) is the best thing ever.”

Young woman

Strengths and aspirations driven

Projects build on the needs, strengths and aspirations of girls and young women.



Voices are heard and believed

Girls and young women are at the heart of specialist project services; they are listened to and their voices are heard. Girls and young women are often blamed for what has happened to them or are too often disbelieved. Projects believe in and believe girls and young women.

The whole young person

Projects work with the whole young person (a holistic approach) and how they experience the world, rather than focus upon a single issue. For example, young women may need support around abuse, housing, relationships and skills simultaneously.

“ *What is nice is being told and reminded of your strengths and what I’m good at.*”

Young woman

Culture and community

Specialist project services work with girls and young women in their cultures and communities and tend to be staffed by women and volunteers (though not exclusively) who understand them and their contexts.

Trauma informed

Projects understand the impact upon girls and young women who have experienced trauma and provide support that is designed to help them to understand and manage their feelings and responses.

“ *It means a lot to me that that I can now name and connect with my feelings, I can now say things like feeling satisfied, feeling content. I just never knew how I felt.*”

Young woman

Key dimensions of the work

Projects identified the following dimensions of their work that are important to girls and young women themselves and work in practice to achieve good outcomes.

Safety

Being in a safe space and feeling safe is essential for girls and young women to start to make progress, many of whom who have little trust in adults/other young people, or may have felt very unsafe before. For many girls and young women, a women only space offers the safety they need.

“They don’t judge the bad things you have done in the past.”

Young woman

“It’s extremely easy to trust the staff, they never judge you no matter what.”

Young woman

“Doing things, I love and talking to someone I can trust.”

Young woman

Trust

A trusted adult is the cornerstone of relationship based work with girls and young women and is a consistent finding from evidence.

Trust takes time to develop.



Time

Work with girls and young women can't be rushed and requires time, flexibility and as long as it takes for recovery to begin.

It's important to stay alongside girls and young women, not to give up and to give them the time they need.



“I have had a lot of support from the project. I have a lot going on at home and in my life and when I come here it's like an escape. I can talk about all the issues I have and I am able to talk to them freely and I feel they understand even though it can be hard for people.”

Young woman

Space

Having space to be is a consistent finding that works for girls and young women, when your identity has been shaped by adverse and negative experiences.

Space to be your self is a building block for positive mental health.



“Don't treat me like I'm a bother.”

Young woman

Belonging

Girls and young women need to feel that they really belong in projects and services.

Working with and alongside girls and young women is one way to achieve this.

Contributing to learning, development and shaping of services is now considered to be essential for girls and young women, so that they focus upon what's important and what's needed.



“I really like coming to the young women's project as it helps boost your confidence. They also give you lots of support and the worker are always there if you need someone to talk to. People that come to the young womens project all have different reasons to be there they are really understanding and always help you through bad times and makes your day even better by cheering you up.”

Young woman

Engagement

Girls and young women may be disengaged from other services and it can take some time to win their trust and engagement.

Engagement is usually achieved by believing in girls and young women, treating them with respect and compassion and building trusting relationships over time.



“The project has helped me, with applying for maternity allowance, gained confidence, make new friends, support throughout my pregnancy, gain new skills, with my confidence in being a mam, helped me through hard times, think of my career options, apply to college, offering me counselling with their counsellor, learnt life skills, e.g cooking, Supporting me at my child protection meetings and core groups.”

Young woman

“It’s fun and I want to take social action. I really enjoy doing ASDAN work and getting qualifications like Foodwise and leadership skills.”

Young woman

Achievement

All girls and young women can achieve and with the right help and support can manage what has happened to them and thrive; many do. These are the girls and young women of the future and can be empowered.



Constructive challenge

Projects offer safe spaces for constructive challenge. Alongside receiving support, girls and young women are enabled to think through their issues, and questions that may challenge them constructively.

This is a powerful feature of being able to change and works best when girls and young women are in a stronger, more stable place.





