

**Research Paper**

2022/04

(Published 2024)



## **The Paradoxical Paradox: Exploring Probation staff attitudes towards working with women**

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## Acknowledgements

The inspiration for this study is rooted in our firm belief that women are best served through holistic support that is fostered through a therapeutic alliance between the woman and her case workers. It would therefore be remiss of us to report our findings without first offering thanks and gratitude to all of the staff that participated in our research, enabling us to explore this phenomenon. In particular we want to thank staff across the two Women's specialist teams that took part in our focus groups, taking time out of their busy work schedules to offer us their insights and experiences.

Armed with rich data, we set out to analyse and make sense of the field work and it was Jane Dominey, we turned to for support. Jane's wisdom, patience and knowledge kept us going, even when we doubted ourselves, she maintained hope so in all honesty, this really wouldn't have been possible without her. This belief was echoed by Chris Leeson and the Griffin's Board who continued to support our endeavour, even when faced with delays. Finally, to our team, who continue to support our pursuits, value our 'pracademic' identities and listen to our recommendations, we want to assure you that our ethics continue to be in line with the core values of the team.

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## Abstract

Throughout our careers, Probation staff have presented differing attitudes and approaches towards working with women. To some, it is actively avoided, and it is quite common to hear from practitioners that 'working with one woman is like working with ten men'. Yet to others, it is the part of the job they most enjoy. Whilst practitioners' attitudes towards working with people having certain convictions is well investigated (i.e. Lea, Auburn and Kibblewhite, 1999), the phenomenon of attitudes towards working with women is hardly discussed. This study sets out to fill this gap by investigating the self-reported reasons for these differing attitudes and understand whether they were based on personal beliefs or external factors that could be changed through a shift in the organisation. Employing a two-staged, mixed method approach, we first conducted a staff survey across the Midlands probation region and then spent time speaking with two teams of staff who work exclusively with women, in focus groups.

In this study we found an even split between staff that preferred working with men, preferred working with women and had no preference, with similarities and differences between these groups. All groups described working with women and the women they work with as 'complex' and 'challenging', and all groups felt that working with women was more emotionally laborious than working with men. Key differences were found in perspectives on the meaning found within the work, training, peer support and line management. In our conclusion, we link these findings to the new relevant HMPPS policy and make recommendations about further organisational approaches and future research.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Probation practice has changed significantly over the last decade however the tightrope of 'effective practice' between risk management, enforcement and rehabilitation essentially remains the same. Whilst increasing managerialism and high-profile Serious Further Offences provoke more punitive measures, much of the literature calls for greater focus on solutions-focused and person-centred approaches to supervision and case management (Burke et al, 2022). Probation work with women is no exception. The Corston Report (2007) called for radical changes to the organisation in its approach towards women, notoriously arguing that the same treatment (of men and women) does not equate to the same outcomes. In response, the Ministry of Justice first published its Female Offender Strategy in 2018 (MOJ, 2018) and within it, committed to improving outcomes for women at risk of or involved in the criminal justice system. One of the main ambitions of this strategy is to create a workforce that is gender specific and trauma-informed in its approach towards criminalised women.

During the reign of Community Rehabilitation Companies under the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda (Birkett, 2019), many probation regions developed teams of practitioners who worked exclusively with women on their caseloads. In other areas, one practitioner within a team, acted as the 'specialist', holding all the women managed by that team. This role, sometimes known as a 'concentrator' came under scrutiny by Ellis-Devitt (2020) who found that whilst the specialist interest and knowledge was preferred by the staff who were working with women to a generic caseload approach (where all staff held a mixture of men and women), the role was not without difficulties. Elevated levels of burn-out and feelings of isolation were noted, and this often led to high staff turnover and unfilled vacancies. In review of this work, we previously appraised both approaches following unification of the probation service and concluded that women's specialist teams offered the benefits of specialist working whilst avoiding the costs of concentrating the role, particularly when these teams were co-located within community women's centres (Morley and Rushton, 2023).

Whilst there is a growing tendency for probation regions to deploy resources to develop women's teams, owing partly to the growing evidence base, recruitment into these posts continues to be challenging. Of course, this should be measured against a backdrop of increasing workload pressures and unprecedented organisational changes. Some commentators have referred to emotional labour (Phillips., et al, 2020), moral injury (DiCiro et al, 2023) or identity crisis (Carr, 2024) as occupying the

profession in the face of increasing managerialism, however, these theories alone do not explain why such roles are left vacant longer than others. Thoughtful recruitment into such specialist posts is not only ethical but arguably paramount for success (Ellis-Devitt, 2020) with negative attitudes leading to more punitive approaches and poorer outcomes (Bowers et al, 2000; Black et al, 2011; Bodner et al, 2011; Eren and Sahin, 2015; Hamilton et al, 2014). At the very least, holistic approaches that are trauma-informed must rely on fostering a therapeutic alliance between practitioner and client in a way that mitigates rather than frustrates the imbalance of power if we are to avoid re-traumatisation (Thomas, 2007; Epperson et al, 2020).

Before now, this phenomenon has been untouched empirically other than anecdotal evidence accrued through our own operational practice. In this research study, we aim to unpick probation staff attitudes towards working with women and explore possible ways to improve negative attitudes by;

- Identifying the barriers, enablers and systemic issues impacting on staff attitudes towards working with women.
- Exploring potential changes that would increase the number of staff interested in working in women's specialist teams.

In Chapter 2, we will provide context to this study by reviewing relevant literature and drawing out the tensions that arise for probation practice and specifically for those working with women. We will then go on in Chapter 3 to describe our approach to research, taking care to assess the ways in which we mitigated against being 'insider researchers.' In discussing our findings in Chapter 4, we highlight both the similarities and differences drawn out from the surveys and add the narrative from experiences brought by specialist women's practitioners across two teams. Finally, the conclusion summarises our work and makes policy and research recommendations in a bid to influence future developments.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout this study, it became abundantly clear that many of the tensions discussed were presented or 'experienced' as a paradox. The term 'paradox' is first evident in criminology writing in the work of Thomas More (OED, 2023) in discussing his 'Utopia' in 1533 and refers to a seemingly contradictory statement that is in fact true. Whilst the term is often used in mathematics and philosophy, we are also beginning to see it being increasingly used to think about organisations and operational delivery especially where competing demands are experienced but cannot be resolved through a trade-off (Carmine and Smith, 2021). This is a useful way to conceptualise the conflict that arises when we think about criminalised people and how the criminal justice system identifies and works with these people and so we draw out and highlight some *moral paradoxes* that exist at a social then organisational level. Further, whilst many of these paradoxes can be evident in our work with both men and women, we explore the notion of a *gendered paradox*, which affects the probation practitioner to a greater degree when working with women in their care. Throughout our discussions, we also consider the notion that, in some instances, the paradox itself is paradoxical, in that it is both true and false to consider the tension itself as a paradox. Some of the tensions are 'felt' as a paradox in that they are experienced as a conflict, such as a woman being both a victim and perpetrator, but in fact the paradox is an illusion, created through our social construct rather than being a true tension.

### 2.1 The moral paradox

The victim-offender dichotomy persists throughout society despite unequivocal evidence to suggest that not only many perpetrators have been victims themselves, but that victimisation increases the likelihood of someone becoming a perpetrator (Johnson, 2023). For example, despite the Home Secretary commissioning Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to inspect the effectiveness of police engagement with women and girls as both victims and perpetrators in 2021, the findings only addresses their contact with women in the context of being victims (HMICFRS, 2021). In contrast, there are also seemingly contradictory theories that women are either treated more leniently, through Chivalry (Pollack, 1950) and perceived weakness or more harshly due to double deviance by transgressing social and gender norms (Grabe et al, 2006). In either account, women are labelled as inherently 'mad' or 'bad', rather than consideration given to the social and

environmental factors affecting them (Kennedy, 2018). For example, 60% of women in prison report being victims of domestic abuse and often, coercive relationships play a significant role in many women's routes into criminality (PRT, 2022).

