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**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Rutter, N ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0346-3601> and Barr, U ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4774-5259> (2021) Being a 'good woman': Stigma, relationships and desistance. *Probation Journal*. 68 (2). pp. 166-185. ISSN 0264-5505**

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## Article

# Being a 'good woman': Stigma, relationships and desistance

Probation Journal

2021, Vol. 68(2) 166–185

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DOI: 10.1177/02645505211010336

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## Abstract

This article critiques the focus on responsibilisation of criminalised women within desistance research, policy and practice, through the neglect of the structural conditions surrounding women's criminalisation and victimisation. The concept of the 'good woman' within these areas is grounded in patriarchal and neoliberal discourse. Drawing upon women's narratives, we show this results in feelings of shame and stigmatisation, negatively affecting relational networks and leading to a denial of victimhood. Research from two complementing studies drawn together here suggest that positive relationships which challenge feelings of shame and stigmatisation are essential to women's desistance both from crime and harm, and are therefore fundamental considerations for practice.

## Keywords

desistance, responsibilisation, criminalisation, victimisation, relationships, stigmatisation, shame

## Introduction

Female service users of the criminal justice system remain one of the most marginalised voices in society (Harding, 2017a), often ignored and unheard (Fitzgibbon

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and Stengel, 2018), and overlooked in policy, planning and services (Prison Reform Trust, 2016). Although desistance theory has begun to include women's perspectives (Barr, 2019; Hart, 2017a; Leverentz, 2014; Österman, 2018; Rodermond et al., 2016), studies continue to focus on the individual desister, at the detriment of both relational and structural analysis (Gålnander, 2020; Hart, 2017b). We are also witnessing the domination of neoliberal ideals of responsibilisation and individualisation within the criminal justice system. In 2007, Baroness Corston proposed that women's 'vulnerabilities' provide the backdrop to their criminalisation, arguing this can be overcome 'by helping women develop resilience, life skills and emotional literacy' (2007: 15). This review was prompted by the deaths of six women in HMP Styal alongside the upward trend of the women's prison population and was commissioned by the Home Office to consider measures could be taken to avoid imprisoning women with certain vulnerabilities. The focus that on the responsibilised woman overcoming the hardships she faces, has been continually present in policy documents that relate to women's experience of the criminal justice system. The Female Offender's Strategy (Ministry of Justice, 2018) was published after having been promised in the 2016 Prison Safety and Reform White Paper. The Strategy set out two years of community supervision funding for women, five 'residential women's centres', and a commitment to reducing the number of women in prison. However, this has failed to address the need for structural change in order to improve the life chances of 'female offenders' or what we term criminalised women. 'Female offenders' individualises and responsibilises women while 'criminalised women' locates the structural inequalities inherent in criminalisation and desistance. Our research has shown that those who come into contact with the criminal justice system are a particular group of marginalised and subjugated women. Criminalised women are those who are materially deprived and have come from contexts of abuse and neglect from the state. In addition, the Farmer Report (2019) highlighted the importance of strengthening family and other relationships for 'female offenders', recognising the centrality of victimisation in the lives of criminalised women, and the importance of positive relationships to support women's desistance. However, it fails to critique patriarchal structures which provide the context for domestic abuse and regard mothers as main carers to children.

Our combined research suggests that promoting the responsibilised individual woman to overcome personal problems leads to feelings of shame and the omnipresence of stigmatisation when attempting to desist. Shame and stigma, this paper argues, are located in the women's experiences of both criminalisation and victimisation, and are evident in their interpersonal relationships with families, friends, as well as with service providers, for example probation and partner agency staff. Our research suggests that positive relationships which challenge feelings of shame and stigmatisation are essential to women's desistance both from crime and harm (Barr, 2019; Barr and Christian, 2019), with conclusions considering some implications for practice.

## Neoliberalism, responsibilisation and victimisation

Criminology in general, and desistance theory in particular, can learn from intersectional abolitionist feminism which critique, and aim to dismantle, white-supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (hooks, 2009). As has been noted above, the 'difficulties' and 'vulnerabilities' faced by criminalised women have long been recognised by state research and analysis. Yet these reports are produced at times where women continue to be criminalised, while their services are cut at ever increasing increments. Desistance theory, emerging from the study of the experiences of white men, included references to the 'good woman' (Laub and Sampson, 2001), usually a romantic partner or mother-figure, who would influence men to go-straight. These supporting (literally as well as figuratively) characters were not examined in these initial desistance studies (Harding, 2017b). This absence of investigation is particularly jarring when we consider that criminalised women's offending is often linked to the offending of a male partner (Barr and Christian, 2019; Gålnander, 2020) and/or histories of victimisation.