Implications for decision makers

Targeting support

Gender discrimination, norms and practices mean that girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to sexual and domestic abuse, stress, anxiety and depression, with rising levels of body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and self-harm. Services specifically for girls and young women which offer targeted and specific support in separate spaces, are therefore of great importance for this group rather than generalist all age services.

Policy development

Local and national policies would be strengthened by including information about the particular circumstances of growing up young and female. Insights and evidence from girls and young women's projects, this briefing, published research and by collecting and disaggregating data by gender and age, can usefully strengthen local and national policies.

Influencing commissioners

WGI girls and young women projects often work closely with partner agencies and support these and commissioners in a number of ways. The projects are important sources of knowledge, skills and advice and can also be included in local and national round tables, consultations and decision-making forums.

Timely interventions

Early and consistent intervention, such as that provided by projects included in this group, makes social and economic sense for society. Not meeting the needs of girls and young women at the right time can result in a lifetime of disadvantage.

Transitional support

WGI projects provide support for girls and young women in transition from being children to young adults. Effective support for girls and young women when they move from children's services to adult services is considered to be of key importance so that they do not fall through the gaps.



Access to therapeutic and mental health support

Access to therapeutic and mental health support that meets girls and young women's particular needs at this stage of life is crucial.

Listening and time

Girls and young women need to be listened to and given time, so that they can develop their confidence, build trust, take up new roles and make incremental changes.

The ALS and this briefing were delivered as part of the WGI Learning and Impact Services, on behalf of The National Lottery Community Fund's WGI. The fund has invested £44.7million from the National Lottery in 62 projects across England to support and empower women and girls facing a wide range of issues. The WGI Learning and Impact Services contract was awarded to the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, DMSS Research and the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit – the partners – in early 2018. These services are helping projects better record and share their learning and through this create a stronger community of services that has greater influence on decision making structures across the country.

Contributors

Our thanks are extended to the people and WGI projects whose insights created this briefing. This briefing was written by the participants of the action learning set which met from 2018-2019 and guided by Sue Botcherby of DMSS Research and Camilla Child of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.

Chamomile Project

(Provides Support Advice and Guidance for young women and young mothers)

Joanne Jopling – Young Women’s Outreach Project
12 Gladstone Terrace, Gateshead NE8 4DY
www.ywop.co.uk

Pause, for thought

(Groups for girls and young women to explore life)

Rebecca Rawlings and Rachael Hoggarth –
Women’s Community Matters
Nan Tait Centre, Abbey Road, Barrow-in-Furness
Cumbria LA14 1LG
www.womenscommunitymatters.org

REACH programme

(Targeted outreach and support for young women and single mothers in Nottingham)

Hyacinth Francis-Watson and
Yvonne Francis-Palmer Chayah
Renewal Trust Business Centre
3 Hawksworth Street, NG3 2EG
www.chayahgroup.co.uk

Together Women Vibe (Voice Influence Be Empowered) Project

(For and led by young women and girls aged 12-19 to have a say on issues affecting them and make changes locally, regionally and nationally)

Shelly McDonald – Together Women
106 Arundel Lane, Sheffield S1 4RF
www.togetherwomen.org

Blossom Project

(Targeted support for young women aged 16 – 24 years living in the Stockton area who are at significant risk of poor outcomes due to a range of vulnerabilities and complex needs)

Sarah McManus, Charlotte Gibbons and Emma Tindale –
A Way Out
The Gate, 1-2 Castlegate Quay, The Riverside
Stockton-on-Tees TS18 1BZ
www.awayout.co.uk

Project 1325

(Targeted emotional and practical support for young women aged 13-25 years in Calderdale and Kirklees)

Sara Pigdon and Ann-Marie Gallacher – WomenCentre Limited
23 Silver Street, Halifax HX1 1JN
01422 386500
www.womencentre.org.uk

SEE Project (Support Empower Educate)

(For young women and girls aged 14 to 18 who have been affected by sexual violence)