Sentencers are given the arduous task of balancing the needs of the victim and perpetrator through appropriate sentencing but rates of short-term imprisonment for women are ever-increasing despite poor social outcomes and high rates of re-offending (MOJ, 2023). We are also seeing increasing levels of women being remanded into custody as a 'place of safety' (Coomber, 2023) even when this is considered to be flawed and potentially dangerous (Pattinson, 2016). So even when there is an attempt to consider the complex needs of women facing prosecution, the attempt itself further compounds the problem. The tension between victim and offender may therefore be an illusion of a paradox. There is no real conflict between the two states, in fact evidence tells us that there is a strong correlatory relationship between the two, particularly for women, however we will struggle with this tension in society and when we talk about experiences of victimhood or we talk about 'offenders' we continue to perceive them as opposing rather than related traits.

Whilst the paradox of victim-offender might be an illusion, this raises another paradox of care and control. The rise of the 'risk society' (Giddens, 1990) has seen statutory welfare organisations focus shift from caring for individuals and families to assessing and managing the risks associated with future potential harm (Alfandari et al, 2022, Cottam, 2018). Attitudes towards risk can often lie on a spectrum between procedural self-protection, or 'covering your back', to a more client centred approach to preventing harm (Killick and Taylor, 2012) which arguably is exacerbated by high profile media coverage and increased scrutiny of professionals (i.e. BBC, 2023). This seems at odds though with our traditional notion of 'care' and introduces yet another potential paradox of autonomy and coercion. What if a person doesn't want our intervention or want to avoid the potential path towards harm that we might want to prevent? Muusse et al (2022) consider care and control within community mental health settings and argue that despite its juxtaposition, care and control and autonomy and coercion are interrelated. Sometimes we can 'care' ahead of a crisis, applying increasing levels of coercion and control if the person is unable or unwilling to avert the crisis beforehand. So, in effect, rather than a paradox, care and autonomy are afforded only within the constraints of what is possible, if the receiver is co-operative and if they agree with the expectations on them.



## 2.2 Probation practice

To current probation practitioners, the values; advise, assist and befriend may feel like an urban legend. Yet the divorce between probation and social work began 30 years ago with the government rejecting social work values in dealing with offending and a separation of care and control (Garland, 2001). In his article, 'Probation as social work' (2024), Canton argues that the social context within which offending occurs is inextricably linked to the causes for and ergo routes out of criminality despite the efforts to eliminate social work principles from probation work. The role of a probation practitioner, at every level, must reconcile the seemingly fractious responsibilities of risk management and rehabilitation and therefore an enterprise still linked to 'emotions, values and ethics.

Rather than just a plight of the recusant practitioner, the organisation should and arguably is beginning to make sense of this dilemma, particularly in work with justice involved women. Building on foundation feminist criminological texts (Smart, 1976; Carlen, 1985) writers began to explore pathways in and out of crime (Gelsthorpe et al, 2007) commenting on the need for better treatment and a gender informed lens. However, it was not until 2007 when Baroness Corston wrote about the continuing injustices against criminalised women that things started to change. In her report, Corston called for a radical shift which would see a distinct, holistic approach towards women, taking account of their social and structural disadvantage (Corston, 2007). This was later granted through the government's commitment to improving outcomes for women at risk of or involved in the criminal justice system in its Female Offender Strategy (2018). Under this strategy, the National Concordat on women (2019) obliges statutory and non-statutory organisations to work together in accordance with the core principles from reducing the number of prosecutions against women and use of short-custodial sentences to better conditions for women in prison.

Many observant commentators noted the delay between the government commissioned Corston Report (2007) and following policy direction of the Ministry of Justice. In understanding the delay, we should also take note of Transforming Rehabilitation agenda that gave rise to fractured service delivery and part privatisation (MOJ, 2013) which also saw much of probation's work with women being taken by the newly formed Community Rehabilitation Companies, known as CRCs. Although these new private companies were afforded flexibility which saw some innovative work such as the creation of women's specialist teams (Morley and Rushton, 2023), the picture remained inconsistent (HMIP, 2016). Fragmentation of the service was considered a political disaster (Annison, 2019) with costs exceeding

expectations and increasingly, women's needs were being left unmet, leading to increases in women being sent to prison (Baldwin, 2015). As a result of poor outcomes, the TR agenda was scrapped and since June 2021, the operations have again come together under a single public sector rebranded the unified Probation Service with services for women contracted out to the voluntary sector. (HMIP, 2021).

Despite a sea change in organisational structure, the tenets of the Female Offender Strategy (2018) remain alive and well. Whilst aspirational, the strategy has not been without criticism. Most notably, the National Audit Office (2022), the Public Accounts Committee (2022) and the Justice Select Committee (2022) pointed out a distinct lack of tangible objectives upon which to measure progress and commentators predicted that progress would be stunted by a lack of financial commitment (Dominey and Gelsthorpe, 2020; Gelsthorpe, 2022). In the following year, an updated Delivery Plan (2023) was published, promising financial backing and adding a fourth priority area of improving resettlement support for women leaving prison. It is too early to appraise this latest effort but there are some promising developments listed in the MOJ's latest publication, the 'One Year On' Progress report (2024) such as the Intensive Supervision Court for women in Birmingham, established Women in the Criminal Justice System Expert Group, and funding to support alternatives to short-term custody. There has also been more attention paid to women in sentencing guidelines amendments, with the introduction of new mitigation and more specific guidance around the sentencing of women in the perinatal pathway (Sentencing Council, 2024).

Whilst some of these advances have been, at least in part, an attempt to reconcile those tensions between victim-offender, care-control and autonomy-coercion, the tensions themselves have not fully been 'called out', nor have efforts been made to reconcile that both extremes of these spectrums must be balanced. The organisation's attempt to build trauma-informed care into practice has called for practitioners' greater consideration of how the experience of trauma can affect behaviours, encouraging consideration of this impact when working with people on probation. This has not sought to blend the approach with the requirement for staff to manage risk.

### **2.3 Trauma-informed care**

To operationalise the recommendations of the Corston Report (2007), the probation service has attempted to create a workforce that is trauma and gender informed in its approach to women involved in the justice system. However, this remains at odds with traditional notions of managerialism and neoliberalism. Stephanie Covington (2022) has paved the way in arguing the need for practitioners to

understand the function of trauma in women's pathways into crime and the influence this has on our quest to support rehabilitation. Her work has inspired the creation of trauma-informed training that has since been disseminated across the prison and probation service. McCartan (2020) argues that for trauma-informed practice to be effective, individual practice must also be embedded within policy that also speaks directly to trauma-informed principles. This, it seems, is the mechanism by which we can reconcile these tensions but Kellman et al (2022) argue that despite our efforts, our attempts at creating trauma-informed justice, at least in the prison service is futile and confirms the notion that women continue to experience more enduring effects of long-term imprisonment than men (Crewe et al, 2017). If we are to re-envisage a service that brings emotions, ethics and social care back into focus (Dominey and Canton, 2022) open and honest communication about these tensions is paramount.

