

Research Paper

2018/01



Survived...but at what cost? A study of women in the criminal justice system who experienced domestic abuse and the potential for change

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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our appreciation to our employer, NIACRO, for allowing us the opportunity to undertake this important research and for the understanding and support extended that enabled us to complete it.

Our thanks also to Professor Monica Mc Williams, our Supervisor. Her guidance and constructive suggestions during the planning and development were very much appreciated. Thank you for sticking with right us right to the end!

We are particularly grateful for the assistance given by the Sentence Co-ordinator (you know who you are!) in Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison who identified the majority of the women for interview and made the interviews in prison possible.

We also want to acknowledge the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Prison Service for permission to conduct the research and interview women in their care. Thanks are extended too to staff members of all of the other statutory and voluntary agencies who were willing to be interviewed and thereby contributed to the research findings.

A huge thanks also goes to Gwen Montgomery for transcribing the work.

Our final and special thanks go to all of the women who agreed to be interviewed. We were humbled by your stories and extremely grateful that you allowed us to represent your stories in this research. No one has the right to treat others in the ways you have experienced. From what you have told us, it is clear that you are strong, and have survived extremely difficult circumstances.

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Abstract

This research focuses on the impact of domestic abuse and its implications for women in Northern Ireland who offend so that more appropriate responses can be identified and introduced across the criminal justice system. Its objectives were to:

1. Share the stories and experiences of women who experienced domestic abuse and who offended, focusing particularly on their 'journey into crime' and some of the barriers women in Northern Ireland face in reporting (or choosing not to report) domestic abuse.
2. Explore whether living in a post-conflict society impacted upon the women's propensity to report domestic abuse.
3. Establish whether the Pre-Sentence Reports prepared by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) referenced domestic abuse and assess whether or not domestic abuse was taken into consideration as a mitigating factor at sentencing.
4. Document the women's experiences of serving their sentence.
5. Identify appropriate responses, particularly alternatives to custodial sentences.

Interviews were conducted with 20 women in custody, on Probation and beyond their sentence and a series of staff from statutory and voluntary agencies within or close to the criminal justice system. The research findings and recommendations were structured around the need for:

- Earlier interventions for women affected (particularly for those not yet ready to disclose domestic abuse).
- A review of the processes by which women are introduced to decisions taken regarding the sentences they receive, including their Pre-Sentence Reports.
- Better provision for community-based sentencing, as alternatives to custodial sentences where appropriate.
- Improved specialist domestic abuse support for women within the criminal justice system, both in prison and on Probation.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This research focuses on the impact of domestic abuse and its implications for women who offend so that more appropriate responses can be identified and introduced across the criminal justice system. It was conducted by two members of staff from NIACRO, a voluntary organisation that has, since 1971, been working to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities across Northern Ireland. Its vision is of a society in which the needs and rights of all, including victims of crime, adults and children who offend and those who are at risk of offending, are equally respected.

Geraldine McGuigan co-ordinates services for women affected by the criminal justice system, particularly focusing on equipping women to integrate back into community life upon release from custody. Ruth Walker is the Business Development Manager.

Women's Aid Federation held a series of workshops in 2016 for women in prison in Northern Ireland. 85% of the participants had experienced domestic abuse¹; reflective of the estimated numbers of women in prison nationally. NIACRO has been working on this issue for some time and this research provides the opportunity to formalise our understanding of these links for the women we support.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 recognises the prevalence of gender-based violence in post-conflict societies. The Women's Resource & Development Agency and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland were partners in Women & Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning (2012-14); a two-year research project to "*distil and disseminate learning from the Northern Ireland peace process.*"² The research painted a stark picture of women and girls subject to high levels of domestic and sexual violence, in and outside the home, concluding that women and girls' experiences in Northern Ireland fit with a global picture of post-conflict societies. Coercive control by men in the home and community emerged as a distinguishing legacy of paramilitary involvement, within Nationalist and Loyalist communities.

¹ <https://www.womensaidni.org/assets/uploads/2016/07/WAFNI-response-to-Improving-Health-within-Criminal-Justice.pdf>

² <https://wrda.net/lobbying/women-and-peace-building/>

More recent research on domestic abuse in post-conflict Northern Ireland confirmed that violence against women is at its highest levels since official data was recorded (McWilliams & Doyle, 2017). Their research outlines the progress of the Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland Strategy (Department of Justice NI 2015). It outlines three further research needs:

- i. *increasing our understanding of who experiences domestic abuse in Northern Ireland and what their experiences are;*
- ii. *tracking the impact of the aforementioned legislative/policy changes on the ground; and*
- iii. *identifying the impacts of changes to the political situation (crucially of reaching a political settlement) on experiences of/response to domestic abuse.*

With that in mind, the objectives of this research are to:

1. Share the stories and experiences of women who experienced domestic abuse and who offended, focusing particularly on their 'journey into crime'.
2. Explore whether living in a post-conflict society impacted upon the women's propensity to report domestic abuse.
3. Establish whether the Pre-Sentence Reports prepared by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) referenced domestic abuse and assess whether or not domestic abuse was taken into consideration as a mitigating factor at sentencing.
4. Document the women's experiences of serving their sentence.
5. Identify appropriate responses³, particularly alternatives to custodial sentences.

The report's recommendations have been developed with reference to three particular initiatives:

- (i) Recent attempts by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) to account for women's backgrounds and needs, particularly the adoption of Pathways 8 & 9⁴, as recommended by Corston (Home Office, 2007).

³ Within the criminal justice system and the community (particularly health).

⁴ Pathway 8: Support for women who have been abused, raped or who have experienced domestic violence.

Pathway 9: Support for women who have been involved in prostitution.

- (ii) Work currently being undertaken by Department of Justice (NI) to develop a Women's Strategy.
- (iii) Several key priorities within Northern Ireland's Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland: A Seven Year Strategy (2016)⁵.



⁵ Year 3 Action Plan is being implemented, with the Department of Justice, Department of Health & Department for Communities responsible for leading on relevant actions.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Domestic abuse: defining the term

The literature reviewed acknowledges the wide range of behaviours that can be associated with domestic abuse, from serious physical violence to emotional, coercive and psychological abuse. The cross-government definition⁶ of domestic violence and abuse references the extent of the phenomenon.

“Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to: psychological; physical; sexual; financial; and emotional.”

The definition goes on to recognise that, encompassed within domestic abuse may be:

- controlling behaviour: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.
- coercive behaviour: an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) definition⁷ is:

“Any act [of gender-based violence] that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

The following definition also supports a wide-ranging understanding of domestic abuse:

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-violence-and-abuse>

⁷ <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

“Domestic violence does not only – or even mostly – consist of acts of physical violence, although these are often present. It includes psychological and emotional tactics including threats, isolation and undermining self-confidence. The severity of its impacts centre on the common operation of fear, terror and control.” (Pain, 2014)

Pain goes on to make the important point that this “widespread and everyday phenomenon in higher and lower income countries alike” cuts “across boundaries of class, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation”. O’Donnell too observes that ‘relationship violence’ occurs at every socioeconomic level and across all age groups, however, she contends:

“Women in their early 20s living in economically disadvantaged urban communities are especially vulnerable. Nonfatal intimate partner violence peaks during late adolescence and young adulthood, and women living in poverty are more likely to be victimized by intimate partners than are more affluent women.” (O’Donnell, 2009)

O’Donnell points to a “constellation of factors” including family histories of abuse and involvement in community violence “... known to contribute to increased risks of intimate partner violence in settings where relationships and families are challenged by poverty. Low-income, predominantly minority, young women may also be at risk because of their reproductive histories, which differ in a number of ways from their more affluent peers”

2.2 Reporting domestic abuse

There are varied and complex reasons why many women live with domestic abuse for prolonged periods without leaving abusive partners or reporting to authorities. These include:

- feelings of shame associated with being a victim and wanting to be seen to be conforming to social norms (Sulak, 2014)
- assuming that children are less aware of the abuse, and, if they are aware, it has little impact on them (Odojsky, 2018)
- fear of losing children to the care system (Prison Reform Trust, 2017)

McWilliams and Doyle’s 2017 study is based on findings from over 100 interviews with women victims of intimate partner violence and representatives from professional groups offering

support. Interviews were conducted in 1992 and 2017, with the 2017 report providing “*up-to-date information on the experiences of and responses to violence against women in intimate relationships in Northern Ireland today, and investigates key similarities and differences in experiences of and service responses to IPV between 2016 and 1992.*” They highlight the “*largest ever absolute numbers of recorded domestic violence incidents ... since the data series was established in 1998/99.*”⁸ They surmise:

“the impact that the introduction of a more representative police force and greater policing attention to domestic violence crimes have had on the ground are suggested by the dramatic increase in the number of domestic violence incidents now being recorded by the police. For example, between 1992 when McWilliams and McKiernan completed their research and the most recent year 2015, the number of incidents responded to by the police in Northern Ireland increased tenfold from 2,800 to over 28,000.”

However, they also point out that this figure “*concern[s] only those incidents that are reported to the police. Given the tendency among victims of violence not to report incidents, the statistics are likely to underestimate the real prevalence of violence.*”

Under-reporting of domestic abuse was raised in a Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland 2010 report which highlighted the need for “*advocacy and support for victims in order to encourage them to report cases and engage with the criminal justice process.*” (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, 2010).

2.3 Domestic abuse in a society emerging from conflict

Inclusive Democracy’s 2013 report points to “*a backlash against women’s agency in Northern Ireland in a number of different ways*” because “*Northern Ireland is not yet a society at peace as the legacy of the past continues to over shadow our present.*” It highlights domestic and sexual violence as “*...a particular and often hidden problem in societies emerging from conflict.*” In particular, men who left prison under the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 found ‘adjusting’ to life outside of prison, and beyond the conflict, difficult, with many turning to drugs, alcohol and newly-emerging forms of criminality. “*Women believe this has exacerbated the problem of domestic and sexual violence.*” (Inclusive Democracy, 2013). Furthermore, “*avenues to seek*

⁸ 29,166 incidents of domestic abuse were recorded by the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2016/17

support, safety and justice are often closed” to women across the sectarian divide; an ongoing phenomenon, even in our ‘post conflict’ society.

McWilliams and Doyle also noted *“new groups of paramilitaries have emerged in Northern Ireland, hotspots of violence remain where police cannot enter areas, and societal divisions and mistrust persist, and these are all aspects of the Northern Ireland situation which may (or may not) have implications for victims of domestic violence.”* However, they also found *“distrust of police in relation to Intimate Partner Violence, which was a key finding of the 1992 study, was not raised by any participants (including participants from Catholic, nationalist/republican communities) in the 2016 (post-conflict) study.”* For explanation, they point to *“the successful post-conflict reforms recommended by the Patten Commission following the 1998 peace agreement.”*

Writers beyond Northern Ireland also recognise that domestic abuse goes on within a public, political context. Weissman, for example, argues that *“To fully explain domestic violence, it is necessary to examine the private in the context of the public and the social and moral in the context of the political and economic.”* (Weissman, 2007). E Erez et al (2015), too, writing in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, recognise that domestic abuse lies at the intersection of private and political conflict in their considerations of the implications for the policing of it.

2.4 Domestic abuse public policy: Northern Ireland context

Whilst the literature accepts that domestic abuse appears to be more prevalent in societies that have experienced and / or are emerging from conflict, McWilliams and Doyle observe: *“Northern Ireland has, and continues to lag behind the rest of the UK in its domestic violence policies”* even with the *“major changes in the comprehension of and responses to domestic violence”* that have emerged in recent years, in particular:

- Better alignment of Northern Irish policies (and those of the UK more generally) with the objectives/outlook of influential international frameworks
- Changes to the domestic political situation since the end of the 1990s, and particularly since the peace agreement in 1998.

McWilliams and Doyle identified the following reforms in Northern Ireland as significant, whilst also noting the lack of recent empirical studies to judge whether they have, in reality, afforded victims with greater protection.

- Family Homes and Domestic Violence (NI) Order 1998
- Violence, the Housing Support Services (NI) Order 2002
- Housing (NI) Order 2003
- Crime and Victims Act 2004⁹.
- Strategy for 'Addressing Domestic Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland', 2005, a *"high quality, coordinated, multi-agency response to domestic violence"*

The 2005 Strategy led to the introduction of ¹⁰Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) in 2009 to address cases of abuse identified as most likely to result in serious harm or homicide. Between 2010 and 2015 over 8,000 cases were discussed. It was replaced in 2016 by a joint Department of Health and Department of Justice Strategy, *Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland*. Whilst it expands the understanding of domestic abuse and has provided a framework for annual action plans¹¹, McWilliams and Doyle raise concerns about:

- the reluctance by the government to commit financial resources to the Strategy
- inactivity owing to the stalemate within the Northern Ireland Executive as inhibitors to better progress
- the Strategy's weakness in overlooking the specificities of Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society and how this impacts on domestic violence.

2.5 Impact of domestic abuse: women's well-being and risk-taking behaviour

Herman explains that, after a traumatic experience, *"the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger may come back at any time....Long after the danger is passed, traumatised people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in*

⁹ Which is complimented by the Law Reform Miscellaneous Provision Order 2005.

¹⁰ MARACs have been shown to reduce repeat victimization rates elsewhere in the UK.

¹¹ At the time of research, Year 3 Action Plan was underway.

the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts.” (Herman, 2016).

The use of alcohol and illegal substances to cope with the trauma associated with domestic abuse, particularly when experienced over extended periods of years and decades, is a common theme in the literature. Overup et al’s two-year study of 818 North American undergraduate students suggests that survivors of intimate partner violence drink to cope, which in turn leads to greater drinking problems (a self-medication model).

“Individuals who have experienced IPV seem to experience greater alcohol problems because they are drinking as a means of coping with the negative effects associated with their victimization, including depression, anxiety, and social problems.” (Overup et al, 2015)

They point to the likelihood of alcohol dependency becoming a negative feedback loop, *“whereby individuals experience negative emotions, drink to dull such emotions, and yet experience more negative emotions as a consequence”*. They also open up the possibility of women moving beyond alcohol, to *“other drugs”* and to *“other risk-taking behaviours including criminal activity.”*

In their study, O'Campo et al found *“significant acute and long-term physical and mental health consequences for women, with mental health problems representing the greatest health care IPV-related costs”*. They found *“Comorbidity of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression affected 19.7% of abused women versus 4.5% of non-abused women”* and recognised that *“major or repeated trauma such as partner violence can impact all aspects of women’s lives including her sense of self, behaviour, coping, ability to respond to treatment, and intimate relationships to name a few.” (O'Campo et al, 2006)*

In a similar vein, Pain highlights the extent to which *“prolonged abuse leads to a different kind of fear and trauma”*.

“Everyday abuse and entrapment work through psychological as well as physical control. In an intimate context, the terrorist’s justification for violence is very powerful. Prolonged trauma in these cases ‘invades and erodes the personality’; it may lead to psychological

changes including depression, internalization, self-hatred and, often, taking responsibility for the abuse.” (Pain, 2014)

It is uncontended throughout the literature, therefore, that *“Domestic violence affects people in a variety of ways, and has been linked to substance misuse, self-harm, and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.”* (National Offender Management Service, 2015)

2.6 Domestic violence and offending behaviour

The Prison Reform Trust (2017) report makes the important point that most women affected by domestic abuse do not commit offences. However,

“The evidence suggests that for a majority of women in prison, the experience of domestic abuse has been a significant contributory factor. In some cases there is a direct causal link, where women offend under duress from a partner or under threat of harm if they do not comply. For other women, there may not be an obvious causal link.”

The report recognises the links between victimhood and offending behaviour:

“Many women in prison have been victims of much more serious offences than the ones they are accused of, with a growing body of research indicating that women’s exposure to physical, emotional and sexual abuse, including coercive control, is for some a driver of their offending.”

Rumgay too recognises the regularly with which women have a *“dual identity”* of victim and offender, often stemming from the *“psychological legacy of victimisation.”*

“Woman offenders often have histories of prior victimisation ... childhood abuse, domestic violence and victimisation that occurred in the context of high-risk social relationships.”
(Rumgay, 2010)

In outlining some of the main ways in which domestic abuse may lead to women offending, the Prison Reform Trust (2017) identifies:

- Reacting with violence against an abusive partner. Even defensive actions may be regarded as having been initiated by women when manipulative partners may control the evidence. Abusers, in this instance, may go on to use the partner's involvement in the criminal justice system as a further form of abuse against her.
- Committing offences on behalf of or to protect the partner or to support the partner's drug use and/or other criminal activities.
- Self-medicating with drugs / alcohol in an attempt to cope with the trauma associated with the abuse; making women more susceptible to offending and further abuse.
- Economic disadvantage exacerbated by domestic abuse particularly where the partner controls the household's finances.

In her article (*Time*, 2 October 2017), Cox highlights the plight of women imprisoned in the United States: “...many of the incarcerated women... were victims of domestic and sexual violence whose income was vital to their family household.” Her observation that “these concerns have rarely been part of prison-reform discussion, and yet this fact is typical of the history of women’s incarceration in our country” is of equal relevance to Northern Ireland. Cox points to a Vera Institute Report which uncovers that the overwhelming majority of female prisoners are held for nonviolent offenses, most are black and 86% are victims of sexual violence.¹²

Numerous reports have found that at least 50% of women in custody in the UK have a history of domestic abuse and / or experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse as a child.¹³ Women in Prison (2009) for example, reported that 80% of the women they surveyed in their research reported such victimisation.

¹² The profile of female prisoners across the USA is starting to attract political attention, with the introduction of the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act introduced by several Senators. Yet, since July 2016, the Dignity Act has only advanced as far as the Senate Judiciary Committee where no further action has been taken.

