

## **CHALLENGES OF GENDER-RESPONSIVITY IN PROBATION WORK WITH WOMEN SERVICE USERS**

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### ***Abstract***

This article reports on research into the supervision of women probationers in England. It is contextualised through a review of the literature on good practice, with particular focus on Corston's (2007) recommendations and subsequent guidance documents and through discussion of the organisational context. The research took place during a period of substantial change and corresponding uncertainty within the probation service, prior to and during the implementation process of Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) which took place between January 2014 and February 2015. Drawing on qualitative data derived from extensive analysis of videos of supervision sessions and interviews with probation workers and women probationers, the research highlights the importance and extent of practitioner awareness of gender-responsivity issues. These are of particular relevance where women probationers have experienced extensive victimisation. The article considers implications for probation practice, emphasising the importance of responsivity to women probationers, and discusses the place of and attitudes towards women-only provision. Specific organisational barriers to implementation of a gender-responsive approach in the short and long-term are explored against the backdrop of the TR initiative.

### ***Keywords***

gender-responsive; probation; women service users; victimisation awareness; trauma

## Introduction

Criminal offences by women have traditionally been far fewer than those by men, and the treatment of women within the criminal justice system has been given relatively little attention. However, since the start of the twenty-first century, gender-responsivity in the justice system has been identified as a concern within governmental and pressure group publications, particularly in terms of probation work with women. In the UK, the Corston Report (2007), a review of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system, has been of special importance, and subsequent practitioner guidance has provided much-needed constructive information. In this article practitioners' familiarity with the issues is explored, de-constructing specific areas which apply especially to women – practitioner/probationer relationships, women-only environments and their significance for victimisation/trauma work. There is examination of the operationalisation of recommendations and guidance from significant documents within probation and voluntary agencies. This article considers how widely gender-responsive issues were known and acknowledged, and whether an emphasis was placed on creating a suitable environment for victimisation disclosures within the context of statutory probation supervision.

## Terminology

Woman probationer (WP) or woman service user (WSU) is used to denote all those subject to a statutory order – either a community order or licence. Officers with a formal probation qualification are referred to as probation officers (POs) and those without this qualification (although they may possess substantial experience and other qualifications) are referred to as probation service officers (PSOs). Probation trusts managed all these public service probation workers prior to 2015. Practitioners within the holistic women's centres (HWCs) are called women's centre workers (WCWs), and were working in partnership with the trusts. Trusts were disbanded under Transforming Rehabilitation (TR), with the service splitting into 70% privatised community rehabilitation companies (CRCs) and the still public but much-reduced National Probation Service (NPS).

## The context for women probationers

This research period took place prior to the introduction of the TR initiative, which accelerated neo-liberal marketisation moves, removing state responsibility and financial backing and prioritising profit and simplified, formulaic approaches (Walker, Annison and Beckett, 2019). The Corston Report (2007), by way of contrast, had emphasised the complexity of WSUs' needs. Although these ideas had been expressed before,<sup>1</sup> Corston's review gained standing and publicity which was previously lacking. The proposals were taken forward through probation worker guidance documents: *The offender management guide to working with women offenders* (NOMS, 2008), followed by *A distinct approach: a guide to working with women offenders* (MoJ, 2012) and *Working with women offenders* (NOMS, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> The Women's Offending Reduction Programme (2004) and the Equality Act 2006 were its precursors, but many of the issues raised by the review had also been put forward by academics such as Carlen, Gelsthorpe and Worrall since the 1980s and 1990s (Gelsthorpe, Sharpe and Roberts, 2007).

One of the central tenets of Corston's review is relationality, involving trusting, consistent practitioner/WP interaction, which is highlighted as significant for many women. Investing time and energy at the start of the Order to promote a positive relationship involves clarifying the requirements and making sure they are realistic (NOMS, 2017). 'Role clarification' helps service users to understand their part in the supervision process, the expectations of the worker, and the boundaries set by the organisation (Trotter, 1999:17-18). In establishing relationships with WPs, Plechowicz (2009) citing Ward, Day, Howell and Birgden (2004), argues that it is practitioners' personal characteristics and attachment styles that are important, not formal training, which, it is claimed, has virtually no impact on establishing positive relationships. Sheehan (2011) too found that the most significant issue for WPs was the 'relationship' with staff. McDermott (2013:441) notes in her study that women appreciated practitioners 'who treated them with respect and showed genuine interest in their lives', whilst Sheehan (2011:90) emphasises that interventions need to be 'strengths-based and promote skill-building'. In accredited programme groupwork, Martin, Kautt and Gelsthorpe (2009), cited by Gelsthorpe and Wright (2015), found that men leaned towards instrumental compliance, when they acknowledged the negative consequences of non-compliance; contrastingly, women tended to accomplish normative compliance involving social bonds, good attachment and acceptance of the probation worker's legitimacy, participating because they found it personally worthwhile.