## **2.4 The probation practitioner**

It is not the elements of the paradox that cause the tension but the perception of it. Relevant here is the work done on emotional labour. Phillips et al (2020) argue that emotional labour is not only a requirement of a probation practitioner's job but one which attracts many individuals to the work despite it often resulting in staff burn-out. The ability to use, manage and display emotions effectively not only supports a trauma-informed approach in the development of therapeutic alliances but is also crucial in work that balances care and control. They argue that although emotional labour has been marginalised in favour of a managerialist approach, it remains a central element of the practitioner's role. Again, it is not removal of the tension that Phillip's and colleagues suggest but instead being more explicit about its demands and prioritising it through structured support services. Those attracted to the job because of the human factors involved can also be those who have suffered trauma themselves. The phenomenon of the wounded healer is one which the healers own wounds can be remedial to the client themselves (Jung, 2015; Barr, 2006). Newcombe et al (2015) indeed describe how those with their own adverse childhood histories enter the helping professions, but that the teaching and learning needs of these professionals must be acknowledge within the context of this.

The consequences of insufficiently mitigating against the emotional demands of the job through training and support is described by Lewis et al (2013) as resulting in burn-out. Burn-out, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma were all reported by Petrillo (2022) as neither inevitable nor untreatable but recognised as frequently occurring in the probation service. Her findings suggest that when staff are appropriately skilled and supported to work in a gender and trauma informed way, they report

increased job satisfaction and decreased levels of burn-out. Unlike Kellman, Petrillo argues that a trauma-informed service is not only possible but is in fact the solution to striking this balance. Again though, it is stressed here that this is only possible by reflecting on ourselves as practitioners and through supporting other practitioners through policy and operational support as well out outwardly through effective recruitment and appropriate training.

## **2.5 The gendered paradox**

If, instead of prioritising the management of risk and public protection we must instead reconcile trauma-informed approaches with risk management, we need to find a better way to define and measure our work. This requires a holistic lens where focus is not limited to criminogenic needs alone but is considerate of the wider family and social structures contextualising a woman's identity (Sharpe, 2016). The quality of effective practitioner relationships with women is harder to define and measure though and this contradicts the current preferred business model of targets and key performance indicators (KPI's) which better suit managerialism.

Many of these tensions could be equally applied to working with both men and women but we do find some evidence of a gendered paradox that might further frustrate those working with women. Whilst men lean towards instrumental compliance (Hall 2021), which aligns well with the KPI approach of the managerialist probation service, women's compliance involves the development of social bonds and attachment (Goldhill, 2019). This suggests that it is imperative to find a way to attach value to the soft skills required for emotional work (Knight, 2012) even if only with women given the significance of emotional connections in women's desistance journeys (Miller and Stiver, 1997; Chermis and Goleman, 2001). Here lies a gendered tension, the need for practitioners to fit women's needs into an incompatible framework of targets and measures. Ellis-Devitt (2020) shines a spotlight on this tension, evidences the antagonistic relationships between the need to work flexibly to deliver gender informed practice and the inflexible approach to enforcement in her research in to the womens-lead role.

We also know that women have always presented a much lower proportion (9% currently) of those on Probation's caseloads (MOJ, 2024) and so the available resources, training and evidence more readily supports the functions of 'male centric' approaches. Baroness Corston (2007) most famously stressed that equal treatment does not equate with equal outcomes, but many other commentators have also highlighted women's distinct pathways into and out of crime. This evidence has helped us shape and

drive forward the development of women's specialist teams where staff can be trained to work in a gender-specific way (Morley and Rushton, 2023).

Resolution of this tension via the development of women's specialist teams was first seen during the separation of probation work under Transforming Rehabilitation. We find however that recruitment into these roles, in some areas, is difficult and we're now starting to see the disbanding of some teams. If we are to better support staff in these roles and retain our gender-specific approach, we must try to understand the reluctance to work in this way.



## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

Using a mixed methods approach, this study explored the nature and origins of probation staff attitudes towards working with women with a specific focus on the following research questions;

- What commonly held views about working with women are held by probation practitioners?
- What are the beliefs underpinning these views that facilitate or act as a barrier towards working with women?
- What operational or strategic changes to service delivery might improve opinions about working with women?

A mixed methodology can produce rich data and a well-rounded picture (Burke, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitative methodology helped us to explore the prevalence of differing opinions across the Midlands probation regions and we followed this up with a qualitative approach to further investigate survey responses using two specific teams of staff. Although this mixed design is considered by some as methodological triangulation, we also triangulated the data and our approach to analysis to ensure that we mitigated against bias in every viable way (Wilson, 2014). The design therefore involved five distinct phases:

Phase	Type	Method	Participants	Outcome
1	Focus Group	Qualitative	10	test out survey design
2	Survey	Quantitative	49	Conduct survey
3	Analysis	Analysis	Researchers	Mid-term analysis to explore attitudes and form focus group questions
4	Focus Groups	Qualitative	2 x 10	Investigate survey findings with two women's specialist teams
5	Analysis	Analysis	Researchers	Final thematic analysis

### 3.2 Procedure

Whilst wanting to understand the broad views of as many staff as possible towards working with women, we were also keen to eliminate any potentially leading questions. Therefore, having designed a draft of the survey to reflect the research questions, we tested this out on an initial focus group with ten staff from all grades and with experience of working with women in the probation service, before adapting the survey accordingly.

The survey was then sent out across the whole of the midland's probation service, including practitioners from; sentence management, Court settings, Unpaid Work, Prisons and Programmes. Additionally, the survey was promoted to Senior Probation Officers, Deputy Heads and Heads of Probation Delivery Unit's. We were supported by regional engagement leads (a communications lead for the probation regions) to promote the survey at regular intervals to all staff to encouragement completion, reaching a potential audience of over 1000 members of staff.

After being 'live' between December 2023 and January 2024, with reminders posted every ten days, 46 responses were collated. Out of the 46, only two people were no longer working as a frontline practitioner and were themselves first-line Managers to frontline staff. Unsurprisingly, responses mostly came from staff who were currently case managers, but we also had a few responses from staff working across courts, unpaid work, programmes delivery and prisons.

We reflected on the small number of completions, only 2.8% of the potential sample size which raises a potential critique to the research due to the ability for this data to represent the views of the entire region. Whilst this was disappointing to us, there were, nonetheless some strong themes within this data and the design of the research supports further testing these themes to ensure that they are not relied on in isolation.

The themes we identified from the survey results were used to shape the structure of the follow up focus groups. Using purposive sampling (Ritchie 2003, Descombe, 2002) we identified two women's specialist teams (one in East Midlands and one in West Midlands) who agreed to take part, adding further credibility (Dyson and Browne, 2006). The aim was to test out the survey themes with a group of individuals who were experienced not only in work with women, but also those who understood the impact of organisational systems and structures directly on the ability to work effectively. Whilst data from the surveys generated some key findings, the aim of the focus groups was to allow for revelation of complex layers to these themes and understanding of where they may have emerged from (Macnaghten and Myers, 2004).

Focus groups can be described as ‘group interviews’ with the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights. By using this environment and reflecting, paraphrasing and summarising the views that we were listening to, we were able to glean more information about the themes we were testing. For optimum results, we ensured that we had eight to ten participants at each group (Morgan and Krueger, 1997). Each of the focus groups was held online and the data collected was typed verbatim from the discussions.

### **3.3 Mode of analysis**

To search for the meaning across all the collated data, we developed two stages of analysis so that mid-term findings could be tested in the final qualitative stages of our research. In each, we carried out thematic analysis which “provides a flexible and useful tool which can provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p5) as well as using descriptive statistics from the data.