Alison Phipps speaks of the 'ideal neoliberal subject' as someone who faces adversity 'and makes the best of all situations' (2014: 34). The 'good woman' in early male-focussed desistance analysis exemplifies this characterisation. There are neoliberal pressures involved in the contemporary promotion of 'positive thinking' to evade victimhood. Phipps highlights a 2010 study by Joanne Baker where 55 young women went to great lengths to avoid the 'victim' label, associating it with a lack of personal responsibility and control around situations involving sexual and domestic violence. This was particularly salient in the most disadvantaged group in the sample. Phipps and Baker situate this introspection, and way of viewing victims, as part of a lengthy process of individualisation which has the effect of depoliticising the postmodern and neoliberal subject. In turn, this can affect declining social safety nets, evident through wider austerity in England (Mansfield and Cooper, 2017). As noted by Phipps;

There is psychological work involved in living up to the structures of neoliberal individualism and this can have punitive, social and psychological consequences for those who fail to evade victimhood or 'choose' not to rise above their misfortune. (2014: 35)

In particular, for criminalised women, who are labelled threefold for their transgression of female norms, their criminal behaviour and their victimisation (Rutter, 2019) the responsibilisation rhetoric of the criminal justice system (Hart, 2017b) is evident in their narratives.

## Exploring relational networks

The concept of being a 'good woman' is also realised within criminalised women's relationships. Desistance research has evidenced and acknowledged how desistance must be understood within the context of relational networks (McNeill and Weaver, 2010; McNeill et al., 2012). However, this has continued to focus on the

male experience. Theoretically, relational desistance considers how change is seen by others (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), while the argument around tertiary desistance highlights the importance of an individual's sense of belonging (McNeill, 2016). While this enables recognition of wider structural forces that move beyond individualisation, it fails to distinguish the vulnerabilities and victimisation of criminalised women which are shaped by patriarchal structures, and how a sense of belonging can reaffirm what it means to be a 'good woman'. While women are more likely to emphasise the importance of relational desistance (McIvor et al., 2004) their experiences are largely formulated within relationships where they are the main carers of children. This reiterates responsibilities for family members, and the ideals of heteropatriarchy, with Booth et al. (2018) raising the importance of considering the diverse forms of 'family' surrounding criminalised women's experiences.

Although deemed vital, criminalised women often experience a lack of strong, positive relational connections (Singh et al., 2019) providing the context and environment for abuse, victimisation (Barr, 2019) and dysfunctional relationships (Booth et al., 2018). McNeish and Scott (2014) highlight women's experiences of violence and abuse are often perpetrated by family members. However, the response is often only addressed at an agentic level, with the structural forces of patriarchy neither considered nor discussed (Barr, 2018). In addition, when men are involved in the lives of women tangled in the criminal justice system it is often through their role in promoting criminal behaviour (Leverentz, 2006) challenging the ability to separate criminal behaviour and victimisation (Gomm, 2013). Research into understanding women's desistance therefore requires an understanding of the factors which shape their involvement in the criminal justice system (Brown and Bloom, 2009). This would enable a recognition of wider structural forces to challenge the entrenched responsabilisation and individualisation of criminalisation, alongside the more complicated relationship dynamics experienced by women (Rodermond et al., 2016).

This is not to say that all criminalised women are involved in negative relationships, depicted through victimisation, coercion and criminalisation. There is, however, an understanding of women's coercion into criminal behaviour, and coercion can also be involved in desistance from crime within abusive situations (Barr and Christian, 2019). Therefore, it is of fundamental importance to recognise that it may not be the relationship individuals are involved in that promotes desistance, but the meaning behind the relationship (Jardine, 2017). This enables recognition of an individual's unique and changing group of relationships and interactions (Borgatti et al., 2009). Research has shown the qualities of trust, being respected, not being judged, evidencing understanding and the importance of time, as fundamental in desistance supportive relationships (Rutter, 2019). It is therefore paramount to distinguish between those relationships that can be supportive to desistance, those that represent toxicity and a barrier to the process (Farmer, 2019).

