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Problem-Solving Courts for Women

A review of the Evidence



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August 2025

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Supporting the voluntary sector
working in the criminal justice system

About the authors



Dr Sarah Waite is a Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University who specialises in penology and gender-responsive criminal justice. Her research focuses on gendered dynamics of staff-prisoner dynamics, prison officer development, and innovative justice approaches for women, including her current work on Problem-Solving Courts for women. She has collaborated with HMPPS, Unlocked Graduates, and the Howard League for Penal Reform on research, education, and knowledge exchange initiatives. Sarah is passionate about creative, participatory, and person-centred methodologies. She serves as a trustee of Transform Justice and is dedicated to integrating research, practice, and lived experience in efforts to reform the criminal legal system.



Dr Alexandria Bradley is a Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University and a trauma specialist who has extensive experience working, researching and teaching in prisons. Alexandria has led evaluations of trauma-responsive programmes and works on collaborative research projects. Alexandria is currently involved in co-lead research projects. The first, alongside Dr Sarah Waite, involves an evaluation of Greater Manchester's Problem-Solving Court for Women. The second project is a long-term partnership with Sofia Buncy, DL, MBE and Dr Sarah Goodwin, to explore culturally informed support provision for Muslim women who are involved in the justice system. Alexandria has also translated her research into a successful working with Trauma Quality Mark, which is offered by One Small Thing nationally to services who are working relationally with people who have experienced trauma.

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Problem-Solving Courts for Women

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Why read this evidence review?

This evidence review provides an in-depth look at women's problem solving courts (WPSC) which are endorsed by the Sentencing Review as an important component in preventing the unnecessary incarceration of women. Dr Sarah Waite and Dr Alexandria Bradley review the evidence base – to which they are significant contributors –and cover a number of key issues:

- The broader context of problem-solving courts internationally and in the UK?
- The evolution and current state of WPSC in the UK
- The critical success factors for the design and delivery of WPSC which support women, to help them to address their needs and move away from the criminal justice system.

The review contains much concrete advice on best practice for voluntary sector organisations looking to get involved in WPSC.



Why Focus on Women's Problem-Solving Courts?

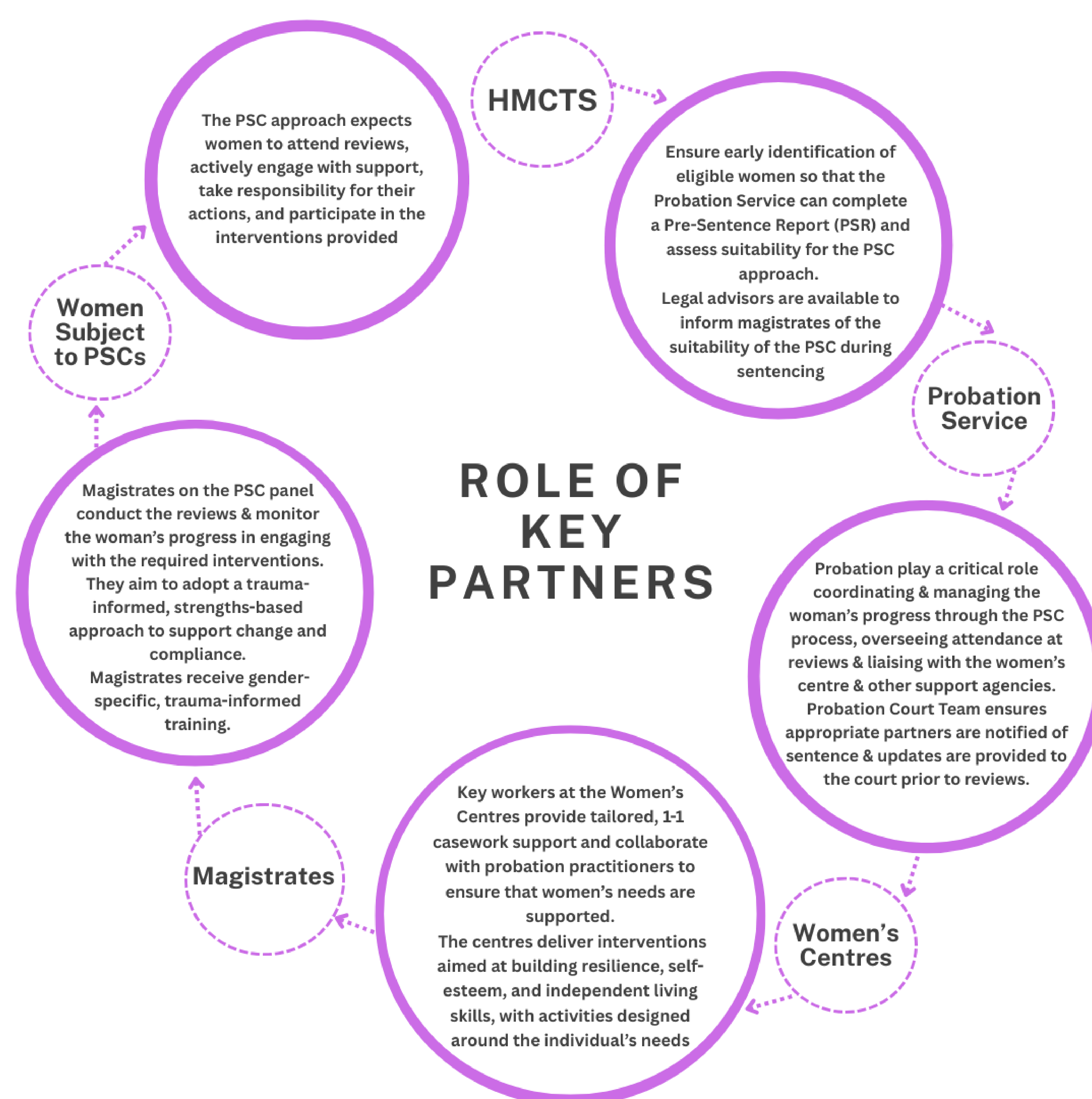
There have been long standing calls to support the distinctive and intersectional needs of women criminalised by the state (Corston, 2007; Prison Reform Trust, 2017). Compared to men, women are more likely to be care experienced, suffer from mental and physical ill-health, report substance use problems, be sole carers for children and be victims of abuse (Masson and Booth, 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2024). Recognition of the needs of women have seen gender-responsive approaches embedded within policy documents such as the Female Offender Strategy (Ministry of Justice (MOJ), 2018), Women's Policy Framework (MOJ, 2021) and The Concordat on Women in or at risk of contact with the Criminal Justice System (MOJ, 2020).