Dominey's (2016) contention is that without a facilitative foundation, supervision will not be perceived as either meaningful or helpful, but barriers to establishing strong relationships are accentuated by the organisational changes arising from TR. Dominey's (2016) research on fragmentation within probation discusses the problems that occur from inconsistency, when people 'have to keep explaining themselves to new people' and adjusting to probation officers' differing *modus operandi* (Dominey, 2016:137). During the lead-in to TR, many workers, including middle and senior managers, resigned or were reassigned roles (Walker, Annison and Beckett, 2019) resulting in constant changes of practitioner.

Changes of officer or the ending of an Order may seriously affect the supervisory relationship. On the day the Order finishes, support from probation stops abruptly; this can leave individuals, especially those with attachment issues, feeling abandoned (Plechowicz, 2009). The significance of attachment issues for female offenders is stressed because past deprivation, neglect and abuse frequently lead to chaotic and destructive relationships in adulthood. Psychotherapeutic literature supports a focus on preparation for the final stage of the therapeutic alliance, a time for review and transformation (Etherington and Bridges, 2011). Recommendations for successful closures are also evident in the guidance literature (MoJ, 2012), suggesting considerable skill is needed to encourage the person to separate themselves from justice services and move towards local community provision. The guidance stipulates that endings should be on the agenda from the first interview, with reminders throughout the supervision process. Introducing women to 'mainstream services' is advocated by acting as a 'bridge' to the community 'and the next stage of her life' (MoJ, 2012:34).

Barriers to successful relationships may exist beyond the probation practitioner's immediate control when unconscious discriminations emerge. Double deviance occurs when women are judged, not purely on their offending but on the perceived absence of stereotypical female and maternal characteristics, so that legitimacy and a sense of justice are lost (Heidensohn and Silvestri, 2012:351). Although this concept is generally cited in research on sentencers, other studies have shown that professionals such as police, prison officers, social workers and probation workers also react adversely where there are gender and racial stereotypes (Chigwada-Bailey, 2003; Lloyd, 1995; Phoenix, 2012). Frequently, it is substance-misusing women with children or those seen as 'unladylike teenagers' who fall into this category (Hudson, 2002). Women's voices, even those of influential women, are traditionally not given prominence. Examples of this are evident at other strata of the criminal justice system and society in general. Corston's (2007) recommendations were side-lined, and magistrates and judges still fail to recognise women's victimisation issues in sentencing decisions (Halliday and Hurst, 2017). Experiences of vulnerable women are frequently those of being directly or indirectly silenced, making them invisible and powerless through domestic physical or psychological violence (Barlow, 2015).

Awareness of these issues has established a need for gender-sensitive responses. Bloom, Owen and Covington (2003), cited by Covington (2008:378), explain 'gender-responsive principles' as firstly, acceptance of gender as important and secondly, the establishment of spaces where women can feel safe and be treated with dignity. The term is also implicit in Corston's (2007:16,79) notion of 'a distinct, radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach'. Covington (2008) does not specifically advocate an all-woman environment, but the implications of her argument point to this conclusion. A 'calm', accepting environment is considered essential but does not blend well with some of the controlling, punitive and confrontative approaches in criminal justice agencies. Comments and 'looks' directed towards women by male offenders in mixed environments, such as the courts, accredited programmes and in waiting rooms, can also provoke discomfort (Worrall, 2002).

Cherry observes that a feminist perspective would favour avoidance of male supervisors for WPs, on the grounds that they represent reminders of past oppressive relationships. It is assumed that women will find it easier to be open about abusive experiences with another woman, and that two women will have 'a shared perspective on the experience of being a woman in a male dominated society' (Cherry, 2005:133). Alternatively, Cherry (2005) points out that there is an argument for male supervisors to model alternative ways of treating women. Within Gelsthorpe, Sharpe and Roberts' (2007:8) models of provision lies the goal of women-only spaces, offering 'a sense of community and to enable staff to develop expertise in work with women'. Other research, as well as the guidance documents, advises that many women prefer all-female environments to generate trusting relationships (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007). The structural challenge for probation workers is that criminal justice agencies are not set up this way. All-women settings are strongly encouraged in Gelsthorpe et al.'s (2007:28) report on community provision for women, but the report also recognises that 'women-only provision' is politically and logistically contentious, not being considered financially viable. The

argument has always been around economies of scale: that there are not enough women to justify women-only services. Mawby and Worrall (2013) state that women practitioners make up over 70% of the probation workforce. This seems to indicate that female supervisors might easily be made available, but female staff may not always be present in the courts or community payback (Goldhill, 2018). There is also the question of women's heterogeneity, whereby other diversity considerations – of class, ethnicity and values – are influential in forging positive relationships or, alternatively, preventing them becoming established.

