



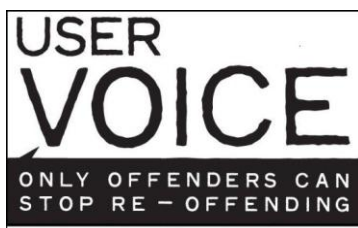
## WOMEN'S BREAKOUT

Chances to Change  
New Directions for Criminal Justice

### Experts by Experience

The collective voice of women in criminal justice

*“Have a heart. Have compassion. Don’t be judgmental.  
Don’t condemn us!”*



## **Acknowledgements**

Our thanks go to all of the women who have participated in this project.

Our member organisations do a fantastic job. We would like to thank and acknowledge the work undertaken by some of our member organisations in delivering on this project as follows:

- Start Up, London
- Anawim, Birmingham
- New Dawn New Day, Leicester
- Brighton Inspire Project
- Brighton Oasis Project
- Changing Lives, Newcastle
- Together Women Project, Leeds
- Key Changes, Sheffield
- Advance Advocacy, London

## Foreword

At Women's Breakout we believe that the voice of women service users is exceptionally powerful and critical to reducing reoffending by women. Over the last year, we have been working on a project called 'Women Experts by Experience'. This project provides a challenge to service providers to listen and act on what women tell us they need in order to bring important changes in their lives; and it is a celebration of the courage and achievements of the women in our services who have worked so hard to make their voices heard.

Women's Breakout has 51 member organisations and all of them have processes in place for women to contribute to the development and evaluation of the services they receive. What is unique about this project is that it brings together the collective voice of the women who use these services, and provides a national message.

This project has consisted of five phases

- (i) **100 Women Speak** – all of the member organisations of Women's Breakout were invited to work with women around a set of semi-structured questions and the responses have been collated. We have now collected the 'voice of over 100 women' in response to the same questions.
- (ii) **Deep diving** – nine of our member organisations worked with women to use innovative ways to capture the experiences of some of the women in their services such as video diaries, collages and films.
- (iii) **Collective Voices** – the nine member organisations in phase (ii) each supported a group of women to explore key themes to be addressed in an Open Space Event. Two women from each organisation were then supported to take forward the group issues to an open space event.
- (iv) **Open Space event** – this was a fantastic, energetic meeting of 'Experts by Experience' and decision makers across the Criminal Justice System, that culminated in a set of recommendations to decision makers.
- (v) **Lay Assessors** – Ten women have undertaken an accredited residential course at Fircroft College, Birmingham to become trained Lay Assessors. They will be using these newly learned skills to evaluate the service user experience of projects that wish to participate in peer evaluations.

This report describes the 'Collective Voices' and the 'Open Space' phases of the project. Women's Breakout commissioned User Voice to deliver these two phases, and they used innovative and creative methods to draw out what women wanted to say.

I am so impressed by our 'Experts by Experience'. They have worked hard, they have overcome emotional challenges, they have supported each other, and they have climbed mountains in terms of their confidence and belief in themselves. And what for? They have done this so that a system that has damaged them can be improved for others.

I do hope that their efforts will be rewarded by the decision makers who can change the future for so many women by listening, understanding and acting.

**Jackie Russell, Director, Women's Breakout**

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

It is a disturbing fact that women who enter the Criminal Justice System of England and Wales in 2014 are still faced with the reality of a system created by men for men. The gender specific needs and pains of women are sometimes little understood by those who develop and administer Criminal Justice practice even now almost seven years after the Corston Report was published.

This project was designed to capture the experiences of women who have been through the 'system' and allow them, in their own voice, to explain their issues and needs. These lived experiences then informed a co-produced, and generative, event where the issues could be discussed and recommendations for the future developed.

## Process

Women, their experiences, knowledge and realities, have historically been silenced and subsumed under wider, patriarchal, discourses. Criminal Justice practice imposes further silence and vulnerabilities on women. As such focus groups were chosen as the format for this project as it was recognised that a supportive and inclusive group would be more effective in allowing those most vulnerable to voice their experiences and expertise.

Nine focus groups were held in Birmingham, Brighton, Leeds, Leicester, London, Newcastle and Sheffield in order to gain a national understanding of the issues. In total sixty-five women attended these groups and contributed to this report.

## Key Issues

There was a certain degree of uniformity to the issues articulated by the women who participated in this project.

There were issues with regard to intimate partner, and other forms of domestic (familial and filial) violence as well as wider issues of mental ill health and the impact of those issues on offending and desistance. These factors were interwoven in complex matrices with the following core issues that were identified by the participants:

### New 'Pains' of Imprisonment

A number of 'pains' of imprisonment, which went beyond those in the traditional literature, were identified. These included:

- Pains of separation, relating to separation from children, family and support networks in home town;
- Pains of censure, relating to the judgements made by authorities over gender specific needs and requirements eg mothers, hygiene, medical and emotional care;
- Pains of surveillance relating to how every aspect of their lives as women and mothers was scrutinised, recorded, catalogued, judged and shared;
- Deprivation of opportunities relating to occupational opportunities; opportunities for emotional stability and well being; and, economic foundations.

## **Stigma**

It was noted by many that having a criminal conviction was a barrier to employment, resettlement and reintegration and acted as a continuing punishment. For others it also acted as a cause of shame and increased negative emotion within their families and communities which further isolated and marginalised them from structures of support.

## **Housing**

Housing was raised as a major stumbling block for those trying to rebuild their lives post custody. This was compounded for those who had been subject to intimate partner and other forms of domestic violence. A further problem had been recent changes and restrictions to benefits and allowances which posed severe problems for securing or maintaining accommodation.

## **Family impact**

There were a number of family impacts but perhaps the two most common were the hurt inflicted on children and the subsequent damaged relationships and feelings of guilt. Secondly, the attitude, inflexibility and destructive practices of social services further punished women and children by enforcing separations and loss.

## **Lack of care**

Care was seen as a major factor missing from criminal justice practice and the experiences of women. At a minimal level this related to a lack of understanding of women's issues and the plight of those in desperate situations, which was often when support services were withdrawn. At a more serious level this involved direct dismissal of concerns, complaints and problems by both probation and social services.

A related issue was when services responded to a problem inappropriately for example when counselling was required but mental health service interventions resulted in psychiatric intervention and prescriptions instead.

## **Drugs and alcohol**

There was a complex picture painted with regard to this set of issues. Of particular note was the role that alcohol and drugs played in some women's lives and wider familial and peer relationships outside of offending patterns. Another issue was an over reliance of group work with a dearth of one-to-one services available and a further lack of women only groups. For those exiting prison being placed in hostels and other settings conducive to substance misuse was seen as particularly problematic and 'setting them up to fail'.

## **Inadequate education, training and employment (ETE) services**

There were three core issues raised around education, training and employment: The first was concerned with a lack of courses provided by services for women. The second noted that even if there were courses available to women then these rarely had any real world value or professional standing. The third related to poor, outdated or even misleading information – especially about barring and disclosure issues – which negatively impacted on women's chances of gaining employment.

## **Immigration**

Changes to immigration policy was seen as a real barrier to women where their status was in question. Whilst immigration services investigated a woman's status that woman would be

excluded from employment, social services, benefits and, potentially, housing. Not only did this render them even more vulnerable but also made it nearly impossible to build successful lives.

## **Best Practice**

There were a wide range of good practices designed for women in criminal justice described by the participants in this study. The factors which make services effective, supportive, generative, and actually aid the women who access them were:

### **Safe spaces**

The creation of spaces where women feel safe and can express themselves and reveal their needs without ridicule or threat.

### **Trust**

Trust in their recovery/desistance enables women to engage and progress, even though there will be times when women will fail, relapse and reoffend.

### **Acceptance**

Acceptance and non-judgemental support creates open and generative environments for women. Being constantly judged for past mistakes and vulnerabilities creates negative environments for women that destroys confidence and compounds low self-esteem.