## **The prevalence of shame, guilt and stigmatisation**

Criminalised women often associate their behaviour with a profound sense of guilt and/or shame (McIvor et al., 2004) at higher levels than men (De Boeck et al., 2018). These self-conscious emotions (De Boeck et al., 2018) result in negative emotional feedback (Tangney et al., 2007).

As noted above, when women have been considered within desistance research and theory the focus has often been on their roles as mothers and/or partners, evidencing the internal and external limits that are placed on their choices (Schwartz and Steffensmeier, 2017). Falling short of achieving the role of motherhood, in line with societal ideas of what it means to be a 'good woman', perpetuates the feelings of shame and guilt (Leverentz, 2014). The assumptions surrounding traditional gendered norms also result in criminalised women experiencing higher levels of societal stigmatisation (Estrada et al., 2012) maintained by wider patriarchal oppression, and challenging positive relational networks (Rutter, 2020). This stigmatisation is exacerbated by the wider media, where women are given greater attention (Malloch and McIvor, 2011) and seen as somewhat other when involved in crime (Jewkes, 2015). Local media also reaffirms gendered expectations and stereotypes (Barlow, 2015), perpetuated by social media which increases feelings of shame and guilt when criminalised (Rutter, 2020). Lageson and Maruna (2018: 115) note;

Public exposure of past crime and misdemeanours carries a specific type of shaming stigmatisation that violates privacy and takes away control over one's identity, complicating desistance and reintegration processes.

As will be argued in this article, both shame and stigmatisation are influenced by individuals' responsibilisation, affecting criminalised women's relationships, and ultimately their desistance from both crime and risk of harm through victimisation.

## **Recognising practice-based challenges**

The stigmatisation and negative labelling which creates a spoiled identity for criminalised women has also been evidenced to challenge their access to services (Sharpe, 2015). Sharpe (2015) outlines how women's perceptions of this left them feeling unable to attend support services previously accessed through motherhood, especially when forms of surveillance were intensified. There has been a continued, although somewhat lost, emphasis on the importance of the relationships between practitioners and women involved in community supervision, with discussions on engagement (Phillips, 2014), relationship style (Morash et al., 2014), mutual respect (Barr, 2018), the fragility of trust (Hedderman et al., 2011) and the time available (Gilbert and O'Dowd, 2019). The limited positive and prosocial ties available to criminalised women within their wider relational networks can make relationships with practitioners, through probation or partner agencies, especially important (Morash et al., 2014). Criminalised women's experiences evidence a

lack of flexibility and gender sensitive working in probation delivery, especially when women are single mothers with caring responsibilities (Barr, 2018). This demonstrates how practice requires a recognition of whole relational networks (Farmer, 2019; Rutter, 2019) to move beyond individualised responsibility and recognise the complexities of women's circumstances, experience and vulnerabilities which need to be taken into account (Österman and Masson, 2017) to move beyond equality and into practices which evidence equity and justice.

Within policy, criminalised women are somewhat an afterthought within service delivery, and specialist provision is described as a 'postcode lottery' (Birkett, 2019: 100) with extreme concern surrounding a deteriorating situation (Annison et al., 2019). The Transforming Rehabilitation agenda led to outsourcing (Albertson and Fox, 2019) a large proportion of probation services and coincided with wider austerity across public services (Corcoran et al., 2019). Although Transforming Rehabilitation has now taken a political U-turn with contracts ending early circumstance continues to leave Community Rehabilitation Companies relying on precariously funded women's services (Birkett, 2019). The neoliberal agenda, and an ethos focused on individualised responsibility were key features of what has been defined as policy disaster (Annison, 2019). However, despite the concerns raised privatisation is likely to remain a feature of the re-organisation of probation delivery evidencing the governments persistence in pursuing a model of marketisation (Millings et al., 2019).

## **Narrating the experiences of criminalised women**

Research within criminology, and in particular desistance, has increasingly recognised the role and value of narratives, not only to understand experience and action but also the relationship to individual identity and the wider collectives to which individuals belong (Pemberton et al., 2019). Our narratives are central to our human experience, constantly changing and evolving over time (Presser and Sandberg, 2015). This mirrors the dynamics of desistance, with narratives not only providing an important methodological approach but also an intervention which can support the process (Bove and Tryon, 2018). In this sense relationships and people matter, with any attempt at effecting change being rooted in relations and interpersonal networks (Crawford, 2020). Developing creative methodologies provides a space for different voices be heard, celebrated (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2020) and listened to.

