

ARTICLE TITLE

Building Alliances: Community spaces centring justice in times of injustice

Abstract

The numbers of women in prison in England and Wales has risen once again (Prison Reform Trust, 2023), just as women's imprisonment globally rises exponentially (Fair and Walmsley, 2022). Can existing 'community-based alternatives' shift the stubborn use of prison for girls and women? More importantly, how do such approaches engage with the concept of 'justice' for women? This article opens by reflecting on the recent past. What lessons must we learn from the failure of 'gender-responsive' policies of the last two decades? (Berman and Fox, 2010).

Getting things wrong, trying again, taking risks, and experimenting; these are all principles embedded into the imagining and building abolitionist responses (Kaba, 2021). In the main sections of this article, the authors reflect together on recent attempts to convene spaces to centre women's experiences of policing, punishment and (in)justice. In coming together in community, we are reminded of the radical roots of resistance to the criminalisation and punishment of girls and women. These collective moments offer opportunities to build new alliances and energy.

The BJCJ journal was established with the aim 'to encourage debate about the contested meanings of the concept of 'community justice' (Williams, 2002; p1). Our article reflects on collective spaces exploring (in)justice, in recognition that statutory responses too often fail girls and women, with institutional interventions often adding to the harm experienced by girls and women (Clarke and Chadwick, 2023; Clarke and Leah, 2023). The collective offers an opportunity to move beyond a critique of current approaches (Hill-Collins, 1998) to explore how grassroots spaces, shaped by abolitionist principles, can contribute to transformative justice for girls and women.

Keywords

Justice, Collective, Women, Grassroots spaces, Failure, Resistance

Introduction

If the definition of a challenge is an invitation to attempt something new and difficult, both thinking anew about women and justice and writing together for this special issue are welcome challenges. We (the co-authors) think together a lot. Our usual mode is to 'gab'. This is the first time we've written together. In the main section of this article, we follow a conversational, interview or symposium format often used to reflect the collective and dialogic nature of experimenting and dreaming that drives abolitionist ideas (Kaba, 2021; James, 2022; Tchaikovsky, 1983; Day and McBean, 2022). By 'trade', Becky is a researcher and Zara a youth and community worker. These are our tools. Ultimately, we share a love of community and a drive to call out and challenge injustice.

In this article we reflect on what it might mean to draw from abolitionist principles in response to injustices faced by women and girls in our local communities, especially those who find themselves policed or criminalised. How do we 'serve justice' to girls and women who survive harm¹? What role can the wider community or collective play in such responses? These questions are urgent, with rising trends in women's imprisonment globally (Fair and Walmsley, 2022). Our abolitionist principles reflect those of other abolitionist coalitions such as Critical Resistance, who over two decades ago called for the linking of sites of resistance, safety, and justice.

We seek to build movements that not only end violence, but that create a society based on radical freedom, mutual accountability, and passionate reciprocity. In this society, safety and security will not be premised on violence or the threat of violence; it will be based on a collective commitment to guaranteeing the survival and care of all peoples. (Incite! Critical Resistance, 2001).

This paper opens with a reflection on the limits of pragmatism. The necessity to recognise the confines of support provided 'through' punishment, for example when punishment is delivered within supportive spaces like a women's centre. Together, we then explore possibilities of justice for women when led by abolitionist principles. This paper considers responses to injustice and harm experienced by girls and women outside of existing 'criminal justice sector' systems (Cooper and Mansfield, 2020). Drawing on experiences from the recent Manchester Women's Justice Collective events, we reflect on the energy and power of solidarity and collective hope alongside the challenges, the 'messy' and 'bumpy' journey, that is building coalitional spaces to resist injustice (Day and McBean, 2022).

The Limits of Reform – Towards Abolition

Over recent decades there have been many attempts, across various jurisdictions, to 'gender' the justice system for criminalised girls and women². These pragmatic attempts

¹ 'Although the justice system brought me to justice, it has not served me justice' (Freya). Quote from <https://barrowcadbury.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Stories-of-Injustice-women-and-JE.pdf>

² The use of term 'criminalised' girls and women is to denote the significance of

focussed on improving both community and custodial punishments often acknowledge the interpersonal and structural context of the lives of women who are selected for punishment. This includes a recognition of the high levels of victimisation, both domestic abuse and sexual violence, as well as the fact that many criminalised women are economically marginalised (Carlen 1985; 1988). In seeking to offer a 'radical' policy response in England and Wales, the Corston report (re)framed these structural relations and context as women's 'vulnerabilities'. The recommendations advocated for an expansion of women's centres in the community, as 'one-stop-shops' that can 'prevent women entering or returning to the criminal justice system' (Corston, 2007).

