

Research Paper

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‘Hell hath no fury..?’ The experiences of women convicted of serious violence

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Executive Summary

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Background

This research was initially inspired by my observations and experiences whilst in role as Women's Strategy Lead in the North West Probation region between 2018 and 2021. At the time, this was a new role introduced as part of the Female Offender Strategy (MOJ, 2018), with a remit to drive and improve local outcomes for women in contact with the criminal justice system. At the time, the majority (60%) of women on the North West Probation Service caseload had a current offence classed as 'violent' but there was a corresponding lack of available staff training or structured interventions targeted at working with this group. As such, probation officers were reliant on male-based theories of violence to inform assessment and to utilise male-orientated cognitive behavioural methods of intervention, which are not appropriate or relevant to women's lived experience (e.g. Covington and Bloom, 2003; Kaschak, 1992). Given the primary role of probation to manage risk and protect the public, the lack of a coherent gender-specific understanding and related approach to working with women convicted of serious violence was therefore problematic.

Research Aims

The aim of this research was two-fold. Firstly, to understand more about women convicted of serious violence through exploring their lived experiences, including histories of trauma, and their own reflections and beliefs about the aetiology of these offences and secondly, to develop knowledge on ways of working that are (and are not) useful and effective in working with women convicted of serious violence, with the aim of facilitating the development of more woman-centred programmes and interventions within the Probation Service.

Methodology

Shaped by the above-stated aims, the research design utilised a qualitative approach focussed on exploring lived experience within a small sample group of seven women. The decision was made to utilise semi-structured interviews as the singular data collection method. This form of interviewing was chosen as it 'allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants' responses and the

investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise' (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p57).

Similarly, a decision was taken to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) to interpret the data collected. Typically, IPA is a research method utilised to understand how particular experiences - for example, an event, relationship or process - have been understood from the perspective of particular people within a particular context. The highly individual nature of women's experience and expression of anger and violence therefore made IPA a logical choice owing to its capacity to consider the diversity and variability of human experience (Willig, 2001).

This research design necessitated a purposive sampling strategy (Miles and Huberman, 1994) enabling women with relevant lived experience – those who had committed a serious violent offence and were being supervised within the North West region – to be identified. The aim here was to increase the depth (as opposed to breadth) of understanding (Palinkas et al., 2015), selecting respondents that were 'most likely to yield appropriate and useful information' (Kelly, 2010, p317).

Key Findings

This research set out with the intention to explore the experiences of women convicted of serious violence, including their histories of trauma and their own reflections and beliefs about the factors relevant to their violent offending. Three key findings emerged:

(1) The prevalence of trauma

Confirming the wide body of literature on the extensive trauma histories of criminalised women and those in custody (e.g., Bloom et al, 2003; Bloom and Covington, 2003; Belknap, 2015; Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2017), all of the women interviewed described experiencing violence within the home as both children *and* adults. Other traumatic experiences were wide-ranging, and included rape, the loss of a child through adoption, the loss of a parent to suicide and the murder of a sibling. It is impossible to generalise this prevalence of significant trauma as representative of women in the criminal justice system, but the commonality and breadth of traumatic experiences within the sample group serves as a stark indicator of the links between trauma and offending.

The women also described a lack of recognition of the trauma they had experienced, stating that they felt unheard in these experiences by both family members and those in authority. The strongest accounts were from those women who had felt unheard or 'missed' as children, although this was also a clear deficit felt by participants when they had entered the criminal justice system. The importance of 'bearing witness' (Anderson, 2016) to these experiences, and interpreting the relevance of these to the narrative and desistance journey of women within the criminal justice system were therefore highlighted.

(2) The relevance of trauma: Women's experience of anger

When revealing their experiences of anger and the links between this and their conviction(s) for a range of serious violent offences, a high proportion of the women described this in terms of protection, either of themselves or others, specifically their children. This is not to say that all violence by women is reactive in nature but there was less of a sense of instrumental violence than might be expected from a cohort of men convicted of serious violence. Instead there was a perception of the women reaching a limit of what they were prepared to withstand, within the context of a lifetime's experience of abuse, and with their violence coming very much at this tipping point of no longer being able to cope or put up with a situation or behaviour which was reminiscent of earlier trauma. This was consistently described as a 'snap' moment.