The Women's Budget Group (2020) suggests that around £1.7 billion per year is spent directly on criminalising women. Multi-agency, 'whole system' approaches have shown particular promise when working with women (Kinsella et al., 2018) and there has been growing interest in the use of Women's Problem-Solving Courts (WPSCs) to address the underlying causes of the criminalisation of women and divert women from custody. The recent Independent Sentencing Review recommended the expansion of specialised PSCs to address prolific offending and recognised the importance of gender-responsive provision (Gauke, 2025). Given these developments, this evidence review has been written for voluntary sector organisations who are thinking about getting involved in a WPSC. It draws together the latest research and insights to help organisations understand best practice, what challenges to be aware of, and what meaningful involvement can look like.

What are Women's Problem-Solving Courts?

Problem-solving courts gained popularity in the US in the 1980s and are underpinned by ideas of rehabilitation, therapeutic jurisprudence and problem-oriented policing (Centre for Justice Innovation, 2021). The idea behind them is to have the court at the centre of the monitoring and multi-agency process, acting as an orchestrator of the support and interventions women receive whilst also promoting compliance. Currently, there are four models of WPSCs across the UK (Armstrong and Minson, 2025). These include the longstanding Greater Manchester model, established in 2014 (Deacon, 2023), and the Intensive Supervision Court for women in Birmingham, which is part of a statutory Ministry of Justice pilot, as well as a WPSC in Aberdeen and the Female 'Offenders' Court in Glasgow. Whilst there is variation between each model, including the use of Magistrates or Judges and whether non-attendance is breachable (see Armstrong and Minson, 2025 for detail on national and international models), they have common operational characteristics. These include monitoring by the judiciary, multi-agency collaboration involving HM Probation Service and third sector organisations, tailored reviews of women's progress, and intensive support. Underpinning WPSC models, is an emphasis on gender-responsive working, promoting women's participation and relational practice.

Figure 1: Key stakeholders in Greater Manchester PSC model (Bradley and Waite, 2025)



What Does the Evidence Say?

Internationally, drug courts have formed the most common focus for PSCs, with evaluations demonstrating their effectiveness in reducing reoffending and improving well-being (Rossman et al., 2011; Ward, 2014). In the UK, specialist domestic violence courts were the focus of the first PSC models in the adult criminal legal system, quickly followed by the development of family drug and alcohol courts (CPS, 2014). There are fewer evaluative and long-term studies of PSCs in the UK, and international studies are unhelpful in assessing impact due to cultural and contextual variation (MOJ, 2010). Of the studies that have been conducted, positive results include increased partnership working, increases in compliance, improved victim satisfaction and confidence in the system, and cost efficiency (Crown Prosecution Service, 2007; Pakes and Winstone, 2010; Harwin et al., 2011; Centre for Justice Innovation, 2022). Research has also found challenges in PSC models, including the motivations of stakeholders involved in the process and the ability of staff to build rapport with people going through the process (Kawalek, 2021).