Harding (2020) raises the importance of recognising similarities and difference across an individuals' position within society, questioning how the knowledge privileged in criminal justice is often quantifiably deemed facts about criminalised individuals rather than the subjective experiences of criminalisation. It is therefore of fundamental importance that both researchers and practitioners listen, and attend to the views of those in receipt of service provision (Burke et al., 2019). Narrative methods sit well within intersectional feminist approaches, drawing attention to the patriarchal and neoliberal structures and discourse which provide the context to women's criminalisation, victimisation and desistance.

Feminist research has developed to establish action against power raising questions of the imbalances within research when traditional forms of knowledge production reproduce those present within the social contexts that research and knowledge production occur (Harding, 2020). In addition, taking a feminist approach offers a contribution which pushes back on the intersectional relations of power, inequality and oppression felt by those whom are the focus (Glucksmann, 1994). As research reflexivity, authenticity and trustworthiness develops, we echo the words of Armstrong and Ludlow in that power-dynamics do not change without discomfort and that:

when you begin to see the world with new eyes and feel the world with a new heart, it becomes difficult to continue to inhabit the world through an old politics. (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2020: 8)

This paper works to address and recognise the need for desistance-based research to challenge the stereotypical views of what it means to be a 'good woman' shaped by patriarchy and neoliberal structures which create suppression.

### *Drawing together narrative research with women*

The discussions presented derive from two separate pieces of qualitative doctoral research, conducted in Northern England (Barr, 2019; Rutter, 2019) and focused on narrative experiences to produce 'rich', 'holistic' data (Maruna, 2010: 12). Both projects ensured ethical and risk assessment protocols were adhered to in line with hosting institutions and fieldwork sites. In addition, both adopted opportunistic sampling with women gradually recruited as they expressed interest in the research themselves, or through those working with them.

Taking a gendered comparative sample, the first explored the role of whole relational networks in the processes of desistance, through a consideration of opportunities for co-production (Rutter, 2019, 2020). Longitudinal fieldwork was carried out over an 18 month period between late 2017 and early 2019, within 'Female Street' women's centre contracted to deliver support to criminalised women within a Community Rehabilitation Company. The original research drew upon a mixed methodological approach that included conversational interviewing supported by visual and activity-based research. This article draws upon the narratives shared within the conversational interviews of the 13 women involved. Over the longitudinal time frame 44 research sessions took place with an average time of 75 minutes. In addition, the number of times women were involved differed, ranging from once to eight times. The women involved were aged between 18 and 58, with an average age of 36 and were subject to a community order with at least 6 months remaining at the point of engagement.

The second considered the plurality of criminalised women's desistance experiences through the narratives of 16 criminalised women who were participants in at least one semi-structured life-course interview. These interviews took place between spring 2014 and spring 2015. The participants were aged between 23 and 60,



with an average age of 41. Interviews lasted on average 50 minutes. All the women were either completing or had recently completed Specified Activity Orders at 'Northshire' Women's Centres, where the researcher had observed 17 group work sessions completed as part of the Specified Activity Orders, or were part of the 'Housing for Northshire' project following a period of imprisonment. Contact with the 'Housing for Northshire' project was made through social media, while the 'Northshire Women's Centres' were contacted through university-based gatekeepers.

Although a quantitative analysis of offending histories was not considered within either piece of research, anecdotally a number of women had no previous convictions while others had 'lost count' of their convictions. Their recent convictions could be described as 'low level' and included offences like shoplifting and handling stolen goods. Women also represented a range of wider social backgrounds and experiences. However, it should not be assumed that the sample is representative of all criminalised women subject to community supervision. In addition, those individuals difficult to reach, and maintain contact with, are likely to be unintentionally excluded.