Groupwork is another area where women are still given requirements as part of their community sentences. Aside from having to associate with predatory men, groupwork sessions have been designed for male offenders (Worrall, 2004). It is now known that women's response to group interventions consists of a 'collaborative rather than competitive' learning style (Gelsthorpe et al, 2007:28). This would differ from approaches adopted for men, although these are not always effective for men either (Hughes, 2017). Reasons for women's offending are not the same as for men: the seriousness of offending is generally far less, women's role within the family context is usually more central (Sharpe, 2016) and there are women's interconnecting problems of victimisation, substance misuse and mental/physical health (Corston, 2007). Roberts (2002) outlines the importance of 'a safe woman only environment', preferring all-women groupwork to one-to-one work 'because women work well in groups' and childcare facilities, such as a crèche, can be made easily accessible (Roberts, 2002:116). Like Corston, Roberts proposes that ideally women's programmes should be closely connected to an outside agency, such as the HWCs, where life skills can be incorporated. HWCs offer an alternative model with a better staff/WP ratio than in probation and more in-built worker supports (Plechowicz, 2015).

## **Methods**

The aim of the project was to investigate the process of supervision for women in the community, looking in detail at the communications between the pairings of practitioner/WSU against the backdrop of wider organisational, political and societal issues emanating from the TR implementation. Data for this article derive from a larger-scale study for PhD research (Goldhill, 2018). Research took place in two probation areas in the South of England over a period of four years (2011-2015). Participants came from XPT (X probation trust), consisting of B town (a city), C town (a large town) and W and E towns (both small towns). The other area, ZPT (Z probation trust) consisted of M town (a large town), where groupwork was observed, but most participants came from T town (a small town).

An ethnographic approach was taken, through participant observation paying attention to individuals' behaviours and narratives in day-to-day, natural situations 'in the field' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:3). The documentary sources (Corston's review and the guidance papers) outlined above 'are crucially involved in social activities' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:121) and integral to this ethnographic analysis. Direct fieldwork participant observations took place over the research period (2011-2015), involving 65 pages of field notes. Participant observation involved shadowing practitioners in the office

and on home visits, attending formal meetings (such as groupwork review sessions with probation facilitators), and informal interviews with Rita, the manager of Empower. The research takes an innovative approach, combining data from participant observation, video observations of probation supervision sessions and semi-structured research interviews with practitioners and WPs. Purposive sampling was used, whereby information-rich cases were chosen to produce detailed, comprehensive data (Wengraf, 2001). All together, 33 supervision sessions were videoed lasting between 20 minutes and 1 hour, 7 of which were part of the pilot study. These were followed up in all cases with research interviews involving 13 probation workers (including two WCWs) and 13 WPs. The spread of WP ages was from 18 to the mid-50s, with three women identifying as BME, one as lesbian and one as a transgender woman. All of the women had experienced abuse or victimisation at different points in their life and exhibited mental health or substance misuse difficulties. The observed practitioners were female; although this was not planned, it might be expected in an organisation where most main-grade staff are female. Also included are responses to a post-fieldwork follow-up email to all practitioners in November 2015. Data were explored using ethnographic, case study and discourse analysis techniques with the intention of examining how POs manage the supervision process and the responses produced by their efforts. As probation supervision is accomplished through discourse, permeated with emotional and intimate concerns, as well as having its own history and being subject to shifting political influences, these approaches provided appropriate detail. Approval was obtained from the university sponsoring the PhD research and from probation trusts. All participants gave informed consent, and locations and personal names have been anonymised.

## **Research findings**

### **Gender-responsivity awareness**

In the semi-structured research interviews, practitioners were asked routinely about the MoJ guidance document (2012) and resources for women in their area. Such questions surrounding individuals' knowledge of the organisation's gender-responsive strategies raised responses tinged with embarrassment. For example, when asked about the document, Joe (PO, XPT) initially gives a categorical negative, but goes on to show that he does in fact possess knowledge and strong views on issues pertinent to WPs and the available resources:

R. Do you know about A Distinct Approach?

J. No, never heard of it. Obviously, there was [the women's group] I think it's still going. There are issues around that. They wouldn't run them at probation offices with good intent, but then they would run them at family centres and I had slight issues with that as the family centres are almost becoming like pseudo-probation outlets and I think it discourages women from using the facilities in other respects. I go along to the family centres and they're all probation officers' and social workers' kids there... you need a place where they don't have any association at all.

(Research interview, Joe, 09.07.2014)

Despite Joe's assertion of never having heard of the guidance document, he is still able to offer a critique of what is viewed as good practice. He knows that it is seen as beneficial for women to have their supervision sessions away from the probation office. However, Joe suggests that the alternative arrangements, embodied by the family centres, retain stigma and feelings of coercion and control for the individuals concerned, similar to those experienced at the statutory probation or social services offices.

Gender-specific responses, such as always offering women the opportunity to have a woman PO, are recognised as the ideal (MoJ, 2012; NOMS, 2017), but are not always accepted or followed. Allocation of WPs appears fairly random. In XPT a number of male officers were keen to work with women, taking offence when not allowed to have female cases; one male officer was discussed as 'inheriting' a caseload, which included three women, when a female colleague left (field notes, women's supporters' meeting, 29.03.2012). Joe illustrates some of the confusion when talking about his lack of familiarity with WP resources:

R. What resources for women are available round here?

J. To my shame I don't really know – women-specific... I think there are employment service specifically for women... I don't know if drug and alcohol workers have anything particular for women. I mean they might do; I just don't know. A couple of years ago there was a team meeting where somebody agreed to do a booklet on services for women and there was one produced, but I don't know what happened to it... So, I feel ashamed. It's like all these things, they just fall off the agenda and you just get on with the grind...