¹³ The Cortson Report, *Prisoners’ Childhood and Family Backgrounds*, Ministry of Justice 2012, Thinking Differently about Female Offenders, Ministry of Justice 2014

Women's Aid Federation held a series of workshops in 2016 for women in prison in Northern Ireland. 85% of the participants had experienced domestic abuse¹⁴; and a 2016 Report on an unannounced inspection of Ash House Women's Prison found that *"the population of Ash House remained a complex one, with many of the women experiencing mental health issues, high levels of self-harming behaviour, domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse."* (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, 2016).

2.7 The Criminal Justice Response

As far back as 2000, HM Prison Service Women's Policy Group¹⁵ recommended that good practice in responding to disclosure of a sexual abuse history ought to involve the formation of a multi-disciplinary team to support women: *"comprising medical, nursing, probation, chaplaincy, uniformed staff and outside agencies, which can bring together expert knowledge to create a programme a counselling suitable for the individual."*

Yet Rumgay points out that practice is still far from this provision. She argues that the *"tension inherent in a contradictory dual identity as both victim and offender has presented a considerable obstacle to the development of coherent policy and practice, particularly in the fields of sentencing and rehabilitation."* (Rumgay, 2005). She believes societal requirements to attribute blame and distribute punishment have proved too much of a barrier, as society remains concerned that offenders are held accountable for their behaviour. She asks whether attempts to understand an offender's plight as a victim first and foremost appear as mere excuses for crime and exoneration from personal responsibility.

In her report, Baroness Jean Corston *"considered these women in terms of their vulnerabilities"*. (Home Office, 2007). The first of these vulnerabilities was her 'domestic circumstances' including experiences of domestic abuse. Corston was fearful that the (then) seven prison resettlement pathways *"are leading to fragmentation of services and funding streams. Many of the small voluntary agencies working with women do not fit exclusively into a sole pathway and these artificial divisions risk putting an intolerable burden on these small bodies."* She recommended

¹⁴ <https://www.womensaidni.org/assets/uploads/2016/07/WAFNI-response-to-Improving-Health-within-Criminal-Justice.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmhaff/193/19315.htm>

that Pathways 8 & 9¹⁶ which had been “developed to the credit of the Prison Service Women and Young People’s Group”, be mandatory.

Women in Prison’s 2014 publication summarised the progress made (and progress still to be made) across England and Wales since the publication of the 2007 report. It found that criminal justice agencies had gone some way towards meeting Corston’s recommendation that they prioritise and accelerate preparations to implement the gender equality duty and radically transform how they deliver services for women. Particular publications and training which had contributed include:

- *The National Service Framework: Improving Services to Women Offenders*; policy paper outlining principles and good practice and expectations.
- *Prison Order 4800 on Women Offenders*, guidance to prison staff on dealing with women who have experiences of domestic and sexual violence.
- *Supporting Women Affected By Violence: Guidelines for Staff* published by the Women and Young People’s Team within the National Offender Management Service.
- *Offender Management Guide to Working with Women* which sets out the expectations for Probation Services.

However, progress yet to be made included, for example:

- A re-examination of the case for a separate sentencing framework for women
- That community solutions for non-violent offences should become the norm
- That community sentences be designed to take account of women's particular vulnerabilities and domestic and childcare commitments.

The report also highlights the patchy nature of provision across England and Wales:

“There has been an increase in women-specific community sentences and the development of women-specific conditional cautioning, and co-location and other means of partnership working with women's support services to overcome the disadvantages

¹⁶ Pathway 8: support for women who have been abused, raped or who have experienced domestic violence.

Pathway 9: support for women who have been involved in prostitution

women face in gender-neutral community sentences. However, the availability across the country is still too limited.” (Women in Prison, 2014)

The Prison Reform Trust (2017) too call for more attention to be paid to:

- UK and Welsh Government strategies on tackling violence against women and girls, on women offenders, and on victims
- Sentencing guidance
- Frameworks of standards, guidance and training for all criminal justice professionals – police, prosecutors, offender managers, criminal defence lawyers and the judiciary
- Commissioning of specialist, gender-specific support and rehabilitation programmes in prison and the community
- Police responses to women offenders who may be affected by domestic abuse, including through problem solving triage and diversion schemes.

It is noteworthy that the UK has signed up to the UN Rules for the Treatment of women prisoners and women receiving non-custodial sentences (the Bangkok Rules)¹⁷. These require that nation states:

- Address structural causes of violence against women, including those in prison, and provide training on gender equality and women’s rights for law enforcement personnel and the judiciary.
- Meet standards for the treatment of women offenders affected by violence and abuse, including screening of women on entry to prison for abuse before admission.
- Ensure that where a woman discloses abuse, prison authorities “*endeavour to ensure that she has immediate access to specialised psychological support or counselling.*”
- Ensure abuse is taken into account in sentence plans which should “*include rehabilitative programmes and services that match their gender-specific needs...*”
- Ensure resources are available for suitable community alternatives to custody for women offenders “*with interventions to address the most common problems leading to women’s*

¹⁷ www.ohchr.org/Documents/Professionalinterest/BangkokRules.pdf

contact with the criminal justice system” which may include ‘therapeutic courses and counselling for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse...’

The 2011 Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service undertaken by the Prison Review Team, chaired by Dame Anne Owers, called for a high-level and well-resourced change programme for *“a service whose ethos was shaped in the Troubles, and which now needs to play its part in making Northern Ireland a safer society....one which could play a leading role in helping people desist from crime and in making communities safer.”*

The Review recognised that the prison system was intimately connected to Northern Ireland’s history; the approach of Prison Service staff had been *“conditioned by the experience of the Troubles”* and *“events in prison play out in the community and vice versa. Prisons therefore have political, as well as criminal, resonance and importance.”* That is why the Review formed part of the Hillsborough Agreement of February 2010 which led to the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Review observed:

“In order to protect society, prisons need to provide opportunities for prisoners to change and desist from crime. Simple containment will not achieve this: there needs to be positive work to provide prisoners with skills, tackle the underlying causes of offending and ensure resettlement support. This approach benefits victims as much as prisoners, by helping to reduce offending and encouraging reparation.”

In its 2013 publication, Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending, the Department of Justice (NI) specified the following action in the context of completing Prison Reform tasks:

“Roll-out of Inspire model across Northern Ireland to provide a more appropriate, gender-informed approach to supporting women in addressing the complex issues associated with their offending behaviour.” (Department of Justice (NI), 2013)

Whilst the 2013 the document recognised women offenders as a group with *“specific needs”*, it did not outline what these needs were or how they would be taken into account when supporting women in the justice system. Rather, it committed the Department’s Reducing Offending Unit to progress the Framework by *“identifying the needs of specific groups, including women.”* In a

subsequent 2015 document, the Department made two further references to the particular needs of women, but again did not specify what these were or how they may be addressed.

“Desistance theory emphasises the need for a dynamic, person-centered approach to support individuals who have offended, recognising differing needs between women and men.”

“In using desistance principles to structure our approach towards reducing reoffending, we will work with the person who has offended and ensure that we provide assistance that is responsive to their individual needs. This will involve recognising the differences associated with gender and age, with services and programmes being tailored to the multiple and complex needs of men, women and young people.”

(Department of Justice (NI), 2015)

The NI Prison Service’s most recent (2017) strategy document is written in the context that *“the Ministerial Group overseeing the implementation of Dame Anne’s recommendations reported that over 90% had been delivered or signed off.”* (Northern Ireland Prison Service, 2017). However, NIACRO’s response to the public consultation questioned the extent of the progress claimed.¹⁸

2.8 Alternatives to custodial sentences

The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (2014) called on the UK Government to *“develop gender specific sentencing alternatives”*, noting: *“Most women in prison do not present a threat to society and the consequences of their incarceration includes enormous personal, economic and social costs.”* She recommended that the UK Government should *“ensure that women’s histories of victimization and abuse are taken into consideration when making decisions about incarceration, especially for non-violent crimes.”* (Prison Reform Trust, 2017)

¹⁸ NIACRO Response to Prisons 2020 – Driving continuous improvement in the Prison Service, 29 September 2017

Dame Vera Baird QC, when chairing Prison Reform Trust's summit, *Domestic Abuse as a Driver to Women's Offending* (October 2017) also recognised that imprisonment cannot be the most appropriate response for many women who experience domestic abuse and offend.

"Domestic abuse can leave long-term and widespread effects on some women who may have endured years of being repeatedly assaulted, threatened, ridiculed, starved of money and isolated from their friends – all done by someone they thought loved them Putting them in prison seems like a double failure since we didn't tackle the abuse and blame them for its consequences. It is time for a radical rethink."

"Most of the solutions to women's offending lie in the community. The use of custodial remand and short prison sentences can exacerbate the problems that led women to offend..."

(Prison Reform Trust, 2017)

Within Northern Ireland, the Department of Justice (NI) 2013 Strategy also recognised that custody is not necessarily an appropriate sentence, particularly for women who may have been victims as well as offenders.

"It is important to ensure that justice is fair and that appropriate sentences are given. Research demonstrates that non-custodial sentences are often more appropriate and more effective in reducing reoffending. However, custody is still necessary for those who commit serious or grave offences, as a form of both punishment and of public protection. It is also important to recognise that in some cases, particularly among women and young people, an individual can be both a victim and an offender." (Department of Justice (NI) 2013)

In highlighting a survey of sentencers' views, the Prison Reform Trust report suggests *"judges would welcome an explicit description of how it [domestic violence] contributed to the offence."* It goes on to chart how the Public Prosecution Service is *"undertaking work to ensure judges and magistrates have the information they need in pre-sentence reports"*. This does, of course, require Probation staff to be *"alert to offenders who are also victims of domestic abuse"*.

In its 2015 report, the National Offender Management Service recommended the use of advocacy services in the community for women affected by domestic abuse:

“Advocacy services, which help women explore and access services in the community, and identity and achieve personal goals, can help women who have suffered domestic violence. Such interventions can improve overall well-being and reduce the chances of physical re-abuse, as can legal advocacy, which helps women with civil and criminal matters.”

Corston endorsed the contributions of women’s community centres:

“They recognise the impact that victimisation and isolation by disadvantage can have on a woman’s circumstances and behaviour; the shame and stigma that many women feel by a number of life experiences, not just being convicted of an offence but also mental illness or being a single parent. Perceptions of being judged as a failure serve to reinforce disadvantage, isolation and social exclusion. The centres are able through multi-agency partnerships to provide the support of community-based services, which themselves recognise the value of centres because they provide access to many women whom they have previously been unable to reach.” (Home Office, 2007)

She points to their “integrated approach” capable of meeting women’s needs “at various stages of their offending history, from prevention and diversion to resettlement into the community at the end of sentence, whether served in the community or in custody.” She also highlighted an additional potential benefit of community centres being “reduced victimisation of women through access to domestic violence support.”

2.9 In-prison support

The need for better support and clearer information to women in custody to help them to understand their progress through an often-confusing and complex justice system was highlighted by O'Neill’s 2016 study on the experiences of women leaving custody in Northern Ireland. She discovered that women released subject to post-custody supervision either did not know, did not fully understand or could not remember the full details (and implications) of their

post-release licence. She identified *“the need for clear and timely information as to what their licence conditions entailed, particularly for those who had no previous offending and no previous contact with the Probation Service.”* (O’Neill, 2016).

A report on an unannounced inspection of Ash House Women’s Prison reported:

“..staff were aware of a range of agencies to which they could refer women who had experienced abuse, rape of domestic violence. Women could call Women’s Aid confidentially.” However, there was *“no formal strategy for supporting women who had experienced abuse, rape of domestic violence ... staff had a growing awareness of their needs but lacked confidence in identifying and supporting victims. Two sentence managers had been appointed as ‘champions’ and knew of the agencies offering support ... staff had run a domestic violence workshop ..”* (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, 2016).

The inspectors found that a previous recommendation requiring *“a strategy to encourage women to disclose experiences of domestic violence, rape, abuse or prostitution, and specialist services to support them”* had not been achieved. The report, therefore, repeated the recommendation that *“staff should receive training so they can encourage women to disclose experiences of domestic violence, rape, abuse or prostitution and refer them to specialist services.”*

England and Wales are ahead of Northern Ireland in this regard with NOMS having a framework in place for supporting women who have experienced domestic or sexual violence, stating that all interventions should adhere to this, noting that:

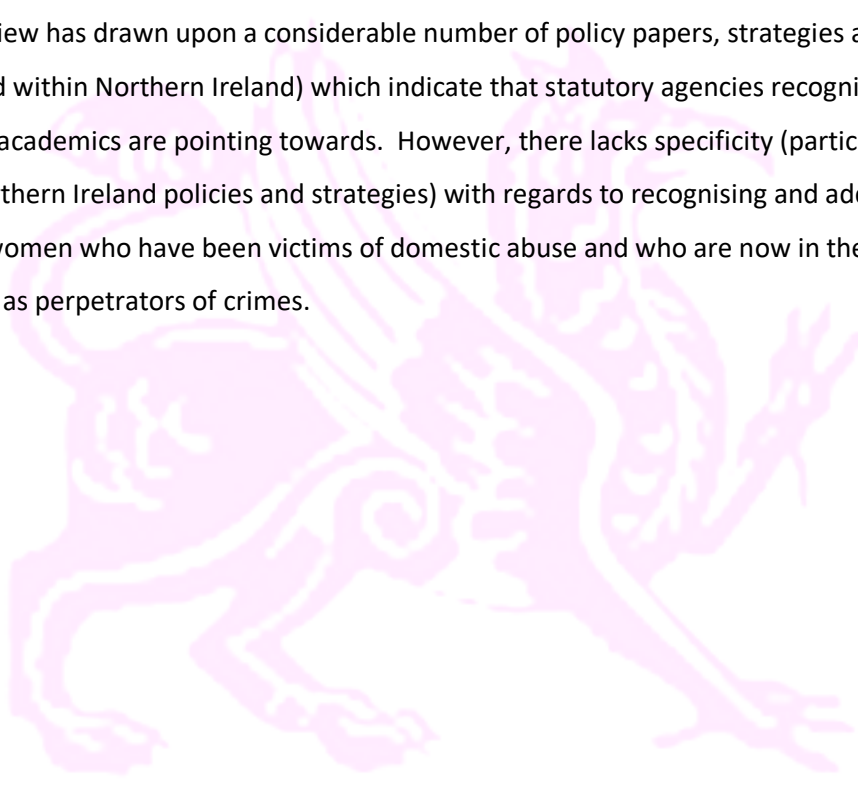
“There is promising evidence that suggests that programmes that adopt a gender-responsive approach — that is, an approach that is built on theories of women’s crime, taking into account the characteristics of women who offend and factors that affect the response of women to interventions — have good outcomes.” (National Offender Management Service, 2015)

DoJ (NI) (2013 and 2015) and NIPS (2017) strategies refer to the female population within the justice system as having particular needs, but do not identify what these are or recommend any

strategies or approaches to meet these needs. Current work being undertaken by the DOJ (NI)'s Reducing Offending Unit to develop a women's strategy is therefore significant.

2.10 Concluding remarks

The academic literature points overwhelmingly to many and complex connections between women's experiences of abuse and her behaviours, including risk taking and offending behaviour. The inference of the writers is that this connection requires the attention of policy makers and practitioners across many disciplines including health, social services and criminal justice. This Literature Review has drawn upon a considerable number of policy papers, strategies and plans (nationally and within Northern Ireland) which indicate that statutory agencies recognise in practice what academics are pointing towards. However, there lacks specificity (particularly within the Northern Ireland policies and strategies) with regards to recognising and addressing the needs of women who have been victims of domestic abuse and who are now in the criminal justice system as perpetrators of crimes.



Chapter 3: Methodology

The research interviews involved women in Northern Ireland who had been convicted of an offence and had disclosed that they had experienced domestic abuse. To obtain a representative cross section of women with differing experiences (and different types and seriousness of offending) interviews were undertaken with women who were serving custodial and community sentences and women who were beyond their sentence. Applications to the ethics committees of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) and the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) were submitted to secure permission to interview women in custody and women under Probation supervision. The women beyond sentence were identified within NIACRO's services.

Mindful of the sensitive nature of our subject matter, NIPS and PBNI agreed with the researchers that only those women assessed to be suitable for interview be identified. The following interview criteria were used to select participants:

- Have experienced domestic abuse
- Have been convicted of an offence(s)
- Are willing to engage with the research by speaking about their experiences

Women who were identified were asked if they would be willing to engage. An explanation of the purpose of the research was provided, along with a consent form for the women to sign (see Appendix 2). Consent was also secured from each woman for PBNI staff to review and report to the researchers the contents of her Pre-Sentence Report using a proforma (Appendix 3). It was agreed that each participant would be sent a copy of the final report.

At the end of the interview, each woman was given the opportunity to reflect on how she felt and provided with details of support she could access (from prison or in the community) if needed.

All interviews lasted between one and two hours, using a semi-structured approach (see Appendix 1). Whilst the questions were used consistently, each interview allowed for singular perspectives, depending on the women's own experiences and what she felt comfortable sharing.

An inductive approach was applied to the analysis of the data. Rather than beginning with a particular hypothesis, the researchers identified and categorised common themes as they emerged from the interview transcripts. Interviews with professionals were conducted once these themes had been identified, creating the opportunity to ask professionals to respond to the themes that were emerging. Interviews with representatives from the following professional bodies were conducted:

- Northern Ireland Prison Service
- Probation Board for Northern Ireland
- Victim Support NI
- Women's Aid
- Two barristers
- District Judge
- Department of Justice (NI) Community Safety Division
- Department of Justice (NI) Reducing Offending Policy Unit
- Chief Executive, NIACRO
- Monica McWilliams, researcher and expert advisor on domestic abuse in conflict situations.