Bringing together the sample sizes of both projects addresses the limitations of small-scale qualitative research. In addition, this is addressed by the in-depth narrative approach adopted which resulted in the accumulation of a substantial amount of data across both research projects, as detailed above. In each project the women's narratives were recorded and transcribed verbatim, supporting the initial stages of analysis. Each project also used NVivo to ensure strong organisation and management of data and supported the formulation of open codes and themes inductively grounded in the data. For this article, transcribed narrative, codes and themes were brought together for further, and comparative, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to build a stronger evidence base on women's desistance. The following discussion provides detail on the key themes which emerged across both projects, outlining what it means to become a 'good woman', the shame, stigmatisation, criminalisation and victimisation felt and evidenced to challenge women's desistance and impact on their relational networks.

## **Becoming a 'good woman'**

The concept of being a 'good woman' was ingrained in Karen's mind. She associated 'normal womanhood' with getting married and going shopping, both of which are constructs shaped by patriarchal and neoliberal discourse.

You know I was thinking about this the other day, you know when I was younger and little girls used to say, "when I'm older and I get married and . . ." I never had that in my head, I never dreamed of getting married and things like that . . . my mum actually wants to see me get accommodation, live properly, go shopping, live a normal life, do things that normal women do. I don't seem to have that in me, I just feel you know, incomplete. (Karen)

Karen felt that her inability to live up to the expectations of her mother linked to her criminalisation and ill-fated (as she saw them) desistance prospects. Karen was also a victim of domestic violence at the hands of an ex-partner. Like the women in Baker's (2010) study, she associated victimhood with choice, blaming herself and linking this being unable to live up to the standards of good womanhood.

My kids... I feel like I've lost them through the domestic violence. I wasn't strong enough to make a choice you know. They put me in refuges... But I just blocked it out. I just got involved with bad things, I felt like to punish myself, I felt I deserved it. I felt like I let my kids down... It was hard work, and then with him on top. So for years you know I was, you know, family orientated and then when it all crumbled, I just went back to what I was like. (Karen)

Anna similarly associated desistance from crime with fitting to the model of a 'good woman', surrounding expectations of motherhood.

And then, I pulled back out of it and realised, right, "You can't do this shit, you've got a kid." So I sorted myself out, and like did the perfect mum shit. (Anna)

Nonetheless, following this revaluation of what it meant to be a 'good woman' and 'good mother' Anna was drawn back into the criminal justice system through a friendship, and convicted for handling stolen goods. Discourse about the characteristics of 'good women', as well as 'bad women', also emerged through the use of misogynistic language from those within the criminal justice system. Marie considered her interactions with the police following convictions for stealing stone flags from abandoned buildings.

Marie: So I go out to an old farm, but I usually get caught on the way back, put in the slammer for a flag! (Laughs)... Police call me flag slag.

Una: Did they tell you that?

Marie: No someone else told me, one of the stone yard blokes. Flag slag... I'm quite proud of that really. Only joking... it's better than just 'slag' though in't it?

The 'good woman' trope is clear from criminalised women's narratives which demonstrate patriarchal discourses of womanhood that are reaffirmed through criminal justice agents. This shaped women's self-image, affecting both their desistance and their relational networks adding to the shame and stigma they felt when they failed to live up to the patriarchal ideal of wider society.

## Shame, stigma and criminalisation

Across both studies, women spoke of the shame and stigmatisation of their criminalisation and interactions with the criminal justice system. Sarah became involved in criminality for the first time later in life, with this being her first conviction. Sarah had strong, supportive and positive relational networks with family, they spent a lot

of time together, went on family holidays and always arranged large family gatherings. These close relationships exacerbated Sarah's feelings of shame and guilt regarding her criminalisation, which she felt would be with her forever.

I came in here and I felt as if I had just gone back six steps . . . I didn't think I would get over that initial shit and I just thought this would be with me for the rest of me life . . . and I think most people must feel like that . . . I don't care what you have done but you must come out of those courts and think god this is gonna be wi me forever . . . think I felt ashamed quite a lot . . . you are almost 58 and you're on probation how horrendous is that. (Sarah)

Here Sarah evidences the internalisation and responsibilisation of her criminalisation and the patriarchal discourse of her 'double deviance' in breaking both gendered and social contracts (Hart, 2017b), particularly, as she sees, reflected in her relationships with others.

Across both studies women talked about how the guilt and shame surrounding their addictions and law breaking caused them to hide truths from their partners affecting their relationships. Rebecca reflects here on hiding her past conviction for credit card fraud from her current partner.

