

HIDDEN HEROES: SUPERVISING, SUPPORTING AND SAFEGUARDING WOMEN ON PROBATION DURING THE EXCEPTIONAL DELIVERY MODEL IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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Abstract

The introduction of COVID-19 restrictions meant that probation practitioners worked from home, engaging and supervising people on probation remotely. However, limited research has explored the personal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on probation practitioners who supervise women. Women on probation are often a marginalised group, who have multi-faceted and complex needs, and were at even greater risk and disadvantage during the pandemic. The current paper explores the experiences of probation practitioners, who were responsible for supervising, supporting and safeguarding women on probation during COVID-19. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-one probation practitioners working remotely for five Community Rehabilitation Companies. Probation practitioners reflected on their challenging role, often thwarted by a myriad of practical obstacles, and heightened emotional turmoil due to the triple-edged sword of unification, the pandemic and working with complex women. These hidden key workers demonstrated core resilience as the probation service navigated through uncharted waters to provide a professional service to some of the most marginalised women in society. The findings offer a unique perspective on the experiences of frontline workers supervising women on probation during the exceptional delivery model in response to COVID-19. The study offers important implications for current practice and for the future of hybrid work in the criminal justice system.

Keywords

COVID-19; women; practitioners; Community Rehabilitation Company; emotional turmoil.

Introduction

There have been numerous studies detailing the impact of COVID-19 on general probation practice in terms of changes to supervision, practical obstacles to operational practice and the experiences of people on probation (Carr, 2021; Dominey et al., 2020; Dunne et al., 2020; HMIP, 2020; Phillips, 2022; Piquero, 2021; Revolving Doors Agency, 2020; Woolford, 2021). Recent work has examined women working in voluntary women's services during the pandemic and noted the emotional impacts, vicarious trauma and need for organisational support for staff health and wellbeing (Ferreira & Burman, 2022). However, less is known about the impact on probation practitioners who continued as key workers during the pandemic (Norton, 2020; Phillips et al., 2021; Piquero, 2021). Previous studies have highlighted the importance of the practitioner-probationer relationship (Lewis, 2014) and the need to recognise women as a specific cohort (Olson et al, 2003). This exploratory study begins to give some insight into the impact on probation practitioners supervising, supporting, and safeguarding women on probation during COVID-19. Four themes emerged from the data. Most notably the study highlights the obstacles probation practitioners faced with remote supervision and the heightened welfare concern during the pandemic, especially with women at risk of domestic abuse. Practitioners faced additional challenges managing a vulnerable and high-risk caseload while conducting supervision over the telephone or through doorstep visits. Despite this, practitioners expressed pride, passion and commitment to probation work. This study aims to build on existing literature to understand the experiences of probation practitioners supervising women on probation during the exceptional delivery model (EDM).

Turbulent context of probation services: EDM, COVID-19 and TR2

Although the probation service has undergone numerous structural and cultural changes since its creation (Mawby & Worrall, 2013), the last few years can be described as 'the most radical change it [probation] has ever seen' (Newburn, 2013). Throughout 2020 and 2021 the UK government passed many laws commonly described as 'lockdown laws' to slow the spread of COVID-19 and bring the pandemic under control. In response to this on the 24th March 2020 probation services implemented the EDM to reduce face-to-face contact and increase remote supervision prioritising the risk of harm to others. 'Exceptional delivery plans prioritising effective safeguarding and public protection were prepared at speed' (HMIP, 2020: 7). This resulted in the closure of many probation offices and probation practitioners predominantly working from home. This was a significant change in operational delivery with a notable increase in workload (Rees, 2020) and an increase in COVID-19-related sickness across the workforce (Lomas, 2020). Face-to-face contact was prioritised for people on probation who were recognised as vulnerable or assessed as posing a high risk of harm to others (Woolford, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exposed the existing health inequalities and the interconnections between race and gender associated with health outcomes. In addition, the death of George Floyd in the United States of America caused 'fear, vulnerability, anxiety and re-traumatisation' (HMIP, 2020: 12) for many Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups for both people on probation and probation practitioners. Literature during the COVID-19 pandemic has recognised the considerable burdens to probation practitioners conducting complex and challenging work from home. Many faced conflicting, demands, such as childcare, home schooling, care for the vulnerable and wider family responsibilities.

For example, supervising cases with an element of domestic abuse, substance use, or sex working was particularly difficult to navigate in a home environment with family members including children present. This work often includes conversations about offences and offending, mental health and displays of negative emotions (HMIP, 2020). Whilst some probation practitioners noted the positive aspects such as increased task effectiveness and spending more time with family, others expressed significant concerns about working this way. (HMIP, 2020). For some, working from home results in difficulties 'switching off' and finishing work at the end of the working day (Rees, 2020).

Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) aimed to reform the delivery of probation services and reduce reoffending rates (Ministry of Justice, 2013). As such, TR split the probation service into two types of organisations: the publicly owned NPS which managed offenders posing a high risk of harm to the public, while 21 privately led Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) supervised low-to-medium risk offenders (Ministry of Justice, 2013; Tidmarsh, 2021). Numerous studies have emerged detailing the systematic failings of TR (Ministry of Justice, 2018a; Tidmarsh, 2021). Consequently, in May 2019, Justice Secretary Robert Buckland announced the end of the privatisation changes of the TR programme. From the 26th of June 2021 the new probation service had responsibility for the day-to-day management of all people on probation in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2022). This resulted in twelve probation regions across England and Wales providing probation services. Returning to the public sector was designed to reduce reoffending, streamline, and strengthen service provision, and ensure consistent training and support for probation practitioners.

Women supervised by the probation service

Many studies have shown that the experience of the criminal justice system is markedly different for women than it is for men (Bloom et al, 2004; Walklate, 2013). Women are more often convicted of drug crimes and property crimes, more rarely violent crimes. Females generally report many psychiatric symptoms and have often experienced psychological, physical or sexual abuse during their lifetimes. Women are a minority in the criminal justice system, representing about 10% of those supervised in the community (HMIP, 2021a). In creating appropriate services for women in the criminal justice system, it is critical to acknowledge gender differences. Probation practitioners advocate women and men on probation often have different needs. Therefore, women require different supervision strategies in areas such as parenting skills, domestic abuse interventions and substance abuse treatments (Seng & Lurigio, 2005). Gendered differences have also been acknowledged and implemented through recent government policy, such as the Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022 to 2025 (Ministry of Justice, 2023). In addition, women from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority groups face the 'double disadvantage' of gender inequality when in contact with the criminal justice system (Cox and Sacks-Jones, 2017). These experiences can be exacerbated by discrimination worsening mental health, isolation, and poverty leaving women from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority Groups at a greater risk of reoffending. Academic literature has emphasised the importance of the probation-practitioner relationship and how women react to their probation supervision. Probation practitioners are encouraged to be alert and responsive to any potential trauma women may have faced. Trauma is an 'event, series of events, or set of circumstances' that may be 'physically or emotionally harmful, or life-threatening'. These may have 'lasting adverse effects' on 'functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-

being' (SAMHSA, 2014: 7). Therefore, a trauma-informed approach builds on the individual strengths to empower women in their journey to desistance whilst acknowledging that probation supervision may re-traumatise and to actively take steps to prevent this from happening. Probation practice adheres to five key trauma-informed principles: safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment. The 2019 Farmer Review (Ministry of Justice, 2019) found that 'women's relationships directly affect their likelihood of re-offending significantly more frequently than is the case with men (2019:7). The need for positive relationships with probation practitioners which challenge feelings of shame and stigmatisation are essential in probation practice to aide desistance from crime and harm (Rutter & Barr, 2021).

Methodology

This research was a follow-up study to Woolford (2021) as some interesting questions were raised regarding the impact on key workers delivering services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment for participants was undertaken via email and through the cooperation of the CRC management. Qualitative research was carried out throughout the summer of 2020 and the winter of 2021 across five Community Rehabilitation Companies in England and Wales. The staggered fieldwork facilitated the opportunity for participants to share their reflections and experiences of the three national lockdowns (Prime Minister Boris Johnson **introduced** on the 23rd March 2020, 5th November 2020 and 6th January 2021). The small-scale study involved remote semi-structured interviews with 21 participants holding a caseload of women. All the participants taking part in the study were female N=100%. Guided estimates from local performance teams suggest that probation practitioners who work with women equate to approximately 11.6% of the workforce. However, CRCs adopted different approaches to their management of female caseloads, largely dependent on geography, caseload numbers and staffing resources. In this study, participants comprised: N=7 probation practitioners; N=10 probation service officers; and N=4 PQIPs. There was also a mix of experience from participants in working with women in the probation service from six months to over 15 years. In addition, 13 participants had a female-only caseload and eight participants had a mixed female and male caseload. Participants worked with a range of low, medium, and high-risk women under probation supervision. Participants reflected that often, the women under their supervision experience chaotic lifestyles involving substance misuse, mental health problems, homelessness, and victimisation.

As advised by HMPPS, remote data collection methods were prioritised to keep everyone safe. The introduction of Teams on the probation service IT equipment facilitated opportunities for video conferencing adding a more personable and interactive approach. Due to exceptional times, special consideration post-interview was given to ensure the wellbeing of participants. Post-interview researcher Woolford extended the debrief, facilitated time and space for participants to discuss feelings and views and where required signposted to wellbeing services. The interview schedule was designed to elicit answers from probation practitioners regarding the impact of the EDM on their keyworker role. The research questions explored the participant's experiences of supervising, supporting and safeguarding women on probation through the EDM during COVID-19. The interviews were recorded with the participant's permission and lasted an average of 45.14 mins, with a time range of 39.89 – 53.45 mins. Thematic analysis was used by the researchers Woolford and

McCarthy to analyse the transcripts. This method was chosen because it is appropriate for effectively describing and summarising the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Howitt & Cramer, 2010). Interviews were read and re-read to ensure familiarisation whilst documenting initial codes through identifying interesting features of the data. The researchers Woolford and McCarthy discussed the data to refine and define key themes which emerged. The three themes explored in the interviews through the research questions posed were:

- Obstacles of Supervising Women;
- Heightened Welfare concern over women; and
- Supervising women at risk of domestic abuse.