Overview of the Women Interviewed

Of the 20 women interviewed:

- 12 were in prison at the time of the interview (and identified for the research by Prison Service staff)¹⁹
- Four were under Probation supervision at the time of interview (and identified for the research by Probation staff)²⁰
- Four had completed prison and / or community sentences and had maintained contact with NIACRO. They were identified by NIACRO

¹⁹ The average daily prison population in 2017/18 was 57 (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/r-s-bulletin-262018-northern-ireland-prison-population-2017-18>)

²⁰ The total number of women on Probation in 2017/18 was 409 (<https://www.pbni.org.uk/about-us/statistics-research/pbni-caseload-statistics>)

Table 1 summarises key information about the women interviewed and their experiences:

Age Range	Number of Women
20 – 35	8
35 – 45	7
50 – 60	5
Number of Abusive Partners	Number of Women
1	8
2	6
3	2
Multiple	1
1 main but others cited	3
Years experienced domestic abuse	Number of Women
Under 5 years	5
5 – 10 years	2
10 – 15 years	6
15 – 20 years	3
20 – 25 years	3
Over 25 years	1

Table 1

4 of the 5 women interviewed aged 50-60 had experienced domestic abuse for over 20 years and three had had only one partner during these years, whilst all except five of the younger women

had had two or more abusive partners. Staff at Women's Aid Belfast confirmed that they are responding to younger women with more abusive partners than older women.

8 of the women described the nature of the abuse as physical and psychological and 12 described the abuse as physical, psychological and sexual.

For 17 of the women, sustained domestic abuse was not the only adversity they had experienced. The following extracts from the interviews provide some insight into the very significant and complex difficulties many of the women had faced throughout their lives. These include being abused as a child, witnessing domestic abuse and / or other violence as children, family members' involvement in serious criminal activity and little family support.

"My first beating was from my eldest brother who beat me so bad he put me to hospital. From then I met and lived with my partner; he thought it was normal to drink and take drugs every day and beat me up every day."

"Just growing up, knowing to keep your mouth shut...I think that's why I just let men use me throughout my life."

"My mummy beat me from when I was three or four years of age. It was all I knew. It was the way I was brought up."

"I used to think domestic abuse was normal because I grew up in a house with it."

"I lost my mum at an early age so I really only had my daddy to live with I was sexually abused when I was younger...I always thought my life was going to be drink, drugs and getting beat. I never thought there was a life you could live where you're happy, where you can be happy like."

For the three women who had experienced a more stable family life, relationship with an abusive partner became the dominant feature:

“The funny thing is I know what it’s like to come from a normal life. I was never brought up with drug or alcohol abuse - I had a good family background and I know that. It’s just when somebody gets inside your head, it’s hard for you to see otherwise.”

“Alcohol was a big factor. We both worked in high-pressured jobs.”

Please refer to Appendix 4 for summary profiles of the women interviewed. The following case study is an account provided by one woman interviewee. It helps to gain insight into the lives and the challenges the women interviewed faced, and continue to face.



Experience of Domestic Abuse *I've been through most definitions of domestic abuse; I've been beat, I've been sexually abused. But that's not as bad as the mental abuse I got. He used to do that to me all the time; sit with knives, flicking me with them, tapping them on the table. I'm petrified of knives. Then calling me names, it was terrible. I don't have much self-worth even until today. I value other people more than I do myself. I don't feel worthy of even having my children. I've been hurt that many times by different men, but for him in particular, it was after the child was born.*

I had nobody around me. It got that bad I ended up in a psychiatric hospital. He'd say 'You don't need to go down to your mum's house. Stay here and have something to eat.' 'You don't need to go to town with these ones'. 'If you let them into the house that's it - I'm leaving'. I realise now that was control and I didn't before. I just thought it was because he loved me but obviously he didn't.

Getting help from family and statutory agencies *I've never brought charges against anyone even for beating me. A few times I called police. They came out and asked me what happened, approached him and told him to stay away. That was it. They couldn't do anything unless I gave a statement and I wouldn't. I would maybe on the night, but I would take it back for fear of him. He is well connected. I told lies to get him out of prison, because my mum was told that, if I didn't, six men would take me away.*

A Social Worker and Health Visitor tried to help. I heard the door knocking; I knew the Health Visitor was coming. I had a black eye so didn't open the door. She came back with a Social Worker. I couldn't hide because she had seen me. I opened the door and they checked my child over. They thought she was hurt. They seen my eye and knew it was him. There was no marks on her; they told me that if I didn't get rid of him they were going to lift her. I agreed that my mum could take her so I could have a break. I was meant to leave him and I didn't. That's why she was never returned to me because it wasn't safe. Looking back, I understand. She could have been killed. It was too volatile.

Coping *I use drugs and alcohol to cope. I self-harm as well. I have thought of ending my own life. I'm on a *SPAR at the minute over it. I've tried to hang myself, overdose, throw myself off a building. I don't want to live anymore to be honest; I've nothing in this life. I'm not happy. I live this life for my children but I wouldn't want to cause them more heartache. I'm not happy. Never have been. I put on a brilliant face.*

Journey into Crime *Most of my charges are for GBH. I have 7 serious assaults against men on my record as well as fighting with police. I definitely think all of it is related to the domestic abuse. For my last charge I got 2-3 years. Before that it was all 6 to 12-month sentences. I was meant to get a life sentence for my last charge but the judge had a change of heart. I've grew up a lot through this sentence. I feel really bad for what I have done in the past. I'm remorseful for the people I've hurt, I really am. Jail hasn't really helped me this time. Courts think I am the bad person but they don't know what's behind all that. Mostly men behind every woman in here. It's scary. The ruination of women – men they can be.*

**SPAR: Supporting Prisoners at Risk process. Helps staff to identify and support prisoners that may be in personal crisis and in need of support.*

Chapter 4: Findings

The Chapter is broken down into six sections:

1. An overview of the impact of living under abusive control, particularly highlighting the detrimental impact on the women's social life (including contact with family, friends and community), self-esteem and self-confidence and mental health.
2. A summary of the women's reporting (or not) of the domestic abuse to authorities including whether living in a post conflict society impacted on women's propensity to report the abuse.
3. An overview of the women's journey into crime, identifying five main pathways which characterised this journey.
4. Details of the sentences the women received and an exploration of whether the women knew and / or understood the process by which they were sentenced (including whether they were aware of what was written in their Pre-Sentence Reports).
5. The women's experiences of serving their sentence (custodial and community) including professional interviewees' observations of custodial sentencing for women who have experienced domestic abuse.
6. The women's suggested alternatives to custodial sentencing for women in similar situations.

Each section ends with concluding remarks and introduces related recommendations, all of which are brought together in Chapter 7.

4.1 Impact of living under abusive control

The following extracts offer some insight into the nature of the control the interviewees had experienced:

"He really did hunt me down like a dog, totally relentless. It never ended, he just seemed to be everywhere. He would ring me - 'I can see you'. He could describe what I was wearing, even if I changed three or four times a day he still seemed to know where I was."

"Mobile phones are the worst invention ever, I couldn't get outside the fecking door without bringing the mobile phone and every five minutes he'd be on. Where are you going? Where are you now? Who are you talking to? Before mobile phones I had a little freedom."

"He convinced me he could read my mind. He had me convinced that I needed him, that I can't survive without him or something."

Control can be exerted psychologically as well as physically, even from a distance. One woman spoke of how her partner continued to exert control whilst he was in prison and two interviewees felt they were still being controlled during their imprisonment.

*"He was able to control me through the emotional stuff even the fact that he was having affairs because I wasn't good enough ... I offered on numerous occasions to leave ... He didn't want me, but he as sure as f*** didn't want anyone else to have anything to do with me."*

"It went from sexual abuse and then he started taking money off me every week. I then wasn't allowed out of the house. Even when I did go out of the house to get shopping I wasn't allowed to look at anyone."

"To be honest the phone calls when he was in prison, was nearly worser than the beating. If I said I can't get up today he's be calling me names saying I want money and I need my visits. It was stress like."

"He knows I'm getting out soon. Was in contact when I first got sentenced."

"Because I can hold down my own now he didn't like it. I'm not 16 any more, I told him. I'm not 16 any more ... he's trying to worm his way in before I even get out the door [of prison]."

Several women who had left abusive partners were able to articulate the distinction between how they view the relationship now and how they perceived it at the time.

"I was weak then, he kept me weak; he wouldn't let me get strong."

"I realise that was control and I didn't before. I just thought it was because he loved me but obviously he didn't"

Five women spoke of their partner introducing them to drugs to exert control.

"Taking me for walks, filling me full of medication, taking me back, leaving me back. It was constant all the time."

"He had a hold on me over prescription drugs. I always used to say if I wasn't on drugs I wouldn't go near him. I never went on drugs until I met him. I used to go with a drug dealer and didn't take drugs."

"He gave me a tablet one day cos I had a hangover ... he knew he had a hold of me. It was his, it was hard to get one of those scrips - his prescription; he was giving me half of his. It was control and he knew it."

Nine women spoke of her partner's control of the household finances including:

- Partners' drinking / drug use took up most of the household income (four women)
- Partner's gambling took up most of the household income (one woman)
- Partner controlled all spending, mismanaged money or spent her money (six women)

At its most extreme, this led directly to theft for survival:

"There was money there on the day it [offence] happened but he had it. He was drinking. So I had no choice but to end up stealing. That day it was baby food. He was drinking. I didn't want to ask him for money, that kinda way. The other [offence] was more toiletries for the kids. Basically, all to do with drink."

Other women offered similar testimony:

"I didn't get no money, he had control of the money. He had control of what I could wear and couldn't wear. In the summer I was wearing jumpers because I wasn't allowed to wear wee tops or anything."

"There was even no food in the house for the kids or us it was terrible. What was he doing with the money? Drinking it and going out."

The controlling nature of their relationships 'shrunk' the women's lives, undermined their independence and kept them (physically and/or ideologically) 'close' to their partner. All of the women reported isolation, low self-esteem and self-confidence, and mental health difficulties.

4.1.1 Isolation

Twelve women described how their partners intentionally isolated them from friends and family.

"He didn't like me being close to my family... He'd bring up that they didn't care about you..."

"He isolated me from them [family]. He took them out of the equation."

"I was never allowed out anywhere to see my own mother and father...A prisoner in my own home until I plucked up the courage one night."

"There was things like not being allowed to go out with my friends.... I wasn't allowed to go out and do my own thing."

"My best friend stopped speaking to me because I kept taking him back. My parents didn't know the extent... I was just very isolated."

Ten recounted how they stopped socialising with friends or going out at all, either because they were not allowed to, or because they lost interest in socialising as a result of low self-esteem.

For several women, friends/family became disillusioned by their inability to 'break away' from the relationship. A further four spoke of closing themselves off from friends or family to avoid questions about scars and bruises.

"I was staying in the house two or three days because I didn't wanna come out, because of people seeing my face. Then my family were ringing me. Do you want to go here do you want to go there? Because I was in that rut, I was just scared to leave the house."

"Because I was put down so low I was made feel that no one would want to be friends with me. "

"I've hid it all from my family."

"Made me think my family didn't care ... it did work until I came in here. [prison]" I actually didn't think my family cared ... and that pushed me closer to them ones [partner's social circle]."

Three women described how their partner's social circle was the only avenue open to them for socialising or any contact with the outside world. This influenced their lifestyle; contributing to their involvement in criminal activity.

"The only people I was allowed to talk to were people who were going to abuse me... I didn't go to cafes ... didn't go to any places like that where you could socialise or be seen out"

"The only people that were sort of made available to me friend-wise were people that lived below me. They had drink and alcohol problems. At that stage, I didn't."

"A whole lot of it was to do with the circle of friends. His friends would have been ex-joyriders, glue sniffers, alcoholics, druggies, didn't work and all guys."

One woman spoke of feeling judged by her children's school. This may reflect low self-esteem as well as intentional isolation by the partner.

"I felt so judged by them [children's school]. Whenever there was case conferences and that at school the teachers at school looked down on me differently. They didn't really want to have any conversations with me. They knew what was going on, how to deal with the subject of domestic violence. I just think they didn't really want anything to do with it."

Community isolation was also highlighted:

"All I needed was somebody to go 'Look here's a way out of this'... Not one person said you've got to get away from him or supported me in any way shape or form."

"A lot of them were being beat. I discovered this, I was talking to them [and they were saying] sure that's just normal. Are you serious? They were as sick as him? They were obviously putting up with the same behaviours."

The overall impact of isolation, with no obvious or trusted sources of support or protection is summarised in this interview as follows:

"How the hell can you get out of a situation when you can't contact your family, you haven't got any money that you can use, you haven't anybody to turn to, to trust to help you. Even when I went to hostels, even when I left the house he had a sister who would coerce me into coming back home; he's going to be better, he is going to be a better person, he will stop doing that. He had this way of making everything seem rosy. He would put the blame on me, say it's her fault that I react like that."

4.1.2 Low self-esteem and self-confidence

17 of the 20 women spoke about the impact on individual self-esteem and confidence.

11 were forced to stop work, training or education, often because of the partner feeling threatened by her status. The consequence for these women was lower skills levels (and fewer

options), a diminished sense of worth and purpose, and reduced confidence. Experiences ranged from stopping school at age 14 to being forced to leave steady jobs.

"My first abusive partner was 9 years older than me and after a while I went from someone who worked in the civil service; I had quite a decent job. Always dressed in designer stuff, to someone that ran about in his tracksuits, which were too big on me, didn't wear make up, stopped doing my hair.... I felt so worthless and low and down."

"The strange thing was I was fairly well educated. I had done my qualification as a nanny, so he was jealous of that. People used to say to me at the beginning 'you are too good for him' 'you know stuff' 'you are a good person'. The fact that they said I was a good person made him jealous and made him want to bring me down"

"He made me leave my job. I was working in a barber's shop. He used to call over to the salon every day and sit in a pub opposite where I worked. And call me, every new customer that came in, constantly and repeatedly. 'Who are you talking to now? Who are you flirting with? You're nothing but a slut. You're a tramp. You're a whore'. All I was trying to do was earn a pound so I could take my children out at the weekend or do something nice for them. A good 10 years wasted on an abusive relationship... I could have been doing my psychology, the things that I wanted to do."

"Any time I tried to better myself with Open University he tried to put obstacles in my way. Not looking after the children so I could do my work. Burning my course books. Not allowing me go to tutorials."

"I missed the last 2 or 3 years in secondary school, which are the most important, because of this guy. He was on the run and I had to be. I was with him." (This woman was 14 when she left school).

"...he said it was the work [that caused me to miscarry] but it wasn't strenuous work like it was just house work but again I thought he was being caring."

"I had to give up two jobs because I wasn't allowed to go to work. Because if I was going to work I was with someone or cheating with someone."

Five women spoke of their partner undermining their perceptions of their parenting ability or suitability. Two women spoke of being forced into having abortions, with long-term feelings of guilt and shame.

"You are not a fit mum to look after your children they would be better off with me... It wears you down very quickly at the beginning."

"I don't have much self-worth even until today. I don't feel worthy of even having my children. Don't feel good enough for anything... I'm not happy, never have been. I put on a brilliant face."

One woman who fought against the prevailing poor self-esteem spoke of keeping *"myself good and I think that really hurt him more"*.

The following extracts illustrate how the women felt about themselves over time, and particularly how their abusive relationship(s) influenced that:

"If someone be's nice to me I go wooaahhh what's going on they are looking something. They looking sex or something."

"Is it any wonder I am the way I am? All the while you are still having the put downs, all this and bit by bit it chips away at you".

"He kinda made me feel that I could never do any better than him and to be honest I didn't think I could... To be honest, I stayed because I didn't think I deserved any better, or could do any better."

16 women made a link between domestic abuse, how they felt about themselves and their offending, or their potential to engage in offending behaviour.

"Going through domestic abuse and being that victim had a big impact on me. I felt worthless about myself. I hated everything about myself and I know that's the way they [abusive partners] wanted me to feel. I had given up on the world before I even had a chance and then started drinking. Whenever I was drunk I wasn't in the right mind to make any decisions. This is what led to crime. It's all a big circle but if I wasn't in violent relationships there's no way I'd be in prison now. I strongly believe that and I could relate it to so many women as well that are in here [Ash House]."

"I have no confidence. I got to the stage where I was even selling my own body, I didn't care about myself. Didn't care, still don't care. I feel like shit. It's getting to the point where I'll kick somebody's head off. It's gonna be for something stupid."

4.1.3 Mental health difficulties

Each of the women reported experiencing mental health difficulties, particularly depression, anxiety, panic attacks, difficulty sleeping and difficulty concentrating. We cannot draw the conclusion that this was linked directly and solely to the domestic abuse, for as the Methodology highlights, most women experienced a number of adversities through life. However, 19 women are taking or have in the past taken medication for depression, anxiety or other mental health problems and addictions. Dependency on prescription or illicit drugs or gambling featured in 14 women's account of the reasons behind or circumstances leading up to their offence. The following account depicts mental health difficulties as the backdrop to a first conviction.

"Mental health and stuff was brought up but that was when I first was getting into trouble with assaults on police and criminal damage. That was when they were trying to take me to hospital. I was not letting them take me into hospital but I was sedated twice in hospital. When I woke up there was a policewoman fixing straps across my legs I lifted me feet and kicked her across the floor but that was coming out of sedation and plus I had alcohol and all on me that night."

14 women made a clear link between sustained exposure to domestic abuse and mental health difficulties, speaking of *"panic attacks when I'd seen him"* to *"I'd be in bed I'd be scared he's come in to batter me like."* One woman highlighted the double complication for her mental health of

adding “strong pain relief for my physical injuries” and alcoholism, “when you have a drink problem...for alcoholics coming off the drink for the body and brain and stuff”. This was a typical scenario, where alcohol and/or illicit substances accompanied prescription medication for anxiety, depression and panic attacks.

The incident below was experienced by a woman who has been on medication for over 20 years. It had clear implications for her mental wellbeing:

“But he also kept me a prisoner in the back bedroom for three days, telling me there were people in the house and I couldn’t go downstairs, and he was only allowed down the stairs. Then in my head, I started to hear voices thinking there were people in the house. My head was going, God I can hear them and all.”

The ongoing nature of the women’s struggles with their mental health are well illustrated by this woman’s reflections. She received a community sentence.