### **Understanding**

Professionals working with women need to understand the issues that impact on the lives of women and not impose ideals and misconceptions upon them.

### **Consistency**

Services and key workers need to be consistent and not change at regular intervals. The development of a trusting and open relationship with a single professional can be key to a woman's journey of progress.

### **Practical aid**

Advice and guidance is not always sufficient. At times practical help, support and services are needed.

### **Social activity**

Social activities enable them to build networks of support and engage in pro-social relationships. Many women are isolated and have very little access to purposeful and meaningful interactions.

### **Confidence building**

It is essential that activities, programmes and services designed to help women build their self-confidence, esteem and assertiveness. Women can often be rendered mute and vulnerable by their histories and experiences of Criminal Justice.

## **Co-Production Event**

The purpose of this consultation with women was to prepare them to take their places at a co-production event in London on the 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013. The event was based upon an

'Open Space' format which is designed to be a flexible model for holding meetings or conducting workshops and is based on self-organisation. The process is designed to encourage participation and equality of engagement. It has successfully been used in a range of contexts, in varying scales by large companies, local government and community activists. The process works well in the context of complex issues, where there are divergent perspectives and skills and allows everyone to contribute as much or as little as they like.

The event was attended by over sixty people. Of these, seventeen were women who had been affected by contact with the criminal justice system and the rest were criminal justice practitioners and commissioners from both private and public sectors, third sector and specialist organisations, and representatives from funding bodies.

## **Recommendations**

The event resulted in a set of recommendations which arose from the conversations on the day and which were voted for by the participants. The top eight were:

**The establishment of a dedicated Women's Centre in every community which can supply information and services**

**Education and training for magistrates, judges and other criminal justice practitioners aimed at raising awareness and understanding of the very specific needs of women entering the Criminal Justice System – especially around intimate partner and domestic violence.**

**Recruiting and employing women with first-hand experience of Criminal Justice to advise and assist in the local Transforming Rehabilitation programmes.**

**The introduction of advocates and peer advisors who can provide information and sign-post agencies who can aid women who have issues with Social Services.**

**For the new National Probation Service as well as local providers to expand, and introduce through the gate, peer-to-peer mentoring to aid resettlement and assist in reducing reoffending**

**Extending peer-to-peer mentoring to working with people in custody especially in First Night Centres and during Induction and pre-release periods**

**Improved ETE opportunities for women that have real world value and develop a wider range of dedicated links with employment agencies as well as colleges and other training outlets.**

**A dedicated Foreign National Service User group with access to senior practitioners and involving relevant Government officials**



## Introduction

*“I think if we don’t own it and speak it out, a) we don’t challenge the idea that people can make mistakes, or shit can happen to people that causes them to make decisions that end up not being good ones, and b) people can recover from that, you can get over it.”*

It is a sad and unfortunate situation that in 2014 women are still having to suffer a criminal justice system that was designed by men, for men. The gender specific needs, risks and disparities of women, though often recognised, are still subsumed within the structures of a Criminal Justice apparatus that is ill suited to deal with them. It was the recognition of this unacceptable situation that led Baroness Corston to conclude that in order for women to have access to a justice system that can cater to their specific needs and requirements that there was a need for:

*“a radical change in the way we treat women throughout the whole of the criminal justice system and this must include not just those who offend but also those at risk of offending. This will require a radical new approach, treating women both holistically and individually – a woman-centred approach.” (Corston Report 2007).*

Since the production of this report there has been a growing acknowledgement of the importance for a women-centric approach to the criminal justice services that deal with women. However, a historical problem, one that reflects the silencing of women’s voices in wider society, is that those women who access or come before these services are rarely, if ever, consulted. Further, women tend to be silenced in a number of ways. This project seeks to redress this by recognising and promoting the concept that the lived experience of women instils in them an expertise in their needs and requirements and the manner in which services, and service providers, can better aid them.

## Process

The experience of every woman is to be acknowledged as real and pertinent and of immense value in and of itself. Every story, narrative, tragedy and success has its own inherent probity and worth. It is for this reason that interviews are generally used as the primary collection tool in order to capture the experiences of women. However, the individual approach can be both intimidating and, when trauma may potentially be revealed, distressing. Focus groups can be more supportive and generative for the participants and more productive in terms of enabling them to speak and ‘be heard’.

Nine focus groups were held in eight locations around the country. The locations were chosen for two reasons: the first being to provide a representative sample of women with differing life and social experiences as well as a variety of differing forms of criminal justices services and practices; the second was these were areas where Women’s Breakout had member organisations that could both facilitate the focus groups and recruit women to them.

Women’s centres in Birmingham, Brighton, Leeds, Leicester, London, Newcastle and Sheffield supported the process and enabled the research to occur. The following process was followed at each site:

Stage 1 – a series of visits with the lead at each of the Women's Centres provided the opportunity to discuss the project in more detail and to allay any fears and concerns. Following this meeting, the Women's Centres were able to prepare the women for their involvement in the project.

Stage 2 - engagement meetings were then organised with the staff members engaged on the project at each women's centre. This provided an opportunity for the two staff teams to build a rapport.

Stage 3 –focus group dates were scheduled and the women who used the Centres were invited to attend. The process was again explained to the women who wished to be involved, and the women were advised that they could withdraw at any time and that any information they provided would be handled confidentially and any materials used in this report would be anonymised.

In total sixty five women participated in the focus groups as follows:

Region	Venue	Number of Participants
Birmingham	Anawim	10
Brighton	Oasis Project	8
Brighton	Women's Centre – Inspire Project	2
Leeds	Together Women's Project	8
Leicester	New Dawn New Day	7
London	Start Up Now	8
London	Advance Advocacy	5
Newcastle	Changing Lives	11
Sheffield	Key Changes	6
	Total	65

Recordings of focus groups were uploaded to a secure server and were transcribed. These transcriptions were then analysed using an adapted form of thematic analysis. All emergent themes were coded and then each transcription was re-analysed for code prevalence and frequency. This ensured that not only were all themes captured but also enabled the author of this report to establish which themes, by virtue of their frequency, were seen by the participants as being the most pertinent to their lived experience.

Stage 4 – regional training sessions were organised in order to explain the nature, purpose and outline of the Open Space event that was to be held in December. These sessions were based upon the principles of co-production and confidence building and enabled those women who took part in the final event to have their voices, their experience and their expertise heard.

All who attended the training sessions received a support pack.

Stage 5 - the final stage was the Open Space Event which will be discussed in full in the relevant section below.

## Key Issues

*We don't want to be a burden on society. We want to look after ourselves. So if they gave us an open door, we would walk through it with our heads held high. But they are shutting every door on us.*

This chapter is split into two related sections. The first details those themes which women identified as impacting on them most profoundly. The second outlines those factors which were identified as best practice amongst those services which they encounter and access.

### New 'Pains' of imprisonment

The classical penological literature identifies a number of deprivations, or 'pains', that are experienced by people in prison. Pat Carlen<sup>1</sup> identified a number of gender specific pains: increased censure (women's behaviour is judged more harshly than male prisoners), gender discrimination (especially around issues of feminine health), limited opportunities (women's prisons have either less purposeful activity than men's or gender stereotypical activities that have little real world value) and 'pains' of separation (related to children and family and the distance that many women are kept from their home towns).

**On Average 10,500  
women are sent to prison  
in the UK every year.  
Women in Prison, PRT**

This is the experience of many of those who took part in this study. Many found that the experience of imprisonment was extremely distressing, painful and damaging in innumerable ways which also exacerbated many of those issues that had resulted in them coming before the criminal justice system.

### Separation

Perhaps the most pertinent of these was with regard to the 'pains (and guilt) of separation' that was experienced and how little this was understood or taken into consideration. Those that spoke of these issues spoke of the pain related to their guilt of being absent, of being unable to provide care, of harming their children through their absence.