A raft of gender-responsive initiatives have flowed from Corston's policy report, including a 'whole system approach' in Manchester that sought to target every 'gate' for women entering the criminal justice system (Kinsella et al, 2018). Captured in the evaluation of this approach, and many other evaluations and reviews, women attending women's centres often report a positive and life affirming experience in these spaces of support (Women in Prison, 2022).

'Women's centres are vital to empowering women and supporting them to make positive progress... For women facing multiple disadvantage, having a strong support system makes a world of difference. Again, this is where women's centres become invaluable' (Lewis, 2024)

However, there have always been challenges. From the vantage point of hindsight, we can see the limited nature of the reforms proposed in Corston's recommendations (Clarke and Chadwick, 2018).

In multiple evaluations acknowledging the beneficial experiences for some women were other concerning findings. These included a repeated finding that young women and racialised women were consistently 'missing' from the women's centres (Kinsella et al, 2018). Other research examining the impact of women's centres found that women on community punishment orders were often out of touch, not attending and women were being imprisoned for breach or recall (Clarke, 2004; Kinsella et al, 2018). A broader indicator of the potential for such responses to facilitate decarceration, that as the network of women's centres has grown, the number of women going to prison has not fallen (Clarke and Chadwick, 2018).

It could be argued that such limits to reform were entirely predictable. For those observing the Canadian Correctional System's experience, arguably one step ahead of the U.K. at that time, it quickly became clear that:

'The dominant feature of penal reform is its seeming inability to fracture the prison/punishment nexus' (Kelly Hannah-Moffat, 2002 p. 217)

institutional intervention and failure as a central feature of the criminalisation of girls and women (Chadwick and Little, 1987; Seagrave and Carlton, 2012; Clarke and Chadwick, 2018, 2023; Clarke and Leah, 2023).

A Griffins-sponsored UK-based research project in 2004 provided an opportunity to hear from women on probation who were not attending their statutory appointments but were voluntarily accessing support elsewhere (Clarke, 2004). Women were clear that they wouldn't access support connected to probation, because they were left feeling 'patronised' and 'angry' by social services and probation (spoken about as if one and the same). Being failed by these services in the past, especially for girls and women with experiences of care or of having their children removed from their care, women expressed that they would not 'get over' their distrust and anger (Clarke, 2004). More recent research, using feminist participatory methods, reveals how women navigating support through punishment from women's centres experience this as 'playing a rigged game' (Harding, 2021). Such research surfaces the tensions of even well-intended intervention in delivering valued and emancipatory community spaces for girls and women.

Some of the spaces and centres supporting criminalised women, including those included in Griffin's research (Clarke, 2004), were long standing women's centres with radical origins. These predated, but then overlapped with, attempts to 'gender' the justice system. Many, such as Clean Break and Women in Prison, emerged from radical grassroots, established by women surviving the prison and demanding change in the 1970s and 80's³. In challenging contexts, with increasing tensions around funding, these groups have arguably sought to retain a 'visionary pragmatism' (Hill-Collins, 1998, p188). The commitment of these organisations to 'call out' injustices and campaign for visionary change, has coexisted alongside more pragmatic approaches to advocacy and support of women caught up in the criminal justice system. Yet this relationship has been stretched further in the context of neoliberal policies of 'gendered' justice and wider austerity welfare cuts (Cooper and Mansfield, 2020).

Many women's centres have increasingly relied on state, and specifically Ministry of Justice, funding to support criminalised women. For some this has included taking on contracts to deliver community punishment alongside engaging with the government's policy reforms. Such pressures have limited the parameters of genuine debate about how the delivery of these services might serve women 'justice'. As happened in relation to services supporting women fleeing violence and abuse, an 'uncritical support for state-based solutions' reflects a wider set of neoliberal politics and has served to sever such responses from 'our histories of radical resistance' (Day and McBean, 2022).

In this context, the journey of the group Sisters Uncut is a vital reflection of how to shift horizons through the work of embedding abolitionist principles – 'abolition is a road, not a destination' (Thesis 2 of Day and McBean, 2022). Abolitionist principles and thinking push us to ask new questions, as well as to expect failure and value this as a source of learning and growth. At a time when the number of girls and women in prison is increasing again, and the number of those harmed while experiencing 'justice' also rises, we must create opportunities to be challenged. Opportunities to engage with new visions and ideas, to experiment with transformative and radical approaches 'serving' women justice in

³ [A History | Clean Break](#); [Women in Prison — Our Story](#)

community, are needed more than ever.

The potential of the abolitionist imagination is at the heart of the collaboration of the authors of this paper, Our emerging collective hopes to spark a new energy, language, and politics to conversations around 'women' and 'justice' in Manchester. This article offers a space for us to reflect on these new spaces for dialogue and action.

The Manchester Women's Justice Collective

The MWJC is an abolitionist experiment. We are collectively asking 'what happens if...

... We centre 'justice' as an idea.

... We hold a space that acknowledges the gendered harms and failures of systems to deliver justice for girls and women.