“There’s times I have felt even myself suicidal. What’s the purpose? Can I be totally honest? Do you know where my mental health is at? I’ll go home straight into my confines and lock myself into my bedroom. I’ll not come out of the bedroom. (I’ll obviously use the bathroom!)... I just feel because our situation in [home town] became well known, they are probably not - people don’t wake up in the morning and worry about me. I imagine people’s talking about us, people staring at me, all consuming.”

11 women had attempted suicide on at least one occasion.

“I was in a black place, wasn’t even low, it was black... I just couldn’t see any way out...I’d written letters to my kids. I really felt everybody would be better off I genuinely felt that I remember taking a razor blade apart and trying to cut my wrists on several occasions.”

“I took an overdose when I was about 19, not long after he had beat me. That was the most serious time when there was a lot of planning went into it.”

"I used to go down by [place name] and I used to stand on the bridge and I used to think. I've done that about five times; just jumping in then everything would go away. Then I'd think about the children I'd be leaving behind. If he was left with them their lives would be complete torture."

4.1.4 Lifestyle implications

The accounts illustrate the significant impact of domestic abuse on the women's lives and lifestyles. Whilst isolation, self-esteem/self-confidence and mental health emerged as the most significant impacts others included:

- Living in and with fear and resulting powerlessness
- Blame – believing the lies of being the one 'at fault'
- Shame at not being able to break free from the relationship
- Constant vigilance
- Deadened emotions; distancing oneself from people and circumstances
- Questioning 'normality'

For all the women, domestic abuse led to or reinforced lying and deceit becoming a way of life and / or violent behaviour becoming 'normalised'. Lying to authorities such as social workers and police about domestic abuse and/or their partner's criminal activity, lying about their own involvement in the partner's criminality activity and lying to friends and family about the extent of the abuse was commonplace.

"Lies became a way of life. I just told people lies. I just lied for him."

"I was leading such a double life that I couldn't acknowledge the whole truth"

Did you tell your Social Worker? *"No they had their suspicions."*

Did you cover up for him? *"I just said I was drunk or fell."*

So you were covering for him? *(Laughs). "Probably just a wee bit. Yeah."*

"I had to lie and make up stories. When you tell a lie, you've to tell another lie to tell another lie."

4.1.5 Concluding remarks and recommendations

The multi-faceted impact of domestic abuse is evident from the women's testimonies and, for the majority of the women, these were layered over previous adverse experiences, compounding the impact. However, perhaps the single most significant impact of the abuse that emerged was the 'shrinking' of the women's world and associated loss of standing in the community. Women found themselves distanced from community life; less 'community-minded' and with less concern or appreciation for the wider consequences of actions or decisions. This had a limiting impact on the opportunities and the choices open to the women – to pursue a full life and to seek help.

These observations expose the limited effectiveness of interventions that seek to address any one 'single issue' in isolation. For example, being prescribed medication for depression or anxiety by her GP without recognition of the need to address the root causes of a woman's difficulties. Yet, the shame and low self-worth exhibited by the women means they were resistant to disclosing information about their circumstances to professionals. This highlights the need for statutory agencies to share information about women who are or may be vulnerable before women may be ready to disclose. For example, if a woman is on Probation and police receive a call out or the woman presents at hospital for suspicious injuries, this information ought to be relayed to her Probation Officer, so that she can receive the support she needs to access specialist services. The police are often the primary means by which information about women may be co-ordinated and passed on. One woman observed, *"they [police] are the first on the scene and they might be the only people on the scene and the only ones who know apart from the injured party."*

The work of the DoJ (NI) and DoH (NI) to introduce an Advocacy Support Service for women who are victims of domestic abuse is to be welcomed. However, the research would suggest that a service which relies on women coming forward for support may not suffice. Therefore, an inter-agency forum which would put the onus on professionals to identify and discuss cases and make appropriate referrals; similar in format to Police Concern Hubs, may be a more appropriate way forward.

4.2 Reporting domestic abuse

Ten women reported the domestic abuse formally (outside of their conviction) to professionals including: health, police, Women's Aid, Housing Executive, social services and solicitors. Ten chose not to. Reasons cited for not doing so were: fear of partner; mistrust of police; and perception of how difficult it would be to get any kind of conviction. For six women, others (particularly neighbours) intervened, calling police and instigating the reporting although five recounted revoking a statement (on at least on occasion) once it had been given. For three women, barriers to reporting related to their partner's criminal activity (in which they were caught up).

"If I opened my mouth over anything he did over the years. He was drug dealing and everything. I couldn't open my mouth - I couldn't. ... He didn't put an actual gun to my head but he used his fingers to suggest it. 'Open your mouth and you'll see what happens.' 'If you talk, if you let anyone know what's going on' I knew too much at that stage you see. I was a major threat to them."

Not seeking help or not admitting to professionals what was going on did not necessarily mean that professionals were always ignorant of the women's circumstances. One woman describes how she discussed the domestic abuse with her solicitor but was advised by her barrister not to use it:

"I was going through the procedure with the solicitor, the solicitor brought it into the situation then the barrister said not to give it to the jury 'cos it would look like I was wanting self-pity"

Another describes how an Accident & Emergency doctor asked about her injuries in front of her abusive partner. She couldn't be honest:

"Even when I had my eye-socket and cheekbone broke, I said I fell. He [partner] was beside me. The doctor said 'No, this was sustained from a very hard punch'. I said 'No. I fell'. The doctor knew!"

Several women believe that, had they spoken up and let professionals intervene, their lives may have taken a different direction.

“If I hadda listened I wouldn’t be here now. Either Probation because I could have explained to Probation and they would have got help for it. I wouldn’t mind, I’d have done all that [speaking to Women’s Centres or other supports] rather than coming in here [prison].”

One woman’s partner was under a VOPO (Violent Offenders Prevention Order). As part of the Order a Designated Risk Manager (DRM) would call unannounced to the house. On several occasions, the DRM asked to see her:

“If Probation were out seeing him and I’d a black eye he’d say ‘you go to bed and pretend you are sleeping’ ... they were asking where I was, he would say I was in bed ill”

This woman believes that the DRM should have done more; should have insisted that he saw her.

The women were unlikely to disclose the first, or even the second or third time a professional suspected or asked a probing question. This reflection – from a woman who repeatedly and deliberately hid her situation from professionals for over 15 years – when asked what practice she would recommend, replied:

“Go out, arrest them, follow the case through whether the woman wants to do it or not ... The police need to take this new law on where they do carry it through.”

4.2.1 Reporting domestic abuse: influence on perceptions of police

The women’s accounts substantiate McWilliams and Doyle’s findings; that there was a 37% increase in participants who described the police as ‘helpful’ between their 1992 and 2016 studies.

One woman, for example, felt that the police were, “*very unsympathetic with domestic abuse*” in her early experiences, over 15 years ago. She contrasted these with more recent

experiences. Events of 15 years ago had made her antagonistic towards police, whereas more recent more positive experiences have made her more receptive to their intervention.

"I was actually frightened by the police as well... I was ringing the police to try and protect me and my children. Yes, they took [partner] out of the situation but at the same time they brought more fear onto me and my children."

"I did [decide to prosecute] that was like after 15 years of them [police] coming in and out of my house. By that stage I felt they were more empathetic to what was going on. Their attitudes towards domestic abuse had changed slightly, they were more understanding I thought. These were the younger newer ones ...they were just in general more supportive saying they had done all their best."

"In terms of if the police pursue charges and charges are brought against the person, there isn't enough support given to the woman at the time that can be far more damaging because of the repercussions when he comes back to her."

"I think a lot more support is put in place now to make sure that a woman does want to break away from him. At the same time women in that situation are very good at stories....covering up what's going on 'yea I'll do this'. When the man comes back again they are into the same routine with him. I'm not sure what training they get but definitely more domestic abuse awareness training for them. What I also noticed towards the end of it, if there was female officers available, they came out to the house. I felt that was good help as well."

The following account illustrates how one woman's fear of her partner is intertwined with her perceptions of police involvement.

"He got me under the bridge and punched and kicked my stomach and broke three of my teeth. My head was split open, there was blood all over my face. You couldn't see my face at all. He kept going on and on. I had to rap some wee man's door to get an ambulance. At the time I told the police a couple of other people had done it at the time. The police sort of knew it was him. The police said to me it was a bit of

a coincidence that he was the only one around. The police went to look for 'people' and went around that area. The CID man who interviewed us again said it was a bit of a coincidence that he was the only one there. He kinda knew. But I was freaking out that I was getting let off and charging him. I was very tearful and asked the police to tell him it was nothing to do with me why he was being charged.....I've had times where I fought with the police from stopping them from taking me 'cos they wanted to take me to hospital to get help. I've got charges for assaulting police. "

Another woman recounted how police interventions could result in her arrest:

"I mean I rang the police on a number of occasions, with [first partner] more than [second partner]. They were coming out and arresting me because it was in his property. I was getting arrested and I was going to court for him abusing me because I was in his property and wouldn't leave sometimes."

4.2.2 Influences of post-conflict society

The Fresh Start Panel Report on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in NI (May 2016) recognises *"issues of exclusion and marginalisation of women within [paramilitary-controlled] communities. Where women are living in high-risk areas where police officers are delayed, or prevented, from responding to calls due to concerns for their own safety, violence against women is likely to increase."* Citing the UN Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace & Security, the report affirms women's valued roles in post-conflict reconstruction. Yet, evidence suggests paramilitary influence continues to undermine and suppress women.

However, McWilliams and Doyle (2017) found that distrust of police was not raised as a point of concern by any women in their study (including participants from Catholic, nationalist/republican communities), *"pointing to successful post-conflict reforms recommended by the Patten Commission following the 1998 peace agreement."*

In this study, eight women felt the Northern Ireland situation did influence their decision about whether to report, eight felt it did not and four were unsure. Some of the connections alluded to and the experiences shared were historic but yet they remained sufficiently significant for the

women to highlight. Of the women who felt that the Northern Ireland situation did influence their decision to report to or contact police during incident:

- Two women claimed her partner was a member of a paramilitary or dissident group.

When recounting the aftermath of one particularly violent assault when her social worker contacted the police, this woman asked the police not to press charges, because of her partner's associations.

"Told them I wasn't pressing charges because he's in the UVF, you have to understand here, do not be pressing charges please just try and get a normal restraining order. Next thing [partner] is out on bail and I'm going to have to say in court that I made that up and be charged with being a nuisance."

- Seven women claimed that the partner had connections (including family members) to a paramilitary or dissident group and cited these connections as a factor that inhibited them from contacting police (historically or currently).

"[Partner] would be well connected, yeah. I made a statement one time, told lies to get him out of prison, because my mum was threatened, if I didn't six men would take me away. I had to sign bail everyday so they knew my movements."

"My uncle is connected, he made me take it back. Plus the police phoned me and told me they would do me for perverting the course of justice because I had the evidence. That was the last bit. My uncle said he would protect me first. Then when the police told me that, I was scared so I took my statement back."

"[Partner's] dad is or was paramilitary. He lived in the heart of East Belfast. You weren't calling the police to there. Especially not when it's a Catholic like... You can imagine me phoning the police! ... He had power in the area."

"He said that if I got my family involved, that he knew people who would have them killed, that's as good as threat – when you live in Northern Ireland, you believe it."

"But my partner has connections to paramilitaries and that was always used... See my life story. It's unbelievable. ... That always scared me."

*"People were scared of him because his mother was in the 'RA years ago. You know what I mean the family had a reputation You were from [place name], it didn't matter what was going on. You didn't phone the police. They were not to enter that area. If you were the one responsible for having them come in to that area, the consequences were grave. You would have been shunned, you were made feel like you were a tout. You were putting the police on to somebody who was in their eyes a valued member or valued person. His mother was [name], she was a Republican. He was a Republican, everybody around me was Republicans. It [calling the police] was never an option. My mother would be 'get away from him'. These men aren't well, they are Republicans. They have been through the mill. I knew all this when I was taking him on. I didn't realise he was a f***** animal. I didn't think he would turn on me. I was his partner. I was meant to be the one he loved. You have your rows with other people but you don't take it internally into your home. I couldn't believe he was taking it onto me. There were so many other people we stood together against, so why was it me he was turning it on. I just couldn't comprehend it."*

- Three women lived in areas precluded to police

"...my family don't deal with the police. They deal with things themselves"

"You weren't allowed to phone the police. That's the way it would have been with [partner], my first boyfriend. You weren't allowed to phone the police and he beat me 15 times and went to hospital several times and I went to [community organisation] instead and got no action from them at all. You weren't allowed to have the police in the area. The police were phoned one night - the night he kicked the door in. When the neighbours phoned the ambulance, the police came as well. When I went to [community organisation] they said we can't help because you have the police involved... If you phoned the peelers you were a tout."

- One woman spoke of the community pressure she experienced as a result of calling in the police.

“He wasn’t involved with paramilitary activity but it was paramilitaries that came to my house that night with the guns. The first time I did bring the police into where I was living, I was then accused of.... the paramilitaries were living around me, a couple of weeks later their house got raided for drugs and I was accused for ringing them because they had seen the police coming into my house, but they didn’t know it was for domestic abuse.”

“As if anyone would ring the police and say ‘blah blah blah’ and bring them to your house! You would do it anonymously over the phone. Nobody around where I live speaks to me even to this day. Still look down on me [because of the] police and the domestic abuse as well.”

4.2.3 Disclosure of domestic abuse inside the Criminal Justice System

7 women have a clear memory of reporting / disclosing their domestic abuse experiences to criminal justice professionals during arrest, questioning or when preparing for trial. Seven women claim that they did not report, four are unsure and a further two did not report it immediately, but some details came out eventually with their Solicitor or Probation staff.

However, details of the domestic abuse appeared in all of the 18 Pre-Sentence Reports reviewed²¹. It would seem, therefore that the women’s domestic circumstances were reported on or disclosed at some stage during every women’s journey through the criminal justice system, even if women claim (for whatever reason) that this was not the case. Four women spoke of being reluctant to report domestic abuse once inside the criminal justice system.

“I didn’t want all that information read out in court. It’s too personal and embarrassing, so I didn’t say anything to my solicitor.”

²¹ One woman is awaiting sentence, on remand, and one report was not accessible to the researchers.

“I was very conscious of saying certain things with regards to domestic abuse that I had – as in getting beat up – as I was afraid then that would have an impact on him.”

4.3 Concluding remarks and recommendations

Voluntary and early reporting of domestic abuse to statutory agencies (and even to friends and family) remains difficult; half of the women interviewed did not report the abuse, and those who did so did not all do so voluntarily. Women often felt regret for not reporting with hindsight, but the barriers to reporting at the time were simply too great for the women to overcome alone.

40% of the women interviewed felt that Northern Ireland’s post-conflict situation influenced their decision about reporting their domestic abuse to authorities, largely citing their partner’s connections (including family members) to paramilitary or dissident groups inhibiting them from contacting police (historically or currently). Whilst it was difficult to establish whether some of the women’s conflict-related experiences were historic or current, we cannot ignore that for a sizeable number of women, they continue to remain significant and an additional barrier to be overcome. However, it is noteworthy (and resonates with McWilliams and Doyle’s 2017 research), that the older women who had had encounters with the police over 20 or more years noted a welcome change in police responses to domestic abuse.

The interviews did not uncover as much detail as may be expected about the women’s experiences of disclosing domestic abuse within the criminal justice system. This may be because trauma, shame and false loyalties to their partners characterised their thinking at the time of arrest and trial. Even women who shared that they did disclose domestic abuse at this stage were not able to give fulsome accounts.

The District Judge reflected *“the default position is to not tell anyone in authority anything. The people who could help you or get something done, you won’t tell.”* This was ‘drilled into’ the women by their partners over many years. This highlights the need for persistent and consistent exploration of domestic abuse experiences with women who enter the criminal justice system.

We recommend, therefore, that police and PBNi ask women about domestic abuse during their initial interviews (in a similar way to midwives' practice), creating as many opportunities as possible for women who may be reluctant to volunteer any information, to disclose.

Access to professional domestic abuse support/counselling leading up to and during trial could also help women to recognise the value of disclosing domestic abuse once they are in the criminal justice system, unlock this cycle and help them to develop the courage to do so.

4.3 Journey into crime

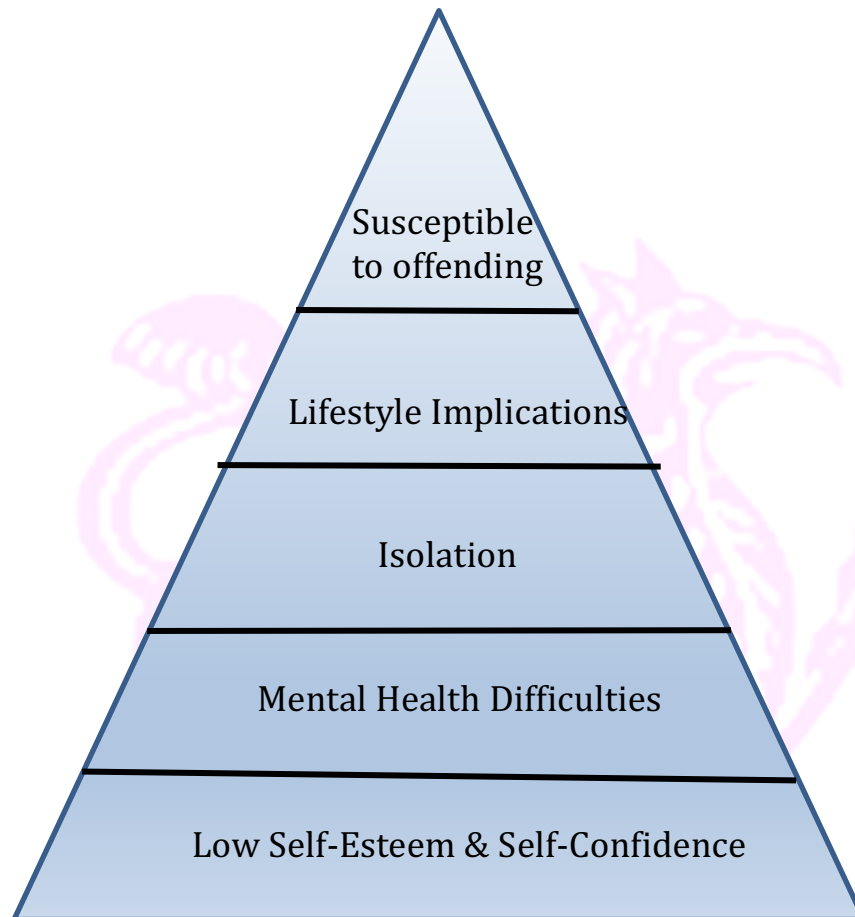
Table 2 summarises the offences the women had been charged with at the time of the research. However, given that 14 had a series of repeat convictions, the accounts provided relate to these and other charges. Three of the four women who were convicted of a one-off offence were aged 50-60 years. One younger woman who had a one-off offence was convicted for the manslaughter of her partner.