An unexpected theme that researchers Woolford and McCarthy found in common with the data from the 21 interviews and therefore interpreted as being important by the study participants was:

- A difficult but rewarding role.

Findings

Obstacles of supervising women

Probation practitioners in the current study highlighted several obstacles faced when supervising women during the COVID-19 pandemic ranging from increased workloads, mixed engagement levels, difficulties of offence-focused work and enforcement of Probation Order. Interviewees discussed a notable increase in their workload during the pandemic. This was then felt to be exacerbated by the multi-faceted needs of women such as 'mental health support', 'greater emotional needs', 'added complexities' and the perception that they were the only support service still open to women on probation. As a probation practitioner explained 'We normally have XXXX or XXXX, for rough sleeping but, because of COVID-19 that all got closed down straight away' (interviewee 007). As key workers, probation practitioners continued to provide an essential service to women on probation throughout the three waves of COVID-19. Probation practitioners discussed that as everyone began to realise the longevity of the pandemic, the women they worked with developed high expectations of weekly 'telephone contact.' Probation practitioners explained that telephone contact became more frequent and longer in length with detailed conversations on more intense issues. The number of supervision sessions were highlighted to have increased significantly. 'If women were on monthly reporting, then during lockdown, they were on fortnightly, if on fortnightly women were now on weekly reporting.' Therefore, the increase in supervision with many practitioners making weekly calls to a large proportion of their caseload was due to the remote delivery model adopted by the probation service during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the height of COVID-19, the restrictions and social distancing measures I had about forty medium-risk women on my caseload. So, I was making forty calls per week. It was hard to keep women engaged, do meaningful work and get a true picture of what was going on in their lives. It

was intense and hard going. (interviewee 003)

Engagement of women on probation during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown was mixed. Reflections depicted accounts of 'extremely brief check-ins' (interviewee 010) to 'hours on the phone due to a crisis' (interviewee 011). Probation practitioners discussed a lack of meaningful engagement through formal compliance with women. As a probation practitioner, re-quoted from a woman on her caseload 'this is the easiest time to be on probation. It's bloody brilliant, all you got to do is answer a phone' (interviewee 012). Whereas other probation practitioners found engagement improved with more meaningful compliance. 'With some women, the lack of face-to-face allowed for some real, frank and honest conversations. It really removed some of the barriers of office supervision' (interviewee 007). Probation practitioners shared their experiences that COVID-19 facilitated the opportunity for more complex, multi-faceted or chaotic women to comply with their probation supervision. As interviewee 016 explained 'it's much easier to answer a telephone than attend an office visit. I think communication with the women just by being able to pick up the phone was a lot easier.' However, as restrictions began to ease the meaningfulness of weekly supervision became less and less. Telephone check-ins became more of a tick-box exercise. Probation practitioners conveyed their concern with formal compliance such as women responding with 'yeah, yeah yeah', 'everything's fine' or 'nothing has changed.' As interviewee 010 said 'after each wave, meaningful conversations became less and less because you were having to call women up each week, and it just felt like a tick box exercise.' Furthermore, as restrictions eased, and services started to reopen the remote delivery model became harder for probation practitioners to deliver. For example, ensuring meaningful, difficult, or sensitive conversations with women were in a private, confidential, and safe setting was harder to measure.

I arrange a telephone appointment as remote supervision. As the conversation progresses it becomes clear that she is out shopping in public. You re-ask if it is a convenient time to speak and you will get a response of "yes, yes, yes" but you can hear they are going through the check-out at ASDA. (interviewee 015)

When women come into the office, it's a lot easier to do because you are in a room together and you have their undivided attention. You can appropriately support assess and challenge women in a private and safe place like the office. Whereas on the phone there are distractions, interruptions and you can't be 100% sure of what they are doing through remote supervision. (interviewee 011)

In addition, probation practitioners found it harder to do more offence-focused work or challenge behaviours or attitudes over the phone. The majority of interviewees noted the difficulties in conducting normal routine procedures, such as drug and alcohol tests. Interviewees discussed their inability to challenge and use visual or non-verbal cues. Reflections discussed in the interviews included determining the women on probation sobriety through 'cannot smell alcohol' (interviewee 006) or gauging drug use through 'appearance and weight loss' (interviewee 002) 'a lot of the work we do is helped by body language' (interviewee 001). Probation practitioners had growing concerns over missing

visual cues to 'build a picture', establish rapport and gain trust with women. 'Women are just telling you the parts they want to share, you don't have facial expressions, body language, appearances' (interviewee 019).