... We practice an ethics of care that prioritises connections and dreaming.'

It is therefore both purposeful and organic. In recognition that there are no immediate or 'quick-fix' solutions to gendered harms, we are curious to see what happens if we continue to hold spaces for local girls and women that acknowledge pain and trauma, share in care and joy, support imagination and dreaming. We share a desire to try something new, in recognition that many women's spaces can actively exclude and fail so many girls and women.

The Manchester Women's Justice Collective (MWJC) was founded by us - Zara and Becky - in early 2023, both by accident and with intention. An opportunity arose to host a Manchester based community meeting in partnership with Stop Watch UK. The Stop Watch Girls and Women project aims to challenge the ongoing invisibility of girls and women in community, research, and policy debates around the institutional harms of racist policing and punishment (Ritchie, 2017). The Manchester event had the explicit goal of supporting girls and women to share experiences and concerns regarding policing in the city. It was a credit to the Stop Watch Girls and Women team that their energy and investment in our collective vision enabled us to create a caring and nurturing space.

A central objective of the MJWC spaces is to create spaces to be in community with one another, grounded in care, celebration, and protection. Acknowledging that while we are surrounded by violence, the spaces we create for ourselves can and should be, feel and look different, as we resist and dream together, ensuring that those who arrive feel provided for and listened to. We know the impact of curating our spaces in this way is hope, respite, joy, energy, sustenance, and strength. Many attendees reported that this energy was something they had not experienced before. Meanwhile, others who have previously been engaged in feminist and anti-racist struggles had not sensed this collective energy for a long time.

At that first event, across two spaces, over 75 local girls and women took part. It was both a challenging and transformative space to experience. The experiences shared about policing were clearly difficult to both speak and hear. Perhaps inevitably, the contributions spoke to the interlocking nature of harms: of prisons, borders, and failures in social care.. The potential to build coalitions of women across different fights for justice was clearly revealed as a result.

'In recognising the interconnectedness of systems of state violence, abolition can be the basis of a new solidarity: one that acknowledges the specific experiences of violence in particular communities, whilst building a unified internationalist resistance' (Day and McBean, 2022, p193).

A sense of power and healing that was released in the spaces of the collective was revealed in the days that followed via people getting in touch and expressing feelings of affirmation and encouragement. It exposed how few spaces exist for women and girls to be in community together in our city, where we can speak of safety alongside the need to resist carceral systems (Day and McBean, 2022). Bringing together our collective anger at the failure of systems to protect us, with the gendered and racialised injustices at the heart of systems that police and punish, enables us to acknowledge a central feature of the criminalisation of girls and women: that girls and women survive and are punished in the context of this failure (Clarke and Leah, 2023; Kaba, 2021).

As the MWJC spaces developed, the focus has remained on 'What is justice for women and girls?' Our events and spaces, now totalling five in fourteen months, have often included performance and film. We've used these to ensure contributions are led by those with experience of the harms of policing, prisons, and immigration. Many events have included local women performing spoken word, music, and poetry. We have also partnered with other women's arts and support services from London. Clean Break theatre brought their play 'Catch' to a local community centre in April 2023 and then in March 2024 we screened their film 'Hope' at multi arts centre HOME (an arts venue in the city). We hosted London's Hibiscus 'Women Inside' project, screening their film and speaking about the heritage project.

Pictures from MWJC events during 2023



Poem written during a session of MWJC (April 2024)

I see you.

I see your pain, I see your struggle, I see your power.

I see your strength, I see your light, I see your creativity.

I see your vision, I see your hope.

I see your emptiness, I see your anxiety, I see your thoughts.

Mother nature sees you.

I see your peace, I see your movement, I see your love.

I see your sisterhood, I see your heart.

I see you.

I see you.

By Sandra

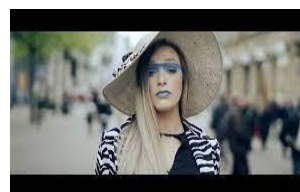
Lyrics of song performed at MWJC (July 2023)

Here's my soul on a page, it's raining, raining. But I see the sun.

And they know my face, they know my name, but they don't know me, no more.

I lost my soul, I let that go, I felt that flow. Felt power, power.

Pavia Ward 'Living Free'



Our collective is made up of women and girls who have/are surviving the violence of systems of policing, prisons, borders, mental health, and social care. Our collective is a community, in defiant pursuit of justice. Our collective is setting out to build a new collective outside of the state or other organisations is an acknowledgement that reforming our systems, does not and will not get us justice. We must dismantle and rebuild anew. This call to turn away from reformist strategies in response to both institutional failure and harm is at the heart of an internationalist abolitionist feminism. In the introduction to 'Abolition. Feminism. Now', the road map offered is for others to pick up and build with. Both the MWJC and the collective writing of this paper is in response to this call.