The initial survey data was segmented in a few ways to look for cross-cutting themes and patterns, using an inductive process. We compared responses in relation to the answer to the first question, ‘Compared to working with men, how much do you enjoy working with women?’ We also made observations within questions and between questions. The resultant themes and sub-themes which were deduced from the data were strengthened by this cross examination. A strength of working as co-authors to this research also came from our individual analysis of the data. We discussed our findings and reached a mutual agreement of themes whilst teasing out and contemplating any discrepancies. Working collaboratively in this way supports the reliability of the data through observing repeated themes from both authors (Golafshani, 2003).

The prevalent themes found within the survey data were then developed into open questions to explore these topics in focus groups. We designed semi structured schedules for the focus groups which allowed for probing into survey responses but with flexibility to allow the group to expand and cover any related issues which were important to them. Again, using an inductive approach, the transcripts were coded, discussed and compared to deduce common themes and sub-themes working between and across the focus group data.



### 3.4 Key ethical considerations

Completion of this research required agreement of both the Ethics Committee at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge and HMPPS's National Research Committee. We experienced a prolonged process with the NRC who responded with two stages of adjustments to the research design following requests for changes. The changes that were requested included the order change of the methodology process – from focus groups first, to completion of a survey first. Having been open with NRC about our own career histories and reasons for interest in the research, this change was to mitigate any potential bias that we may impose on the research and its findings. Secondly, we were asked to limit our data collection to just the Midlands probation regions, having originally asked for the survey to have national coverage.

Throughout the research, we wanted to ensure the safe and decent treatment of everyone involved. To ensure informed consent, we set out clear guidance in information and consent forms that were shared with everyone and made it clear that participation was completely voluntary with no personal or professional consequences for choosing not to take part. The survey was designed to be completed anonymously which encouraged honesty but did mean that we couldn't offer to withdraw responses retrospectively. We did however offer the option of withdrawal to focus group participants as using Microsoft teams as the hosting platform meant that we had a record of attendees and could therefore track responses. In this way, we supported the notion that informed consent was a process rather than a fixed event (Osterman, 2018). We then removed names from data at the point of analysis and thereafter only identify responses as 'Focus Group 1' and 'Focus Group 2' throughout our reporting.

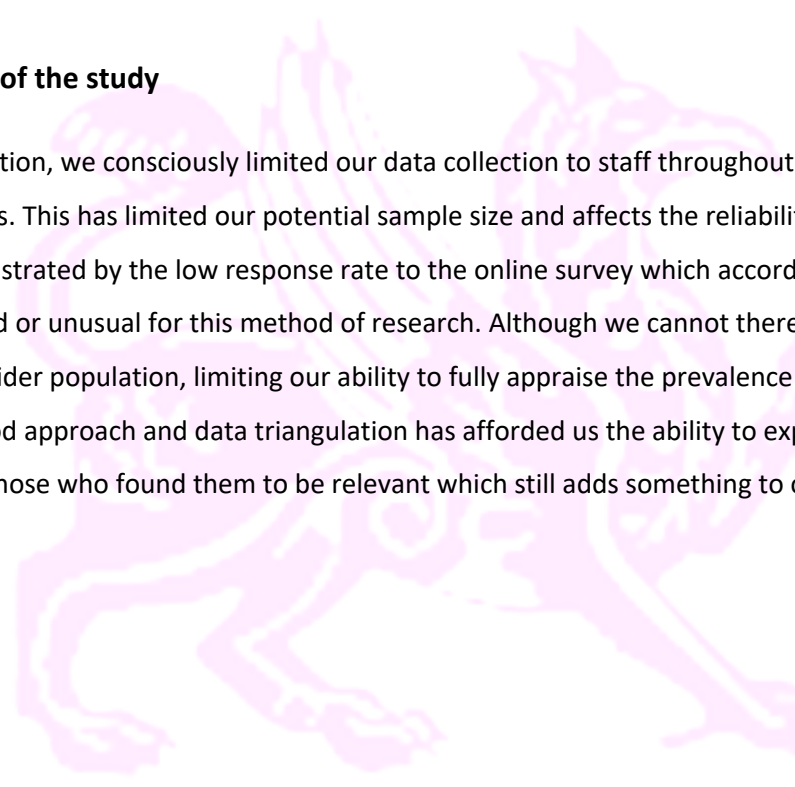
To date, we each have enjoyed a career working with women in the probation service and latterly in HMPPS National Women's Team. The experience in these roles provided the initial impetus to consider this research. Therefore, our status as 'Insider Researchers' (Greene, 2014; Chavez, 2008) is acknowledged. It can be considered an advantage that we have an experienced understanding of the service, it's culture, purpose and its management of women offenders (Chavez, 2008). However, we acknowledge that this can also mean that research findings and interpretations run the risk of our being 'too close' to the topic to provide objective analysis. There is also a risk of 'conflicting interests' where we need to adhere to our civil service and professional codes of conduct whilst also having integrity to our findings, a delicate balance formed by our identity as 'pracademics.'

To mitigate against this, we have engaged in supervision throughout the process to consider our approach and reflect upon our findings. We were also keen to engage a broad spectrum of staff to allow

for as wide a range of response as possible. Finally, we deliberately designed the research methodology with mixed methods and in a staged manner to allow for the data being received to then shape the subsequent stage, thus minimising any potential for our views to influence the questions. Nonetheless, a feminist approach to research would encourage the view that the process of interviewing should include statements and discourses about our own experiences with the phenomena under question. Therefore, whilst ensuring a robust methodology and supervision structure to mitigate against any potential bias, we did demonstrate to the participants an investment for the topic ahead of the focus groups (Oakley, 1981).

### **3.5 Limitations of the study**

Following instruction, we consciously limited our data collection to staff throughout the Midlands probation regions. This has limited our potential sample size and affects the reliability of our findings. This is further frustrated by the low response rate to the online survey which according to Nulty (2008) is not unexpected or unusual for this method of research. Although we cannot therefore generalise our findings to the wider population, limiting our ability to fully appraise the prevalence of such attitudes, our mixed method approach and data triangulation has afforded us the ability to explore the themes more fully with those who found them to be relevant which still adds something to our understanding.



## Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.1 Groups

Our survey was completed by 46 participants. We considered the results in numerous ways to allow for analysis, but for the remainder of the findings section, we will refer and contrast between three specific groups within the data. That is those who:

- Enjoy working with women more than men (Enthusiasts);
- Enjoy working with both men and women equally (Neutrals)
- Enjoy working with women less than working with men (Reluctants)

The split between these groups was relatively even and comprised of 15, 18 and 13, respectively. Only four of the participants were male and the roles of the participants was a broad spread ranging from Offender Manager to Court Officer, to Unpaid Work Supervisor and Senior Probation Officer. The two focus groups held were attended by 9 and 10 practitioners, respectively. All participants of these groups were female, and each group was attended also by the women's specific Senior Probation Officers who managed the teams. When segregating the data, we understood that themes could be collated not only by the research questions, but also by organisational, team and individual level experiences. However, for ease of reading, we will report on the findings by theme.

### 4.2 Language and its impact

Analysis of survey data revealed a strong and perhaps unsurprising theme that working with women on probation is **challenging** and that women are **complex**. This view is one which has been reflected in multiple articles before ours too (Devitt 2020; Knight, 2020, Gelsthorpe 2009, Dominey and Gelsthorpe 2020, Morash 2010), however interestingly, our data demonstrated that this theme was prevalent across all groups: enthusiasts, neutrals and reluctants. Whilst 'challenging' could be a phrase used for all work with people on probation, there were only three participants from the whole study who believed that working with women was no different to working with men.