In the women's team we do work with a lot of chaotic women. I feel like remote contact doesn't work for them and we do need to have that face-to-face supervision. When women are in crisis, plus they are very chaotic you do need to see that person to make an assessment. Often women can say they are fine but deep down they need support and aren't comfortable to talk, admit their problems or ask for help over the phone. (interviewee 021)

Furthermore, interviewees reflected on the difficulties of enforcing the mandated court orders to women during the pandemic. Probation practitioners reflected that their role during the pandemic changed to be a 'supportive' role with minimal 'enforcement' of the court in terms of addressing or challenging attitudes or behaviours. With more complex cases where there were more support needs, probation practitioners found it much harder to manage remotely. Reasons from women included 'my phone battery died', 'I lost my phone', or 'my phone stopped working.' Therefore, practitioners reflected on being flexible through re-scheduling but faced ongoing obstacles to remote delivery with complex women.

With chaotic women, issues include women who don't have a phone, or they lose their phone or they're changing their number constantly. It's hard if not near impossible to keep in contact, keep track of your cases. And these women are also the ones that I would assess as most vulnerable and at risk to themselves or others. (interviewee 005)

Probation practitioners concluded that enforcement during the pandemic 'boundaries became blurred.' Prior to COVID-19 if a woman did not attend her office appointment it would be noted as a failure to attend with a warning letter sent out. However, during the EDM and remote supervision women were given three chances to engage with an appointment. Probation practitioners suggested that 'it made the enforcement process a real grey area' (interviewee 018). Reflecting on practice, where one probation practitioner may use professional judgement, another may use a warning, and another may breach. Therefore, problems were identified over the consistency of the service during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Heightened welfare concern over women

During COVID-19 there was a change in the dynamics of supervision, with more emphasis on support and assistance for women who were feeling vulnerable. Interviewees reflected on the added pressure and worry of supervising women during COVID-19, particularly in relation to homelessness, substance misuse, sex work and domestic violence (interviewees 001; 006; 008; 017). The interviewees discussed how COVID-19 impacted the women they supervised, often vulnerable, with complex needs and chaotic lifestyles and how this, in turn, heightened their welfare concerns. Forming an emotional attachment to women on their caseload is not new for probation practitioners. However, it could be suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic may have heightened these emotional attachments.

Women who were assessed as high-risk or vulnerable played particularly on the minds of probation practitioners. Interviewees reflected on the 'plight' of women such as increased social isolation, deterioration in mental health, increased vulnerabilities, and intensified home environments. Descriptions of 'extreme isolation' (interviewee 020), 'huge increase in anxiety, depression and stress' (interviewee 001) 'relapsing into old coping mechanisms such as binge or excessive drinking and drug use' (interviewee 003) and 'living with domestic abuse perpetrators (interviewee 015). In addition, the struggles of motherhood during the pandemic created commonalities between practitioners and the women they supervised. Shared experiences of the difficulties in homeschooling, keeping young children entertained and fears of protecting family members from the pandemic created a real bond between probation practitioners and the women they supervised.

You have a lady on the phone who has a house full of children. She would have the complications of trying to access some sort of home schooling for her children as well as trying to find the time, space and somewhere quiet to have a conversation with myself for remote supervision. (interviewee 019)

One minute, I'm speaking to a woman about the potential of having her children taken into foster care. And then my baby's running up to me going, "mummy, mummy, mummy." How do you juggle those two things in one go? (Interviewee 012)

Difficult conversations about domestic abuse, sexual abuse or drug misuse posed real challenges for women and their probation practitioners. This was particularly difficult in the home environment for practitioners and felt more acutely for interviewees with children at home. Several interviewees reflected on in-depth conversations with women who were abusive reflecting on 'difficult calls' (interviewee 001) where they were 'being shouted or screamed at' (interviewee 013) in their own homes. Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges for probation practitioners when discussing sensitive and emotive issues.

These conversations are now in your house. So, it can taint your home life as well. This is my living room and I feel I shouldn't get shouted at in my own home as it is my safe space. I think it did blur the boundaries of work and home. (interviewee 020)

If I was dealing with a woman who is difficult over the phone, for example, enforcement action and I'm being called every single name under the sun or she's screaming down the phone. I didn't have any childcare, my child's going "Mummy, who's that speaking to you? Why are they being so nasty?". (Interviewee 014)

Interviewees reflected on feelings of 'stress', 'lack of motivation', 'anxiety' and 'uncertainty' as key workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside this, many probation practitioners discussed both the facilitators and challenges of the best way to juggle work with personal and family life. The challenges were further exacerbated by no face-to-face contact with colleagues in the criminal justice system to 'offer emotional support and offload'

(interviewee 001). Probation practitioners cited the inability to discuss anything with their family or friends due to their code of ethical practice and confidentiality. As interviewee (010) explained after a difficult conversation or message with a woman, 'you are stuck with these thoughts and feelings and there is no way to get rid of them.'