Evidence on the operation and impact of WPSCs in the UK is limited and the importance of gender-informed research has been highlighted (Birkett, 2021). Emerging insights show there is data to suggest the Greater

Manchester Whole Systems Approach is linked to reductions in reconviction rates following a one year follow up period (Kinsella et al., 2018). This shows the strengths of multi-agency working but as the WPSC pathway only represented 6% of the referrals in this study, it is difficult to draw conclusions on the role of the WPSC. This evaluation did show staff felt the court had a strong multi-agency commitment, though some did raise concerns about the potential for 'up tariffing'¹. Analysis at systems level has shown that WPSCs work well when there is continuity of the judiciary, collaboration, opportunities for meaningful progress and when the holistic support of women is prioritised (Armstrong and Minson, 2025; Minson et al., 2025). Early findings from the ongoing process evaluation of ISCs also indicate promise in the model's potential to strengthen collaboration (MOJ, 2024). However, evidence from the perspectives of women experiencing the model is lacking. Courtroom processes and spaces can be stigmatising and disempowering for women and girls (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Darley and Waite, 2025). Caution and consideration is also needed in regard to the operational challenges of under-resourced statutory and third sector services at national and regional level, and the challenges arising from intersectional marginalisation with some evidence showing Black, Asian and minoritised women may be underrepresented in accessing these services (Kinsella et al., 2018; Lightowlers and Benefer, 2022; Padmanabhan, 2025).

Learning from Women's Experiences

Gender-responsivity is about underpinning and centering women's experiences throughout the design and delivery of service provision. Based on our own research (Bradley and Waite, 2025) involving court observations and interviews with women, magistrates and probation staff, we have identified several ways in which WPSC models might achieve best practice.

1. Trauma Sensitive and Comfortable Environments

"Like go in a room like say ages before the...don't do it in the Courts, do it in a room where they're sat there where it's a bit more comfortable...I reckon if they done it in a different way it would be a lot easier for people to...do you know what I mean cooperate and stuff, but it would be more easier like. When it is more comfortable like us [Women's Centre], it's more comfortable isn't it?" Karen

Women often have a wide range of disempowering, stigmatising and harmful experiences of legal spaces. Court spaces are not trauma-informed by design and WPSCs would be more suited to the needs of women if they were to take place in a neutral community setting. This would encourage open dialogue, safety, and trust in the process. Review panel members should be consistent and review reports should avoid offence focused language and discussion. To promote a culture of gender-responsive, relational practice, all WPSC staff, including judiciary, should undergo regular training and undertake critical reflection as a structured and formalised process to ensure depth and development of practice. Crucially, WPSCs should be appropriately resourced to reflect the level of specialism required to provide trauma sensitive and comfortable environments that consider the impact of legal spaces, review reports and the importance of reflective, gender-responsive relational practice.

2. Ownership, Visibility and Participation

“Do you know what I’d love to do as well me is like stand up in front of someone or like people who are in my situation and maybe in a couple of years, when I’m like free of everything. Me to stand up and like, be like this is what I went through, and this is what I come off and do you know I got through my court case, and I did my Women’s Problem Solving and everything...” Lucy

Women want ownership, visibility and participation in processes that are imposed on them. WPSC models should ensure collaboration with women subject to reviews at each stage in the process, ensuring women have time and space for meaningful participation. WPSCs would benefit significantly from embedding lived experience expertise throughout their design, implementation and operation. This insight would promote gender-responsivity in WPSC models, offering opportunities to learn from women and understand how WPSCs, and the support they aim to provide, can be most meaningful and effective. Women with experience of being criminalised should be employed to be involved in the recruitment of all staff to WPSC panels, sit as members of WPSCs and provide support and peer mentorship to women engaged in the WPSC process. Evidence shows peer mentorship acts as an effective bridge to wider services, enhances engagement with supervision, and supports women’s access to housing, health, and emotional wellbeing through trusted, lived experience-informed relationships (Buck, 2021; Clinks 2021). Additionally, judiciary and other WPSC staff who do not work closely with women would benefit from education and training delivered by women with lived experience of the criminal justice system. This would ensure approaches are informed, gender-responsive, and grounded in women’s social realities.

Caution: while participatory models are growing across criminal justice, care needs to be taken to ensure participatory processes are ethical and not tokenistic. Several good practice guides are available, including Clinks (2016).