Rather than read this short book and the snapshot of campaigns, organizational formulations, and analysis we offer as a road map – as prescriptive tools for the present and future... we suggest an engagement with the goal of our collective writing: to expand dialogue, practice reflection and more.' (Davis, Dent, Meiners and Richie, 2022; – p. xiv)

The MWJC is still in its formative stages, but we remain hopeful in the possibilities of building solidarity and a world where we can all experience justice. In both coming together as the MWJC, and the writing of this paper, 'a sense of connectedness between people who are simultaneously similar and different is what we call solidarity' (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012; p307)

A Conversation: Envisioning Justice, Building Solidarity

What is justice for girls and women?

Z: This is still a question that I've never been able to find an answer for, other than

generalised things, of basic needs being met, of freedom, liberation, comfort, care, healing. But what that tangibly looks like for me, would be different for you, would be different for other people. My thing is that I'd always come to justice in my work from the perspective of a general 'what is justice for everyone?' rather than specifically for women and girls. And then we have this, that in a lot of ways the focus of my work around policing, punishment, and prisons, has become centred around boys and men. The statistics and the data amplify their experience.

So, there's an erasure of the experience of the women and girls that are living alongside the boys and the men being harmed. And also, with how they're directly harmed. So, because in the data and our minds the scale that relates to women and girls isn't as high, it isn't spotlighted, there isn't attention drawn to it.

Yet my work in social justice movements, experiences working with youth, it's always been women that have surrounded me in the work. The women that are driving it. A lot of that, a lot of the thinking, but also a lot of the care. So, it was never really like 'oh, I need to go away and do work around women and girls', I suppose in the past I'd always thought, well, if we make things better for boys and men, it will get better for women and girls anyway. I think, even for myself, justice here is about stopping the erasure of women and girls, bringing them to the centre of the conversations of justice.

Doing the Stop Watch event, even in the planning of that event together, when it became about centring women and girls' experiences, that was a different way of approaching a space. And then going into that space where it was, only women, girls, and marginalised genders, it was like, oh, this is a different feel. I'm thinking ****. Right. OK, there's something here that like, people are hungry for this focus on justice.

B: It did feel so different, right? What we created for the Stop Watch event, you know, that space felt so different. I think about spaces that I've gone into around 'women and girls' related to justice, it's either exclusively about their experiences of harm from other people, interpersonal violence, you know, what is called a violence against women and girls' sector. Or it's about women and punishment, the 'female offenders' conversations. In those spaces we rarely think about how institutions are violent to women and girls, how the failure to protect women is at the heart of that injustice. It is only as my work has led me to campaign spaces, to activist groups, to family groups, all women led, that questions of women and justice have been central.

Z: What I think the difference was for me with this work that we've done is that in every other space where it's about violence committed against women and girls, whether that is sexual abuse, whether it's murder, whether it's domestic violence, even with the state violence, women and girls are positioned as victims and survivors, depending on who you speak to, who's holding that space, even how the people in that space deem themselves.

Whereas what it feels like in the spaces of the collective, here women are resisters of violence. We are thinking of ourselves collectively. If you look at like policy and initiatives and stuff that are happening like in NGOs, or by the local authority and whatever, even the stats and the data, it's always centred about the individual. This was something about

women as a collective, and our collective experience.

Even in making our own places, that is resistance. It's not just about surviving. It's about empowering each other. It's about being defiant. I think that's the word that I'm looking for, collective defiance.

B: I absolutely feel this, it is about growing collective power, growing resistance, growing that determination to change things for us all. Listening to you now, justice then is as much about acknowledgement and recognition. Pushing against what have become the 'automatic reflexes', like that when we talk about justice or injustice, we centre boys and men. Or, when we talk about violence against women and girls, we individualise those experiences and only think about interpersonal violence.

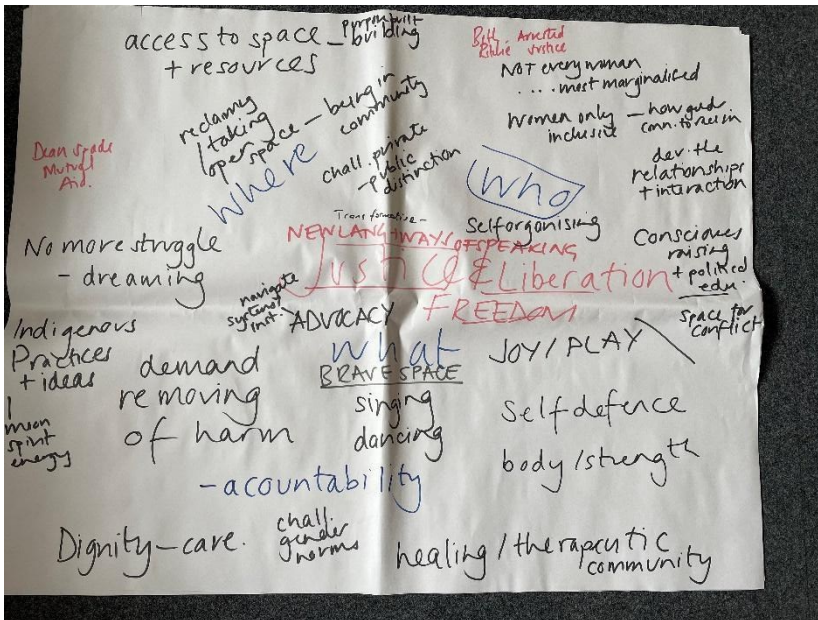
An acknowledgement that women have power, that women are resisting, and we build from this point. Women are at the centre of so many justice campaigns, they are the heart of that work. Whether organised campaigns, or the mums and sisters who will not give up on the injustice experienced by their family. The work that's done to challenge the harms and the failures of the justice system have often been led by women. To see an acknowledgement of that, to recognise what that means collectively, to draw strength from that knowledge.