Probation practitioners reflected on the impact of restrictions on the home environment of women and how this may have resulted in an increase in isolation, loneliness, and a lack of access to services. A core element of the interviewee's work was to signpost women to essential services such as food banks to gain food and medication. Food poverty, energy and utility hardship, lack of child support and financial deprivation were common challenges women faced during the pandemic. Probation practitioners had to deliver difficult messages such as 'delays in food parcels' (interviewee 019), 'not being allowed to physically meet their children' (interviewee 003) or 'no open mental health services to gain much-needed support' (interviewee 005). As interviewee (020) reflected 'I felt support was delayed during the pandemic, especially when it was urgent and not something you can wait three to five working days for.' In addition, practitioners had to absorb emotional pressures that were out of their control to influence. Interviewees discussed situations whereby there was a loss of income in the household, deterioration, and dysfunctional relationships, as well as the pressures of primary childcare responsibilities twenty-four hours a day.

Delivering difficult messages to our women during COVID-19 was really hard. Common questions were "why can't you get me a house?" or "why can't you sort out my mental health?" or "why can't you find me childcare help?" Listening to women in crisis was not easy during the pandemic. (interviewee 021)

Interviewees reflected on women feeling 'anxious', 'trapped', 'fearful and 'overloaded' during the pandemic. Many of these factors were beyond the control of both the women and their practitioners but created huge concerns and for some an increase in risk of reoffending.

Supervising women at risk of domestic abuse

Interviewees reflected on the amplification of pre-existing social problems during COVID-19. A critical area of concern for probation practitioners throughout COVID-19 were women at risk of being subjected to domestic abuse. Many women during the pandemic faced heightened insecurity such as stress, loss of income and isolation. In turn, this may have exacerbated the risk of violence at home. Interviewees reflected on the difficulties of supervising high-risk women remotely, exacerbating vulnerabilities for victims of domestic abuse and providing more opportunities for perpetrators to exercise control. As interview (017) highlighted 'we didn't know if women were in a safe environment to talk to us' and this was further mirrored by interview (002) 'we are still talking to women and don't know who is listening to our phone calls in the background.' Therefore, interviewees questioned whether victims of domestic abuse would minimise their current situation if the perpetrator was present during remote supervision. Similar scenarios were explained by practitioners on remote supervision during the most punitive restrictions of COVID-19 for domestic abuse victims.

Our office was always a safe place, and we don't have that now for women. Working with women who are in a domestic abuse relationship, you can't discuss anything because the perpetrator might be in the background. It causes massive safeguarding issues for complex cases. Women want to come into the office, they are desperate to have a safe place to speak to us. (interviewee 010)

There were some serious obstacles to what was considered key elements of probation work with vulnerable and high-risk women. Interviewees discussed considerable tensions on remote supervision and what was considered 'good work.' While remote supervision was used for most women on the caseload, those considered high-risk or vulnerable were visited by practitioners through 'doorstep visits.' The focus of 'doorstep visits' were primarily for risk assessment and safeguarding rather than challenging behaviours or encouraging rehabilitation. Interviewees were generally negative about using 'doorstep visits' for women, viewing it as both impractical and resource-intensive. The impracticality of 'doorstep visits' was vividly depicted by interview (010) as they posed this question; 'would you want to discuss your innermost feelings and personal problems on the doorstep?' In addition, practitioners were concerned about the consequences of their 'doorstep visit' leading to serious further offences. 'If I am stood on the doorstep talking about probation, often they don't want to talk as there is no privacy to do that' (interviewee 003). Interviewees also discussed the resource intensiveness of 'doorstep visits' regarding timings and the need for two staff members at each visit. 'Door stepping seemed pretty pointless, two probation practitioners taking a day out to follow each other around in our cars' (interviewee 017).

Probation practitioners reflected on the devastating impact COVID-19 has had on victims of domestic abuse. This abuse was further escalated, and the availability of support networks ranged from non-existent to limited during the restriction. Practitioners suggested that the restrictions and lockdown rules may have aided further control to perpetrators of domestic abuse. As interviewee (009) discussed 'domestic abuse thrives in isolation' little support available to victims during the earlier restrictions may have been a contributing factor to 'higher rates of disclosed abuse without intervention' (interviewee 006).

During the pandemic it has been very trying for relationships ... we have had disclosures from women where alcohol-fuelled arguments have resulted in extreme violence. Especially looking back at the first lockdown a lot of our women were staying with the perpetrators of domestic violence as there wasn't really anywhere else to go. (interviewee 005)