Type of Offence	Women charged	Type of Offence	Women charged
Theft & false accounting.	1	Attempted robbery	1
Theft	3	Criminal damage & assault	2
Aiding and abetting rape and other sexual offences	1	Manslaughter/Manslaughter with diminished responsibility	2
Hijacking	1	Possession of drugs & theft	1
GBH / with intent	3	Drunk and disorderly behaviour	1
Murder	1	Fraud	1
Assisting an offender	1	Causing death by dangerous driving	1

Table 2

Whilst not all women who experience domestic abuse end up offending, for the women in this study, the abuse had a series of consequences which resulted in them being more susceptible to offending.

This is illustrated in figure 1.



“My crime is related to domestic abuse yet they didn’t take into account that I was also a victim. That didn’t come out until the very end [of the trial]. That didn’t matter to them that I was abused. They said that I abated and that I did everything by my own choice. They didn’t realise that I had been coerced; I had been threatened and that I had been treated the same way [as his other victims]. You are an intelligent woman, you know what is right and wrong, that was their exact words.”

Offending behaviour was often the culmination of all of the women's circumstances, namely: isolation, low self-esteem and self-worth, mental health difficulties and lifestyle implications, including drug and alcohol use. All of these combined to reduce the women's capacity to make positive choices. The most obvious option open in many cases was the crime rather than asking for help. Perhaps the most powerful illustration can be found in Chapter 4.3.4. And as established in Chapter 4.2, the choice to remove themselves from harm proved extremely difficult or impossible for the women.

Several headings 'categorise' the ways in which the women's convictions were linked, directly or indirectly, to the control and coercion of abusive partner(s) or to the trauma experienced as a result of domestic abuse. Where possible, the women's own accounts illustrate their perceptions of the connections. It is important to consider too the extent of other adverse experiences that characterised most of the women's lives. We cannot ignore the very real possibility that these were often additional factors in their chaotic lifestyles, the abuse of alcohol and drugs and associated offending behaviour.

4.3.1 Response to the trauma

The women were subjected to many years of being 'worn down' by abusive behaviours, explosive acts of physical violence and psychological manipulation. The women's responses to these deeply distressing and disturbing experiences (trauma) differed. We outline below three different ways in which their responses resulted in criminal activity.

The woman who gives her account below, for example, was convicted of theft and false accounting. She came forward to confess to the police and believes, with hindsight, that her behaviour was as a result of a breakdown. This was detailed in the psychiatric report prepared for the court.

"It started off as a bit of fun for my mind to be thinking of something else..."

"They classified me as a compulsive gambler – another word - a pathological gambler. That's someone who gambles but not for money, for worth. That's what I was classified as. That in itself was some sort of - I don't know where it came from the trigger I was with

[partner]. *I reckon it's been a build up over the years, then my mummy died – just the s*** hit the fan. I was able to go to work in the mornings. Put the mask on. Never once did I ever gamble there. I came home, did my chores, got the dinner, went on my computer and that was me... thriving off the danger."*

Women in this study spoke of shoplifting to make them feel better, or to escape from the realities of life.

"Then I used to shop lift too. I used to love going out and getting all new stuff, coming in and thinking it would make a new me and change everything. Tried stuff on and then hung it at the back of the wardrobe. It would have been stuff that was inappropriate, like dresses and I dunno just stuff that was never really me and then it all would have ended up in charity."

When asked whether she felt her offending behaviour was linked to her experiences with her partner, one woman reflected:

"Yeah. I'd have become more aggressive so I woulda, especially after, then I'd have taken it out on someone I'd always end up in a big fight, usually the police like. I was the game back on show like... Mainly criminal damage and assault 'cos I internalise a lot and then all of a sudden go KABOOM. That's why I used to cut and then not tell anybody, take beatings and not tell anybody, then all of a sudden explode all round me."

4.3.2 Aftermath of violence

Similar to trauma but with a more specific focus are examples of instances when women 'lashed out' or took matters into their own hands in the aftermath of violence. Again, their actions and choices resulted in a criminal charge.

After a particularly violent assault by her partner, one woman took matters into her own hands. Up to this point, she had been frustrated that the police had not moved to charge him for assaults on her. She believed the police were 'stalling' because they had said they didn't know where he was living.

"We [she and a friend] decided it would be a good idea to try and find him...but he wouldn't come out. My friend threw something through his window. I said 'What are you doing that's the wrong window...that's his window there!' So I lifted a table leg out of a skip and threw it through his window. The motivation and the attempt was to let the police come out, let them arrest me for criminal damage. When I am up in court I'll say 'Why have you not done him for GBH with attempt?' Apparently, you are looking for him for over a year and now you know where he lives. The police came out the next day and arrested me. I was still quite drunk to be honest. They got a duty solicitor out. The sergeant said between you and me there's no record at all of anything against your partner and between you and me he must be a police informant. There was never any charges brought against me for criminal damage. But I didn't get to have my day in court with him."

Violent flashes with her partner were the lead up to several of this woman's convictions:

"That was the time he beat me with the bottle and I lifted the knife and put it in his back, like. Even after I did that I was in court. Ended up going to prison for two weeks on remand then to a hostel. He was still torturing me even after what I had done to him."

"[Police] never gave him a warning. They actually came out and seen me one day and my face. Blood was pouring all down there I was drinking. [Partner] was saying 'I want her out', stumbling. I actually think it was concussion. They put me onto the floor, handcuffed me for no reason I couldn't really see. I was like give me a minute.... next minute they handcuffed me."

This extract explains what happened when one woman entered her partner's flat, to see him with the other woman.

"..well I went bugaloo. To be honest, I did beat her. Because I beat her, he rang the police and got me lifted. How could you do that? ... He says [to the other girl] the first time I hit her, right get out! Then he threw her out and let me sit on for another hour, then he rings the police. I actually thought it was her that rang the police. But the police told me

it was him... I was on for GBH with attempt that was the last one. 18 months I'm on for. Three years bound over for 18 months. I have to live with this 18 months now."

The woman convicted for the manslaughter of her partner did not speak much of the lead up to the offence, but did share:

"I can't even remember, I can't remember nothing. Even when I went in there [police station], the officers said 'You were in a terrible mess. You didn't know where you were Traumatized. That was my very first offence ... and my last."

4.3.3 The Partner's Offending Behaviour and Associated lifestyle

Several women believed that their partners deliberately orchestrated events to have them arrested or charged. *"He got me remanded"*, claimed one woman, the implication being that he deliberately placed her in a position where she would be remanded into custody. *"That's probably what he's trying to do before I get out because if he can't get his claws into me, he'll get me remanded again."*

"The first one [offence] was bringing drugs into Maghaberry for my child's dad. That was the first offence. Then it started leading to assaults on police."

"If I wasn't with those guys [partner's connections] I wouldn't be sitting in prison right now. No way would I."

"They [offences] probably start at disorderly behaviour right up to attempted robbery. There is a burglary on it [chemist shop], my ex-partner he's the one that left the stuff against the door, he was a career criminal and he went and broke into some car place. Brought me with him and threw me over the fence so I was caught and had a horrific charge....Another was for Driving and Taking Away, I can't drive. I was in a stolen car with my ex-boyfriend and two of his friends. The police chased us and we all got out and run. They caught me. "

"The reason they done me for taking jewellery was my fingerprints were on the steering wheel, my boyfriend swinging on it and he was like 'Help me.' I can't drive and I got done for driving and taking away."

4.3.4 Theft for necessities

"For one of my things I'm in here, for one of the sentences. There was money there on the day it happened but he had it, he was drinking. So I had no choice but to end up stealing. To be honest, If he had no money for drink, he'd probably batter me. I told the police that...Theft, all theft. Never had anything serious like. That day it was baby food, he was drinking I didn't want to ask him for money, that kinda way. The other was more toiletries for the kids. Basically, all to do with [his] drink."

4.3 Coping mechanisms

15 women spoke of using drugs and alcohol as a means of coping, often initiated by or encouraged by the partner as a means of coercive control.

"I took drugs. He made me feel like scum of the earth. This is no excuse for taking drugs but I just feel like I wasn't worthy of anything and even to this day I still do."

"My way of coping was to take drugs – take drugs to block it out. When you are on drugs you feel like you do love people. Soon as I'm off drugs now I look at him I'm physically sick."

"Helping control the pain but I still wasn't enjoying it as such it was just to block out the pain."

"I hated me and I stuck my head in the bottle, all because of [partner]. All because of it."

"I ended up using alcohol as a coping mechanism to numb my pain. My family didn't understand that. They kind of distanced themselves from me they didn't see that I was drinking because I was hurting because of the abuse I went through; that I wasn't picking it. My mum would have said you are picking drink and drugs over your job, over this, over your family and I wasn't. It was all I had to cope with."

"Once I started the drugs it was an escape and even though I still would have been getting hit and put down, I would crave the weekend coming that I knew the children would be away with mum and dad I could take my drugs because the children were not there. It was helping me cope."

Whilst up to 15 of the women's convictions were connected to the misuse of drugs and alcohol (either directly drugs related or fuelled by drugs or alcohol), only one woman was convicted of a drugs offence (Possession of Class C drugs).

"The drugs became a big issue. 'If I can't beat him I'll join him' I said to myself. 'He's coming in wiped out. Maybe if I did this it would help him stop hitting me. I wasn't doing it for wanting the drugs. I thought it would help the situation, which of course it didn't. I started Es. I never took acid I was always afraid of that. That started me then onto drugs. When I became really addicted to the dihydrocodeine, really addicted, and the family split up and we were all over the place, that's when I started to get into trouble – house being raided for drugs. Possession of Class C drugs and theft when on drugs ... As much as I was denying it, I was crying out for help but sinking and sinking."

4.4 Concluding remarks and recommendations

The use of alcohol and drugs to cope with trauma emerged as a common contributory factor, although there were many different pathways and reasons behind the women's offences. For many, the complexity of the adversities they faced certainly contributed. However, the single most significant contributory factor was domestic abuse.

15 women claimed that they could see a link between the abuse they had experienced and their journey into crime. Two responses in particular merit attention:

"I was forced to take the blame because I knew what would happen for me if I didn't do what he wanted."

"Yeah. I see the connection 100%. Never been in trouble until I went with [partner]."

A Sentence Co-ordinator at Ash House reflected that *"eight out of ten women here have experienced domestic abuse"*. She observes a strong link between their offending behaviour and the abuse experienced.

Several of the professionals and a member of PBNI's Inspire Team commented on theft in particular as a manifestation of trauma:

"For many women I work with, they would say that stealing would be something they have control over. Their way of coping." PBNI Inspire Team Member

"It's the planning, execution, getting away with it – fulfilling some form of desire, most [women] can't articulate." District Judge

These contributory factors must continue to be taken into consideration at sentencing, and particularly when issuing custodial sentences. Furthermore, appropriate specialist supports must be provided for the women, within and beyond prison. In the case of Probation Orders, the work to be completed over the course of the Order must be useful in addressing the abuse and its impact and pathways out of the abusive relationships.

4.4 Sentencing

Of the 20 women interviewed, 19 had been sentenced as follows²²:

Sentence Received	Number of women
Life imprisonment	1
Indeterminate Custodial Sentence	1
Determinate Custodial Sentence (4 years & 4 years)	1
Determinate Custodial Sentence (3.5 years & 3.5 years)	1
Determinate Custodial Sentence (12 mnths & 12 mnths)	1
6 years (custody & licence)	1
3 years (custody & licence)	1
2 years (custody & licence)	3
18 months (custody & licence)	2
12 months or under (custody)	1
3 year Probation Order	1
12 -18 month Probation Order	2
Community Service	3
(On remand)	1

Table 3

7 women claimed that the details of her domestic abuse were not cited on her Pre-Sentence Report and 6 did not know. However, of the 18 reports reviewed²³, some level of detail about the domestic abuse was detailed in every report.

The women's perceptions of the reports did not always reflect reality. For example, one woman believed:

"My Pre-Sentence Report was basically bad because of the trouble I was getting into when I was 18."

²² One woman was on remand.

²³ It was not possible to access two Pre-Sentence Reports

However, her report examined the domestic abuse she suffered from her partner and the pattern of her returning to that relationship time and again. The report also referenced her disclosure that she had been in a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old at the age of 12 and the mental health consequences of the abuse she experienced.

Of the 19 interviewees who were sentenced, 9 believed the domestic abuse was not taken into account at sentencing and three did not know whether it was or not.

“They didn’t take into account that I was also a victim. That didn’t come out until the very end. That didn’t matter to them, that I was abused. They said that I abated and that I did everything by my own choice they didn’t realise that I had been coerced. I had been threatened and that I had been treated the same way. ‘You are an intelligent woman, you know what is right and wrong.’ That was their exact words.”

2 of the 8 who believed it was taken into account at sentencing appealed their original sentence and believe it was at the appeal stage that their domestic abuse was taken into account.

“For one of my things I’m in here, for one of the sentences. There was money there on the day it happened but he had it, he was drinking. So I had no choice but to end up stealing. To be honest, if he had no money for drink, he’d probably batter me. I told the police that but the judge didn’t take it into account – just gave me 12 months there and then. But last week in the High Court, he took it into consideration like. Reduced it to 6 months. I wasn’t even taken to court for the appeal. It was done in my absence. I was meant to be taken to court but I wasn’t.”

4.4.1 Reflections on sentencing

The women had not been able to take on board fully the contents of their Pre-Sentence Reports even when they had been read out in court or had featured in the woman’s trial. Professionals had several observations about this:

“The Probation Officer reads out the report to the woman at the end of the interview or has a representative read it at court. I’d like to think that they would go through the contents with her – I’m curious that they forget it was discussed. I’ve always found Probation Officers to be very good and thorough, the first section of the PSR being background, growing up etc. They seem to be attuned to asking the right questions to get the answers. Of course, it can only be in the report and taken into account at sentencing if the woman volunteers the information. Where the woman doesn’t see the link herself, she won’t know to volunteer it. If properly represented and Probation Officer is doing their job right (and I haven’t seen any evidence to suggest they don’t) they will be asking the woman the question. If the woman doesn’t want the information to be in the public domain – for example, for social services to find out, we’ll not know. But if the woman is in a position to answer the question, it will be there. Whether or not it makes any difference to the sentence is another issue.” Barrister

“I’m surprised it was on the PRS in every case. Women tend to be guarded or not even realise the domestic abuse was domestic abuse until we start to build the relationship when they start to engage with Probation. Many women internalise or don’t recognise it. They often don’t tell the full story of their background or are afraid that if they’ve revealed too much they will feel at risk.” PBNI Inspire Women’s Team Member

Examining the women’s offences and respective sentences received, PBNI Inspire staff believe it is likely that mitigating factors were taken into account when the women were sentenced.

However, 12 women either did not know this or believed this not to be the case.

Similarly, O’ Neill (2015) found that women being released from custody did not know, did not fully understand or could not remember the full details (and implications) of their post-release licence. Her recommendation for *“clear and timely information as to what their licence conditions entailed”* is key and resonates with these findings.

4.4.2 Concluding remarks and recommendations

It appears that sentencers are taking domestic abuse into account as a mitigating factor which is to be welcomed. As reflected by the District Judge. *“It is important that [domestic abuse] is brought to the fore as a factor that we should be looking at.”* However, more than half of the women interviewed were not aware of this. There is therefore a need for this to be more apparent to women, at the time of the decision, and at a later stage when she is more ready to take the information on board.

Despite reference being made to domestic abuse on the Pre-Sentence Reports in every instance, women tended not to know this.

PBNI and NIPS ought to consider a review of the process by which women are taken through what is written in their Pre-Sentence Reports and how these details were (or were not) reflected in the sentences handed down. This may involve identifying an appropriate time for a structured conversation to take place some time after the sentence has commenced. Such a structured conversation would help to ensure that women are able to take in all that is explained and have the opportunity to reflect on the trial process and the sentence received.

4.5 Serving the sentence

Before exploring the women’s experiences of serving their sentences, it is important to highlight that, when asked to reflect on this, many spoke about how they perceived their treatment in the media and the harmful impact this had on them and their family. This was particularly the case for women in custody.

4.5.1 Custodial sentences

12 of the 14 women who received custodial sentences were in custody at the time of interview including one who was on remand. 8 spoke of some positive impacts of being in prison including the opportunity to develop relationship with family that they hadn’t had in the community and ‘space and time’ to think, reflect and feel safe. One woman spoke of how she hopes that receiving a sentence will help her son to realise the significance of criminal activity.

The following extracts illustrate some of the ways in which women regard prison to have been beneficial.

"In here I've built myself. I've actually gained a self-value and become a person again. In here has saved me. It's a funny thing to say and people do laugh at me when I say it, but it's been a turning point in my life. For the first time I feel I am a person again."

"I didn't have any life. I was on the streets anyway when it happened. I was better off in here."

