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Building Better
Policies for
Girls' Mental Health

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The Children's Society and the University of Manchester are working in partnership to improve understanding and better address policy surrounding girls' mental health. This collaboration brings together research expertise and policy advocacy to drive change.¹

In July 2025, we co-hosted the *Building Better Policies for Girls' Mental Health* workshop in Westminster, bringing together civil servants, academics, and third sector leaders to explore how policy can be strengthened toward supporting girls' mental health. The event was chaired by Chloe Laws, a journalist and writer whose work centres on the lives of girls and women, and the unique challenges they face.

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¹ This collaboration is funded by The University of Manchester's UKRI Impact Acceleration Account.

Research Context

At the event, we shared insights from The Children's Society's Good Childhood Reports (presented by Jack O'Neill) and from an NIHR-funded project on girls' mental health led out of The University of Manchester (presented by Dr Ola Demkowicz)² highlighting that:



UK girls consistently report lower happiness relative to boys, and there is a concerning trend of this markedly declining in recent years ([The Good Childhood Report, 2025](#))



Across every area of life (such as appearance, school, or family), the proportion of girls that reported being unhappy was larger than the proportion of boys ([The Good Childhood Report, 2024](#))



UK girls also report the lowest rates of life satisfaction when compared to UK boys but also compared to girls and boys across Europe as a whole ([The Good Childhood Report, 2024](#))



Rates of low mood and anxiety are also worsening among girls, which girls themselves have attributed to challenges including difficult gender norms, intense educational pressures, the comparative landscape of social media spaces, and difficulties within peer relationships ([Demkowicz et al., 2025](#))



Girls want to see system change including strengthened social media education and regulation, culture change in schools around gender norms, comprehensive approaches on school-based sexual harassment, and greater access to social spaces centred around hobbies ([Demkowicz et al., in press](#)).

² This study was funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Public Health Research Programme (project reference NIHR135295). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Workshop Summary

The workshop brought together 14 participants from across the civil service, academia, and the third sector.

We presented research insights and then asked delegates to discuss in small groups: their own policy context; key barriers within their sphere to improving girls' mental health; what information, data or insight would help their organisation or role to take more effective action; and where cross-sector collaboration is needed and what would make that possible.



Building on what works: Learning from successful approaches

Discussions identified several practices that should be sustained and strengthened, including:



Whole school approaches that prioritise listening to girls and fostering strong relationships.



Co-production with young people, including with a focus on girls' needs.



The use of shared language around girls' mental health, promoting clarity and consistency across sectors.



Establishing safe, inclusive environments, including, in some contexts, girls-only spaces

Challenges and Barriers



Girls are navigating considerable pressure: Girls face persistent pressures rooted in widespread gender stereotypes and societal expectations, including everyday sexism, misogyny, and intersectional discrimination, such as Islamophobia. Academic stress and exposure to online harms were also raised alongside safety concerns and the lingering effects of events like the COVID-19 pandemic.



Gender inequality issues are deep-rooted: Gender stereotypes, sexism, and misogyny were seen as pervasive from early ages as girls' needs were perceived as often deprioritised compared to boys. These structural inequalities were described as deeply embedded across various aspects of girls' lives, and this can make them difficult to disentangle and challenge.



Perceived barriers to strengthening supportive and inclusive everyday environments: In schools, overstretched staff and limited capacity to address gender issues were highlighted. Outside school, the lack of trained, culturally competent adults and safe community spaces were viewed as restricting girls' opportunities.

Opportunities for change

Participants highlighted a number of actions that could be used to strengthen policy approaches to girls' mental health in both the short-term and the long-term, which include:



Amplifying girls' voices in decision-making.



Improving communication around mental health.



Establishing how teams can discuss girls' mental health in a constructive way.



Addressing gaps in mental health services, including those affecting neurodivergent girls.



Supporting better data collection and cross-sector data sharing with a focus on gendered mental health patterns.



Prioritisation of individual wellbeing, rather than economic growth, within policy decisions.

Data Gaps

Girls' own lived experience and direct input are frequently missing from policy and programme development.

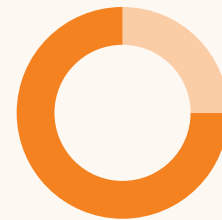
- ! Comparative insights from countries with better outcomes, or different ways of working around girls' mental health, could inform more effective approaches.
- ! Data on how the online world is regulated, and what this means for girls specifically, is insufficient.
- ! Non-binary and transgender young people are often not included in comparative research focused on girls and boys.

Conclusion

There is growing recognition that girls' mental health needs require action across a range of policy areas, yet **efforts can feel fragmented**, policy agents can feel unsure how to make change when the issues are deep-rooted and embedded in stretched systems, and **girls' own voices are not always present or heard**.

The complexity of these challenges goes beyond any single service or sector, underscoring the need for greater connection and collaboration. This workshop demonstrated the value of bringing varied policy perspectives together around a shared commitment to building better policies for girls' mental health. Based on a survey completed at the start and end of the session, this event improved participants' sense of connection to others working on girls' mental health in policy, improved by 75%, and their confidence in their knowledge of girls' mental health increased by 39%.

Moving forward, continued space to bring together different policy agents is critical, facilitating open discussion on what is working and what needs to change to shape real solutions toward improving girls' mental health in the UK.



Connection

↑ 75%



Knowledge

↑ 39%

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