Z: A big thing for me when thinking about resisting injustice is when I think about how many women are in prison for defending themselves around the world. How many women are punished for fighting back against harm. It is essential that we understand the rules of strategies, loads of charities, policies, agendas, events, programmes saying they're focussed on violence against women and girls, but the work is being done by the same people and organisations that are causing harm. I don't know by who, or when, I was introduced to that phrase 'your oppressor will never be your saviour' but it's something that I have clung to ever since.

In this work, it's not about going begging hat in hand to the Council, listen to me and include me in your policy or 'five-year strategy'. Instead, we come together as community. We are not looking to those spaces that are causing injustice for our justice.

Of course, I also understand that for some people who are coming into the collective spaces, they are working in ways connected to the council, the state, and its services. Being able to hold space for them, us all, to go on a journey to understand where that comes from. To think about why that might be feeling like an answer in the immediate, but recognising in the long term, how it can be the answer.

B: When we held the round table in the afternoon at one of the events, when asked in those small groups to think about what justice, liberation, freedom for girls and women could look like, how quickly, I mean literally, in 20 minutes we put down a blueprint of what it could look like.



Picture from Women's Justice Collective Roundtable (April 2023)

We imagined an alternative set of values, resources, spaces, interactions, collaborations, initiatives, you know that that could and should be there. That would provide that alternative to the current responses. In those ideas we sought to respond to experiences of interpersonal violence, but also to resist institutional violence and survive structural violence.

We must be able to hold in the framework of our imaginations the many forms of violence, harm and injustice girls and women face. The violence of unpaid labour and crap wages for work, the totally inadequate welfare support that leave families, and often women, unable to afford to feed their loved ones or heat their home. This stuff alongside the devastation of sexual violence and domestic abuse, the injustice weaponization of social work or harms of police state violence.

Our current approaches in the criminal legal system mean that so many of the girls and women surviving the most toxic mix of these harms - economic, interpersonal, structural, and institutional violence - are criminalised. We punish them. Knowing this makes it hard, perhaps impossible, for me to engage with the system as it is, as something that can deliver justice.

Z: I personally believe that a strong feminist movement is anti-capitalist in nature. Capitalism is propped up by white supremacy and its neoliberal ideologies mean that you get paid dependent on what position you hold in society. Well, naturally, the positions that women hold in the workplace are usually lower paid, insecure, precarious contracts. Which means that we naturally can't pay our bills easily.

I remember my mate's mum got sent to prison for not paying council tax. She had two jobs! Do you know what I mean! And then she went to prison, the kids went into care. We must think about where these structures have come from, how it has come to function the way it does. That mapping of a new way you just spoke about, what is the big stopper, the barrier. What's in the way of us creating the systems we want... it's to access resources and use them as we need them to be used. Not how others who are so detached and far removed see as the best fit. We must recognise that there is a motive behind how resources are currently used by the state and services and that motive often erases the very real needs of women.

What is the MWJ Collective?

In this final section of our conversation we explore what the collective is, how it might be defined now, and what the next steps might look like.

Z: The collective is about not being formal, not being too structured. Yeah, there's a plan, but the feel is to come and be yourself and let us embrace each other. About us believing in a connection. It's not about networking; it's about connecting and bringing and forming relationships. And I think this is what we've both probably learned separately away from here and brought together. That idea that strong relationships are the foundation of any good work and strong connections is how you can find the magic. A lot of the reason that we were able to get to the places that we got is because you'd invested in so many relationships in that room and that there was already a trust established when people entered.

B: I imagine it, feel it, as energy. I know it can sound strange; I measure the space on the energy. There's been a different energy and there's a very particular energy, can't put finger on it or name it but it is there.

In the interactions, this energy is encouraged through how we frame the interactions. You've given me lots to think about in how we do that – what it takes in very small ways to create opportunity for different energy between people. How we can centre girls and women, not to be exclusive or to exclude the need for care for people of marginalised genders, and of boys and men.