In addition, practitioners felt uncomfortable in remote contact with very limited knowledge of 'who was in the background and listening in' (interviewee 004) to their telephone calls. Furthermore, practitioners felt unable to have important conversations with vulnerable women 'I was unable to check if my lady or her children were safe as I didn't know whether partners were listening to the call' (interviewee 017). This made practitioners feel 'uneasy', 'concerned', and 'worried' for some of the women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, probation practitioners explored innovative ways to proactively communicate with vulnerable and high-risk women to ensure that they were safe in their own homes. At the height of the pandemic telephone contact was the only provision for women supervised by the probation service. When supervising women remotely interviewees problem solved, posing the question 'how do we get around the fact that perpetrators may be listening to our calls?' Practitioners discussed developing a code with women where they could answer yes or no specifically related to domestic abuse and safeguarding. Examples of closed questions included 'Are you alone?' (Interviewee 009) or 'Is it safe to ask you some questions about your relationship?' (Interviewee 010). In addition, practitioners created codes for women to indicate that their partner was currently present and needed to pause the conversation about relationships or another code for if the women needed to end the call abruptly. Examples included, wrong number, declining cold caller or declining a phone upgrade. Probation practitioners emphasised the importance of checking in with vulnerable and high-risk women but there was a need to proceed 'delicately' (interviewee 006) regarding domestic abuse. Checking in facilitated the opportunity for practitioners to support the most in-need women, provide signposting information to services that were available locally and encourage women to contact emergency services if they felt unsafe in their own homes.

A difficult but rewarding role

Women on probation often present multifaceted problems and challenges to their supervising probation practitioner. The differences between men and women on probation were highlighted across all interviewees. The practitioners believe women and men have different needs and therefore require different supervision strategies. Women were described as "complex" needing more one-to-one discussions around mental health, child protection, emotional management, and relationships (interviewees 013; 015; 016). Interviewees discussed the greater emotionality women would express during supervision often placing greater demand on probation practitioner's time, energy, and skills. Supervising women on probation 'you are not just dealing with their offence you are dealing with the women's whole life' (interviewee 010). As interviewee (001) reflected 'you are not just working with your female case, it's their whole world, their family, their children, their personal life...' Anecdotal evidence collected from the interviews suggested that working with an all-female workload was not popular within the probation practitioner workforce. 'When we're trying to recruit extra staff to the women's team, not a lot of people want to do it' (interviewee 012). The rationale for not wanting to be part of the women's team was perceived to be based on 'the complexities and emotional drainage of an all-women caseload' (interviewee 013). Further exploration of probation practitioners who are willing to work with women and those who are not in an under-researched area. In future studies, it would be useful to explore and compare the perceptions of practitioners working in women-only voluntary sector services.

A strong message taken from all interviewees was the passion, pride and commitment practitioners have working with women on probation. 'I enjoy working with women because they are often complex, chaotic and have a variety of needs' (interviewee 002). Practitioners discussed the enjoyment of their role through providing much-needed support, motivating change, and helping make positive choices with women who are often chaotic and complex. The difficult but rewarding job role is explained in the following way.

We are passionate about working with women as they are more of a challenge. However, this makes getting those positive outcomes more rewarding. Women will share mostly all their problems with you, giving you a truer picture of who they really are. This means you can provide more support for them to contribute towards real rehabilitation. (interviewee 009)

Women who are facing multiple challenges, may encounter a combination of problems such as domestic abuse, substance misuse, homelessness, and mental health issues to mention but a few. Probation practitioners reflected on their 'trauma-informed approach', the need to be 'empathetic' and 'passionate' about making a difference to the women they supervise. The myriad of existing obstacles and issues women face may have been more heightened by COVID-19. Practitioners detailed women had 'a lot to cope with' (interviewee 007) with the impact of restrictions set by the UK government. As interviewee (021) explained 'during the pandemic often women are left to deal with added pressures and issues of family life such as poorly family members, difficulties with home schooling and caring responsibilities of older relatives.' In addition, listening to the women's stories and lived experiences helped probation practitioners to understand priorities, motivations, and triggers to deliver a supportive service that aids rehabilitation and recovery. Interviewees discussed a shared commonality with women on probation as they had an 'understanding of the difficulties women face in day-to-day life' (interviewee 015). This often led practitioners to feel passionate about working with women on probation. As explained below.

I am passionate about working with women on probation as I feel as a female, I can relate to them. I find working with women a more rewarding cohort ... I often find women are more open and forthcoming with their lived experiences through their feelings and emotions. (interviewee 005)

Key workers across the UK had to balance their home and work life during a worldwide pandemic. During the height of COVID-19 probation practitioners carried out supervision with women mainly by telephone contact or doorstep visits for critical cases. As interviewee 019 noted 'we have a duty to protect and support women.' Therefore, carrying out probation work during COVID-19 required resilience, creativity, and adaptability. Earlier studies have highlighted the challenges and barriers, practitioners encountered during the remote delivery of probation services. Similarly, interviewees shared reflections of difficulties working from home, changes to probation practice and balancing home life which also mirrors existing COVID-19 studies. Although challenges and barriers were noted, positive aspects of the job were also highlighted. Probation practitioners recognised their role for women as 'essential'.

I felt that the pandemic had the potential to negatively impact women more than men in the community. I felt a responsibility to support women through the pandemic; women at an increased risk of harm such as domestic abuse, women who were struggling or experiencing a deterioration in their mental health... I felt like I was the support and an outlet for women. (interviewee 016)

Interviewees reflected on making a positive difference on mental health, being the only support service available and monitoring risk during COVID-19. Probation practitioners discussed 'pride in our work' and 'going that extra mile during the pandemic for women on probation.