'Losing it' in this way was a striking feature for a number of the women, with a sense of a tangible pause prior to violence; a moment of conscious decision-making in response to reaching a limit to what they were prepared to tolerate before responding with aggression. Due to the strength of this feeling, some of the women talked about fearing the repercussions if they were to 'lose control' again, with some participants talking about seeking psychological intervention as they felt that their experiences of anger were 'not normal'. As such, there would seem to be a role for probation intervention here in normalising anger as an aspect of healthy human functioning, and supporting women to express this in pro-active and pro-social ways in order to avoid the build-up of emotion and distress which formed the foundations of their violent offending.

(3) Opportunities within the system

More than half of the women described experiences of imprisonment or probation supervision in positive terms; as having 'made' them and providing an opportunity to 'grow up' which they would not have been afforded had they not entered the criminal justice system. Three of the

women stated that without this intervention they would 'not be here'. That said, almost all of the women stated that, first and foremost, what they needed was for someone to have noticed what was happening to them in childhood and to have intervened. They talked about what they viewed as missed opportunities within 'the system' to both identify and address their experiences of trauma and enable them to reflect on the link between this and their violent behaviour. Considered in the context of how positively women spoke about their experience when they *were* able to access support, the need to ensure responsive, targeted interventions which reflect women's experience was therefore made all the more apparent. Indeed, the importance of feeling heard and seen within a busy and under-resourced system was highlighted repeatedly within the women's accounts of their experiences.

Recommendations

The findings of this research evidence the need for a distinct approach to working with women convicted of serious violence. The need for specialist training to inform probation practice is highlighted, alongside the need for enhanced supervision to support practitioners in undertaking this complex and emotionally demanding work and in turn, to enhance the support available to women convicted of violence.

The following recommendations are made:

- 1) The Female Offender Strategy (MoJ, 2018) already contains an acknowledgement that gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches should be at the heart of all work with all women in contact with the criminal justice system.** Given the current lack of practical guidance for practitioners in working with female violence and the inherent complexity of this work, this commitment should be extended to inform specific practice guidelines and structured interventions for women convicted of serious violence.
- 2) Specialist training aimed at working with women's anger and violence should be made available to all probation staff working with women convicted of violence.** This should include education on the factors and contextual considerations outlined in the literature review section of this report and the contributions of feminist pathways research on the role of trauma in women's criminalisation. One Small Thing's 'Trauma Informed Training' would offer a ready-made and accessible training package.

- a) By extension, women who have been convicted of violence should only be supervised by probation staff who have received specific training around female violence. This could be in the form of online training to increase reach and practicality.
 - b) This training should also be mandated for probation managers working within a multi-agency setting (e.g., MAPPA) to ensure that this learning informs wider system understandings of female violence and guides appropriate multi-agency risk management strategies.
- 3) **Staff working with women convicted of serious violence should have access to specific support to manage the emotional demands of this work.** This should be in addition to standard line management supervision and could be delivered in a group setting to enhance models of peer supervision and reflective practice for practitioners.
 - 4) **The Probation Service should invest in developing a specific programme or intervention for working with female anger and violence.** This should not rely on cognitive behavioural methods (how you think and behave) and should instead focus more on distilling, containing and managing emotions with a relational focus (Covington and Bloom, 2003). It should not be based on the male-focused 'red mist' model of interpersonal violence discussed in Chapter Four, and should instead recognise the myriad ways in which women's lifelong experiences of abuse and trauma feed into and precipitate their own anger and interpersonal acts of violence.
 - 5) **A follow-up study focussed on the experiences of probation staff in managing, working with and responding to female violence** would be beneficial in providing additional information to guide policy and guidance around practitioner support.
 - 6) **Development of the new Assess, Risks, Needs, Strengths (ARNS) assessment tool** (which will replace the existing OASys assessment) should be responsive to the differences in male and female criminality and include consideration of how the tool will both facilitate and promote gender-responsive assessment.

ENDS