"Now I have hope. Didn't have hope before."

"I know my triggers and I know what makes me drink and all now, and what makes me paranoid, what to stay away from in here. She [addictions worker in prison] has helped me a lot."

"[Sentence manager] is quite good. Sometimes I think she knows me more than I know myself - encouraging and supportive."

"Time to think clearly. You don't have all the riff raff around you to make you feel so bad... I couldn't see that he wasn't the right person to be around ... until I came in here."

"There are a few members of staff and they are amazing. There's one in particular, very supportive, she will sit on the edge of the bed with you. She doesn't come across like the sergeant major locking you up..."

"My family and all stood by me, which was great so it is. Because I wasn't allowed to see my family, hadn't seen my family in about 18 years or so. They were the first ones I contacted when I was arrested and they stood by me... I have a brilliant relationship with my brother and sisters and my kids... Visiting me every week, got to know me, still getting to know them. It's a horrible thing to say they didn't know me and I didn't know them ones."

Every woman who received a custodial sentence, (including those who made some of the positive remarks in the previous section) testified to the detrimental impact that the sentence has had on their mental health, self-esteem, their family and their sense of hope or choices for the future.

“There are more drugs in here than on the outside...It’s not benefitting me in any way...I am becoming one of those people who are going in and out. It’s not helping.”

*“Devastating. My children have suffered especially the elder one; she’s been bullied and everything in school about me. She’s had a hard time the wee darling. [Child] is too young to understand. She just thinks I am at work. They are coming on Wednesday it feels like months. I’m feeling s*** but when I see them on Wednesday. They race in and all pulling each other back. They are beautiful. I can’t believe they are mine.”*

“It broke their [family’s] hearts basically. My auntie had to be taken out of the court gallery. She just dropped to the ground crying...I was in tears to him like begging my co-accused to stand up and tell the truth but he just put his head to the ground. My auntie stood up and shouted to him ‘Tell the truth scumbag’. That’s when she broke down in tears and had to be taken out.”

“I was saying to myself ‘I’m never going to get out of here, I’m going to die in here’. Even up to this day they have my sentence confused. That’s taken a lot out of me. I go into that room at night and I cry in there.”

“It’s very hard for my family to get down here to see me ‘cos they live in the South... This has taken a lot out of me to be honest.”

“[Son] asked a few times can he sneak me out of here. On Saturday I had to explain to him why I’m here and the fact that I can’t go out of here and basically in here’s a jail. It was hard but I think the child made it better for me to be honest because he just kept telling me he loved me. The child made it so easy. I didn’t think it was going to be like that. If I get out of here in the 14 years I just have it in my head ‘well who’s going

to employ someone who's been convicted of murder?' So at the minute I think education is just pointless to me in here."

4.5.2 Community sentences

Of the 5 women who received community sentences, 3 spoke of positive impacts of the sentence.

*"... there were times when my Probation Order was coming to an end and I was thinking oh s*** who have I got now? And I was going out and reoffending just so I would get an extended Probation Order and more time with NIACRO. Just to know there was someone else there."*

*"I don't really have anybody that's in my corner. It's just me. My back's against the wall there's no one behind me. Probation and NIACRO really, it was a crutch for me. It was a support. Oh s*** this is all going to go away. How can I stop that? Well I'll go out and reoffend. It's fine. Send me to jail. Give me Probation. Fine with that too."*

"This time it was actually good, it helped me. I knew Probation was an avenue I could use to get more help in the community. Whereas previously they just throw fines and they don't help nobody."

"That [community] sentence helped me break away. That was me, just clear."

4.5.3 Reflections on Serving the Sentence

Whilst some women reflected on the 'safety' of prison, many do not address the root causes of their difficulties whilst in prison. This limits the usefulness of the prison experience, as illustrated by the women who continue to return to abusive relationships after a period in custody. This 'pull', to return to their partners after the break that custody gives them is well illustrated by this woman's reflections, whilst still in custody.

"I'm glad to be out of that situation, but it's staying out of it now. I'm still emotionally attached...It's far too toxic I don't know how to break that cycle. I still love him to this

day...In all fairness I could see me going back there again. I just don't know. Either that or I'll end up dead."

Domestic abuse support offered to women serving short sentences is often limited because of finite resources and the time constraints associated with shorter sentences. A Sentence Manager in Ash House explained:

"With regards to support for domestic abuse, resources are targeted at high risk groups and the majority of the short-term women are not deemed high risk."

"Due to prison induction, 30 days to complete a needs profile and 40 days to complete a personal development plan, there is not enough time to work with many of the short term prisoners."

She also explained that when women first come into Ash House, it can take the time outlined in the account above to build a relationship with a woman to the extent that she would feel there was sufficient trust to disclose sensitive information. There is not currently a question on the needs profile or the prisoner development plan that about whether a woman has experienced domestic abuse.

The Sentence Co-ordinator advocated group work with women in prison on short-term sentences; programmes that *"promote strength, self-esteem and self-worth and may help get them to a safe enough place where they can work through the abuse in the community."*

The District Judge and the Women's Aid Counsellor both highlighted the detrimental impact of short sentences, as they are currently structured:

"I'm personally of the opinion that short prison sentences aren't much good – the only thing they achieve is to take someone off the streets for a number of months. They are not going to be changed."

"Short term sentences in particular take you out for a while, but you can't always access programmes so there's potentially nothing – you're just put there."

Whilst the Women's Aid Counsellor was critical of short-term sentences and of the suitability of the prison environment for most women, she did reflect that:

"I know that any of the Sentence Managers we work with are fantastic and are pushing to make the women's stay the best they can make it. They really encourage and want the best."

With respect to community sentences, PBNI's Inspire team's Manager reflected:

"Overall, women who have experienced domestic abuse engage reasonably well [with Probation Orders]. When a woman starts to open up to us, we can begin to support change – we can't do that for her if she doesn't attend or engage with us....This is perhaps the first time she has been in a supportive statutory relationship where she feels that there is help and hope and someone on her side."

However, she went on to comment:

"A Probation Order is not an easy sentence for women. There are standards and demands with a Probation Order which need to be met and women can struggle to meet them. Disengagement is often associated with substance misuse, which is often a coping mechanism for domestic abuse."

The ongoing struggle faced by women on community sentences was well summarised by this observation about a woman currently serving a Probation Order:

"Every time she goes into an abusive relationship, her lifestyle deteriorates, therefore she is more likely to reoffend. She was recalled back into custody because her lifestyle became so chaotic. Now she is released and her partner is inside. We are trying now to 'prep' her for him coming out."

We return to one woman's perception of her Probation Order and the associated support she received from NIACRO.

*"... there were times when my Probation Order was coming to an end and I was thinking oh s*** who have I got now? And I was going out and reoffending just so I would get an extended Probation Order and more time with NIACRO just to know there was someone else there."*

Some women found prison to be their (perhaps first and only) place of safety. Others found Probation Orders to be their only source of help or support in the community. Both of these experiences highlight the lack of support for the women in their communities at their point of need.

Being sent to custody forces physical separation from an abusive partner (at least for a period). Yet, for women serving community sentences, linking with Women's Aid requires a courageous first step that can prove to be exceptionally difficult. Many *"hesitate to link with Women's Aid and require considerable support and encouragement to do so"*. (PBNi Inspire team member). Team members spoke of *"women on our caseload whose partners follow them to appointments, stay outside, and are ringing them the whole time."* Once a woman agrees to accept support, it is important that she secures an appointment quickly, before she changes her mind or her circumstances change. Members of the Inspire team indicated that they do not always get an immediate appointment because of lack of resources, leading one team member to reflect: *"We need a worker, a dedicated worker."*

4.5.4 Concluding Remarks & Recommendations

Several of the women's observations about their prison experience merit further reflection:

"I always end up in here because I feel safe in here. I know they can't get at me when I'm in here"

"To me prison has been a saviour....coming in here was a safety zone."

None of the women or professionals interviewed believe custody to be either proportionate or appropriate for the majority of women.

"We wouldn't be recommending custody for cases which are lower level offending and yet the challenge is where there is a long record and they have exhausted community options, particularly where women don't engage [with Probation]." Manager of Inspire Team

"Prison ought to be about public protection and proportionality. I see women here [in prison] that could have had alternatives, maybe some form of wraparound hostel care or programme support, but it has to be with all agencies involved.....to include a better understanding of where that behaviour is coming from in order to get the right intervention, because custody isn't the right intervention for everyone." Women's Aid Counsellor in Ash House

For some women, prison represented safety; an opportunity to reflect and a complete break from the abusive partner. What reflection is this on the availability or accessibility of earlier or alternative supports for women? And how does it speak to preparation for the women being released back into the community?

To help to identify the support needs of women entering custody, we recommend that the Prison Service incorporate a question about domestic abuse into the Prisoner Needs Profile; an assessment undertaken with every women prisoner 28 days after committal.

"A lot of women have said to me that prison was this space and time to really think and to be away from him and from the situation, but yet they are going back out into it [the relationship], so it's a society thing.....because women are getting out and going back into the same lifestyles and people because they have nowhere else to go." Women's Aid Counsellor in Ash House

A dedicated professional domestic abuse resource for women who are serving custodial and community sentences to support them to come to terms with what has happened and to support them to move into the future free from abusive relationships is also recommended.

Many women serving community sentences appreciate the supportive relationship with their Probation Officer and the Inspire Team's Probation Officers do take cognisance of the women's

domestic circumstances when prioritising the actions to be undertaken during their Order. It may be helpful to consider introducing a therapeutic programme to which women could be referred to help them to 'process' their experiences and the links with their offending; to help to build their resilience and to move away from their current (and future) abusive relationships.

4.6 Alternatives to custody

15 women offered the following suggestions with respect to alternatives to the sentences they received.

- Addictions and rehabilitation services
- Group programmes of support – to talk issues through
- Counselling / therapies **available earlier**
- Better signposting – for women to know where to **get help early**
- **Interventions early**, with school children about domestic abuse as well as the implications of convictions
- Referral to Women's Aid at court and judges better informed of victim perspective
- Open prisons
- Probation can be a good option (as contrasted with a custodial sentence)

The number of references made to the need for earlier interventions is of note. Women regretted that they had not been ready to disclose or to seek help earlier.

"It's my problem I didn't speak to most of them. If I had spoken in the first place properly it would have helped me. How can you help someone who doesn't speak?"

"I wish I had been offered the opportunity to work with Women's Aid sooner and to get counselling sooner because then I would have made me a stronger person. That's the only regret; it would have been a better alternative, counselling. I think I do need counselling."

The women's suggested alternatives to sentencing focused on therapeutic interventions and practical support for independent living. They also recognised the benefits of community over custodial sentences:

"If they had sent me for counselling just and women's centre I would have been more than willing and open to go down those avenues... I think Probation would have been a better option. Probation opens all those doorways. They get in contact, make appointments for you and stuff. I would have appreciated Probation. Locking me in a room has made me a wee bit angry, angry that they saw fit to... I'm not an animal. I'm one of those who'd go out of their way to help somebody. I'm not a threat to the community."

"Some kind of counselling service, a support network put in place. I know this sounds a bit of an excuse, but when I was a kid I never had anybody to tell me right from wrong."

"I think like, see the likes of NIACRO that does the women's group that does the cooking and stuff, right. That's really good. I love going to that, even when I was younger, I loved going to that. It was always an excuse to get out. It didn't matter how you were when you went in, no one cared. It was a good time. You went there and you had a laugh, but you forgot all your troubles outside. Something like that."

4.6.1 Concluding remarks and recommendations

The women presented a strong case for early interventions for women who are in similar situations. And many voiced regrets for not speaking up and getting help themselves sooner. Their early reluctance to seek or accept help requires practitioners to rethink how women who are not ready to receive help can be supported to leave dangerous situations. The implications of this insight (the reluctance to seek help, yet the recognition of the need for early interventions) for practice are considerable.

In addition to the need for early interventions, women's suggestions included better alternatives to custody, and better in-prison supports (specifically therapeutic) for those who serve custodial sentences. Interestingly, these suggestions mirrored the professionals' observations which are discussed in Reflections on Serving the Sentence (Chapter 4.5). Given the prominence of these

three themes in the women's and the professionals' interviews, each merit further exploration. Chapter 6 explores these three suggestions in some detail including recommendations for practice moving forward.



Chapter 5: Conclusions

The five original research objectives were:

1. Share the stories and experiences of women who experienced domestic abuse and who offended, focusing particularly on their 'journey into crime'.
2. Explore whether living in a post-conflict society impacted upon the women's propensity to report domestic abuse.
3. Establish whether the Pre-Sentence Reports prepared by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) referenced domestic abuse and assess whether or not domestic abuse was taken into consideration as a mitigating factor at sentencing.
4. Document the women's experiences of serving their sentence.
5. Identify appropriate responses²⁴, particularly alternatives to custodial sentences.

The research's four main conclusions have been drawn against the original research objectives and structure the recommendations.

Conclusion 1: There is a need for earlier interventions for women

The stories and experiences of women who experienced domestic abuse and who offended, focusing particularly on their 'journey into crime' highlighted the extent to which living under abusive control became 'all encompassing'. Of particular note was the extent to which the abuse 'shrunk' the women's worlds, to the extent that they did not have adequate support networks. Combined with the detrimental impact on their self-esteem, confidence and mental health, women found that they had no obvious or easy way to seek help before their lifestyle spiralled into offending behaviour although there was commonplace regret for not speaking up or seeking help earlier. It is noteworthy that the five ways which characterised the women's journey into crime mirrored those of the Prison Reform Trust (2017), namely: reacting with violence against an abusive partner; committing offences on behalf of or to protect the partner; self-medicating with drugs / alcohol in an attempt to cope with trauma; and economic disadvantage, particularly where the partner controls the household's finances.

²⁴ Within the criminal justice system and the community (particularly health)

40% of the women interviewed felt that Northern Ireland's post-conflict situation influenced their decision about reporting their domestic abuse to authorities, largely citing their partner's connections (including family members) to paramilitary or dissident groups inhibiting them from contacting police (historically or currently). Whilst it was difficult to establish whether some of the women's conflict-related experiences were historic or current, we cannot ignore that for a sizeable number of women, they continue to remain significant.

The conclusion to be drawn from research objectives 1 and 2 is ***there is a need for earlier interventions for women***. Persistent offers of help from professionals are critical and services which rely solely on women being ready to disclose domestic abuse will not be effective.

Conclusion 2: Women lacked basic understanding about the process by which they were sentenced

35% of the women believed that their domestic abuse did not feature in their Pre-Sentence Reports, yet, all of the reports reviewed referenced domestic abuse. The contrast between women's perceptions of their reports and their contents highlights that women did not know or understand all that was written in their Pre-Sentence Reports. Neither did they know whether factors (particularly domestic abuse) were taken into account at sentencing. This leads us to conclude that, with reference to research objective 3, ***women lacked basic understanding about the process by which they were sentenced***.

Conclusion 3: Custodial sentences are often not the appropriate or the proportionate response for women when domestic abuse may be seen to contribute to their offending

More than half of the women who served custodial sentences were able to offer some positive accounts of their time in custody. Women were appreciative of the support and empathy of the Prison Service staff. Yet their reflections revealed the extent to which their needs had not been met at an earlier stage in the community, again pointing to the need for earlier interventions. Furthermore, supportive and empathetic staff did not alleviate the damaging impact of custody on women who were already experiencing poor self-esteem and mental ill health. Insufficient formal opportunities to reflect on the life circumstances that led to their offending and to receive practical assistance and build resilience in order to resist abusive relationships in future meant

women continued to return to abusive relationships after a period in custody and hence remain vulnerable to a cycle of re-offending.

Given the complexity of their needs and the circumstances under which many of the women were led into offending, ***professionals and women alike concluded that custodial sentences are often not the appropriate or the proportionate response for women when domestic abuse may be seen to contribute to their offending.***

Conclusion 4: Specialist support for women who have experienced domestic abuse in the Criminal Justice System is inadequate

The women spoke warmly of Probation's Inspire team members and Prison Service Sentence Managers. It is evident that these professionals are mindful of the women's complex needs and often prioritise support for domestic abuse. However, specialist domestic abuse counselling and practical support is not resourced by the criminal justice system and therefore the specialist offer is limited. Furthermore, given the strong correlation between domestic abuse and offending, Probation and Prison Service staff could give more attention to offering structured opportunities for women to disclose domestic abuse.

Chapter 6: Discussion

It was apparent throughout the interviews that women viewed themselves as an 'offender' who 'deserved' punishment more than they viewed themselves as a 'victim' who deserved recognition. Whilst their crimes did require a criminal justice response, three of the conclusions represent opportunities for women's experiences as 'victim' as well as 'offender' to be explored and recognised, and thereby to move forward from their experiences with greater confidence and hope for the future with a reduced risk of reoffending. The three areas that merit further exploration are the need for: earlier interventions; alternatives to custody; and in-prison supports.

6.1 Earlier interventions

"Earlier intervention that is more persistent and empathetic is needed." Inspire Team Member

"[Domestic abuse] is ever-present for many of the women we are working with – the shame of it. The stigma of being a victim of domestic abuse has to be addressed more rigorously." Inspire Team Member

The majority of the women were reluctant to disclose domestic abuse, often due to the stigma inferred above and fear of their partner. However, when asked about how women in their situation could be better supported, many pointed to the need for early intervention. The question for professionals is how might one square this circle by persistently offering support to women who are not ready to receive it?

McWilliams and Doyle highlight the prominent role of GPs in the help seeking process, observing that, *"GPs in particular are well placed to enquire whether the person experiencing depression and other mental health issues is also experiencing violence and control by their partner."* However, they also observed *"poor responses"* to intimate partner violence, citing reasons including: women being uncomfortable in discussions about IPV; GPs lacking sufficient knowledge to identify IPV; prescribing of anti-depressant medication without enquiring into the causes of the

depression; and/or women feeling that they were rushed out of busy GP surgeries. The renewed emphasis on training GPs to identify and support victims of domestic abuse and the plans to roll out new training within the Year 3 Action Plan for Northern Ireland's Domestic abuse Strategy (DoJ (NI) and DoH (NI), 2016) are therefore to be welcomed.