I'm thinking of a few moments, the one at the summer event where River led us in building the collective poem. As they started us off, I could sense the uncertainty in the room, but there was trust and I watched people move from 'hmm what the heck is this all about', to 'YES, here's my word, I'm in'. In all the shared spaces there have been some lovely moments, that was one. There's been quite a few around sharing food too.

Z: There's something about breaking bread together.

B: There is, in sharing. How wonderful it felt at the Stop Watch session where the wonderful sister had set up a table and shared her knowledge of herbs and salts and oils with us all. Encouraging us to make our own tea bags, lip scrubs, hand oils. Doing that together in community was so joyful. When we are in the space acknowledging harm to have this joy and be building connections is so important.

Z: And I remember thinking to myself, at the event at MMU in the summer, it's important that the majority of people in this room are not boys and men, but it's also great to have folks with us, comrades in the experience. And that women were from so many generations, backgrounds, and communities. That energy and willingness to engage, cooking up the poem together, being in the moment together.

I'd describe it as an energy, the spirituality wavelength. As I've connected more and more with my own identity, heritage, indigenous roots and start to understand, not everyone's a mother, but we all hold like matriarchal energy and it is in an emotional capacity, an ability to empathise, but be firm and stand strong and embrace the uncomfortable. Embrace the difficult, embrace the challenge.

B: There's something that you've just hit on there, it's important. Again, how the space is different. So, I'm now thinking of the workshop discussion after Clean Break had performed *Catch* in the community centre. The play is about women facing housing, addiction and mental health issues, the potential for women's centres to respond to different women.

Now I've been in lots of spaces where there is a conversation about women coming out of prison or being on probation, but never where the idea of community, the challenges felt by communities, has come like that. There was such care, but also a real talk. An acknowledgement from women in the local community of older generations about how difficult it is to have women like the characters in the play, with addiction and mental health, as a neighbour.

It was not said out of judgement or unkindness, there was clearly an empathy, but there was a sense of it being hard for others. If we want to challenge judgement, challenge policing, and support women in community, we must take care to consider others in the community, their feelings. A big part of that conversation was about how, in moments of crisis, there is nobody else to call but the police, but you don't want to call the police, so you're stuck. These tensions must be part of the abolitionist dialogue about women and justice.

It can be so hard to live in community, in family, with others who are struggling. Especially when there are no wider structures of support outside the police. The demand to speak about this, in a way that was gentle yet firm, was so instructive. In policy, academic or even some campaigning spaces, others in the community are not part of the conversation, in any way really, as subject or contributor. We can want to do the right thing for others in our community you know, without that meaning that we erase our own needs.

Z: Yes, I'm thinking about the last event that we did, the screening of 'Hope'. In that space we had women who work in the system, we have women that have been harmed by the system, we have women who are disrupting the system. Young women who were just starting their journey, others who are veterans to causes around women and injustice.

The film was a great way of connecting with the stories of the women in Hope, but it was as much if not more the conversation that came afterwards, prompted by the film, eating cookies, listening to some of the elders who have had to work in systems but never wanted to work within it, trying to make sense of it. Reflecting that if they don't do it, somebody else is going to do it. Being in the system but wishing for more.

I also love how migrant women's voices have been central to the spaces. Often in the policy or academic spaces, there is focus on a particular group and creating a separate space. Our position has been to say no, we share an identity as women and girls in this space for all of us to speak and listen. It's part of the solidarity building, to create and share focus on spaces.

What next? How do we keep building?

B: We both feel that we're coming to a moment where it's time to collectively think 'what next?' We started to ask others 'where do we see this going?'

Z: I think we've been lucky with, well I wonder whether this is because it has been women and girls rather than luck, difficult things have been raised, and challenge has been done without ego. One thing for me, that has been absent from the space, any of the spaces is ego.

There is something about the space that is important too, we've not done this because we want to extract from people. We want to connect with folks. We do this because we want people to form something that can support and nourish, be powerful. We're not doing it to go to the mayor's office and say, look, we've been doing this work now, give us some money. Or to go in for a tender or set up a charity. That's not the thinking here. The thinking is there's a space.

B: It's very hard isn't it because we're in the space, and something is happening but how do we move it forward without being drawn into a systems approach? Repeating some of those steps that shifted radical responses to being so institutionally driven.

We know that there has been such a decimation of funding, from both outside of the state and statutory funding, for women's centres and community spaces. Services, spaces, and resources defunded, underfunded, and then funded only through the Ministry of Justice. But we must be honest, recognise that even if funding were solid, there are consistently some women and girls that women only spaces fail to reach and serve. Girls and women who are also disproportionately experiencing harms and injustice, young women, those with care experiences, racialised groups of women. Our vision here is collective power, collective energy, what might sustain us all, you know, so that we're prioritising spaces that can be inclusive from the start.