*I only did eight weeks, luckily, but it absolutely ripped my heart out. My mum wrote to me saying my son wasn't eating properly. I was crying in my cell.*

What made this a particularly keen 'pain' was that there was little means of ameliorating this affect. Even after release the sense of guilt could remain for many years and while still in prison the pain would mount as it was largely inescapable.

*I just felt guilty, every day. My children needed their mother but I wasn't there ... I don't think I'll ever get over that*

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<sup>1</sup> Carlen, P (2005), *Women in Prison: The early years*, WIP:

This was sometimes exacerbated by the ignorance of staff and the sometimes brutal and unfeeling manner in which familial concerns were dealt with.:

*I went to prison, and two days before Christmas my 20 year old son dropped dead. The prison officers came to my cell on Saturday morning. They opened the door, said 'We're sorry to tell you but your son died last night.' Then they shut the door again ...*

Though an extreme example this experience was nevertheless echoed by others who had concerns, worries and fears about their families and children that were dismissed by prison staff. Therefore, though the 'pain of separation' was common to women in prison it was often denied or dismissed by the prison authorities and not taken into consideration when sentencing or when 'care plans' were discussed or formulated.

*A lot of the judges are middle aged, old men, and they just don't seem to understand a woman's perspective and how bad a situation they may be in. They hand out quite stiff sentences because they don't seem to have understood their predicament at all*

## **Censure**

Censorious behaviour could take a number of forms; those most frequently cited were with regards to how women were made to feel about being an absent mother and a societal failure. This added a psychological weight that many found difficult to quantify but nevertheless was felt as a further erosion of their sense of self. This was most explicitly and eloquently captured by one individual who was comparing the Centre she attended to the prison she had been released from. She noted that at the Centre:

*There are no labels or authorities there that are looking down and criticising you for what you are doing, who you are and what you want to do. That's what it [prison] was like ... being put down all the time.*

For many custody provided little or no positive experience and could often worsen their overall situation. This was especially true in rendering them more vulnerable to more criminally minded peers especially in terms of drug use and further offending

*My first offence was trivial. I went to jail and met some psycho in jail. I came out and tried to help her because she gave me some big long elaborate story about how her life was so traumatic and she was losing her kids. I tried to help her. It turned out she was a heroin addict. Because I was quite young and naive I had no experience of proper drug users, so I didn't know the signs of a proper drug user. When she came out, she came to my house, she took drugs in my house, it got really out of order. I ended up fighting this girl and ended up in prison with false imprisonment, kidnap and GBH section 18. If I hadn't been associated with that sort in the first place at such a young age, that wouldn't have been part of my life. Once that happened my life just went down like that*

## **Diversion**

Preventing women at risk from entering the harder aspects of the criminal justice system was considered an important factor in women's justice.

*My life is shit because I wasn't given a chance when I was 17 or 18. If I was given a chance then, my life would be different.*

*When you go in, you get girls that are coming in 18 and below, they will come in as good girls who have made one silly little mistake, and then they end up on drugs. Then they become constant offenders. I've seen that happen so many times when I've been in prison, the little young ones that are coming in too young to deal with that scenario.*

*I'd been through lots of other services because of alcohol, drugs and domestic violence and all these other things, but it was only when I went through the justice system that I got to know.*

*I think the first time I was given a prison sentence, I don't think a prison sentence was very helpful. Support and counselling for the domestic situation I was in at the time would have been a lot more helpful. It just meant that for three months I wasn't living with my husband. I went back to living with him; same situation, same problems.*

Of course these negative influences, on what may be described as already chaotic existences, were a further source of censure as it would be noted and commented on in pre-sentence and OASys reports. This was especially true if social services and children were involved in a woman's case.

## **Surveillance**

Many of those who participated in the focus groups related the pains of surveillance from 'authority'. It was common for women to refer to the *lack of privacy* or being made to *feel naked* in the gaze of criminal justice services, the fact that if they expressed needs, especially with regard to drug use or to their children, then these would be rephrased as terms of risk and used against them

*I told [probation staff member] that I had used ... she helped me ... but then I found out that they had told Social and they took my kids away again and gave them to him ...*

*They want to jump ahead of you and inform social services or court before you get a chance to sort your life out. That just makes things worse. Then you get more pressure and more stress.*

The problem is that in order to access the help that they need to escape an offending trajectory they need to be open and honest about the problems and issues that they face in their everyday lives. But this information can then be used to further censure and punish them. This increases the depth of the custodial experience, makes the prison more difficult to navigate, and further harms a positive sense of self and impacts on their well being.

Thus prison can be an extremely damaging experience that has consequences for women far beyond the four walls and the gate.

*What can prison actually offer you? Nothing!*

## Lack of Opportunities

Some of the negative impacts of prison can be offset by some of the opportunities that the establishment can offer. However, opportunities must have real currency, but as many noted there '*... was nothing to do*' or '*the work you do does not prepare you for release ... its pointless*'. Even educational courses were seen as being of minimal use as they tended towards the basic and had no '*... real world value*'.

A number of women noted that being in certain prisons denied women the opportunity for, or means of, personal and emotional succour – a process of dealing with their feelings and trauma in a sufficient way

*You are in prison, you are depressed, you are angry, you are bitter, you don't know how to feel ... there is no system to better you.*

*I was in Eastwood Park in Gloucester first off. I would be sat in the big hall, and there would be fights breaking out. There would be pool cues being broken on people's heads. Then I went to Holloway. That is the worst women's prison ever. Somebody had set themselves on fire, so you'd see them walking by with burns all over them. There would be fighting in front of you when you were working ... You do see some real bad things. You don't always get a good experience ... and you're just left to deal with it on your own*

Lastly many spoke of how prison deprived them of economic opportunities and would result in them having to '*start from scratch*' – especially in terms of housing and basic financial security. Resettlement practices in prisons were a particular target for the anger that many felt as it often proved to be of little value

*You get a little thing under your door saying you've got resettlement at 10, but you only really go to get out of your cell. You don't really go and engage or anything. It isn't what it should be. It could be so much more.*

*I think there should be a resettlement programme for a couple of weeks or a month before you are due to be released. You could get your benefits sorted out, your housing, where you are going to go if you've got family, get a peer mentor or something. Then they can help people reintegrate back in because it is really difficult when you are just let out with forty quid, which is what usually happens*

*I did resettlement ... but in a prison 100 miles away from where I was being released. What's the point?*

There were also further issues relating to the prison sharing information, in a similar way described above, about someone's resettlement needs that could make the situation worse for a woman at the point of release

*You got to Resettlement and they say 'Where do you live?' and you tell them. Then they make some phone calls to maybe get your rent stopped and crap like that. They fuck it up for you. You don't even want to give them your national insurance number because then they stop your benefits. It is just crap. Resettlement kind of mess it up for you in the beginning, because they make benefits and housing aware that you are in there. Whereas if you didn't go to resettlement, you might come out and still have*

*your house and your benefits. They stop that and then tell you where to go when you get out, but it is still starting all over again.*

*I was in Holloway. You try to get anything done, and they wouldn't sort it out. You would be there waiting for weeks on end.*

Many of those who had experienced custody pointed out that often they were released having nothing which then put them in a difficult situation in terms of their offending and lifestyle. Even to the point of not knowing where to go, who to speak to and where to get help

*... it is appalling the way they chuck you out with £46, with nowhere to go, nowhere to live, no one to meet you outside. It is disgraceful really. What are you going to do?*

*I didn't know half of what I was doing. Nothing was explained. I am talking about the changes that need to be happening. Nothing was explained to me, so I didn't understand*

For many release and dealing with the various services in the community posed equal problems to those described above.