Accessing Women's Aid support early, before women's lifestyles have deteriorated to the point of offending is also key. One PBNi Inspire Team member reflected:

"There is more that needs to be done to take away the shame associated with women engaging with Women's Aid. Some women haven't come to the realisation that they would benefit from it."

All statutory agencies have a responsibility to recognise when women are vulnerable to domestic abuse and not to ignore the indicators. One means by which all statutory agencies' responses may be co-ordinated may be through a multi-agency Domestic Abuse Support Hub, similar in format to the Police Concern Hubs and the Family Support Hubs. This would enable action to be taken / needs to be assessed where professionals have reason to be concerned about a woman before she may be ready to disclose.

6.2 Alternatives to custody

Recognising the detrimental impacts of prison for women who already face complex difficulties, a barrister, noted *"Courts are reluctant I think to send female defendants to prison unless they really feel they have to, although I think that is maybe changing a little recently."*

The NI Prison Service statistics²⁵ for the average daily population of Ash House, the women's prison within Hydebank Wood College in Belfast (and the only women prison in NI) depict a comparatively stagnant picture over the past four years (Table 4). However, the number of receptions annually paints a different picture (Table 5). These trends reinforce the urgency of exploring alternatives to custody for many women.

²⁵ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/r-s-bulletin-262018-northern-ireland-prison-population-2017-18>

Year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Ash House average daily population	65	53	54	57

Table 4

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Remand receptions	182	215	235	246
Immediate custody receptions	103	84	105	117
Fine defaulter receptions	21	55	68	58
Non-criminal receptions	0	1	2	2
Totals	306	355	410	423

Table 5

Two alternatives that were highlighted as meriting consideration were therapeutic interventions and Problem Solving Justice.

6.2.1 Therapeutic interventions

The place of counselling and other therapeutic interventions was emphasised throughout the research, by professionals and the women; opportunities to identify and to explore all that the women have experienced through life and to find more positive ways to move forward. In some instances, this may require court orders. Professionals called for programmes that would be tailored to suit individual need and circumstance, taking into account particularly whether children are involved.

“Is there something we can do to help women to regain strength and independence? Care cases often involve programmes of work with Women’s Aid and other services post-separation or whenever there is a suggestion of a separation and yet I’ve never seen a Pre-Sentence Report suggesting a programme of work designed to assist or repair a victim

of domestic abuse. If those issues of low confidence, depression, anxiety etc. contribute to the offending, and the point of a Probation Order is to address factors which contribute to offending behaviour. Just as a perpetrator of domestic abuse (if quick to anger / reaction to small slights) can be mandated onto a programme, and there is Probation's Building Better Relations programme they can do, then surely there could be an equivalent?"

Serving Barrister

"Short sentences are not helpful. We need to be looking at what we do instead....you have to ask why they behave the way they do, and you discover what may have happened to them very early in life...find out as soon as possible what happened and counter with therapy, counselling, education etc." District Judge

"Courses to promote strength and self-worth are necessary as the women need to become strong enough to overcome feelings of low self-worth. If not addressed, they continue to seek validation from abusive partners upon release from custody. This contributes to a cycle of reoffending." Sentence Manager, Ash House

The need for this approach was reinforced by the observations of the Women's Aid counsellor who has been counselling women in Ash House for two years.

"In my experience, the adverse childhood experiences of the women [in Ash House] have been horrific and even their very basic needs, many haven't had met, so they tend to grow up in care, move into destructive relationships and develop chaotic lifestyles. They end up with a boyfriend at 17, maybe start to take a drink or drugs and then their pathway to offending, without ever have linked their experiences from the past with their crime. I find our work needs to go back to early days."

Given the impacts of domestic abuse discussed in Chapter 4.1 and the fact that women have been deterred by partners from disclosing anything, entering into programmes and establishing trust is a high expectation. Dedicated domestic abuse specialist support / counselling for women in the criminal justice system (whether they are subject to custodial or community sentences) could support women into programmes, increasing the likelihood of successful engagement.

6.2.2 Relevant community-based sentencing

The District Judge recounted cases where he had been “*remarkably lenient*” because he was trying to get the woman in question to trust that he was doing his best for her. In return, he required an assurance that the woman was committed to working with Probation or Women’s Aid to establish a better alternative lifestyle. *“Some have arrived with packed bags and I have sent them away – you do the following and I won’t send you to jail, but you have to work with me.”*

He cannot, however, continue to bring women back to court for them to demonstrate this commitment *“unless solicitors agree to adjournment.”*

He questions the consistency of practice and approach across Northern Ireland and goes further:

“In England and Wales a court can impose a formal deferral for three or six months and can impose conditions. We can’t impose conditions. Why they can do it in England and Wales and they can’t do it here is a complete and utter nonsense.”

“If someone genuinely is trying to change and work with me, I can make it out, but there will be cases where I have no option but to impose custodial sentences, in serious offences.”

Enabling sentencers to give women time (and requisite supports) to display a commitment to lifestyle changes before sentences are handed down seems to be an important requirement. Whilst legislative change may be required in the longer term, a more immediate solution could be to divert women towards community-based sentencing. The DoJ (NI) has introduced a suite of ‘Problem Solving Justice’ initiatives in recent times which include Problem Solving Justice Courts (currently being piloted) and Enhanced Combination Orders.

Problem Solving Justice Courts

These were advocated by the Judge who commented *“I would prefer to change people and see Problem Solving Justice brought in across the courts.”*

Several Problem Solving Justice Courts currently being piloted in Northern Ireland involve referral (by PBNI) into a judicial process which seeks to address underlying problems that contribute to criminal behaviour and are based on the concept of therapeutic justice. They offer a range of appropriate options to sentencers, including referral to therapeutic programmes and ‘wraparound’ support. Only one woman on Inspire’s caseload has been through the Problem Solving Justice Court pilot.

“We would be keen for more women to come through the pilot. At the moment, the defendant has to appear before the Magistrate in the courts where the pilot is operating and be recommended for the PSC by that Magistrate. Inspire can’t refer into it at the moment.” Manager, PBNI Inspire Team

Given the support for this model within Probation and its seeming suitability for women who face complex difficulties, it has the potential to offer a more constructive experience of criminal justice and, more importantly, longer term benefit. It may, however, require additional development to ensure a gender-informed approach that is fit for purpose. For example, one potential barrier to women engaging with the problem-solving model was highlighted by a barrister:

“I wonder whether many will baulk at the idea of the details of their engagement in programmes or their relapses with respect to drugs etc. having to be shared so publicly in court with everyone there knowing when they’ve had a setback etc. It’s a bit too raw and a bit too personal for a court setting where they are not there voluntarily.”

Moving forward with Problem Solving Justice for women for whom disclosure of domestic abuse is sensitive a gender-informed approach may be to consider operating the Problem-Solving Justice model in closed courts.

Enhanced Combination Orders

Enhanced Combination Orders (ECOs) are intensive community-based alternatives to prison sentences of 12 months or less. They are part of the DoJ (NI)’s suite of problem solving measures, initiated and delivered by PBNI. ECOs engage individuals in restorative approaches, psychological assessments and programmes to support desistance from further offending. An evaluation of

ECOs conducted in 2017²⁶ found that there was a significant reduction in the reoffending rate for those who completed the Order and that the number of prison sentences of 12 months or less awarded by courts involved in the ECO pilot decreased by 10.5%.

5 women had received an ECO at the time of the evaluation. ECOs offer a potentially helpful alternative to short sentences for women that could be taken up more widely, should the scheme be available in more Courts than is currently the case. This is, of course dependent on funding. When an offence is serious enough to carry a custodial sentence (and a sentencer is minded to hand down a custodial sentence of 12 months or less), ECOs ought to be considered as an appropriate alternative. Indeed, ECOs could be seen as an even more valuable alternative for women, given the very significant implications for children of imprisoning mothers. To avoid the possibility of 'up tariffing', ECOs ought not to be considered in cases that would not otherwise carry a custodial sentence.

6.3 In-prison supports

The main specialist domestic abuse support for women in Ash House is access to a Women's Aid counsellor. The same counsellor has been visiting the prison, weekly or bi-weekly, for two years. At the time of the research, the counsellor was working with three women. This is not a funded arrangement (i.e. the work is funded out of Women's Aid's general funds and not by the Prison Service). Counselling women in custody brings very particular challenges, for the counsellor and the woman.

"I find the work with women difficult compared with community. You do really need to hold someone emotionally. Women in our hostel have access to 24 hour support. I can see them every day for a period, if that's what they need. I need to be really sensitive and conscious of the prison environment, so you do your work a bit slower and more gently, teasing it out... Because of that, we have been able to say to the Sentence Managers, 'This particular woman wasn't good today after our session. Can you keep an eye on her or check in with her later on?' I also leave my number with the prison staff so that if they need to check anything about a woman they are concerned about after a session, they can do so."

²⁶ https://www.pbni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ECO-Evaluation_Final-Report-04.12.17.pdf

Ash House staff have recently introduced a module to their Victim Impact Programme concerning domestic abuse. Six women attended this pilot course, all of whom had experienced domestic abuse and four of whom had witnessed it as children. The Sentence Manager reported:

“The women felt that it was good sharing and talking about it, some of whom had held their feelings in since childhood. I could see that some women recognised, perhaps for the first time, that they had been victims of coercive behaviours.”



Chapter 7: Recommendations

The recommendations are introduced within each relevant chapter of the report and presented together in this chapter. They were developed with reference to three relevant initiatives:

- (i) Recent attempts by the Northern Ireland Prison Service to account for women's backgrounds and needs, particularly the adoption of Pathways 8 & 9²⁷, as recommended by Corston (Home Office, 2007)
- (ii) Work currently being undertaken by DoJ (NI) to develop a Women's Strategy.
- (iii) Several key priorities within Northern Ireland's Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland: A Seven Year Strategy (2016)²⁸.

Earlier interventions

- 1.1 We recommend the introduction of an inter-agency forum that would place the onus on professionals to identify and discuss cases and make referrals (similar in format to Family Support Hubs or Police Concern Hubs).
- 1.2 After a woman has presented at A&E or been involved in a police incident, a follow up letter from professionals (copied to the GP) is needed, so that further support can be offered (recognising and taking into account the potential associated risks and dangers).
- 1.3 Continued focus on training for police officers and GPs in support of victims is required and should be cognisant of all adverse experiences women may have had from childhood.
- 1.4 Police and PBNi should ask all women about domestic abuse during their initial interviews, creating an opportunity for disclosure. Professionals could learn from the experiences of maternity services which asks a question about domestic abuse at appointments for all women.

²⁷ Pathway 8: support for women who have been abused, raped or who have experienced domestic violence.
Pathway 9: support for women who have been involved in prostitution.

²⁸ Year 3 Action Plan is being implemented, with the Department of Justice, Department of Health & Department for Communities responsible for leading on relevant actions.

Women's understanding of the process by which they were sentenced

2. We recommend that PBNI and NIPS review the process by which women are taken through their Pre-Sentence Report and how this was (or was not) reflected in sentences handed down. This may require identifying an appropriate time for a structured conversation, sometime after the sentence has commenced, so that women are able to take in all that is explained and have the opportunity to reflect on the trial process and the sentence received.

Custodial Sentences

- 3.1 Time (and requisite supports) are required for women to display a commitment to lifestyle changes before sentencing in order to divert women from custodial sentences where possible. A timely solution would be to divert women towards gender-informed Problem-Solving Justice Courts and Enhanced Combination Orders.
- 3.2 The judiciary should be properly informed about the influence of domestic abuse on women who offend.
- 3.3 For women who are in custody, we recommend that the Prison Service include a question about domestic abuse into the Prisoner Needs Profile.

Specialist support for women in the Criminal Justice System

- 4.1 We recommend that, in the context of the joint DoJ / DoH Domestic Violence Strategy, a specialist domestic abuse support counsellor be resourced, whose time would be split between supporting women on PBNI's Inspire team, women going through court and those in Ash House. This has the potential to be an early intervention – helping to prevent women from returning to abusive partners with implications for their lifestyle.
- 4.2 PBNI should introduce therapeutic programmes to support women to 'process' their experiences and the links with offending. In the same way that court-mandated programmes are available for perpetrators of domestic abuse, it may be appropriate to consider court-mandated programmes for women whose offences can be linked to domestic abuse.

- 4.3 We recommend that PBNI ask all women under their supervision about domestic abuse, to aid disclosure and support help-seeking. A card with details of how to access support should be given to all women at this stage.



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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Interview questions

Date:

Location:

Name of interviewer:

PART ONE: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Personal Status:

Employed/Unemployed/Studying

Housing status:

Sole tenant/Joint tenant/Sole owner/Joint owner

Relationship Status:

Married/Co-habiting/Single/Divorced/Widowed

Dependents:

No.

Finance:

What is your current financial situation? Are you on benefits? How do you find living on your current income?

PART ONE: EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE

1) Can you tell me about your experience of domestic violence?

Prompters:

Made you feel bad about yourself? In what ways?

Belittled or humiliated you in front of other people?

Insulted you?

Threatened or hurt someone who tried to help you?

Threatened or hurt a family pet?

Threatened to take the children away from you?

Threatened to hurt your children?

Hurt your children?

Try to keep you from seeing your friends?

Try to restrict contact with your family or relatives?

Insisted on knowing where you are at all times? Did he need your whereabouts most/all of the time?

Get angry if you spoke to another man?

Get suspicious that you were unfaithful?

Prevent you from making decisions about family finances and shopping independently

Make you take out loans for his benefit and left you in debt?

Forbid you from working outside the home?

Forbid you from leaving the house when you wanted to go out without him

Take away your keys or locked you in the house?

- 2) Can you tell me about the violence you experienced from your partner? For example, did he slap you, push or shove you, hit you with his fist or something else, beaten you, or hurt you in any other way (burning, choking etc.)?
- 3) Can you list the type of injuries you had as a result of the abuse?
- 4) Do you still suffer physically from any of these injuries?
- 5) Did your partner ever threaten to kill you – how?
- 6) If you said you were going to leave, what was his reaction?
- 7) When did the first incident take place?
 - a) *Were you living together at the time of the first incident?*
- 8) Was there one or more incidents of violence?
 - a) *In your life how many times (approximately) were you injured by your partner? Would you say once or twice, several times or many times?*
- 9) For any of these incidents were your children present or did they overhear you being beaten?
 - a) *How often? Once, several times, most of the time.*
 - b) *What was the impact on them? (difficulties in school, ended up in care/poor mental health/ substances/entered into domestic violent relationships)*
- 10) Are there any particular situations that tend(ed) to lead to your partner being violent? (i.e. Drunk, Jealous, Pregnant, Money problems, Refused sex, perceived you to be 'disobedient'.)

- 11) Is there anything you managed to do or try to do in order to prevent the abuse/violence from occurring?
- 12) Over what period of time did the abuse occur?
 - a) *What did you do the first time he was abusive towards you?*
 - b) *Who was the first person you spoke to about the abuse?*
- 13) Were you ever hurt badly enough by your partner that you needed medical attention (even if you did not receive it)?
 - a) *If Yes, how many times?*
- 14) Did you husband/partner ever physically force you to have sexual intercourse when you did not want to?
- 15) Did you ever have sexual intercourse when you did not want to because you were afraid of what your partner might do?

PART TWO – IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- 16) As a result of your partner's behaviour have you ever suffered from any of the following: depression, anxiety, panic attacks, difficulties sleeping, difficulties concentrating, loss of self-confidence, or any other problems?
- 17) How have you dealt with these experiences? (Positively – counselling, support. Negative – drugs, alcohol, self-harm, anger issues, violence etc.) Did alcohol/drugs/self-harm/violence increase? Did you get any professional help for any of this?
- 18) Are you taking medication for any of the above
- 19) How long have you been on this medication
- 20) Has the thought of ending your life ever been on your mind?
- 21) Have you ever tried to take your life?
- 22) Did you receive counselling for what you have experienced?
- 23) What action did you take the last time that the abuse occurred?
 - a) *Why did you decide to take action on this occasion?*
- 24) What is the main reason why you did not contact someone or take action sooner? (Why did you stay? Why did you go back? Why did you take him back?) Check to see if these are a repeat of some questions above.
- 25) In what way, if any, has your husband's/partner's behaviour disrupted your work or other income-generating activities or any education that you were pursuing?

PART THREE: GETTING HELP

- 26) Did you ever feel reluctant to get help or to leave or to talk any other action because of other peoples' attitudes e.g Did you ever feel there would be a stigma against you if people knew about the problem?
- 27) Did anyone ever try to help you?
- 28) A number of women said that the political situation in Northern Ireland – that is the Troubles- affected their ability to go for help, who they went to, and whether they received help. Thinking about this, do you think that there is anything specific about Northern Ireland that has impacted on your experience of violence and getting help? **Elaborate.** Is there, or has there ever been anything about your community has acted as a barrier to your looking or getting help? For example, was your partner affiliated to a paramilitary organisation?

Police

- 29) Did you ever contact the police?
- What did they do?*
 - Did they ever take any official action against him? For example give him an official warning.*
 - Did they help you to pursue a prosecution for the abuse/violence?*
 - If they were they helpful to you, what did they do to show support?*
 - If not, what should they have done instead?*
 - What would you recommend they should do for women in situations like yours?*
- 30) Did you contact any of the following? Did they help you?
- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------|
| • Community psychiatric nurse | yes/no |
| • Probation Officer | yes/no |
| • Midwives | yes/no |
| • Teacher | yes/no |
| • Housing Executive | yes/no |
| • Community workers | yes/no |
| • Benefits Office | yes/no |
| • Womens centre/ Womens Aid | yes/no |
| • Solicitor | yes/no |
- 31) What were your expectations?