Z: And this is the thing for me, right, I don't need a report. I don't need another report. I don't need another piece of research. I'm in contact with the people. I don't need the state or the professor to write something to tell me what my community tells me. I don't need that validation at that moment.

What I do need is validation from my community and the women around me that we're experiencing things and that together we can make sense and respond. What we're seeing is that the priority is whatever anyone brings to the table that day. There's something beautiful about not having to work in those same systems, like consultations. I don't need to consult because I'm in community.

B: It feels like we're naturally moving to talk about our ambitions, the hopes. I've found this quite challenging. In my working life as a researcher, engaged in evaluation, there is a model, and we put it in place and then explore how it has been implemented and if it 'works'. This is totally different. Our approach in the MWJC is organic. It's about the people and creating space for good energy. It's hard to let go of needing those plans and measures! You seem a lot less worried.

Z: Sure, if this was a work thing, I'd be like, right? What's the aim? What's the target? What outcomes I'm looking for. But it's less about the target. It's about the work, the investment. This is something that I was taught by a man, my mentor, who wouldn't call himself a feminist, but he's been my biggest fan, supporter, and motivator. He always said that if you focus on the quality, you'll naturally hit the needed outcome.

We're using the language of community, like in our dialogue about hopes for the future? What visions? What dreams do we have because we have brought in that abolitionist thinking and values into the space. We've not been just like, burn everything down to the ground. Dismantle our system. Well, I have definitely said those things, but I've not 'gone in'. Ha.

I think we've brought that abolitionist energy into the space of like, we're not all right with what's happening now and what exists. We want something new. We can't find something new by going down the same route of reform. So, let's try something different. And me and you talked right in the beginning about how women sit around the table at home, on the estate, on their streets, having a brew setting the world to rights, right? That was the energy we're after.

B: Having an imagination, which in some ways isn't the big or wild imagination, just a belief, that those things in and of themselves can be what it takes to make change. Such a big part of delivering justice for girls and women is working against the sense of isolation. You know, creating space for discussion and dialogue, 'seeing' each other as has happened. We can value each other both individually but also collectively.

Z: You know, we keep coming back to that question, 'what is justice?' Justice is a journey. It's an active pursuit.

B: Ok so now we're talking the abolitionist idea of the unfinished. Striving for and believing in the possibility of justice is where it can be created.

Z: Yep. And I think and for me, if I had to hope, well, I mean my hope is that someone's gonna read this paper and throw 100K at the collective and say, 'Have fun, crack on'! We do need resources, to provide a women's retreat, to put on more sessions that any of the collective want, to be able to feed everybody a nice hearty meal, to pay people for their time for being there and start to have the room to actually create systems of care that prevent criminalisation and interactions with systems of state violence.

B: Hmmm sure, so we don't have to collect all bus fare receipts and have that feeling of people having to prove something for a couple of quid that they've spent to get here but they desperately need back.

Z: Yeah, shite like that. Penny pinching for whatever we do have. Seriously though, my hope is that we have more people join us. More people get involved in the planning and the facilitating that they feel able to say, hey, yeah, I've seen that you've got a session on, Can I do something? Can I present? Can I share about this?

B: Absolutely, my hope is that it continues to have that joyful energy. Whether it's sharing space in food, in being creative in going places and experiencing new things. All going to the theatre, and howling with laughter together, you know, like that joy and fun. Being a girl, being a woman can sometimes, you know, be really just hard work and heavy and you know. If we can share joy alongside sharing in the tough conversations about harm, that would be something.

My other hope is that we find more ways for the collective to involve women in the prison. To breakdown those boundaries of the prison walls. There are women in prison serving very long sentences, or others who are being released and have little support, practical or otherwise. I don't know how we do it, but I am putting it out there as a clear intention.

I have faith though, doing this with you Zara and the wider collective is giving me a new energy. A new language that reflects a set of politics I can connect to and feel. An energy that can only come from being in community, being part of imagining and building alternative spaces to challenge injustice.

The Future: Building solidarity to challenge injustice.

By way of conclusion, we now reflect on some of the key issues the paper raises. We initially summarise the main themes and points surfaced, before moving to make some concluding comments that we are keen to hold on to and engage in dialogue about with others. Support for criminalised girls and women is too often connected to their policing and punishment and almost exclusively delivered by or through state-funded spaces. Such work often leaves out of frame questions of justice, the rights of women, whether in terms of basic needs such

as accommodation and food, for legal advice or for invested therapeutic care⁴. In moving forward, and beyond critique, we make the case for collective and grassroots building of alternative support spaces for girls and women. In these spaces a centring of those most marginalised, policed and punished, can be understood in the context of wider concerns regarding social, economic, legal and political justice. To do this we anticipate that such spaces will need to be built outside of statutory systems, engaging with visionary and transformative ideals both in how we organise and fund, in challenge to both interpersonal and institutional harm (Day and McBean, 2021; Cooper and Mansfield, 2020).