### **Post-imprisonment**

*It is not just going to prison and getting a sentence. They give you a sentence and you go to jail. You think you have done your time and you can come out and live a new life. That is just the beginning.*

It is a common misconception that the negative impacts on the woman are resolved upon release from prison. For many of those who responded to this consultation their problems did not cease once they left the prison gates behind them. In fact for many release presented them with a new range of problems that made the transition to civilian life difficult.

*I've done my crime, done my time, and you still feel like you're being punished, even when you're out.*

It came as a shock to many that the punishments continued beyond the custodial period of their sentence. The expectation would be that post custody they would be aided in rebuilding their lives. However the perception is that they '*... have to do this shit for themselves*' which then absolves criminal justice agencies from providing any more aid than information and sign-posts. This adds further complications to the release process as women are further disadvantaged by the need to navigate a transition with little or no practical aid.

For many this transition rendered them more vulnerable as they were then forced to confront many other issues of their incarceration such as the stigma that came with having entered the criminal justice system, the impact on their family lives, their housing and financial situation, the stresses of trying to secure any type of employment.

*... you can't get a job, you can't get somewhere to live, you can't get benefits depending on your situation*

## Stigma

*... an advisor, and she was saying 'Why do you care what society has to say if you've got a conviction?' I said 'It means a whole lot what they have to say, because you get discriminated.' They might not say it in front of you, but you definitely know you are being discriminated.*

Stigma can impact on family, friendships, societal interactions as well as lead to discrimination in the search for work, housing and, in some circumstances, the level of subsistence that is available. This was seen as a major aspect of entering the criminal justice system for women for which there was little escape or relief.

*Because of my criminal record it is impossible for me to get a job. When they ask you to declare and disclose, if I start disclosing my offences it is going to be longer than my bloody CV. Who is going to employ me? Nobody. I was looking for five years straight, with no luck whatsoever.*

*The other day I rang up a company called xxxxxxx. The lady questioned me first, and then she said 'Have you got a conviction?' I said yes to her. And she said 'When was the conviction.' I told her and she said 'xxxxxx don't take on people with convictions.' That was it. She said she couldn't help me.*

*I think the main thing for me is probably the stigma of a criminal record when you are going to look for future employment. Having to explain yourself, when it might be things that you did so long ago that you don't really relate them to yourself anymore. That brings up loads of things like shame and guilt. You want to move forward, but you have still got to keep revisiting it. That makes you feel quite bad sometimes.*

Even when they could secure employment, they felt forced into a situation where they had to hide their past in order to avoid unwanted and undue attention

*... you just can't be yourself. At the moment I live two lives. I put this face on at work and I am this perfect innocent thing, and then I have my own life at home. You have done this and done that, and it is not really you. So one day I can be me and the next day I can't be.*

*I'm always worried that someone at work will find out ... I can't be myself and I can't let anyone too close ...*

Stigma doesn't just exist in the search for employment and other social practices (such as gaining insurance or securing housing with a landlord) but also in the more intimate and familial relationships. Many stated that they found it impossible to tell their parents or children that they had been in trouble with the police or had been to prison.

*When I was sentenced my mum was not aware of it. I was sentenced on a Monday. The judge said to me 'Go home and come back to me on Friday because you are going to prison. Go and tell your 84 year old mother and your eight year old daughter that this is how you are going to pay.' The judge allowed me to go home and tell my mum. My whole family had to come over the water to tell my mum that Abbey has done something and she is going to prison. My mum said to me that she was not going to see me again because she would die before I came out. I am the last of*



*eight. I see her every day, or I speak to her. When she said that, my whole family was crying. To this day, my eight year old daughter doesn't know I went to prison because I can't tell her. I don't think I can stand up and tell her I went to prison.*

This fear, guilt and shame with regard to the fact of their past resulted in the weaving of elaborate fabrications in order to prevent the truth from being known. This in and of itself posed problems for their sense of self and could in fact rebound and cause further problems.

*I told my son that I had to work away ... he still thinks that was why he stayed with his nan ... I dread him finding out the truth*

*... I had to tell my two as some of the kids school had been saying things to them about their mummy being a criminal. I hadn't told them before. My eldest ... she isn't talking to me ... I feel so guilty, so bad*

## **Housing**

Secure housing is an important part of the process of moving away from offending behaviours and identities. However, for many women, coming into contact with the criminal justice system threatened this basic element of their living experience. For many of the women who participated in this consultation there had also been a need to vacate their previous housing situation due to either domestic abuse or intimate partner violence or other negative/hostile realities. All of these factors rendered securing and maintaining housing a primary concern.

*When I got out I had nowhere to go, nowhere to live, no one to turn to ... I wasn't going back to him ... because of what he had done to me in the past ... but I needed to live somewhere ...*

*I need help and support with housing. I am stuck at the moment where I need to find somewhere to live ... its difficult to do on your own.*

A further problem has been the recent changes and restrictions to benefits and allowances which posed severe problems for securing or maintaining homes. These policies have adversely affected many women, but this is compounded by criminal convictions. Many found that the stability that they had been able to secure in the past was now being pulled out from under them which led to increased desperation, financial insecurity, stress and chaos

*'You got yourself locked up, so you lost your benefits, so you lost your house, we're not helping you'. They don't make it easy for you, they definitely don't. And it would be helpful if they did make it a bit easy, because you might have a chance then!*

Of course this didn't just relate to housing but general subsistence as well.

*I went to food banks and borrowed. I would have stolen if I didn't have all these court proceedings going on. I didn't steal but I've been begging and borrowing. It sets you up to fail. You can't get crisis loans any more. They stopped.*

*I am on benefits and every day the government comes in with different rules. There is not a day I don't sit down and fret.*

*Benefits take too long to sort out ...the changes make it hard too ... Since I got out, I had to reclaim everything and it took nearly three months to sort my benefits out.*

A number also pointed out the sometimes contradictory and nonsensical bureaucracy that underpinned benefits and criminal justice decisions and how this could result in even greater insecurity and vulnerability and have an impact on the family as a whole.

*I'm facing losing my house. I have to sell my house to pay compensation ... I've been living in my house since I was sixteen. What am I supposed to do now?*

*... I lost my job and my home. Whatever crime I have done, let me pay the money, and I'll contribute ... Now the tax payer is going to have to pay extra for me to claim benefits to pay somebody else so I have somewhere to live.*

*We mothers are getting it double, because we have to feed our kids. We don't have jobs. You want to give your kids good things and you've worked all your life, but you have a record that makes your job stop and you cannot buy things for your kids, and you cannot even feed your kids. I am only getting £71 a week, no tax credit, no child benefit, no nothing. So I'm supposed to be living on £71.*

This last point, regarding the collateral impact on the wider family was mentioned by most, if not all, participants.

### **Family Impact**

Perhaps the most traumatising aspect for those women who spoke to us was the impact that entering the criminal justice system had on their families. In every focus group, for many of the women concerned the separation, hurt and trauma that their removal had visited upon their children and loved ones was a direct cause for a great many negative emotions – guilt, shame, embarrassment, anger and self-loathing. In many ways this collateral impact was a greater 'pain' than the actual punishment handed down by the court. This was time that was lost, this was damage that could not be repaired.

**It is estimated that more than 17,240 children were separated from their mothers in 2010 by imprisonment**

Wilks-Wiffen (2011)

*A man going to prison is totally different from a woman going to prison. When a woman goes to prison their whole family goes to prison.*

*I lost my children. And I find that once you get into the justice system concerning children being taken away from you it is hard. Once they have taken them it is hard to get them back. There is absolutely no support for the parent. It is really really hard for a woman when she has lost her children*

Many felt that their time away had irreparably harmed their relationships and the opportunity to provide their children with a 'good' life or a good start in life.