J. ... there was a man who was a woman's 'supporter'.<sup>2</sup> I thought that was a bit odd. There seemed to be a phase where there was a 'supporter' for everything. It felt a bit tokenistic to me...

Joe explains away his gaps in knowledge as there being too much to do in the working day but acknowledges that this is not a satisfactory justification and half-jokingly apologises – 'I feel ashamed'. He knows that a resources booklet has been compiled and his observation on the male 'supporter' as 'odd' may imply awareness of the benefits of having all-women working environments. However, he does not question that *he* has women on his caseload, that women may have problems talking to him as a male officer, or whether the WPs he is supervising have been asked about their preferences for a female officer. He is critical of the 'supporters' initiative, seeing it as 'tokenistic', a superficial management strategy that is ostensibly striving for sexual equality, but in reality is not backed by meaningful action and funding.

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<sup>2</sup> The women's 'supporters' consisted of women POs or PSOs who volunteered or were directed to attend quarterly meetings (on topics relating to WPs), then feed back information to their teams and answer any queries.

In contrast to Joe, Di (PO, XPT) was well-acquainted with the guidance document and the Corston literature and endeavouring to put recommendations into practice. She used family centres for seeing women away from the probation office, as advocated in the guidance (research interview, 27.03.2013), and her colleagues described her as a trailblazer for doing so (field notes, 07.09.2012). At one women's 'supporters' meeting, the discussions focused on the MoJ (2012) guidance document (27.09.2012) and arrangements made for Di to disseminate the information to all XPT probation teams. Commenting on the level of colleagues' awareness of the issues, Di stated it was 'quite alarming some of the things people weren't sure of' (research interview, 27.03.2013). Another idea mooted at this meeting was to offer training to reception workers in the probation office so that 'everybody is involved with women coming through our doors' (field notes at supporters' meeting 29.03.2012).

Similarly, in ZPT a mix of knowledge about the guidance was found. Kate (PO), who facilitated the women's groupwork initiatives, stated that the earlier guidance documents were influential in the setting up of their groupwork initiative, but, when the group folded, learning and information was not passed on to her successors in terms of promoting gender-responsiveness. One new facilitator later told Kate 'I didn't even know they [the documents] existed' (research interview, Kate, 30.06.2014).

### **Establishing and maintaining a positive officer/service user relationship**

Most practitioners in this study succeeded in establishing solid individualised connections, where women felt respected and heard. The importance of moving at the WP's pace is seen as important for engagement, recognising times when an individual is just not ready to go forward. This is evident in Leila's comments about her past and present probation officers in XPT:

When you get people like Steph and Phillipa they do care, and they do genuinely want you to change.... Well with Phillipa specifically well actually she's told me I'm going to get a new one and I'm really upset about it actually because I really get along with Phillipa, I think she's really understanding BUT if I could say perhaps about my ones before some of them, I've had three, since I've been on at probation I've had three different ones. Phillipa's my last one... I think it's the way she gave me space like... She'd ask and if I didn't want to answer she'd leave it a month or something like that and ask again... So, I think definitely, the just letting me breathe

(Research interview, Leila (WP), 26.11.2014)

Leila describes the importance of Steph and Phillipa's approaches but expresses disappointment and distress at the thought of another change of officer. The remaining senior managers implemented minor reorganisations every few months. Leila's distress at Phillipa's departure is partly due to already having had three officers in a relatively short space of time (nine months), partly because she is apprehensive that the next relationship may be difficult, as has happened previously, and partly because she is upset at losing the current trusting relationship with Phillipa. Leila explains why she disliked one of the officers:

... my second one, it's not that I'm not saying her name I've actually forgotten (laughs) her name... I felt a bit on edge with her, this lady. she was a bit stricter... Basically, there was a barrier, so I couldn't tell her how I felt

(Research interview, Leila, 26.11.2014)

The unnamed officer with a 'stricter' approach is compared unfavourably with Steph and Phillipa, preventing Leila from participating fully in the sessions.

Earlier findings from this study have shown that, whilst often being strong at establishing and maintaining supervisory relationships, POs are less adept at providing constructive endings (Goldhill, 2016). Difficulties with this 'endings' stage of supervision were equally evident in the later part of the research, even for experienced officers. As noted above, a change of officer was common during this period, creating a constant situation of endings and disruptions in supervision:

I know from my point of view; the cases I've currently got there are a lot of comments from the cases that this is like their third case manager in a year. So, some of them I've just kept, I'm going to keep them because I can't face the stress and I can't face the stress *for them* of turning round, you know what, I know we've only met three times but now you're going to have somebody else. I thought let's start properly, read the files, get to know, do your notes and I think within a couple of months I was given a different caseload cos they were rearranging things constantly... they've been crisis managing as well and it's just been 'Yes we know it's crap but that's the way it is'.