MWJC reflects the seeds of such possibilities. It has grown organically. Our spaces prompt a new potential for solidarity building in Manchester. A series of energising interactions have supported the linking of sites of struggle and enabled new connections. In the MWJC we have engaged with ideas of (in)justice in community. In doing so broadening our concept of justice, to that of freedom, liberation, and love. Where those entering the collective from varied standpoints feel seen and sense their power.

If and how this space is feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, abolitionist, or any and all of these positions, remains to be explored. The authors have begun to consider how, as just two people, our notions of these concepts, politics and principles are different, sometimes in tension and evolving. Our hope for the collective is that it can be a space that is inclusive of the concerns, energy and politics of all those who come and share space with us. We recognise a practical need for funding of the basics. A space, with heat and food, money for transport and a paid recognition of time of key contributors and facilitators. Moving forward, the question of how to build momentum must include exploration of how we actively include women behind walls, in prisons, immigration detention or mental health facilities.⁵

Across all the spaces we have shared, different circles of girls and women have come out, showing a hunger to challenge injustices and be part of building a new way of relating to each other. The spaces have centred and been led by women with experience of injustice; girls and women who have been policed and criminalised, seeking spaces to acknowledge and resist these harms, including working class women of older generations ignored by social policy, creating their own spaces for support and well-being. Migrant women in a daily challenge to resist the incessant oppression of immigration policies.

In partnering with Clean Break, Hibiscus and Women in Prison our events have a direct

⁴ See for example Graph p12 – reports that the least common provision in women’s centres related to accommodation provision (42%), food bank access (42%), lobbying or campaigning activities (16%), immigration advice (5%), there was no legal advice listed although recognised as a need in the report, and only therapeutic support for to respond to sexual violence or childhood abuse (11%). This raises questions about why such spaces struggle to prioritise issues of justice and responding to the rights of women. [The-value-of-Womens-Centres-report.pdf \(womeninprison.org.uk\)](https://www.womeninprison.org.uk/The-value-of-Womens-Centres-report.pdf)

⁵ See for example the ongoing and inspirational work of Sister’s Inside [Abolition - Sisters Inside Inc](https://www.abolition-sisters.org.uk/)

connection to groups with radical origins: women's campaigns and spaces established in the 1970/80's in direct response to the harms of criminalisation and punishment.⁶ The contributions made by these groups is immeasurable. A space to reignite the vision and principles of the pioneers of these groups is needed now more than ever. Interviewed when the campaign group Women in Prison was just three months old, founder Chris Tchaikovsky acknowledged so many of the tensions that remain present today: How to retain the focus on challenge and campaigning yet respond to the immediate needs of women? How to draw funding without compromise? How to acknowledge the varied standpoints and injustices experienced by women, without fragmenting the collective calls for justice? What stands out to us in this interview, is her willingness to fail. Her desire to keep 'thinking things through', the importance of dialogue in recognition it is messy: 'Of course, we could go wrong. We're completely fallible.' (Tchaikovsky, 1983, p3). So little has changed. The disproportionate sentencing of some women. The use of prison as a response to gendered social problems. The judgement, harm, and death of criminalised women. Furthermore, the number of women subject to punishment is more than double what it was at that time (Spare Rib, 1983). An opportunity has grown to build solidarity with communities of women that are intersectional and intergenerational. By centring questions of justice and contributions of women who are marginalised, ignored, failed, and criminalised, we can create a space for abolitionist experimenting in what is a deeply reformist society.

We see the idea of justice as a practice that we build together, with an explicit focus on removing systems and institutions that contribute harm and injustice in the lives of girls and women. We expect that some things won't 'work' or reach all affected communities. If we keep building, with clear opportunities for dialogue, reflection and learning, we will grow. We anticipate some dilemmas and contradictions, working in community means taking risks, getting it wrong and letting things go.

Building sites of resistance requires thinking about physical and conscious spaces, through dialogue and feeling held, different perspectives and understandings can be shared. Building solidarity is prioritised over having clear or immediate demands or finalised solutions. Justice is a journey, as is the practise of dismantling systems of harm and replacing them with systems of healing and care. This is true for all systems, which affect women and girls, and everyone else. We see this work is part of a wider international grassroots liberation movement; begun long before any of us were born, continuing long after we are gone. The words 'brick by brick' are literal, not just metaphoric. Our ambitions for the collective stands on the experiences of those before us: women's groups in Manchester, in London, across the world, who have been in constant dialogue about the complementary actions of theory and practice that will serve women justice.

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⁶ See footnote '3' and [Girls and young women's research project - StopWatch \(stop-watch.org\);](#)
[The Women Inside - Hibiscus Initiatives;](#)

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