I didn't tell him what I'd done, he knew something was wrong and thought I was an online gambler or I was having an affair so you know eventually it just threw us apart because I couldn't actually bring myself to . . . and that was the guilt. So I justified my lies with never having to feel the guilt . . . And he could obviously see and he thought "well she's just lying" . . . and when it all did come out, he said . . . "Well is that all?" (Laughs) But we've come through that time. (Rebecca)

In Rebecca's case, her feelings of guilt and shame provided a barrier to a deeper relationship which was removed when she told her partner the truth. Although Rebecca's partner was supportive, there were legitimate worries that failing to live up to the expectations of being a good woman would terminate their relationship.

For Sarah the same was clear as she felt unable to tell her partner the truth about her gambling addiction, which ultimately resulted in an escalation of her behaviour and criminalisation. She also highlighted how she felt uncomfortable having her husband there at court, indicating a continuation of shame with regards to her criminalisation.

When I went to court I said to me husband that I didn't want you there and he was like why they need to know that I am supporting you. (Sarah)

Even though Sarah's husband wanted to be there to support her, this close relationship appeared to exacerbate her feelings of shame, responsibilising her actions in an attempt to live up to the 'good women' trope.

However, not all relationships with partners were supportive once the truth of their criminalisation became apparent. In Jess' case her inability to live up to the

ideal 'good woman' and the shame she felt, including presenting the 'perfect family' resulted in distrust and toxicity in her relationship with her partner.

Like I trusted my partner, but he distrusts me now ... I don't trust anybody. I trusted him with my life, you know what I mean. Because he was such a good person ... He never did anything, I did it all to him ... But then he hurt me for hurting him and he said that he will hurt me more than I ever hurt him. Something that he is continuing to do because I ruined our family ... he said you ruined our perfect family, we had it all. (Jess)

The toxicity caused by shame and stigmatisation was also present in relationships with children. Their apparent failure to live up to the ideals of a 'good woman', including a 'good mother', resulted in an accumulative cycle of shame, guilt and criminalisation. Brenda's narrative highlights the internal and external limits placed on her choices (Schwartz and Steffensemier, 2017) and the challenges to relational desistance this created. Brenda was in sporadic contact with her sister, who controlled the contact she had with her children, and whom she wanted recognition and belief from in order to move forward.

... I said can I see them or not, do I have to go to the contact centre, I may be a shit mum but I think they have a right to see me, it does em no good ... you all think you are protecting them from me, but it's more harm than good, they will think I have never tried ... I told them that I loved them all, I have so many good memories and I didn't know what I had. I was blessed to have them. The first time I come out of prison I was trying so hard but then I let idiots back in my house ... all I wanted was for someone to say that my family would love me again. And that I am so sorry. So me sister was like it's fine telling me that ... no one will forgive you until you help yourself first ... I got so far before though Natalie, I want doing drugs ... I came in here every day because I was fucking bored ... But nobody told me how close I was to getting or else I would have ... maybe I would have stopped and not gone with my ex ... if I was that close I would have carried on ... because I have lost it that many times it gets further and further away ... it's like ... it's harder to get to. (Brenda)

Rebecca was more hopeful about the future, and her desistance was linked to relational support networks and her identities as a mother, daughter, sister and friend. Rebecca had the social-structural support to define her own realisation of 'good' womanhood and this identity was constructed over time through resisting patriarchal expectations of 'double deviance'.

So the sentence on my life, it wasn't even a sentence, it was my own behaviours. You know I started beating myself up a lot. You know ... 'cause that's what guilt is, it's turning the knife inwards ... And I started really really doubting myself as a person. But you know, my morals had gone, all my moral fibre, but my values never changed ... I was still a mother, I was still a daughter, I was still a sister, I was still a friend. And you know, I was still the same person I was that had been loved and had a successful career before I went down that road. (Rebecca)

It could be argued, however, that Rebecca was an 'ideal neoliberal subject' (Phipps, 2014), making particular use of resilience to overcome past trauma and becoming a 'good woman' through drawing upon the capital of her successful career. Outside of immediate family relationships, Julie perceived a reaction from wider social circles that the stigma attached to her criminalisation meant that she should not be conducting life in a regular manner. This stigmatisation, she suggested, could be passed on by association.