*You just don't know the effect it is having on them. My daughter is three. I can see things that aren't right.*

*I worry ... I see that they are upset and angry with me. I hope it don't have ... affect them ... down the road, you know?*

These harms to children could be a source of reinforcement of the very negative self-image that the criminal justice system imposes on women. This was especially true when the impact of a mother's legal situation began to spread beyond the familial home to the wider social life of the children

*My child's school totally did not support her. At the time we lived in a little village, quite a stuck up village near [city name], so it was a village school. As soon as they found out I had gone to prison, the kids in the village were picking on her. The school just isolated her from everybody else. They put her in a classroom on her own. That was not what she needed. They said it would be better for her instead of being bullied. You don't want to be sitting in a classroom on your own when you've just lost your mum. ... I felt terrible when I found out*

*I felt really guilty when I came here. I thought my daughter wouldn't get to uni because of what ... because of me*

## **Social Services**

*They scare me the social services*

Related to the wider family impact was the almost universal contempt with which Social Services were viewed. Though many understood the role that this service could play in protecting children from harm, the attitude, inflexibility and destructive practices of social services, and how these further punished women and children by enforcing separations and loss, were seen as a major factor in the punishment of women. For many it seemed that the removal of children was not done in order to protect the children but instead to punish the mother.

*I feel that they hate me. I feel they will do anything to keep my daughter away from me. I see my daughter once every six weeks for an hour.*

*They follow the book. They go straight down the book, and if you don't comply with the rules in this book, you've had it. If they take a dislike to you right from the beginning, you have also had it. They have their own views and feelings and if they don't want you to have the kids back or they don't think you should have the kids back, they won't give them back.*

*It takes someone a year to eighteen months to turn their life around. But the care proceedings are only 26 weeks, so they can't ever support the mothers to have the kids back, because it's too short a space. It just doesn't make any sense, and it's driving me mad.*

*I've got no sense for social services. I've got love for my child, but at the end of the day they can't judge you as a mother because they haven't seen you as a mother. They are seeing your bad side. They are seeing you when you are low. They are seeing you when you have been mentally, physically and emotionally destroyed by a partner or a drug habit. They don't help you, they just snatch your kids away and tell*

*you you've got to step up. How can you step up when you've just had a child taken away from you?*

One point that was made by a few participants but which is nevertheless important to relate is the notion that the 'grief' associated with losing children to social services can be the most damaging aspect of falling foul of the justice system.

*I got more into crime when I lost her, because I thought bollocks to it. I had nothing else worth losing; I'd lost my family and lost her, so I thought fuck it.*

*I just wanted to drown the pain out ... they took the children and gave them to him. I couldn't stand it ... I felt I had nothing to live for.*

### **Lack of Care**

Care was seen as a major factor missing from criminal justice practice and the experiences of women. At a minimal level this related to a lack of understanding of women's issues and the plight of those in desperate situations not only by the courts but even the services which were supposed to help women.

*They're supposed to help you but they haven't been through what you've been through. They don't understand what you have had to do ... to survive, to live, to feed your children*

*I tried to explain about what was happening with my partner ... the abuse, the violence, the threats. They didn't understand*

*They see women like us all the time but they still don't get it ...*

One problem that was repeatedly made was that it was at the point when women were most vulnerable that support services were withdrawn. This could result in women feeling abandoned and unsupported. There was a lack of comprehension of why services that were designed to aid individuals move away from using or offending would cease their services at the point when they were most needed. This made women feel like they were being set up to fail.

*... Its like they want you to fail. I needed help ... I was using again but only because of losing my kid. I needed help but they wouldn't help me*

*I've seen women come back to prison after only a few days because services have been stopped ... and they done something desperate to get help*

At a more serious level this lack of care in criminal justice services involved direct dismissal of concerns, complaints and problems by both probation and social services.

*She says she understands and sympathises with me, but she seems to be falling into the pattern of the other probation officers. If they say one thing, she will side with them instead of voicing her own opinion. If she is supposed to be my probation officer, she should be working for me and supporting me, but I don't feel she is.*

*They don't seem to understand. They just think 'Oh well, she's a feisty one. We've got to slap her on the wrist.' They don't take time out to sit and actually find out what you've been through.*

*The biggest problem is trying to find someone to listen. I tried to seek help before, but they didn't listen. Social Services, probation, they just don't take care.*

*You don't feel listened to. They just dismiss you ...*

A related issue occurred when services recognised a problem but then overburdened the individual by introducing other professionals or services – this was most often the case when mental health services were engaged and behaviours became pathologised and medicalised; i.e. counselling was sought but psychiatric interventions and prescriptions resulted.

*For me it is finding the right support. Finding a balance. Sometimes too many people want to help you, and that is more confusing, because you've got to try and pick who is actually best for you.*

*There were so many key workers and so many psychologists who were all pretty much under the same umbrella, but they all wanted to treat me. It actually did me more harm than good*

*I had a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist is good for medication, he gives you tablets. What I needed was a psychologist. But they thought it was very expensive. So I never treated the problems as the roots*

Probation also came in for a great deal of criticism

*They ought to make it clearer what probation is, because I'm still not clear to this day what probation actually is. I would like to know what probation is and what they have to offer, and what the hell is going on, basically. It doesn't make any sense to me*

One woman spoke of having to report to the same office as her abusive ex-partner whilst others spoke more generally of having to attend appointments when there were no gender specific reporting times.

*I want to also say that it makes a huge difference to be in probation with females. When it was in [LDU] it was horrific. You are mixed with men.*

*Its horrible going to appointments with all these creepy men staring at you ... Probation should do it so its women only.*

## **Drugs and Alcohol**

*I have been slightly out of my head on drugs most of my life.*

There was a complex picture painted with regard to this set of issues. Of particular note was the role that alcohol and drugs played in some women's lives and wider familial and peer relationships outside of offending patterns. However, what was also noted was the difficulty and fragility of women's sobriety or abstinence in the face of criminal justice attention and

scrutiny. Many described situations where they were made to relive and recount the most painful aspects of their lives over and over to various practitioners from differing agencies.

*I keep repeating my life story and things that really upset me over and over again. I have so many different services and so many different appointments, that sometimes I just press the f..ing button, have a drink and don't do anything*

*... going over painful things all the time with lots of different people brings you down ... them is things you want to forget. Makes staying clean really really difficult*

Another difficulty with regard to drink and drugs was the lack of purposeful activity.

*What to do with time is a problem. Because I've been either drinking and using or in therapy, I don't know how to do just normal everyday things ...*

*Not having much to do makes it difficult. You end up back in the same old circles with the same friends ... doing the things you used to ...*

Even when help was available with drugs and alcohol issues and activities there was an over reliance of group work. It seemed that many were just being referred to groups or to organisations with group based programmes. A number stated that there was a real dearth of one-to-one services available for women in their area and, where groups were the only option, there were a further lack of women only groups.

*I've done lots of group therapy, because alcohol is my problem, and groups don't work for me. I've been to all of these programmes and I'm sick of them.*

*Its always a group, mostly with men. I don't want to talk about my stuff in front of them.*

Lastly, for those exiting prison, being placed in hostels and other settings conducive to substance misuse was seen as particularly problematic and 'setting them up to fail'.

*I moved to a hostel. I was clean at the time, although I was on a substitute prescription. The one that I was in, you are set up with another person and you share a kitchen and bathroom. They either put you with someone who is using or is likely to use.*

*Yeah, you get stuck in a vicious circle.*

*They don't think about who they are putting you with.*

*You don't stand a bloody chance really.*

This conversation was indicative of the experience of many. At that time when stress was highest, at the moment they were most vulnerable to relapse, they were placed in circumstances where they were surrounded by users and enablers. This caused a great deal of concern as well as resulted in a loss of faith in the services with which they were engaged.

## **Education, Training and Employment**

There were three core issues raised around education, training and employment: The first was concerned with a lack of courses provided by services for women; The second noted

that even if there were courses available to women then these rarely had any real world value or professional standing; The third related to poor, outdated or even misleading information – especially about barring and disclosure issues – which negatively impacted on women's chances of gaining employment.