(Research interview, Phillipa, 04.12.2014)

As an experienced, qualified officer, Phillipa initially takes a professional, best practice stance. However, with frequent changes of caseload, she feels unable to embark on establishing therapeutic alliances, knowing she will be unable to complete them satisfactorily. On the receiving end, Leila responds by looking to Empower, the local HWC, for the more therapeutic relationship:

Counselling was a choice... alcohol wasn't. .... yeah, I chose to do it. It was good for me. Cos I always used to say no because I've had a really bad background... but once I did give in and actually grew up a bit I thought it is time that I talk to someone... that was the point was where they did refer me... because I didn't feel comfortable... like speaking about my past and then that's when they said to go to counselling (Empower)...

(Research interview, Leila, 04.12.2014)

Leila explains that having to examine her alcohol usage was non-negotiable as part of her Order. She also recognises the maturational factors,<sup>3</sup> moving away from behaving irresponsibly and destructively. However, what may underpin the drinking – namely, sexual abuse – is harder to confront (Covington, 2008; Vaswani, 2018). Whilst Empower was functioning in this way, Leila could choose to talk about her victimisation issues to an Empower counsellor rather than to her PO.

Where endings are not flagged up, poor professional practice may be revealed. Unsatisfactory endings replayed or played out within probation supervision may represent yet another relationship breakdown in the woman's life. For example, Jemma (PO, XPT) miscalculates the length of time that Shirley's Order has left to run and, due to illness, the Order lapses with no 'ending' taking place. In terms of individuals' complex needs, this can only be seen as yet another rejection and disappointment in Shirley's life. Cherry (2005:127) refers to this type of event as offering a 'micro-message', which is unrealised and unintended by the PO, but which carries meaning that lowers self-worth and renews feelings of abandonment.

Even within strong relationships, interview data show that endings can go awry. Women may hold back critical personal information until the last few weeks and paradoxically often place themselves in breach during the last days of the Order. Despite significant progress and an outwardly confident demeanour, Leila is still apprehensive about totally severing ties with probation supervision: 'I'm going to like it obviously the freedom, but we'll see how that goes because sometimes when you've been so used to going back to something it might change'. Phillipa also comments on the phenomenon:

I think you do get a higher percentage of females reoffending towards the end. It's because they get attached, for whatever reason. I think they just get attached to the process sometimes, rather than the person.

(Research interview, Phillipa, 26.11.2014)

On occasions, extraneous factors impact on establishing and maintaining positive alliances where probation workers have little or no authority over other parts of the criminal justice system. This may directly affect the WSU; the words and actions of colleagues and sentencers in the courts can upset one-to-one probation relationships.

Evie (WP, XPT), for example, was up-tariffed to a medium level Drug Rehabilitation Requirement for shoplifting, despite being able to prove that she had been drug-free for several months and cooperating well with her PO and the family intervention worker in the care of her 5-year-old daughter (field notes, 29.11.2012). In Siobhan's case, she received an additional 70 hours of community payback and an extension to her suspended sentence supervision order for an offence committed prior to her current one, despite the consistently favourable reports received from Di (PO, XPT). The police also informed Siobhan's employers of the offences, thus placing obstacles in the way of her obtaining a

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<sup>3</sup> Maturational change is identified as one of Maruna's (2000) three key aspects in bringing about desistance.

job reference. Reporting back on this, Di explained Siobhan's frustrations, attempting to minimise the damaging effects:

I said 'You were really harshly dealt with, even the male PO in court on that day spent time with you because he had never seen anything quite like it either... after court so that speaks volumes really...'. She said, 'Why did it happen to me?' I said 'I know but you're learning from it and it's only going to make you stronger'

(Research interview, Di, 16.04.2013)

The empathy shown by Di acknowledges the unfairness of the sentence, leaving Siobhan clear that she is heard and that Di is taking her side, but also, in the final sentence, reframing the situation with a positive slant (Egan, 2008). As an individual who has rarely been listened to or praised, recognition from a respected and reliable person is particularly important to Siobhan. Di draws on the importance of her court colleague's opinion, explaining that other criminal justice system agencies may hold opposing views to probation and emphasising probation's minimal powers in that particular arena.

### **Women-only environments**

Data from this study show that, where there is sufficient interest, individual officers do pursue gender-responsive measures. Some practitioners are necessarily more experienced and better informed than others. A few of the practitioners in the study had long-standing interests in women service users. Some had researched women as part of their training (Di, PO, XPT, 27.03.13; Jennifer, PO, ZPT, 03.09.2014) or had worked exclusively with women in a prison setting or a refuge (Bea, PSO, ZPT, field notes, 23.01.2014; Moira, PO, XPT, research interview, 12.12.2014). Unsurprisingly, these individuals were more familiar with the concept of gender-responsiveness and the benefits of exclusive women-only spaces.