When examining this dynamic via the three groups it was possible to draw out some subthemes which were distinct between the groups. Phrases such as 'Impossible' and 'specialist' was written in the free text box for the reluctants, whereas enthusiasts scored positively associated words more highly such as

‘rewarding’ and ‘interesting’. This different interpretation of the words challenging, and complex gives an insight into the reasons for some enjoying work with women and others not doing so. Focus group exploration of these adjectives also demonstrated a support for the assertion that ‘challenging’ and ‘complex’ were effective descriptors of this work:

*“They are complex because they have multiple personality disorders... Multiple diagnosis”*

(Focus Group One participant)

*“They have multiple needs in general, alcohol, relationships...there are lots of layers...like an onion. A deep history with childhood traumas. You have to look at what’s behind the layers and at the different masks they wear”.*

(Focus Group One participant)

‘Layers’ was also noted in the free text box of the survey with one participant describing women as ‘Russian dolls’, and another quoted the need to ‘understand the layers and needs’.

When asking in the survey what contributed towards your views of women, each group had consistently high scores stating that this was because of their own practice experience.

Enthusiasts	Neutrals	Reluctants
14 out of 15	16 out of 18	12 out of 13

Whilst the staff who took part in the focus groups were clear and supported one another's views that they are constantly hearing negative views towards women, the survey data would suggest that whilst this is the case, it is less the case that this messaging is influencing other practitioner’s views. Rather, it is as a result of them feeling that working with women is more challenging than working with men. This finding points to a more systemic issues which is contributing towards the difficult challenges of working with women.

Nonetheless, the impact of this language to those specialist women’s probation officers was stark and views expressed in the focus groups included that they felt their work was ‘de-prioritised’ and needed ‘constant fight’ for their efforts to be considered important or of value. Staff in the focus groups found it easy to recall derogatory phrases that they heard others say about working with women:

*“You could not pay me enough money in the world to come and work in the women's team”*

(Focus Group One participant)

*“I would rather die than work with women”*

(Focus Group Two participant)

*“I could speak all day about the negative things people say [about working with women]... It can be isolating”*

(Focus Group Two participant)

Participants of focus group two went on to describe how they felt their work was “*deprioritised*” within their region and both focus groups gave examples of times they had felt dismissed by senior leaders in their region. This messaging from throughout the hierarchy of the probation service is adding to the impact felt by specialist women’s practitioners of lack of value they feel coming from others. This was summarised well by within the focus group:

*“If Senior leaders see us as an 'add on' that filters down and messages are given to the PQips (trainee probation officers), if we saw the work to have value”*

(Focus Group Two participant)

Tensions can be noted through considering the impact of negative language used in relation to work with women on probation. The women’s specific teams’ members feel that the lack of challenge to the negative language associated with working with women is leading to their work being de-prioritised within the service. When their grievances are unheard by senior leaders, they feel the negative assertions are reinforced.

### **4.3 Impact of the work and accessing support**

These challenges, layers and complexities point to the often termed ‘emotional labour’ of working with women. Our survey results gave clear messages across all groups, with regards to the increased emotional labour of working *specifically* with women. When asked if this work affects the survey participant emotionally more than working with men, the groups were again consistent in their responses:

Enthusiasts	Neutrals	Reluctants
12 out of 15	11 out of 18	9 out of 13

The practitioners in the focus groups spoke about the vicarious trauma they experienced from working with women. However, the support for one another within each of the women's teams was palpable. The staff were smiling at each other, demonstrated kindness, empathy and compassion towards each other as they discussed difficult cases that they had managed and how they gained support from their peers to deal with this. The support they explained was emotional support in listening and validation; practical support: "we know each other's cases and we can help out if we see a colleague needs a moment" (focus group 2) and a collective belief that their team is effective in achieving better outcomes for women. This combination of powerful peer support tools and tactics had an impact in offsetting some of the vicarious trauma experienced by the staff when working with women.

*"We come together as we have a common goal. We want to make improvement towards working with women that includes us as much as our cases"*

(Focus Group Two participant)

It is interesting that even those who enjoy working with women are clear that this work is distinct, it is emotional, and it is challenging. Moreover, that this work is difficult specifically because women are different and need a different approach. Across both the survey results and the focus group results, there is evidence of a pattern which demonstrates that this challenging work is better managed in a supportive environment which is honest about the tensions that practitioners will experience and expects staff to require support for the vicarious trauma which is experienced. The theme within the survey that this work is experienced as rewarding by those who enjoy it was mirrored by the women's specialist teams, who despite the challenge and complexity that they are dealing with, can track their progress by rewards, not difficulties. The responses from the women's specialist teams were stark in terms of the specialist support of a women's specific senior probation officer upon their ability to manage their emotional response:

*"[SPO] has the outcome of the work at heart"*

(Focus Group One practitioner)

Reference was also made to the impact of the fortnightly reflective practice sessions that the SPO had ensured was offered to the team. Devitt (2020) also notes the emotional impact and the need for organisational support for those practitioners who work with women. Clinical supervision and more weight on professional judgement for working with women has been asserted as other structures which would be conducive with a supportive enabling approach for practitioners (Morley and Rushton, 2023).

Outside of the women's specialist teams, these structures are not readily in place. Whilst generic practitioners have access to PAM Assist for support if needed, those answering the survey spoke about the need for increased peer support, specific line management support and clinical support. This is evidenced further when considering that 68% of survey participants believed that there was only average or below average support available from the organisation when they were affected emotionally.

#### 4.4 Finding meaning in the work

The overarching themes of complexity and challenging behaviours, results in work with women being an emotionally demanding. However, further interrogation of the data demonstrated other sub-themes. We segmented the data removing the words '*complexity*' and '*challenging*' and was able to note some interesting themes. Table 2 below demonstrates the most frequently-used words used after the omission of complex and challenging:

Enthusiasts	Reluctants	Neutral
Rewarding	Demanding	Relatable
'A victim'	Emotional	
	Draining	

The free text boxes exposed more insight into these themes which now demonstrated difference between the groups and gives insight into the beliefs which underpin the preference of each group. Enthusiasts demonstrated understanding, empathy and compassion in their statements about working with women, also reflected in the increase response that they see women as a victim (table B above)

*"I would find these cases [women] more complex, yet overall, more rewarding"*

(Survey participant)

*“More conversation, more emotionally involved, better rapport”*

(Survey participant)

*“Women tend to be misunderstood and treated as a challenge in probation which makes it difficult to recruit for roles.”*

(Survey participant)

Whereas reluctant staff gave more details about what made the role more difficult as well as demonstrating a lack of understanding about the distinct differences of women compared to men in the CJS:

*“It is much harder to work with women, they have more complex and multiple needs and take far more time to do the job well”.*

(Survey participant)

*“I feel that women are given special treatment because of their gender - there seems to be more flexibility for missed appointments and less offence focussed work conducted. There seems to be an idea that women on probation are still the victim - I understand that in some cases they might be, and we need to be cautious of this, but they have still committed an offence”.*

(Survey participant)

This level of empathy and understanding demonstrated by enthusiasts was also present in the focus groups. The discussion of complexities was frequently backed up by the participant discussing either the reasons for this complexity (Adverse Childhood Experiences, mental health, relationships) or showing empathy and motivation to look underneath the behaviours to find the women:

*“what's behind the behaviour?”*

(Focus Group One participant)

*“All their complexities have brought them to where they are now”.*

(Focus Group Two participant)



In both the survey and the focus groups we experienced disclosure from enthusiasts, of their own adverse childhood experiences and their personal traumas. There was confidence displayed that these experiences contributed towards their effective working with women:

*“As a female who has experienced similar issues to some/most of the women I work with I feel a duty to ensure they are treated fairly with a trauma informed practice”*

(Survey participant)

*“As a female, being able to help empower and not have the same start that I had”*

(Focus Group One participant)

The sense of relating to someone’s position was a strong theme from enthusiasts and reluctant in the research. Gender (specifically being female) was an aspect which was considered to result in improved relatability to a woman on probation. In addition to this in both the survey and the focus groups, participants disclosed their own past difficulties and used this as evidence to demonstrate why they could relate to women on probation.