In terms of the first issue it was noted that in prison there was a lack of education and training courses available to women but that once in the community the situation was even worse.

*There is nothing out here, no training or employment*

*You can go for thousands of interviews but you don't get the job and probation can't do anything to help you ...*

A second factor was that even when training or educational courses were available to women they either had little or no potential for up-skilling the woman concerned as they were at a very basic level. Alternatively the courses had little or no practical value, or professional standing, or, even more frustrating, were not tied to opportunities in the local area.

*I did courses in prison but when I came home ... they were no use*

*You come out and you think 'What have I achieved?'*

A further factor with regard to training relates to the issues discussed above in terms of the sharing of information and the lack of privacy and what impact this has.

*You have to be very careful. They have told them everything about you. I was very upset with [Employment/Training Organisation]. They find a job and send you, and the people where you go know everything about you. I thought my life was supposed to be private. Unless they ask, I don't have to talk. I sat down and they said 'How long have you been inside the criminal justice system?' I looked at him and said 'What do you mean?'*

The last issue with regard to ETE was the poor advice and guidance, or unrealistic information that was supplied to women whilst they were doing courses. It was noted that there was little more frustrating than when you had spent a significant amount of time working towards a qualification, when you had planned your future around a particular trajectory only to have those hopes dashed.

*I did an Affairs and Ticketing Long Distance course in prison and they told me when I got out I could get a job at the airport. I've got all the information at home. They funded the course, the level 1, and I passed it with distinction. Then they funded level 2 as well. They told me I could get a job at the airport.*

*I am now teacher training. I had to fill in an application form to see about my criminal convictions. I can only work with 18 plus. I can't work with under 16s, which is very hard, because I've been a youth worker. I took my three and four year old to work with me. They have said to me that I now can't work with under 16s.*

*I'm at college, but I'm worried because my CRB check hasn't come back yet. What I've done will be on that CRB. I'm frightened I might get kicked out of college ... all I've done will be for nothing*

## **Immigration**

Changes to immigration policy was seen as a real barrier to women where their status was in question. While immigration services investigated a woman's status that woman would be excluded from employment, social services, benefits and, potentially, housing. Not only do these approaches make women even more vulnerable but they also make it nearly impossible to build successful lives.

**Currently 15% of women in prison, 581, are Foreign Nationals.**

MoJ 2013

*I found it difficult when I came out to find a job. I tried to start up my own business with Start Up. The Home Office told me I could go and work. I started my business up and started getting clients. Then, five years later they send me a letter saying I should go and sign again to the immigration centre. I have five children here. My children are British. Now they are telling me I can go home and leave my children. I am going to court now because they are saying I can go and leave my children.*

*If you have immigration issues they shouldn't be used against you to stop you getting job, house ...*

*They spend a lot of money on Immigration ... not to help you*

Beyond the official issues there were more cultural issues that impacted upon women. They could face ostracisation as others did not want to be associated with them or risk coming under the gaze of Immigration or UKBA. There were also levels of stigma that individuals faced at the hands of their cultural peers that further presented problems. This could relate to various forms of exclusion, distinct forms of peer bullying whereby they and their children were not welcome, seen as tainted or dishonoured.

*When I came out I wasn't used to this, not being in the community. I needed help with how to face and cope with it. It was very hard for me.*

*We are the type of people who get stuck. And our community will not help us. You are looked upon as a criminal, even if you just go for one day to prison ... Our community is the worst. People think we are very happy, but we are not. A lot of Asian women have problems*

## **Domestic Violence**

Underpinning all the issues above there was often a situation of hostile and reinforced domestic and/or intimate partner violence. The role that this corrosive experience had on women, their offending, their substance misuse and their mental health cannot be underestimated. A complex matrix of isolation, dependence, destroyed self-worth, negative emotional states and perceived lack of autonomy all

**In 2002, over half the women in prison reported having suffered domestic violence and one in three had experienced sexual abuse.**

Social Exclusion Unit 2002



combined to either fortify, or inculcate, many of the issues described above.

Those who were involved in this project described a great many different experiences of abuse and domestic violence either at the hands of intimate partners or other family members.

*I was a runaway and I ran away from my parent's home. I was getting a lot of abuse from my mum. I hate to say it, because I love her now. She was very violent.*

*There's all different sorts of domestic violence. I never thought I had gone through domestic violence until I compared and listened to other stories. There were some things I could live with, but when it came to other things I would think 'Oh my God, he used to do that!' I have a new partner now, and when the phone rings I tell him who it is. He asks me why I am still doing that, he says I don't have to do that now. It is quite hard to break that cycle*

*For me it was just easier to stay. I didn't even think there was an escape route. I had five kids with this man and I didn't know where to go with them. It is easier to stay in your own house. I didn't have any vision of what my life could look like beyond that. You put your head down and try to manage the situation better so it doesn't flare up.*

The weight of male influences in the lives of women and the continuing negative impact that can have on their situation and perceived action choices is a reality for many of the women who come before the criminal justice system. Often the situation was only resolved by the woman being forced from their home, as this woman describes this often resulted in a great deal of anger directed not only at their abusers but also the agencies who they feel should have aided them.

*Why do I have to move out of my home because of this man? He raped and beat me over fifty times in the space of a year! ... I have moved eight times in 24 months because of this man. Why can't I just go home? I have to take four kinds of painkillers just to get up in the morning to walk, because of the hands of this man. How come I am the one who is having to move out of my home?*

It was further the case that many recounted that they had only fallen foul of the criminal justice system due to the influence of their abusers. This was either because they were offending in extension to their partners offending or had retaliated in some way to an extended period of control, abuse and violent provocation.

*... it has been happening since I was in my teens. Particularly when I was with my ex-husband ... I had a lot of domestic violence, so I had a lot of common assault and I was retaliating to him, but I got charged for it. When you are trying to explain that to someone it is quite difficult. They just see it as assault*

There was a level of mistrust aimed at the criminal justice system when it came to domestic violence. There were concerns with regard to disclosing it, about it being translated into a risk factor and, more disturbingly, about being protected from it. Given the significance of it on the women concerned, their lives and their offending it seemed a major factor is their engagement with, and acceptance of, services which were supposed to aid them.

## Mental Health

A small but significant number stated that they had suffered with, or were continuing to suffer with, mental ill health. A common point was that these issues had often played some part in their offending but were either poorly understood and handled by criminal justice agencies or that contact with those agencies had in fact made things worse for them.

*From a child I had ADHD and dyspraxia and it turned into a personality disorder and schizophrenia now. I am not a dangerous schizophrenic. I'm on medication for it. But if that had got sorted when I was a child, instead of putting me here putting me there, things might not have escalated.*

*I think the experiences I have gone through have made me where I am today, and the struggles that I've faced, and the mental health problems that I've had, and the people that have been in my life. I've gone through some really shitty stuff ... I am not sure they understand that*

*I am meant to be under the mental health team and they don't help me at all.*

*The cost of legal aid, the cost of being taken to prison and all that stuff. It has made my mental health worse.*

## Best Practice

*To have confidence and feel worthy again.*

There were a wide range of good practices designed for women in the criminal justice described by the participants in this study. The key aspects, or best practices, identified by the experiences of the women involved in this project have been analysed. These are the factors which make services effective, supportive, generative, which encourage engagement and actually aid the women who access them.

## Women Only Spaces

Perhaps the first of these related to the creation of safe women only spaces where women could both feel and be safe in and in which they were free to express themselves and reveal their needs without judgement, ridicule or threat.