Informal network

- 32) Did you talk to your family or friends about the problem?
- a) *If not, why not?*
- 33) In what way did they support/hinder you in doing something about it?
- 34) Did they suggest any course of action regarding your relationship or the violence?
- 35) What kind of support/reaction are you getting now from family, friends, neighbours?
- 36) Is there anyone, including not only family and friends but also professional groups (the police, healthcare professionals etc.) that you would have liked to receive (more) help from?

PART FOUR: JOURNEY INTO CRIME

- 37) Did criminal activity lead to you first reporting DV?
- 38) Were you ever asked by your arresting officer or during the criminal justice process if you were/experiencing domestic violence?
- 38) What is the nature of your offences?
- 39) Do you think your criminal behaviour is linked in any way to your experience of domestic violence?
- 40) Did you talk to your solicitor about your experience of domestic violence?
- 41) Was your domestic violence raised during your court case?
- 42) Did you ever raise your experience of domestic violence to anyone in the criminal justice system?
- 43) Who was the most helpful when you disclosed your dv experience before, during or after your offence?

Sentencing Stage

- 44) Was your DV details on your PBNI-prepared pre-sentence report (PSR)?

Impact of Sentences versus Potential for Different Impact of Alternative Disposals

- 45) What sentence was received?
- 46) What impact did sentencing have on self-esteem/worth? (community becoming aware because of media reports)
- 47) What impact did sentencing have on family/relationships?

- 48) What impact did sentencing have on future career/learning?
- 49) What would have been a better alternative? (counselling, women's centres, stable and safe accommodation etc.
- 50) How/was your DV experience dealt with in prison? Any suggestions you might have which would have assisted you – knowing what you now know.
- 51) We have now finished the interview. Do you have any comments, or is there anything else you would like to add?
- 52) We have asked you about many difficult things. How has talking about these things made you feel?

We would like to thank you very much for helping us. We appreciate the time that you have taken. We realise that these questions may have been difficult for you to answer, but it is only by hearing from women themselves that we can really understand about their experiences of violence.

From what you have told us, we can tell that you have had some very difficult times in your life. No one has the right to treat someone that way. However, from what you have told us it is clear that you are strong, and have survived through some difficult circumstances.

Here is a list of organisations that provide support, legal advice and counselling services to women. Please do contact them if you would like to talk over your situation with anyone. Their services are free, and they will keep anything that you say private. You can go whenever you feel ready to, either soon or later on. Thank you again

Appendix 2: Participants' information sheet and consent form**Participants' Information Sheet**

Geraldine McGuigan and Ruth Walker both work for NIACRO. Together, they have been granted a research fellowship from the Griffins Society (www.thegriffinssociety.org). Our research is looking at experiences of women in Northern Ireland who have experienced domestic violence and who have been convicted.

We will talk to women who have been in this situation – women in Ash House and women in the community between January and May 2018. We hope to build up a full picture of the experiences of women who have been in this situation. We want to give women the chance to tell their story. This may include, for example:

- What support services (if any) you tried to access
- Whether you reported any domestic violence incidents to police or other agencies
- Who else knew about your domestic circumstances, including whether the community had any impact (positive or negative) on your or your partner's actions.
- How you feel your experiences may (or may not) have led into offending behaviour.
- Whether domestic violence experiences were referenced on pre-sentence reports

We will use the information we build up through the research to write up a report which will be ready by August 2018 and will:

- Represent the women and give voice to their experiences
- Discover how domestic circumstances are (or are not) taken into account when women are sentenced
- Identify alternative options for women who face this situation.

We will also be talking to:

- Staff at Probation, to understand whether domestic circumstances (including, for example, domestic violence) is included in the pre-sentence reports Probation prepare for the courts
- Sentencers (judges / Magistrates).

If you have any questions about the research or would like to find out more, please contact Geraldine or Ruth (contact details below). Their Supervisor, Monica McWilliams, will check that their research is carried out to acceptable standards. Her contact details are also below.



Participants' Consent Form:

Please confirm that you agree with each of the following statements by ticking the box. If there is a statement you do not agree with or that has not been explained to you properly, please talk about this with the interviewer before the interview starts.

1. I have read the information Sheet about this study and the details of the research have been explained in a way I understand. ☐
2. My questions about the research have been answered in a way I can understand. ☐
3. I am free to ask any further questions at any point. ☐
4. I am free to withdraw from the research*. ☐
5. I am free to decline to answer any particular questions during the interview. ☐
6. I understand how the researcher will keep the information I provide and that she will not keep it alongside my name or any other personal details. ☐
7. I understand that the interview will be recorded and written out for the research. ☐
8. I understand that the researchers will ask Probation Officers to read my pre- sentence report, looking for any reference to the domestic violence experienced. ☐
9. I understand that the information I give at interview will be used to compile the final write-up of the research. Every effort will be made to make sure I cannot be identified by what is presented. (My name will not appear anywhere and any details that could identify me will be removed). ☐

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name: _____

Appendix 3: Proforma for PBNI to report on content of Pre-Sentence Reports

Geraldine McGuigan and Ruth Walker from NIACRO have been granted a research fellowship from the Griffins Society (www.thegriffinssociety.org). The research is looking at experiences of women who have experienced domestic violence and who have been convicted. They are talking to women who have been in this situation –in Ash House and in the community to build a picture of the experiences of women who have been in this situation including, for example:

- What support services (if any) they tried to access
- Whether they reported any domestic violence incidents to police or other agencies
- How they felt their experiences may (or may not) have led into offending behaviour.
- ***Whether domestic violence experiences were referenced on pre-sentence reports***

We appreciate Probation's willingness to check Pre-Sentence reports on our behalf as part of our research.

1. Name of Woman: _____

2. Sentence Received: _____

3. Is there any indication in the report that the woman was asked about / given the opportunity to discuss domestic violence?

Yes / No

If Yes, please give details below:

4. Is there any indication that this was taken into consideration when the woman was sentenced?

Yes / No

If Yes, please give details below:

Further Comments:

Appendix 4: Summary profiles of women interviewed

Interview 1	
Age Range	50-60
Time over which DA experienced	23 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical and Psychological – <i>“I not only experienced mental torture but physical but it was more mental torture, more controlling.”</i>
No. DA partners	1
Other adverse experiences	Debt and financial Had witnessed armed robbery when just married – identifies as another source of trauma.
Type of offence	Theft & False accounting.
Sentence received	2 years – 1 custody/1 community
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	No – didn’t disclose
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 2	
Age Range	50-60
Time over which DA experienced	35 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, psychological, sexual -It was one form of abuse after another. Prostituting wasn’t for money <i>“It was about bringing me down”</i>
No. DA partners	1
Other adverse experiences	Had low self-esteem to start with – bullied at school Wasn’t respected as a person People didn’t want me as a friend but to do things for them <i>“I was bowled over by the attention he gave me.”</i>
Type of offence	Aiding and abetting rape and other sexual offences including indecent assault.
Sentence received	3 years to 18-month custody to 16-month Probation

Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes - the DCS sentence appears to reflect some cognizance of the circumstances where she was the victim of an abusive relationship.
PBNI reported DV cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 3	
Age Range	20-35
Time over which DA experienced	10 + years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, psychological and sexual – <i>"I've been poisoned and all by him he put turps in vodka before."</i>
No. DA partners	1 main but did discuss others who were abusive.
Other adverse experiences	Dad is dead and mum has dementia – lacks family support Witness to fathers domestic abuse towards mother.
Type of offence	Hijacking a car, theft.
Sentence received	On remand
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Not yet sentenced
PBNI reported DV cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 4	
Age Range	25-35
Time over which DA experienced	10+ years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, emotional, sexual - <i>"I've been through most of those definitions of DV I've been beat. I've been sexually abused. I don't have much self-worth even until today."</i>
No. DA partners	Main partner but throughout interview references other partners who have been violent over time.
Other adverse experiences	In sexual r'ship since 12 & memories of abuse by uncle, dad. <i>"Just growing up knowing to keep your mouth shut"</i> <i>"I think that's why I just let men use me throughout my life."</i>
Type of offence	GBH

Sentence received	2 years (custody & licence)
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Thinks it might have been – <i>“I was meant to get a life sentence for my last charge but the judge had a change of heart.”</i>
PBNI reported DV cited on PSR?	Yes - Report author examines and explores domestic abuse history.
Interview 5	
Age Range	20-30
Time over which DA experienced	4 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical and psychological – <i>he got me under the bridge and punched and kicked my stomach and broke three of my teeth. My head was split open, there was blood all over my face you couldn't see my face at all.</i>
No. DA partners	3
Other adverse experiences	<i>“When I was 12 my uncle's auntie's brother (he is not related to me) was 17 at the time and I got into a sexual relationship with him. He wasn't violent but he basically used me when he wanted to. He knew how and use and abuse me. I did fall in love with him I was head over heels with him ...it stopped when I was 15.”</i>
Type of offence	Murder
Sentence received	Life - 14 year tariff
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	No
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 6	
Age Range	
Time over which DA experienced	10+ years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, Psychological, Sexual <i>“First thing he loved me next thing he hated me you're fat, you're ugly, you'll never make anything of yourself. He just raped me. Did whatever he wanted with me to tell you the truth.”</i>
No. DA partners	1
Other adverse experiences	References early abuse in life.

	<i>"It had to be accepted by our foster parents that we had this other life. That we were damaged. I said to my ex-partner I'm damaged goods Yes I AM, not to run myself down."</i>
Type of offence	Assisting an offender
Sentence received	DCS – 12+12
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 7	
Age Range	35-45
Time over which DA experienced	2.5 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, Psychological and Sexual <i>"He beat me and beat me bad. I had to pretend to be dead to get him out of the house."</i>
No. DA partners	Several abusive relationships but this was "the worst"
Other adverse experiences	<i>My mummy was violent with me My mummy beat me from when I was 3 / 4years of age It was all I knew. It was the way I was brought up."</i>
Type of offence	All shoplifting, I have a couple of driving offences
Sentence received	Community service
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 8	
Age Range	25-35
Time over which DA experienced	8 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical and Psychological <i>"It would be mostly about drink and if I'd answer him back when they are drunk do you know, when they couldn't get their anger out on something else. Travelling men take it out on their partners."</i>

No. DA partners	1
Other adverse experiences	<i>"It [domestic abuse] happens in the travelling community. To be honest everything, going through that and my brother's death he overdosed, I had a lot of pressure on my mind I couldn't take no more."</i>
Type of offence	Shoplifting and several driving offences
Sentence received	Community service
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 9	
Age Range	35-45
Time over which DA experienced	17.5 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, psychological, sexual <i>"I had a stand up on the sunbed he took the tubes out one by one and started smashing them over my head. He then got my laptop as well smashed it over my head too I have a big wooden bed. He smashed my head so hard off it he broke the wooden bed. I was actually knocked unconscious."</i>
No. DA partners	2
Other adverse experiences	<i>"The funny thing is I know what it's like to come from a normal life. I was never brought up with drug or alcohol abuse - I had a good family background and I know that. It's just when somebody gets inside your head, it's hard for you to see otherwise."</i> <i>"He [partner] had an affair with my sister. My father then died, I had no one."</i>
Type of offence	Shop lifting
Sentence received	Community Service
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 10	
Age Range	25-35
Time over which DA	18 years

experienced	
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Extensive physical, psychological and sexual with multiple injuries. <i>"My domestic violence was off the scalegoing past that radar ... it was horrific. One of the guys I was with had planned to murder me and had the boot of the car covered in black bags. He was dancing on my head I lost consciousness and woke up in the bath under water, he was trying to make sure I was dead or whatever was going on."</i>
No. DA partners	Multiple
Other adverse experiences	<i>"There was a lot of domestic violence in my home with my dad and my mum when I was younger."</i>
Type of offence	Attempted Robbery
Sentence received	Two years - a year in custody and a year on licence
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes – <i>"A lot of people would have said to me: 'how did you get off with this?' 'It wasn't a case of getting off with it, it was my solicitor standing up and telling the story about me, how I had been abused since I was 14, physically mentally, in some cases sexually."</i>
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 11	
Age Range	25-35
Time over which DA experienced	2.5 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Psychological and physical <i>"I've been choked. I've had a penknife put through my boob - yea that was done one time for flirting. I've been punched. I've been kicked. I think their favourite one is your cheekbone, and it hurts, it always stings."</i>
No. DA partners	2
Other adverse experiences	<i>"I used to think domestic violence was normal because I grew up in a house with it I was brought up in a house where you don't talk about things that happen behind closed doors."</i>
Type of offence	Mainly criminal damage and assault.
Sentence received	12 months Probation and work with Addictions NI
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	No

PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 12	
Age Range	25-35
Time over which DA experienced	11 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, Emotional, Sexual – <i>“At the start it was the stupid wee slap, then it got to the stage... the two worst ever was when he drove over me in the moped.”</i>
No. DA partners	2
Other adverse experiences	<i>“I was young and so in love I thought it was something that just happened in life. I lost my mum at an early age so I really only had my daddy to live with. I was sexually abused when I was younger. I always thought my life was going to be drink drugs and getting beat. I never thought there was a life you could live where you’re happy, where you can be happy like. it’s the fear they put you through you have that fear in you.”</i>
Type of offence	Criminal assault and criminal damage
Sentence received	18 months PBNI and 3 years bound over for 18 months
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes - She thinks it was why she didn’t get custody.
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 13	
Age Range	50-60
Time over which DA experienced	20 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Psychological, physical, sexual. <i>“I’ve been hit that many times by him. He hit me with a hammer, an axe A cord put around my neck and strangled until I passed out.”</i>
No. DA partners	3
Other adverse experiences	<i>“I hadn’t a shoe to my foot. I was walking about with holes in my shoes and ended up taking double pneumonia from it and I was rushed to hospital.”</i>
Type of offence	Manslaughter
Sentence received	Indeterminate custodial

Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes - She thinks that's why she was charged with Manslaughter and not murder
Interview 14	
Age Range	50-60
Time over which DA experienced	23 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, psychological, sexual <i>"I would have woken up during the night with my trousers down - with my jammie bottoms pulled down and him inside me -well to me that's rape at the time."</i>
No. DA partners	1
Other adverse experiences	Her partner's father beat his mum.
Type of offence	Possession of Class C drug and theft (when high on drugs)
Sentence received	3 years' Probation
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Yes - on appeal
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes
Interview 15	
Time over which DA experienced	11 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, Psychological and sexual - Raped by partner and his friend, punched, strangled, kicked in the head etc.
No. DA partners	2
Other adverse experiences	<i>"I had little support from my family – if I went to them all I'd hear would be 'What did I tell you?' or 'We will go and beat him up'".</i>
Type of offence	GBH with intent, carrying a knife.
Sentence received	3 ½ years for GBH with intent, 3 ½ years for carrying a knife.
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	No
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes

Interview 16	
Age Range	35-45
Time over which DA experienced	18 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical and Psychological <i>"I have scars on my body, on my face, they are hidden now, they have started to fade, but they are still there in my mind emotionally. They'll never fade. I will always be wary."</i>
No. DA partners	1
Other adverse experiences	<i>"Fear – living life in fear. I thought there was no help for me, but there is help."</i>
Type of offence	Fraud
Sentence received	18 months - 6 custody, 12 Probation
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	No
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes- Examined within the PSR regarding Child protection issues and impact on her and her family
Interview 17	
Age Range	20-30
Time over which DA experienced	1 year
Nature of DA (brief)	Physical, psychological <i>"Nobody would have stopped him. If he had wanted to beat me in front of them he would have done it."</i>
No. DA partners	2
Other adverse experiences	<i>I should have listened to VAPO officer and my family but didn't want to hear 'I told you so' until it got to breaking point.</i>
Type of offence	Drunk and Disorderly and breach of Probation.
Sentence received	Probation then breach - 6 months custodial
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	No
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes

Interview 18	
Age Range	35-45
Time over which DA experienced	11 years
Brief profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical and Psychological <i>"He just kicked me all over the place. If his shirt wasn't ironed, if there was something wrong, even if something on his clothes that wouldn't wash out."</i>
No. DA partners	1
Other adverse experiences	<i>"I felt trapped, wherever I was, feeling like I was living in sin was enough, living with shame was another, that's the way it was in the travelling community. It's not what my family would have said it was what the other people would have said. My first beating was from my eldest brother who beat me so bad he put me to hospital. From then I met and lived with my partner he thought it was normal to drink and take drugs every day and beat me up every day."</i>
Type of offence	GBH with intent
Sentence received	1 year custody- 6 months' Probation
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	Don't know
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Explored in PSR around D/A within her relationship and impact on her lifestyle and choices.
Interview 19	
Age Range	25-35
Time over which DA experienced	1 year
Brief Profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, psychological, sexual <i>"He got up and cracked me that side, my cheek bone broke. Damage to arm when he threw perfume bottle which imbedded in shoulder."</i>
No. DA partners	2
Other adverse experiences	<i>I'm not going to lie, see my criminal activity has nothing to do, even when I was younger, nothing to do with domestic violence or getting hit at home nothing to do with any of that. I never heard the word 'no' in my life. My reasoning for staying with him, he was my last connection to my daughter.</i>
Type of offence	Manslaughter with diminished responsibility.
Sentence received	6 years - 3 custody 3 on licence
Taken into account at	No

sentencing in her opinion?	
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Discussed in PSR in terms of historic domestic abuse and impact on her growing up
Interview 20	
Age Range	35-45
Time over which DA experienced	8 years
Brief Profile of Domestic Abuse	Physical, psychological
No. DA partners	1
Other adverse experiences	<i>"Alcohol was a big factor. We both worked on a high-pressured job."</i>
Type of offence	Causing Death by Dangerous Driving
Sentence received	DCS 4 +4
Taken into account at sentencing in her opinion?	No
PBNI reported DA cited on PSR?	Yes - Substance misuse evident in marriage that resulted in domestic abusive incidents whilst both under the influence.

ENDS