*“Due to being a woman I feel I can have an understanding and lived experience of some women's focused needs such as periods, motherhood, hormones, menopause etc and how they view the world”.*

(Survey participant)

*“I feel more inclined to work with women due to my own personal experience and understanding that women are often victims and their reasons for offending are impacted by different factors to those of men.”*

(Survey participant)

The wounded healing phenomena is not a new concept and is reflected in these answers. Jung (2015) asserted that those with past traumas entered helping professions and used insight and resilience from their own experiences to transform the lives of others. However, there is some suggestions that one’s past experiences could also act as a factor which would skew risk assessments and effective management of women on probation:

*“I think as a woman I find it too emotional working with women and my empathy may sometimes override my risk assessment”*

(Survey participant)

Nonetheless, the discussion of what effective risk assessment looks like for *women* on probation is argued by Pemberton et al (2019) given that the probation risk assessment tools were designed based on evidence of what works for men on probation. These research findings highlight that probation's risk assessment tools are not incorporating sufficient holistic information for women to allow practitioners to effectively develop risk management and sentence plans.

The ability to compassionately see the women on probation as a victim, or to understand that working with her is complex and challenging because she has multiple needs and is demanding, both demonstrate that the pathology of the woman on probation is not the sole identity that requires management and support. There are other parts of her history and self which do not neatly fit into a box suitable for probation management. The probation service has historically struggled to master the art of managing a person as both an offender and a victim. The shift to new managerialism and 'what works' movements (Gelsthorpe and Morgan, 2007), saw the management of offenders focusing heavily on the pathology and free will of an offender and not their socio-economic circumstances which had been the pre-cursors to their pathways into the CJS. This has been disastrous for women on Probation (Morley and Rushton, 2023).

The underpinning beliefs about the complexities and challenges experienced when working with women on probation demonstrated through this study, highlight that staff are not supported in managing the dynamic of victim **and** offender. The socially constructed definitions of victims can be part of the illusionary paradox that practitioners are navigating, adding to the complexity and challenge of working with women. Maher (1997) noted this dichotomy twenty-seven years ago in his discussion about feminist research which placed women within the complex web of societal factors and oppressive relationships, comparing this to non-feminist research which placed the pathology and individualism of the women at the centre of their pathways into crime.

#### 4.5 Resources

##### **Training:**

Responses within the survey from the neutral and reluctant groups highlighted some views which were suggestive of a training deficit relating to the distinct needs of women in the criminal justice system. Some of these comments called out specifically the lack of training and others demonstrated the deficit within the context of the response:

*“Gender is irrelevant”*

(Survey participant)

*“A lot of training is male centric”*

(Survey participant)

When considering how well-equipped staff felt that they were trained to work with women in the survey results, there was a marked increase in this belief as you progress through reductant’s, to neutrals to enthusiasts. These misconceptions were remarked upon by the participants of the focus groups too:

*“People say it's no different, [that] men have trauma - unless you've worked in this kind of role, you don't get it - it is different. They are also more likely to have children and when they do, social services more likely to be involved - the higher the stress, the greater the shame”.*

(Focus Group Two participant)

It was clear that the training offered for working with women was better accessed by those who were interested in the work. The findings which demonstrated misconceptions and inaccurate information which were contributing towards poor attitudes towards working with women, could be addressed by the organisation better equipping staff to understand the distinctly differing needs of women on probation. The lack of training to work with women on probation has been noted for over a decade (HMIP, 2010) with the Justice Committee (2013) noticing a “generation gap” in those training before and after the advent of National Standards. This contrast was noted within a workforce whose practice became embedded in a ‘rule-based approach’. The described layers and complexities, combined with the dual management of both victim and offender characteristics amplify the necessity of working flexibly with women.

### **Organisational support:**

Adding to the building layers of complexities and challenges when working with women, we can also turn our attention to participant beliefs regarding their ability to achieve effective outcomes with women. The survey posed the question: *To what extent do you feel you have a chance of successful outcomes when working with women?* Staff responses were split into the following options (note participants could answer more than one option):

	Enthusiasts (n = 15)	Neutrals (n = 18)	Reluctants (n = 13)
I can make small changes which improve chances of success	4	7	1
I can meet Probation targets	7	9	5
I can achieve successful outcomes if I work above and beyond the remit of my role	10	6	3
Not at all	0	1	1
I can achieve successful outcomes	1	1	1

Noting the extremely small numbers across all groups relating to the ability to achieve successful outcomes with women, as well as the increasing percentage through the groups from reluctants, to neutrals to enthusiasts relating to going 'above and beyond' to achieve successful outcomes, we asked the two focus groups about the outcomes of their work:

*"It's more of an investment, it's worth the hard work because of something I get out of it, or what I get is more impactful".*

(Focus Group One participant)

*"The bigger the input, the bigger the output"*

(Focus Group Two participant)

These underpinning beliefs about working with women, are again pointing to the paradoxical approach to working with women effectively in an organisation which doesn't reflect the gendered needs of women through their systems. These systemic failures are failing to equip staff in providing a positive service to women; a service in which successful outcomes can be achieved.

Furthermore, a strong theme from the survey and focus groups was the belief that the probation service does not allocate sufficient staff resource to the management of Women on Probation. This is despite the change in the last two years to the workload management tool which resulted in some minor changes in the way resource is allocated to needs as well as risk. Weighted scores in the survey were consistently low for the following question: *How well do you feel that working with women is reflected in workload management?* (1 = not at all, 5 = very much):

Enthusiasts (n = 15)	Neutrals (n = 18)	Reluctants (n = 13)
1.9/5	1.8/5	2.4/5

Discussions in the focus group added understanding to this low scoring area:

*“No one listens to us; we need a reduction in WMT [workload management tool]”.*

(Focus Group Two participant)

*“The complexities of working with women – the crisis management means that the appointments are not half an hour and even though I’ve organised my time, then the day doesn’t run like this. Their chaos becomes your chaos. You can’t tie up your appointments into a neat package”.*

(Focus Group Two participant)

This view is backed up further via the question posed in the survey which asked what the organisation could do differently to support work with women. Out of all the multi-response options offered to this question, changes to the WMT was selected by 53% of all the survey participants, these participants were from across all groups (enthusiasts, neutrals and reluctant).

Focus group one went further, explaining that they had wrote a letter to their senior leadership team evidencing their concerns and requesting flexibility and support to decrease workload allowances. Whilst time was given to this grievance and the staff were provided with the opportunity to meet a leader, the group explained that in response it was described how no action could be taken because of lack of policy support. It is promising that change is on the horizon as HMPPS are on the cusp of

publishing an update Women's Policy Framework with accompanying operational guidance to support leaders and staff making changes to better support working practice with women.