COVID-19 was a difficult time for everyone, but our women are more vulnerable and most at risk. Some are lonely having had their children removed or contact stopped, some are in an abusive relationship with limited access to safe spaces, some are struggling with home education... Coming into this role was about helping people so during the pandemic going that extra mile to ensure the wellbeing and safety was rewarding... (interviewee 011)

Discussion

Mirroring the findings of other studies on probation practice conducted during COVID-19, probation work significantly changed during this period presenting numerous obstacles to practitioners. 'Having to do complex and challenging probation work from home resulted in considerable burdens to practitioners' (Phillips et al., 2021: 2). Post the Corston Report (2007) there has been a plethora of literature exploring women's experiences of the criminal justice system. However, there has been little attention to exploring the experiences of probation practitioners who supervise these women (Ellis Devitt, 2020; Goldhill, 2016). This study explores the impact of COVID-19 on probation practitioners supporting and supervising women during a worldwide pandemic. The findings offer a unique perspective and contribution to the limited literature on women supervised by probation during the EDM. Firstly, probation practitioners faced several obstacles when supervising and supporting women during COVID-19. In comparison to the general population, people under probation supervision have high rates of drug and alcohol misuse, mental illness, and suicidal ideation (Ministry of Justice, 2018b; Phillips et al., 2018). Probation practitioners reflected on the often multi-faceted needs of women. 'Reflecting on the particularities of women service-users as vulnerable and complex, nested in trauma more often than their male counterparts' (Ellis Devitt, 2020:33). Recognising a substantive increase in a probation practitioner's workload (Rees, 2020) through increased levels of contacts with women heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Probation practitioners questioned whether meaningful work could be completed with women. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2020:11) conveyed 'There was a real tension between the need to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and doing what participants considered to be effective or quality work.' The earlier findings of EDM highlighted the inadequacies of remote supervision. This approach could be suggested to heavily undermine the possibility of providing a trauma-informed approach when supervising women. Therefore, probation work defaulted to welfare checks and basic surveillance (McNeill, 2020).

Secondly, probation practitioners felt heightened welfare concerns over the women they supervised. Practitioners had lengthy discussions with women on topics that were sensitive and difficult in their nature. Remote working was common practice for many during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions because of the EDM. Phillips et al. (2020:3) described supervision conversations as 'incompatible with home working.' Adding extra pressure for probation practitioners when conducting work from home over the telephone (Phillips et al. 2021; Norton, 2020). Discussions with women on subjects such as domestic

abuse or sex workers presented emotional burdens and were particularly challenging to navigate at home. This can lead practitioners to feel emotionally drained (Rees, 2020; Ferreira & Burman, 2022). This discomfort may be further exacerbated in situations where young children are in the next room. This finding has been mirrored across the academic literature (Dominey et al. 2020; Phillips et al. 2021; Phillips, 2022). Supervising women with complex needs has already been suggested to heighten the emotional labour, in particular empathy (Ellis Devitt, 2020). With the pandemic increasing social isolation, COVID-related stress and anxiety would be amplified by additional issues women on probation face. As Woolford (2021:1) suggested 'the greater the priority need the more issues and obstacles women encountered.' Feelings of responsibility for the women's whole life from practical needs such as food vouchers, physical and emotional wellbeing to visitation rights to see their children lingered in the practitioners' minds.

Probation practitioners discussed the struggles of switching 'off mentally' (Rees, 2020) when supervising women during the pandemic, often impacting their own well-being. Interviewees discussed their own mental health challenges from stress and anxiety to fatigue and loneliness. COVID-related distress has been noted among many academic research studies, for example, people working in the criminal justice system (Piquero, 2021; Dunne et al., 2020). Pre-COVID-19 probation practitioners described the integral role of other colleagues in the office to debrief and discuss complex cases. Previous research has highlighted the importance of practitioners turning to colleagues for emotional support (Burke et al., 2020). During the height of COVID-19 adapted working measures only facilitated the opportunity for virtual catchups with colleagues. Recognising this was the only option during extraordinary times, probation practitioners had the reluctance to contact colleagues. Managers were described as approachable and extremely understanding of the demands of balancing the job and home life, however, the phone or video calling could not match a friendly face-to-face informal chat in the office. This consequently resulted in 'decreased emotional peer-based support... given its importance in alleviating the negative effects of performing emotionful work' (Phillips et al., 2021: 429). This finding has important implications for the development and enhancement of the EDM moving forward to ensure probation practitioners are supported.