*I did get some help in Hackney, but there is more out there now for women only. Not that I mind mixed groups, but I do find there are more women's groups where you can talk more openly and you feel safer. I think they've only just come about recently.*

*It is actually nice to have a place to go to that are not going to look at me because I have got a criminal record. Does that make sense? It is women as well. I am not a perpetrator, I'm not a victim, I'm a survivor.*

*That is very important. You are not going to be judged, you are not going to be patronised. You are going to be directed or helped*

*I went in there [prison] fit as a fiddle. I was really independent and outgoing. Now I don't want to go out. I know that sounds weird because I have to. If I didn't have to come here I wouldn't go out of the house.*

This aspect of acceptance, community and welcome was incredibly important for the women of this study. Often entering the criminal justice system rendered women more isolated than they had been in their former lives and as a consequence could often be more vulnerable in terms of physical safety as well as in terms of relapsing and reoffending. Centres where they could come, participate, talk or just be were incredibly important.

### **Trust and Acceptance**

Trust, or being trusted, was in short supply in the criminal justice system for women. There was an expectation that women will fail, relapse and reoffend and when this was communicated to women, either overtly or covertly, then this impacts on the level and quality of their engagement and thus the efficacy of the services that they receive.

*Once they find out you've got a criminal record they don't want to know. They all think you are going to reoffend.*

*They won't trust you. They should give you a chance*

*They don't trust me so ... so why should I put trust in them?*

Trust in their recovery/desistance however enables them to engage with the services that are there and therefore allows them to progress and rebuild successful lives. A major aspect of the above process was the level of acceptance and judgement that felt they received at the hands of professionals. Many described that being constantly judged for past mistakes and vulnerabilities created a negative environment that further destroyed their confidence, compounded their low self-esteem and sense of self-worth as well as reinforced the impacted moral identity that the criminal justice system had imposed upon them. Acceptance and non-judgemental support however created an open and generative environment in which they could grow and regain themselves.

*They are women that understand women. They don't judge you at all ... you can be yourself*

*Not to be judged for your past. If I've made mistakes, we all grow up at some point. I'm 22 now. I made mistakes when I was 16 and 18.*

*She doesn't judge you. I met her when I had lapsed. I met her about starting to volunteer. She asked me to start in a couple of weeks, but I was taking heroin again. I told her I had lapsed and that I would give her a ring when I had sorted myself out.....She thanked me for being so honest. I felt about that big having to say I had lapsed. She was really nice. She rang me to see how I was. That support allowed me to sort myself out. Now I'm doing good ...*

### **Understanding**

Understanding played a big part in whether or not women felt accepted by the services that they engaged with. Many of those, as we have seen in the previous section, felt that they and their experiences had not been understood. Many wished that the professionals with whom they came into contact could comprehend the lives that they had and not impose ideals and misconceptions upon them. This was one of the benefits of the Women Centres where there were people who understand their histories, their experiences, their

vulnerabilities and needs. If this understanding could be extended further in the criminal justice arena then women would receive a better form of justice.

### **Consistency**

Of direct concern for many was the lack of consistency in point of contact with various agencies.

*They keep changing. You go one week and see an officer, you go the next week and see another one*

*If you have a probation officer, the continuity of seeing the same probation officer is so important. My probation officer, if he is away for a few weeks, never refers me to see anybody else. He just doesn't think it will be helpful for me to go and see someone who knows nothing about me*

*I was thrown backwards and forwards like a ball. It was so uncomfortable for me. I was crying and repeating myself*

*I think for women who have experienced domestic violence and rape, they ought to have some sort of marking system on your file, so that you don't have to keep repeating it over and over again*

Services and key workers need to be consistent and not change at regular intervals. The development of a trusting and open relationship with a single professional can be key to a woman's journey of progress. Conversely having to relive trauma over and over and having to formulate a relationship with a new worker at regular intervals actually undermines any benefit that the woman could gain from the service.

### **Practical Aid**

Many felt that though advice and guidance was important it was not always sufficient. At times practical help, support and services are needed. This was a big criticism of probation that they could not actually 'do' anything positive to help. It seemed to many that probation could only act in the negative, or the punitive. They could breach, they could inform social services, they could refer you to others but that they could not practically do anything positive or progressive for the women who needed them.

### **Confidence Building**

Lastly, the forms of interaction that were seen as best practice were those that built confidence and enabled women to rebuild their social networks in a pro-social and generative way. As such social activities, largely organised through the women's centres but occasionally other agencies, were seen as an important part of their rehabilitation. Many women who have entered criminal justice are isolated and have very little access to purposeful/meaningful interactions so social activity, though largely ignored due to the unquantifiable nature of the benefits associated with it, are vital.

*We sit here, all of us, and we never think 'What has she done?' We feel like we are a family. Outside this place we meet. We have coffee or we have a drink. I have a*

*dinner party sometimes in my house and we get together to have a nice meal. We come to film club, we love film club here*

*I went back to school. My mum said I wouldn't make anything of myself, but she went to my graduation three years ago when I got my masters degree. That was thank God to [name of Women's Centre]*

*I was working with the Homeless in [charitable organisation], and thank God, they were my saviours. I was on the floor. I was homeless and alone ... they helped me get back.*

*This is something you need to do a lot, especially being Asian. Asian women in the community are so scared to talk about anything. We all get into trouble, we all get into prison, we all come out. The family will not accept you, no matter what. We are a family problem. We can come here. We go out and we keep in contact.*

The benefits of these groups and centres are that they enable women to rebuild their confidence in safe and enabling ways. Many women can often be rendered mute and vulnerable by their histories and experiences of criminal justice.

*It makes me feel like I'm nothing. I've never been anything anyway. I've never really done anything that I wanted to step up and do in life. I've had a lot of things that I wanted to do and I've just not done them.*

*I need help with my confidence and knowing when to say no and mean no. And not to give in to my son.*

*Confidence to be able to speak out and voice my opinions, without thinking I am making people feel bad or upsetting somebody.*

It is essential that activities, programmes and services designed to help women build their self-confidence, esteem and assertiveness in order to ameliorate these negative effects.

*Groups that make you feel better about yourself, and that help you to speak up for yourself, to get back your confidence and your self esteem. Just make you feel like a proper human being and that you're worth something.*

*Somebody to talk with and laugh with. To be open about my problems. If you want to talk to someone about family problems, husband problems, we can talk about everything here. They tell you to be strong. Power to women. This is something I never knew before.*

*.....you just do your time for your crime, you don't do any work on anything. You don't do any work on yourself*

*I have found my voice. I know when is the right time to speak and how to speak. Sometimes it can come across as harsh, but I think if I don't come across like that I am going to be trampled on all over again. I did the self esteem course here and that helped me*

*Getting people involved in more community related projects and giving them support etc. Things that will build people who, for some reason have, become involved in*

*criminal activity. Particularly if it is quite a minor thing, to support them and give them confidence to move on.*

## **Co-production Event**

The co-production event was held in London on the 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013. The event was based upon an 'Open Space' format which is designed to be a flexible model for holding meetings or conducting workshops and is based on self-organisation. The event was attended by over sixty people, of which seventeen were women who had been affected by contact with the criminal justice system. The rest comprised criminal justice practitioners and commissioners from both private, and public, sectors, third sector and specialist organisations, representatives from funding bodies.

Open Space is a consultation model for conducting workshops in an informal and organic manner. This process allows service users to work together with service providers and decision makers and develop a set of recommendations which can be implemented to improve their policy and service development and delivery. The flexible model for conducting workshops that is provided by Open Space is ideal for the emergence of previously unheard voices. The format helps all participants to speak on an equal footing and allows everyone to contribute as much or as little as they like. The approach is ideal for addressing complex issues, especially where there are divergent viewpoints. Most importantly, the topics discussed are what matter most to the people there on the day and the recommendations that emerge at the end have been formulated and prioritised by the group as a whole.

Open Space, is an interactive and generative model that is designed to encourage participation and equality of engagement that has been used successfully in a range of contexts, in varying scales by large companies, local government and community activists. Open Space is particularly suited to engaging with people who are not used to traditional meetings.