In XPT's B and C towns, reporting times were set aside when the probation office was solely open to women. However, it was found that men could not be dissuaded from reporting at these times and were allowed to wait in the reception area until seen by their POs, even during periods allotted for women (research interviews, Lesley, PO, XPT, 20.02.2013; Steph, PO, XPT, 28.05.14). Additionally, women leading chaotic lifestyles could not always be guaranteed to attend during the set times. For some women, harassment from men has become normalised, and they are dealing with unwanted attention on a daily basis. Evie and Siobhan demonstrate this sense of resignation to the harassment they receive from male probationers, viewing it as part and parcel of their punishment and no doubt their general experience in society. For individuals such as Sonia (WP, XPT) who has experienced ongoing severe lifetime abuse, waiting rooms provoke a much stronger reaction:

Horrible... I don't like being trapped... the men in there... Just felt like they were going to get me... It's just because of my childhood experiences er I don't feel good around men. Plus, my ex (shuts her eyes and nods)...

(Research interview, Sonia, 05.12.2014)

Here, the waiting room situation evokes traumatic memories of violence and sexual assault. Carmen (WP), also with a history of extensive domestic violence and sexual assault, expresses her discomfort when an intoxicated man enters:

... he was so drunk, and you could smell it off him. He sat next to me and he was chatting away... I just thought oh my God... I'm sort of stuck with it and I don't want really, I'm not interested in what they've done to be honest but then again you don't know if they're violent, but you don't want by accident to offend them, you don't know what's going to happen.

(Research interview, Carmen, XPT, 10.12.2014)

Carmen's background, incorporating experiences of male violence, similarly arouses feelings of being trapped within the situation and fears for her safety.

There are further complications surrounding women-only settings dealing with agency tasks in the broader criminal justice system, such as when there are no female probation workers on duty for the courts and community payback/unpaid work and with women still being directed to work in mixed groups, often with male supervisors. Although good practice was seen as asking women if they would prefer a woman officer (MoJ, 2012), this was not straightforward. Concerns existed as to whether questions on WSU preferences for female officers were actually posed (field notes, 27.09.2012). How the question is asked and responded to is equally important. Kitzinger and Frith's (2001) research outlines how women will frequently not state rejection explicitly to avoid causing offence. Instead, well-known and socially acknowledged 'refusal skills' are used, which men can and do intentionally 'misinterpret' if it is not the answer they want. Sonia gives an account, albeit once removed, of disturbing, abusive practices amongst some male POs towards women she met in prison:

Yeah and there's a lot of women that struggle and a lot of women get put with men POs and they're, I've been quite lucky I've always had women, but I've always said I won't work with a male. There have been girls at the hostel and in prison who have male POs and they're just like 'Don't say nothing'. They're petrified of them... And he was bullying her. 'There are no other POs that will take you on' – a control thing. And she was never asked, but she asked if she could have a female and he said 'No'.

(Research interview, Sonia, 05.12.2014)

Regardless of PO intent, due to previous victimisation issues and power imbalances, it is unsurprising that some WPs find male officers threatening and intimidating.

In both XPT and ZPT women attended and brought their complex problems with them in a way that is unprecedented in male groupwork. Di, the PO facilitating a women's group, explains the dynamics:

Well in the first week one of them brought up previous childhood sexual abuse and how she was struggling with that and how she was self-harming daily... another lady turn up with her bags packed, homeless, her children had been taken off her into care. Another lady who's alcoholic, really struggling with withdrawal symptoms and emotions are so high that all are in tears at different points.

(Research interview, 27.03.2013)

However, groupwork arrangements for women seemed ad hoc, dependent on practitioners' altruism rather than planned organisational strategies, even where court orders with structured activity requirements (SARs) were attached. At the start of the research period, specialist groups for women with personality disorders were mooted in XPT in conjunction with psychological services, but they never materialised. Di explains why: there were not enough staff; it was not seen as a priority in terms of risk; it was not seen as a priority for TR; and it required goodwill on behalf of staff to take on what amounted to an add-on to their working day. When asked what personal advantages there were in running such a group, Di stated:

... none really. It means I'm working till 9 every night... nobody else to do it because of staff shortages. If I have only two people in the group, it isn't worth it to me. If I had eight people it would be different, but I have to write up everybody else too and on top of my other work, I don't get any workload relief....

(Research interview, Di, 20.02.2013)

Even where women's groups were popular and respected, they still ran the risk of being discredited and then disbanded. Successful award-winning all-women groupwork, Futures, had become well established in ZPT. The underlying woman-centred philosophy of the groups is explained by Kate (PO, ZPT), the group facilitator:

... we would be led by what the women brought to the table. So, we would always do like 'a check-in'. And if something really heavy was coming up for one of the women then we'd often stick with that... our role [was] very much keeping everybody emotionally safe and perhaps steering the conversation [to] include some of the stuff that we wanted to talk about as well

(Research interview, Kate, 30.08.2014)