The challenges described about working with women were contextualised by the layers of complexities, multiple agencies and underlying trauma, yet alongside this, we know that women on the whole pose a lower risk of harm than men with 92% of women in prison posing a low or medium risk of serious harm (OSAG, 2019). The resource intensity of multi-agency working was not a direct question in the semi structured focus groups, yet came out clearly in the participants responses as an additional part of the work specifically for working with women:

*"They don't change the KPI's to take into consideration for women. They don't think it is chaotic or all the issues that come with it. They don't take into account the fact that a Social Worker is on the phone before you've even got the case."*

(Focus Group Two participant)

*"You have a social worker, a DART referral or MARAC - all before you meet the woman"*

(Focus Group Two participant)

This conceptualises yet another stressor that staff working with women are dealing with at increased levels compared to work with men.

## Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks

### 5.1 Conclusions

Supported by literature, this study found that probation practitioners deem the work with women to be more challenging and emotionally laborious than working with men. This was in part due to the multiple, complex needs criminalised women face, but also because practitioners felt that the organisation did not prioritise or sufficiently support them to work in a gender-specific way. This was despite the commitments to do just this in the Female Offender Strategy (2018). The opportunity to create a gender-specific approach to probation case management is not being fully operationalised and a reluctance to work with women is thwarting those efforts which are being made. This research will be important to policy makers and senior leaders if the tenets of the strategy are to be realised. In discussing our findings, we draw on specific themes that consider the challenges faced by practitioners, but we will return here to our original research questions;

- What commonly held views about working with women are held by probation practitioners?

Three distinct groups of staff; enthusiasts, neutrals and reluctants were drawn out from the research in their perspectives on working with women. Whilst all groups described working with women as being more challenging there were differences in the way practitioners talked about the work. Overall, reluctants were more likely to focus on processes and describe the work as 'draining' and 'demanding'. Enthusiasts on the other hand would consider the woman as a victim to a greater degree and find the work rewarding and important.

This mixing pot of complexities and unmanaged challenges can each in turn be contextualised by the tension of working with women within a structure which is not gender specific, thus speaking to questions two and three of the research questions:

- What are the beliefs underpinning these views that facilitate or act as a barrier towards working with women?
- What operational or strategic changes to service delivery might improve opinions about working with women?

The combination of the multiple layers of tensions becomes something which impacts on staff in various ways including the development of a strong dislike of working with women. Negative language left unchallenged exacerbates the impact of the emotional labour and feeling of being oppressed which adds to the feelings of paradox for practitioners and increases the likelihood of burn-out.

The organisational structures and priorities reflect a risk management approach based on an understanding of the offence, not the whole person. Therefore, our research demonstrates that staff do not feel sufficiently equipped or supported to work in a gender and trauma informed (GSTI) way. The strong theme that the workload management tool was ineffective in allocating an appropriate amount of resource to working with women was reflected across all groups: enthusiasts, neutrals and reluctant. Furthermore, the impact on specialist staff and enthusiasts was clear in terms of them feeling that their work was undervalued and de-prioritised across the hierarchy of the probation regions.

Women's Specialist Teams offset the impact of trauma and challenges to a degree. Staff in these teams feel better supported and better equipped. Staff benefit from a better balance between management and compassionate peers, but this does not go far enough as demonstrated by focus groups one's efforts to make a formal complaint to address these structural support deficiencies to the Regional Probation Director. It was clearly asserted that a gender-informed approach to policy, targets and resources were needed to build resilience and encourage more staff to become 'enthusiasts.' Further, making gender-specific training mandatory across the workforce and increasing exposure to specialist work to new staff would help in combating early avoidance.

## 5.2 Recommendations

### Women's specific training

Whilst there is now some training available for working with women on probation, this is not mandated. The misconceptions and inaccurate statements made about women on probation could be challenged effectively by this requirement. Furthermore, we believe that the training offer should go further still. Structuring a training offer to include a renewed focus on social work with an honest approach about the tensions of this in a risk management setting and a focus on women's distinct needs would encourage a holistic approach to working with women and considering the 'woman first' approach. This would address some of the challenges of working with women which are borne out of the contradictions of what is needed and what the service requires of practitioners.



## **Language**

Senior leaders and managers should be modelling a culture of challenging negative language regarding women on probation. Careful consideration of language so that we don't undermine women, pathologies their trauma or conflate risk and needs must be encouraged. This approach will address the tendency to transfer the complexities of the job onto the women themselves.

## **Changes to the Workload Management Tool and organisational approach**

A strong finding from all survey groups and focus groups was the view that the workload management tool did not go far enough in allocating sufficient allowance to practitioners working with women. We strongly recommend a review to the WMT specifically from the perspective of working with women. Rather than trying to fit the WMT to women, instead we suggest starting with the woman and taking a methodical and considered approach to defining what is required to achieve better outcomes and then applying this to the WMT. Undoubtedly from what participants have told us, this will highlight gaps in work which is recognised and those areas which are currently being fulfilled by practitioners going 'above and beyond'. In relation to these gap areas, considerations should be made by the organisation to change the practice requirements and approach to accommodate these specific areas.

## **Staff support**

Our research evidences the increasing degree of emotional impact that practitioners experience because of work with women on probation. Support from specialist managers who demonstrate understanding of the specialist nature of this work goes some way to managing this impact. Specific reflective practice being routinely offered is recommended to manage this emotional impact on practitioners. This could be further supported by structured clinical supervision as standard in probation offices and particularly in any women's specialist teams.

## **Women's specialist teams**

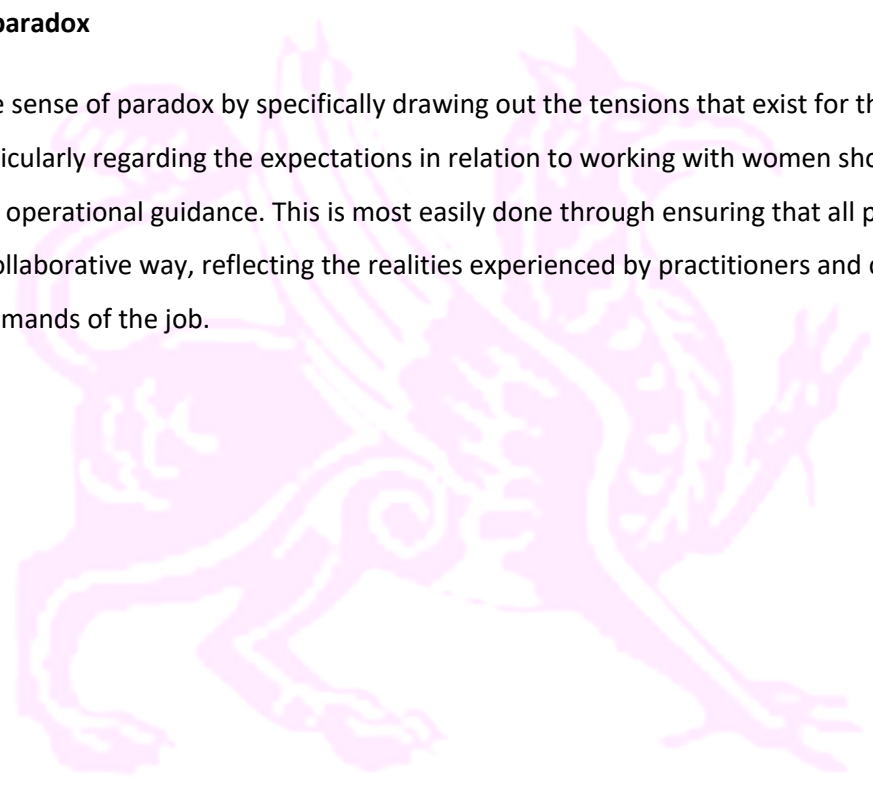
There is clear evidence that women's specialist teams assist in consistent management of women on probation. They provide flexible, carefully managed approaches with compassion and a gender specific response. Crucially they also offer fellow colleagues' compassion, support and motivation which is critical when women's specific practitioners are working in such emotionally laborious roles.