Thirdly, probation practitioners reflected on their concerns over supervising women subjected to or at risk of domestic abuse during COVID-19. Social distancing measures forced greater social proximity between household members as people had to spend more time at home. Moreover, the potential of social isolation and financial uncertainty may have exacerbated existing conflicts within the household. In addition, COVID-19 and the imposed lockdown measures, gave perpetrators a tool to use for coercion, manipulation, and to induce fear (Women's Aid, 2020). Therefore, the effects of preventing a COVID-19 health crisis may have had an unintended consequence on victims of domestic abuse. During this period domestic abuse escalated. Within the UK there was a rise of 49% in the number of calls to domestic abuse services (Home Office, 2020) and the domestic abuse support app Bright Sky was used 67,685 times during lockdown (Hestia, 2020). Throughout the discussions with interviewees supervising women who were at risk of domestic abuse was a real concern.

Concerns about the effectiveness of the doorstep checks, particularly in

complex cases where domestic abuse featured, also led to practitioner anxiety about the consequences of a serious further offence. (Phillips et al., 2021:434)

Prior to COVID-19 women's domestic abuse support services were already facing a funding crisis. Therefore, had little financial resilience to meet the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic (Women's Aid, 2020). Probation practitioners felt the force of limited networks for victims of domestic abuse, often being the main contact point during times of crisis. Reflecting on the earlier discussions over workload pressures and emotional labour, probation practitioners often found themselves as the face of frontline services with rising demand and limited support both internally and externally. Concurrently, probation practitioners were responsible 'for their own self-care within the organisational setting' and too often the safety and well-being of staff are overlooked' (Ferreira & Burman, 2022: 33).

Fourthly, 'the pandemic brought to the fore the already difficult nature of the job' (Phillips et al., 2021:440) with interviewees reflecting on the nature of their role and obstacles encountered during COVID-19. However, probation practitioners expressed their passion, pride and commitment to their caseload of women kept them going through the hard times. As Ellis Devitt (2020) reflected before the pandemic 'seeing women grow, succeed and even flourish' was a clear reward of the role (2020:6). A similar study found that they 'overwhelmingly provide strong personal, moral, and social reasons for staying in this work, the physical and mental costs and consequences are high' (Ferreira & Burman 202:32). The probation service had to quickly adapt and work flexibly to continue supporting some of the most marginalised people on probation throughout the lockdown restrictions. However, questions must be raised on how much the 'new normal' negatively impacted staff regarding the emotional pressure probation work entails' (Phillips et al., 2021:440). The resilience demonstrated by probation practitioners was fundamental during remote supervision. Although the face-to-face rapport with colleagues was not present practitioners took comfort in knowing that colleagues and managers were at the end of the telephone if really needed. Most interviewees had built up a rapport with their team prior to COVID-19 but would the connection of a team spirit be available for new recruits? Possibly not. In addition, reflecting on **operational practice**, Ellis Devitt (2020) concluded that 'whilst probation practice was highly focused on the service user's experience, less consideration was given to staff' (2020:52). Mirroring this notion, arguably there hasn't been much change felt by operational staff during COVID-19.

The new probation model is grounded in the motto of 'One HMMPs' with the vision of 'working together to protect the public and help people lead law-abiding and positive lives.' The reunification of the probation service has been cautiously welcomed (HMIP, 2021b). However, there remains huge challenges to overcome as evidenced by the disappointing inspection ratings of six probation services as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' (HMIP, 2021b). There is a long road ahead for the probation service to meet acceptable standards of service to reduce reoffending and protect the public. Access to accredited theoretical and skills-based training in trauma-informed practice, may offer professional development opportunities for probation practitioners. Understanding the impact of trauma, may strengthen confidence, build best practice, and has the potential to mitigate emotional pressure on probation practitioners when supervising women. The current

findings offer important considerations for the reunification of probation services, highlighting the key needs of staff to address workload and enhance occupational support; in line with the recommendations from the Institute for Government (2022).

Conclusion

The introduction of the COVID-19 restrictions had huge implications for the probation service as it navigated through the uncharted waters of three national lockdowns. Similar to other key workers, probation practitioners were at the forefront of the pandemic. However, unlike the healthcare sector, the criminal justice system were often the forgotten key workers of the pandemic rarely getting any positive recognition. Supervising, supporting and safeguarding women on probation was already a challenging role and the COVID-19 pandemic only exemplified the difficult nature of this role. As explored, earlier working with vulnerable, high-risk women, both providing a service that manages risk and safeguards added great pressure on probation practitioners. Whilst probation practice has a high focus on the experiences of people on probation, far less consideration has been given to frontline staff and even less so to staff who supervised women. This exploratory study highlighted the blurred lines of probation practice and the emotional turmoil probation practitioners endured as a consequence of being a key worker to women during the pandemic. As the probation service adjusts back to 'normal practice' greater recognition is needed of frontline staff who provided an essential service often at the expense of their own **personal** cost. There would need to be a greater ethical and moral emphasis on the wellbeing of frontline staff. As well as meaningful face-to-face supervision, clinical support and reduction in workload pressure when working with women. This may help give frontline staff the opportunity to recharge post-pandemic. For a workforce that demonstrated pride, passion, and resilience during an extremely turbulent couple of years, the probation service needs to invest in the frontline staff who carried the service during COVID-19.

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