This way of working favours a woman-centred approach, designed to give group members a voice. However, Kate and the other groupworkers were removed in the run-up to TR reorganisation, and Futures was discontinued. Groupwork in ZPT then reverted to promoting What Works style standardised exercise-driven, cognitive behavioural treatment (CBT) interventions, conforming to the dominant, risk-based probation discourses. Futures had been held at community premises, separate from the probation offices, but once the new groupwork regime came into being it was moved back to the statutory agency offices (field notes, 16.12.2013; 19.12.2013). The next women's group facilitator, Bea, describes the difficulties with the new approach, referring in the first sentence to how few staff at a training workshop for women's groupwork really understood women's issues:

I'm really sad they don't ask about women's groups. Why did they come if not going to be involved with women's groups? ... Women are like an onion. You pull off the first layer, for example benefit fraud. Then relationships, abusive behaviour. Unpick one bit and a whole load of other bits... With women it's never straightforward. Sessions go so chaotic because it's hard to say we only want to talk about relationships... If the treatment manager queries it there is a pointer there.

(Field notes, post-group session, 18.12.2013)

The task at this training event was to choose CBT exercises from men's groupwork, reverting to gender-blind strategies. Bea describes her disappointment but indicates her determination to continue with a gender-responsive model, whilst writing down CBT exercises, to cover her tracks with the treatment manager. These workers receive minimal groupwork supervision. The advantage of this is the freedom to carry out gender-sensitive, creative interventions, but the disadvantage is lack of organisational support:

I've learnt a lot working with women – I reflect on my own life. But you need to take care you don't get burnt out

(Field notes, Bea, 18.12.2013)

Despite undoubted commitment, Bea is carrying the full weight of responsibility for women's groups in ZPT. Unlike Kate, a senior practitioner and qualified long-standing PO, Bea (although experienced) is a probation service officer (PSO), which marks a demotion in rank for women's work within ZPT. These PSO facilitators for women's groupwork have no formal PO training qualifications and are paid less to undertake these important tasks. Bea takes pride in her skills, knowledge and experience, but should it become too much for her, resulting in her departure through resignation or illness, gender-responsive facilities for women in the area could disappear altogether.

Female senior probation managers orchestrated the HWC initiatives in XPT (there were no HWCs in ZPT). Kris, a senior manager, introduced a wider role for Empower, with women on community orders being supervised at this local HWC, rather than at the probation office. In order to bring this about, she ring-fenced money specifically for this purpose.

The Empower manager, Rita, reported Kris as saying, 'We won't disinvest in something that's working' (field notes, 11.03.2014). Some POs have shown reluctance to talk about probationers' childhood sexual abuse, with POs concerned that they would be opening 'a can of worms' and feeling they did not have the time or skills to respond appropriately (Goldhill, 2016). The importance of *not* shying away from delicate subjects is stressed in Allnock and Miller's (2013) research, where it was found that negative effects of abuse can be compounded through professionals' reluctance to investigate. HWCs were better prepared to deal with women's complex victimisation issues, having a clear strategy for encouraging women to talk about painful victimisation experiences in their lives. As seen earlier, Leila's (WP) preference was to complete counselling sessions which addressed her childhood sexual abuse experiences. Despite having a good relationship with her PO, she felt it was unnecessary to go through it again with her: 'Yeah, it didn't need to be talked about after that really' (research interview, 26.11.2014). Her PO, Phillipa, also looked to Empower to confront more sensitive issues:

... the Empower service who supervise 70-80% of my caseload... if it wasn't for them I think we would all drown... they do a lot of amazing work... the work we used to do because they've got the time to do it. So, they do the work around... childhood trauma, maybe historic domestic violence or just vulnerability factors such as self-harm, and they've got a lot of really good links... they do the job that ideally we would be doing if we did... have the time.

(Research interview, Phillipa, 26.11.2014)

For hard-pressed POs, this partnership agency represented a valuable gender-sensitive resource.

As full TR implementation approached, the situation deteriorated. Many senior managers, who championed gender initiatives, retired or were assigned alternative roles, often replaced by younger men, meaning that funding had to be renegotiated. Rita became increasingly reluctant to discuss negotiations with T Company, the incoming privatised community rehabilitation company (CRC), as a 'gagging' clause had been imposed on her. This clause was common practice when privatised companies took over the contracting of probation trusts and HWCs. CRC lawyers effectively halted the promotion of probationers' individualised rights in favour of a standardised, cut-price resource (APPG, 2016). It is ironic and of concern that in an organisation aiming to give some of the least powerful women a voice (Barlow, 2015), the workers themselves experienced being silenced.

## **Discussion**

The research findings show that efforts were made in the trusts to disseminate information, and messages about gender-responsivity were filtering down from policy and guidance documents to main-grade workers. Initiatives, though, were piecemeal, with several officers completely unaware of the guidance, indicating it would not be on their radar when working with WPs. Structural and ideological barriers hindered the proposals. Feminist enterprise in XPT was overseen by powerful female senior managers, but also

centred on the supporters' (front-line staff's) meetings and actions. The feeling was that women should at the very least be offered a female supervising officer, but this idea remained contentious. Male officers were still being allocated and requesting to supervise WPs on their caseloads, without thought being given to the impact this might have. Sentencers were also seemingly unaware of the gendered implications of harsh sentencing.