There is no pre-set agenda in Open Space - the discussion revolves around what the people attending want to speak about. Open Space events focus on one central question. In this instance it was:

**What do we need to do more of in order to reduce reoffending by women?**

Participants were invited to state the specific issues and topics they wished to discuss in relation to this question. Each point was then sorted into a category of concern (e.g. women's centres, housing, peer mentors, etc) and the group moved into break out areas. Each break out area focused on one of the categories of concern and the group worked together to create practical recommendations in response to the points that were raised. Participants were encouraged to move between groups ("The Law of Two Feet") until everyone had said everything they wanted to say in all of the categories. The recommendations from each group were then produced. (see Appendix A).

The members of the conference were each given ten 'votes' to place and were invited to vote on the recommendations.

The top two recommendations were:

- The establishment of a dedicated Women's Centre in every community which can supply information and services
- Education and training for magistrates, judges and other criminal justice practitioners aimed at raising awareness and understanding of the very specific needs of women entering the Criminal Justice System – especially around intimate partner and domestic violence .

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are those that received the most votes. This is what the 'Experts by Experience' believe will make the biggest difference for women in the Criminal Justice System, and those at risk of entering the Criminal Justice system.

- The establishment of a dedicated Women's Centre in every community which can supply information and services
- Education and training for magistrates, judges and other criminal justice practitioners aimed at raising awareness and understanding of the very specific needs of women entering the Criminal Justice System – especially around intimate partner and domestic violence .
- Recruiting and employing women with first-hand experience of Criminal Justice to advise and assist in the local Transforming Rehabilitation programmes.
- The introduction of advocates and peer advisors who can provide information and sign-post agencies who can aid women who have issues with Social Services.
- For the new National Probation Service as well as local providers to expand, and introduce through the gate, peer-to-peer mentoring to aid resettlement and assist in reducing reoffending
- Extending peer-to-peer mentoring to working with people in custody especially in First Night Centres and during Induction and pre-release periods
- Improved ETE opportunities for women that have real world value and develop a wider range of dedicated links with employment agencies as well as colleges and other training outlets.
- A dedicated Foreign National Service User group with access to senior practitioners and involving relevant Government officials

*A very important thing that should be changed is, when you are coming out of prison, someone has to sit with you properly arrange what you can do outside, where you can get help. To talk to you individually, one to one, and make sure that when you come out that you get the help you need*

## Appendix A

The full list of proposals and recommendations that arose from the event is as follows:

- More smaller organisations for females to access
- Peer support for education
- More information made available about services for women
- Take away the label of the criminal justice system and make IT services available for women and children
- Greater linkage between prisons and community
- Prison to promote the course that are there for prisoners to do
- More organisations should assist in disclosure of criminal conviction
- Remove the 'tick box' from job applications
- Job centre plus to have peer support workers meeting women claiming for the first time
- Extend the opening hours of women's centres to include evenings and weekends
- Local agencies should work more in partnership and share information, service users should be at the heart
- Ensure services that are available are of good quality, should be measured by service users
- There should be a lot more provision when getting released from custody
- We should stop looking at funding and look closer at the persons needs
- Independent support workers for women to advise around court processes
- More preventative work to be done with young people
- Fully funded courses from start to finish
- Better advertising of education and training opportunities – not just word of mouth
- Prisons to ROTL out to nearby colleges
- To create a better partnership with local employers/prisons
- More ex-service users going into schools
- Better safeguarding arrangements for children at risk of offending
- Increased training specifically drug and alcohol and cultural awareness for professionals



- Improve family/child specific visiting arrangements in prison
- Less payments by results
- More half way houses which would get implemented into sentence plan, use as a stepping stone on to education/stability
- Impact on children to be taken more into account in sentencing
- To develop pathways of communication between prison, probation, social services etc.
- Increased communication and training for teachers and parents around children at risk of offending
- More preventative services for women
- Applications for courses should be more user friendly
- Peer mentoring to aid ETE awareness and support to drive forward
- More women specific substance misuse services
- To advertise support for parents with substance misuse more widely
- Prison should help offenders to feel empowered by making their own personal choices
- Inform prisoners about more laws and about their rights
- Probation to be more open and honest
- Police need training about women offenders
- Publicise women specific support
- Women specific support offered at first conviction
- More peer mentors providing through the gate services
- Social workers need more training around substance misuse
- More ex – service users to work in female specific substance misuse services
- Known abusive partners to be legally not allowed in court with women when appearing themselves
- Somewhere to stay on release
- A review to the court to see the progress that has been made
- Healthcare in prisons need women GPs and well women clinics

- Drugs services should be allowed to come out and check the house to see if children are at risk instead of automatically contacting social services. If all is well then social services should not be involved.
- More courses available for all ages
- Criteria for education and training courses need to be wider
- Standardisation across the whole prison estate
- National provision of housing and accommodation and sharing of information between agencies
- Run courses about law for prisoners (legal aid cuts)
- Educate employers and authorities including prison officers and service users should be a part of that
- Women need an advocate when dealing with social services
- Info needed about rights of women when being asked to handover children
- College places should be in place on release
- More planning before release
- Better communication between courts and police about known domestic violence perpetrators
- If women and abusive partner are appearing as co – dependents, they should be separate
- Ex – service users to work in social services
- Social services to automatically refer women service users to women’s centres for support
- Need a cultural shift admiring people who deal with problems openly
- Open access for service user to all files held on them
- Centre for women’s excellence for ETE
- Capacity building for existing women’s centres
- Educate job centre plus on criminal record and discrimination
- More information on loans should be promoted for all to see
- Women’s centre in every community
- Probation to expand peer mentoring to assist in the reduction of reoffending

- Extending peer mentoring to working with people in custody and waiting for them when person arrives in prison for the first time
- Recruiting ex service users to assist in the transforming rehabilitation programme
- Foreign national service user group to be heard by government
- More funding for women's centres
- Educate magistrates, awareness raising as part of their training to understand the needs of women
- Ensure staff within agencies are trained and understand the needs of women service users

## Women's Breakout

### Chances to Change - New Directions for Criminal Justice

Women's Breakout is a national umbrella organisation that represents 51 organisations working with women who have offended and those who are at risk of offending. Its vision is to see gender specific approaches integrated into mainstream rehabilitation provision thereby contributing to a significant reduction in the number of women in custody and a reduction in the number of those coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

Our member organisations have extensive track records in providing services to women who have offended and those at risk of offending. With a proven successful model, the women's community projects provide services to women offenders across England and Wales, in parallel to a similar model to the provision to other women.

Women's Breakout holds a unique position in providing a national, collective voice for the women who are working to support other women who are in, or at risk of entering, the Criminal Justice System; and also for providing a collective voice of those women who are 'exerts by experience' in respect of the Criminal Justice System. And it is this that will be vital to ensuring that services that work for women and reflect their real lived in experiences and needs are developed, offered and maintained as the Criminal justice System goes through its latest and future transformation agendas.

## User Voice

*You can't just give up on your life because you've got a criminal record.*

User Voice is unique because its work is led and delivered by ex-offenders. It exists to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in and around the criminal justice system to ensure that practitioners and policy-makers hear their voices. Its work aims to deliver a powerful rehabilitation experience for offenders, better criminal justice services and institutions, and more effective policy.

The entrenched exclusion of some of the people User Voice works with can be a huge obstacle to service providers. The involvement of ex-offenders and those in effective desistance has many benefits, not least of which is the power of a narrative of success; working with those who have shared experience and an implicit understanding can be a powerful way of motivating people who often have little self-belief that they can overcome the barriers they face. All the work User Voice has done suggests offenders want to talk to people who have 'walked in their shoes', which is why all the frontline staff who would be utilised for this project would be both women and ex-offenders with the lived experience of the criminal justice services under review.