3. Clear and Meaningful Communication

“It’s took me three or four, it’s took me three appointments to have actually understood what it’s about.” Joanne

Care and attention should be given to ensure clear, meaningful, gender-responsive communication throughout WPSC processes. Women need clear and accessible information regarding expectations throughout the process. Consideration should be given to the timing of communication, ensuring women have space to digest information, particularly when this is given pre-sentence. WPSCs should use person-centred language, being mindful that the words/labels used can significantly influence how women experience support (e.g., ‘Offender’, ‘vulnerable’). Language that reinforces shame, stigma, or stereotypes can undermine trust and engagement with women (Rutter and Barr, 2021; Waite and Darley, 2025). Review reports should be forward looking and not refer back to offences to promote constructive and developmental discussions. One of the great strengths of WPSCs is the opportunity for praise from the judiciary, which women often experience as validating. However, this is not

a universal experience, and some women can feel patronised. Superficial praise and repetitive conversations should be avoided to enhance women's perceptions of the purpose and worth of review discussions. These gender-responsive practices emphasise the importance of dignity, voice and positive relationships in WPSCs.

4. Advocacy and Long-Term Support

"I need help, and you know yourself I've needed the help and I've needed the help for years, I don't think. Like mental health teams and everything, I think they just like...I feel like...apart from Probation and the Court and everything these have helped me the most. I think I've been let down by the social services. I feel like I've been let down by mental health teams, I feel like I've been let down by quite a lot of people in professional sides... to be honest, I'll tell you they let me down, do you know they're the biggest part of letting me down in my life and not, but with Probation and the Courts it's been different, they're asking you is "what professional help do you need... take what you need" and that's where the biggest part of the impact has come from." Lucy

Effective advocacy and long-term support are crucial to best-practice. For many women in our research, engagement hinged on the quality of support provided by probation and women's centres. Women's centres, were able to create safe, non-judgemental spaces that promoted trust, continuity, and a sense of connection often missing from statutory provision. They hosted some WPSC reviews online, offering accessible, supportive environments for women who found it difficult to travel to court, further removing barriers to engagement. Crucially, in partnership with HM Probation Service, women's centres were positioned to deliver holistic, wraparound support and reduced the sense of surveillance women often associate with criminal justice involvement. Women's centres were able to provide integral support and signposting in areas such as housing, mental health, domestic abuse and substance use. This ensured women felt supported beyond the court process and makes it more likely that they can sustain positive change. To ensure this work continues, sustainable funding and resourcing of women's centres is essential.

Conclusion

WPSCs represent a promising, though still developing, approach to gender-responsive justice. By aiming to address underlying drivers of criminalisation, WPSCs offer the opportunity for meaningful intervention and long-term support. The success of WPSCs relies heavily on its delivery; environments must be gender-responsive and trauma-informed, women's voices meaningfully included, and multi-agency partnerships effective. Women's centres play a particularly vital role in bridging gaps between statutory services and women's lived realities, offering consistent, relational support that enhances engagement and outcomes. Operationally, WPSCs must focus on gender-responsivity, inclusion, and systemic change, while avoiding the pitfalls of surveillance, up-tariffing and superficial engagement. Sustainable investment is required to ensure that the infrastructure around WPSCs, particularly community-based support, can continue to meet the needs of women.

For voluntary sector organisations seeking to engage in WPSCs, key areas of focus should include

creating and supporting trauma-sensitive and comfortable environments that feel safe and non-stigmatising, ensuring women's lived experience is central to design and delivery, prioritising clear, person-centred communication and offering long-term holistic support that extends beyond the court process. These foundations are critical to building gender-responsive WPSC models.

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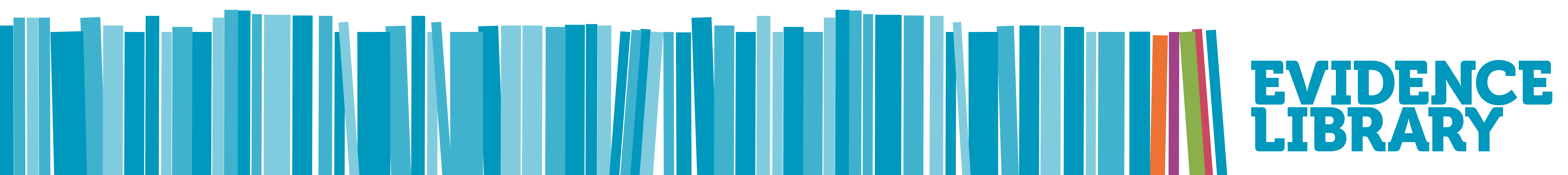
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