**Multi-disciplinary team working**

Women's specialist practitioners, whether in a specialist team or as a singular role within an offender management unit, must be effectively linked into other key agencies to ensure that the holistic needs and *layers* of the woman's needs are met. Being part of a multidisciplinary team allows for the probation practitioner to define their role better. This is likely to reduce the actual workload of practitioners but also their sense of paradox. Best practice for this approach is advocated by others as a whole systems approach linked to a woman's centre.

**Unravelling the paradox**

To de-mystify the sense of paradox by specifically drawing out the tensions that exist for the probation practitioner, particularly regarding the expectations in relation to working with women should be visible across policy and operational guidance. This is most easily done through ensuring that all policy is developed in a collaborative way, reflecting the realities experienced by practitioners and considering the emotional demands of the job.



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## Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

### Participant Information Sheet

**Project Title:** Exploring staff attitudes towards working with women

**Researchers:**

Claire Rushton, Early Interventions Policy Lead, HMPPS Women's Team / Griffins Fellow

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**Who are we?**

In our day jobs, we work for the national HMPPS Women's Team, leading on Early Interventions and Project Management. Prior to this, we both experienced working with women throughout our careers as practitioner Offender Managers then Operational Managers across diverse settings including prisons, sentence management and Approved Premises. We first met in our roles as Regional Strategic Women's SPO Leads in the Midlands and through this work became interested in listening to 'frontline staff' talk about their work with women.

One of the priorities in our current work is to develop a gender-responsive, trauma-informed approach to working with women throughout the criminal justice system so that we can improve outcomes for women who are so very often disadvantaged. For the last couple of years, we have been involved in research, writing and practice in this area and are now keen to gain more insight from staff in our organisation regarding what makes a difference to being able to deliver this work effectively.

**Why are we doing this study?**

Throughout our various roles in Probation, we have both come across a wide variety of different attitudes and approaches towards working with women. Some tell us that "working with women is like marmite, you either love it or hate it" and being told "give me ten men over one woman" is becoming all too familiar to us.

Our research tells us that there are likely to be two main implications of the development of negative staff attitudes towards those in their care, effects on the user and on the provider. Literature on perceptions of women in the Court setting indicates a 'double deviance' effect where poorer sentencing outcomes are associated with negative attitudes in sentencers. There is also some emerging evidence from social care settings that demonstrates the impact of such attitudes on staff well-being, suggesting that staff who are not properly supported in difficult roles will go on to suffer from decreasing morale and resilience.

We want to explore the development and implications of Probation staff attitudes towards work with women both on the women and the staff themselves. We hope to understand; the prevalence of negative attitudes towards working with women, how such attitudes are developed and then explore whether

there are likely to be ways in which such attitudes can be improved, through; better staff training, support or structure.

Finally, we hope that through this research, we can encourage the use of thoughtful recruitment into women's specialist roles and further develop appropriate models of staff support structures to enable improved outcomes for both women in our care and frontline staff.

### What are our research aims?

- Explore perceptions (beliefs / thoughts) of Probation staff on working with women.
- Identify the barriers / enablers for enthusiasm towards this work.
- Consider what operational / strategic / structural changes would improve perceptions of work with women.

### What does it involve?

- 1) **Informal Focus groups (September/October 2023)** – We will hold an informal focus group with 5-10 practitioners having mixed experiences of working with women. We will use this discussion to help shape the development of a survey.
- 2) **Survey (October - December 2023)** - Data from the focus group will then inform the development of a survey that will be sent to a wider pool of practitioners working in a variety of roles (including those whose work includes women and those that actively avoid working with women). We want to identify the prevalence of negative attitudes towards working with women, understand what these perceptions are based on and explore how far these attitudes are influenced by the organisation.
- 3) **Formal Focus Groups (January 2024)** – With two groups of practitioners who work in women's specialist teams (5-10 participants in each group), we will use the survey data to discuss the challenges of working with women and the potential operational changes that might encourage improved perceptions of work with women.

### Is this mandatory?

No - Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide that you do not want to take part, you do not have to give a reason for this, and your decision will be accepted. There will be no disadvantage to you declining to take part.

### Are there risks?

The questions we ask may cause you to consider the impact of working with women on yourself and others. It is important to know that you do not have to answer any of the questions posed, and you can decide to leave the group at any stage. Even if you have already answered some questions, you can ask that these answers are removed from our data or the recording is deleted. You have this option for 14 days after your contributions are made.

All of your answers will be anonymous, and we will use a pseudonym to represent your views in the final write up of the research such as **Women's specialist officer No 1**

At the end of the focus group, we will stay in the location for an hour to provide the opportunity for anyone to ask further questions or discuss anything that they may have found difficult. We can also advise of other people to talk to outside of the Probation Service if this is helpful.

**Is there any benefit in taking part?**

Sometimes, people feel there is a benefit in being able to talk about their experiences and know that someone else is interested in listening to them. There may also be benefit in knowing that your views are important to those working to develop policy and practice for women in the HMPPS HQ team.

**What do we do with the answers?**

We will record (sound) the focus groups so that we do not have to write up everything you say and can concentrate on your conversation throughout. These recordings will be stored and used only by us. We will not share these with anyone else. Once the recordings are written up (called transcripts), we will analyse them so that we can summarise what everyone has said and then destroy the original audio recordings. Survey responses will be collated anonymously and held electronically. All electronic data will be password protected so that only we (the researchers) will have access to them.

The final write-up has to be submitted in March 2023. This will then be published on the Griffins Society website and can be viewed by yourselves and any other member of the public. Once this has occurred, we will destroy all remaining data securely so that nobody else can ever listen to them. This will be a maximum of 6 months following the submission of our final report. We may also refer to this research and its outcomes in other publications.

**How do I agree to take part?**

If you agree to take part, you may be invited to contribute in one of three ways;

- Informal focus group – this will take place in September/October 2023.
- Formal focus group – this will take place in December 2023.

You will be asked to sign consent forms to show that you understand the terms of your participation. Consent forms will be scanned and stored electronically before hard copies are destroyed securely.

- Survey – these will be sent out from October 2023 and responses collated by the end of November 2023.

You will be asked to confirm that you understand the terms of your participation in the survey itself which will determine your consent.

**What if I want further information?**

If you want any further information about this research or the ethics approval that we have had to get to do this research, then please ask us.

Thank you for your time,

Claire Rushton and Claire Morley

**Appendix 2: Consent Form****Consent Form**

**Project Title:** Exploring staff attitudes towards working with women

**Researchers:**

Claire Rushton, Early Interventions Policy Lead, HMPPS Women's Team / Griffins Fellow

Claire Morley, Project Manager, HMPPS Women's Team / Griffins Fellow

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Please tick the boxes if you agree with the following statements'

**YES**

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the study (or have had it read out to me and have understood it) and have had the chance to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I do not have to answer any of the researcher's questions if I do not wish to, and that I can withdraw at any time, without giving reasons, until two weeks after my contributions. If I decline to take part, there will be no repercussions on me.

I agree to take part in the study, which means being involved in a focus group on one occasion and / or taking part in a survey

I understand that my contributions will be recorded (audio only) and that this will be kept securely by the researcher until after submission of the final report (on or after 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024).

I understand that the researcher may use quotes from my contributions but will do this in a way that keeps my identity confidential.

Name of participant:

Date:

Signature:

ENDS