Celeste Stevens – Oxfordshire Sexual Abuse and Rape Crisis Centre
www.osarcc.org.uk

Step together programme

(Working with women with children who are in care, preventing recurrent removals)

Lorraine Webb, Claire Kavanagh and Leah Wood
The Venus Centre, 215 Linacre Lane
Bootle L20 6AD
www.venuscharity.org

Hear 2 Change

(Working with young girls in Haringey and Islington community)

Amy Quinn-Graham and Sasa Onyango – Solace Women’s Aid
5-7, Blenheim Court, 62 Brewery Rd, London N7 9NY
www.solacewomensaid.org

Noa Girls

(Practical, emotional and therapeutic support for girls in the Orthodox Jewish Community)

Naomi Lerer
www.noagirls.co.uk

The Girls Network

(Inspiring and empowering girls from the least advantaged communities by connecting them with a professional female mentor and a network of role models)

Krishna Hathi
1, Royle Studios, 41 Wenlock Rd, Hoxton, London N1 7SG
www.thegirlsnetwork.org.uk

Seerose Specialist Young Women’s Refuge

(A specialist refuge for young women aged 16 to 25 who have experienced gender based violence, including domestic abuse, rape and sexual abuse, grooming, forced marriage, gang violence etc. Provide young women with practical and emotional support to enable them to talk about their experiences, safety plan and move forward with their lives)

Tanya Edwards and Imogen Phillpotts
Birmingham and Solihull Women’s Aid
www.bswaid.org



References

- AVA (2013) *Engaging with young women experiencing domestic and sexual violence, substance use and mental ill health*. London: AVA
- Batsleer, J. (2016) *Youth working with girls and young women in community contexts*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge
- Booker, C., Kelly, Y., and Sacker, A. (2018) Gender differences in the associations between age trends of social media interaction and well-being among 10-15 year olds in the UK *BMC Public Health* 2018:321 London: Springer Nature
- Firmin, C. (2017) *Contextual Safeguarding*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire
- Holmes, D. and Eaton, J (2017) *Working Effectively to Address Child Sexual Exploitation: Evidence Scope* Dartington: Research in Practice
- Kelly, L. and Karsna, K. (2017) *Measuring the scale and changing nature of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Scoping report*. London: Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse
- Kelly, Y., Zilanawala, A., Booker, C., and Sacker, A. (2018) Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health: Findings From the UK Millennium Cohort Study. *E Clinical Medicine*. Amsterdam: Elsevier
- Mcneish, D. and Scott, S. (2014) *Women and Girls At Risk: Evidence Across the Life Course* London: Lankelly Chase
- Mcneish, D. and Scott, S. (2018) *Key messages from research on intra-familial child sexual abuse* London: Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse
- NHS Digital (2018) *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017* London: NHS Digital
- NSPCC (2009) *Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships* London: NSPCC
- NSPCC (2011) *Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK today* London: NSPCC
- ONS (2016) *Impact of child abuse on later life, Crime Survey for England and Wales, year ending March 2016* London: ONS
- ONS (2018) *Domestic abuse in England and wales, year ending 2018* London: ONS
- Parke, S, and Karsna, K. (2019) *Measuring the scale and changing nature of CSA*. London: Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse
- Prison Reform Trust (2017) *Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?* London: Prison Reform Trust
- Scott, S. and McManus, S. (2016) *Hidden Hurt. Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women*. London: AGENDA
- Scott, S. and Botcherby, S. (2017) *Greater Manchester CSE Innovation project: Summary of the Learning from Research and Co-Production* Greater Manchester: Project Phoenix
- Twenge, J., Zlatan, K., and Hisler, G. (2017) Decreases in self-reported sleep duration among U.S. adolescents 2009 - 2015 and association with new media screen time. *Sleep Medicine* 39. Amsterdam: Elsevier
- Women's Resource Centre (2018) *Life-Changing & Life-Saving: Funding for the women's sector* London: Women's Resource Centre
- Young Women's Trust (2018) *Work it out evaluation*. London: Young Women's Trust