It was hoped that one benefit of TR would be increased involvement of voluntary and private agencies, introducing greater flexibility and creativity (Gelsthorpe and Hedderman, 2012). The results here show that in both trusts women-only spaces were limited in terms of success and were easily disbanded, and that the probation agency environment is frequently not a welcoming one for WPs. A few dedicated POs found a more suitable arrangement was to meet with women outside probation offices in family centres, but it is argued that these institutions carry stigma through close association with children's services. It has been seen that one-to-one interventions are most effective in women-only environments, such as HWCs, to address victimisation experiences; but as soon as privatisation enters the picture, where cost-cutting and profit become priorities, they revert to the former ways of working. Within all-women groups, the study shows women are more open about their victimisation experiences and offer support to one another. This contrasts with one-to-one work, where officers may be apprehensive about discussions surrounding childhood sexual abuse, feel ill-equipped to ask emotive questions, and receive minimal emotional support themselves if they do so. However, very few groupwork opportunities exist solely for women. Those that do are frequently transitory, not incorporated into the main organisational framework, with many practitioners doing the work out of goodwill over and above a normal workload. Increasingly, as TR approached, women's groups became the responsibility of officers with fewer formal qualifications and lower organisational status. These arrangements mirror WPs' experiences of being of lesser importance, financially impoverished and often having their views disregarded.

It is seen as good practice to provide a secure base beyond the end of the Order by transferring the therapeutic alliance to a community resource, such as an HWC or mental health provision. The HWC input has also been challenged by austerity measures and cuts, involving decreases in community provision for women (Walby, Towers and Francis, 2016). Strong, articulate, well-educated and feminist HWC managers' voices were suppressed amidst an irresolvable ethical dilemma. Rita's options were either to walk away from a diminished service or continue under the restraints imposed. Although holding serious doubts about the ethicality of the contract, Rita nevertheless had to balance her staff team's need for employment security (a 3-year contract was being offered) and WPs in need of a gendered response. Reluctantly, Empower went ahead with the new model, making half the workforce redundant and removing satellite teams which had provided gender-specific resources to smaller nearby towns. The rigidity of the TR format was thus reinforcing the dominant discourse of standardised risk and punishment at the expense of constructive interventions. The system reverted to WPs' one-to-one supervision located at the probation office, with the numerous disadvantages for POs and

WPs outlined above. Cuts to funding arrangements were still uncertain several months into the new model:

The bid specification was to replace the Empower case work model with Empower engagement support officers delivering women-specific support and complementing the work of responsible officers (TR probation workers delivering core casework). The detail of how this will look is still being worked out.

(Gilli, WCW, 'one year after' email, 15.12.2015)

As a result of so few high-risk women in XPT (field notes, 27.02.2017), Empower lost funding from the public sector NPS: 'Some is being done for free because the conversation hasn't been had yet' (Rita, field notes, 26.11.2015). Again, it was largely individual HWC workers' sense of vocation which enabled a pared down, woman-focused resource to continue at much-reduced cost to probation agencies.

The pattern of gender-responsivity seems to involve survival on a shoestring, short-term basis, championed by a person (or people) in senior management or at field level. With reorganisations, management and/or workers then change, funding is withdrawn, and the project disappears. The MoJ itself acknowledges that there is and has been 'a lack of focus on outcomes for women, both strategically and operationally' (National Audit Office, 2019:35). Time-limited injections of cash feature heavily in the *Female offending strategy* (MoJ, 2018) with a promise of £5 million over two years plus an added £1.5 million for accommodation (MoJ, 2018:8). However, this is considerably less than the £9.15 million grant to set up HWCs in 2007. It remains that approaches which aim to confront the complexities in women probationers' lives appear incompatible with the goals of a 'paternalistic' criminal justice system (Hine, 2019:14).

## **Conclusion**

In this article, gender awareness and responsiveness are highlighted as of central significance. At the start of this research study in 2011 (pre-TR), concerted efforts were being made to institute Corston's gender-responsive initiatives, although the male-focused organisational structures frequently created barriers to successful implementation. By the end of the research period, as TR was being operationalised, and beyond, many gender-responsive initiatives disappeared, were diminished or changed direction through the privatisation focus on cuts to funding and women's issues not being prioritised. Although relating to a small-scale study, the article shows how easily women can become marginalised during times of organisational and societal change where prevailing opinions advocate the ethos of marketisation and privatisation. Whilst this is the current trend, there will remain reliance on officers who feel strongly about women's issues, personally and politically as feminists, performing small acts of kindness within the practitioner/probationer relationship as the main mitigators of misguided and harmful structures. Prominent in the practitioner/WP dynamic is the presence of victimisation and trauma, which requires specialised work that frequently impacts on professionals' well-being. Although some work has been done to investigate the impact of vicarious trauma

(Knight, 2014; Phillips, Westaby and Fowler, 2016), the specific gender issues present an area for further investigation.

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