And because initially I tried to remain optimistic and confident, there was quite a bit of backlash from other people saying, "well if you're out and about doing this that and the other, you're just not bothered." When I was bothered, it was just a question of trying to remain a bit more upbeat. (Julie)

## **Shame, stigma and victimisation**

Despite Anna's attempts to live up to being a 'good woman' within the ideals of motherhood she was unable to desist from crime, or more accurately her criminalisation. Anna had also experienced victimisation through domestic violence and this, alongside a poor relationship with family members, caused her to become an isolationist, avoiding future close relationships.

It was the violence and the abuse I faced off [her daughter's] dad in that seven years was every kind of abuse; so we're talking like he'd rape me in my sleep you know and stuff like that, he'd beat me and be drunk and cause so many problems, and he did it the first time I left my daughter with him for three hours and he done it to her as well, she had a big handprint, and that were the end of it then. But it ruined me back then. Do you know what, I've never had a relationship since, ever, and not let anybody close like that, because in my eyes everybody, even my own family have let me down... (Anna)

The same was evidenced for Brenda, who would not talk about previous victimisation and trauma, often describing herself as a closed book, evidencing the shame she felt, responsibilising the victimisation she had, and continued to experience.

... if its gonna hurt I don't speak about it... I don't emotionally wanna take it, it's not that I don't wanna speak about it or that can't be bothered. I just don't wanna deal with it emotionally. (Brenda)

Brenda indicated low self-esteem and self-respect and talked about how she needed to work on this. However, this was challenged through soliciting, or shop theft, to fund her drug addiction. In further conversations Brenda indicated that she wasn't ready to talk about things, that she wasn't ready 'to rip off the plaster' as she defined it. Here Brenda evidences a continued cycle of shame, stigma and victimisation within the rhetoric of responsibilisation.

While desistance literature places emphasis on the importance of relational networks in the promotion of desistance, it is important to consider the patriarchal conditions which may affect women's lack of supportive relationships, including ongoing and past victimisation. Evidence of victimisation is clear in Jenny's narrative. Jenny was criminalised through the co-offending she engaged in with her partner

I have always loved him... the thing is you love them traits, the bad traits what other people don't love... I think he is a bit controlling... he knows he can manipulate me to stay... I never used to inject me self, me partner used to do it... (Jenny)

## **Shame, stigma, criminalisation, victimisation and relational networks**

For women who experienced shame and stigma as a result of both criminalisation and victimisation, their narratives told of a range of effects on their relational networks. For Katie, her relationship with family members was drastically and negatively altered as a result of the stigmatisation attached to her criminalisation and the anxiety she felt about her contact with the criminal justice system. She described her husband and daughters as lacking in empathy around her mental health struggles:

You can't talk to him about things. I said to my daughters; they're the same, you know, "I don't feel well"; "Oh get over it, stop being so stupid." I've said, "You don't have depression, you don't have anxiety or panic attacks. You don't know what it's like so don't tell me to 'get over it'. It's really hard. (Katie)

Paula was positive about her future and evidenced her agency and ability to distinguish between supportive relationships and those which resulted in further feelings of shame and stigmatisation.

Umm, see the people who, the family member who I stole off, we're fine now. It's like it never happened, to them, I still struggle a bit. To other people, obviously, just won't give me the time of day... Fairweather friends, they're never there when you need them, too quick to pass judgement. So, I know the people who are around me I know I can trust them. (Paula)

Many women also discussed supportive relationships where partners, family and friends have helped them resist and challenge the shame and stigmatisation felt surrounding both their criminalisation and victimisation. The women's narratives below highlight the fundamental importance of the meanings attached and quality of relational networks in positively supporting desistance rather than the 'type' of relational identity in the sense of being a mother, wife or sister.

... me husband is very loyal yeah... when I first got caught, I thought he was gonna leave me and everything and he didn't... he has always been there. (Elvira)

She gives me advice. She's had 3 kids . . . obviously she wants the best for me, she is me sister you know what I mean. But even she gets jealous of me, I know she wants the best for me . . . I trust her, this is the thing. I trust her. (Jess)

In addition, relationships with probation workers or women's centre staff played a role in women's ability and confidence in their attempts to overcome shame and stigmatisation.

Jenny's lovely, my probation officer has been amazing, she's firm but she's fair, she gives me a good kick up the backside when I need it. But I still feel like I've failed and I can't take back that time. You know I've got childhood memories of good parents and never went out drinking or never did anything like that and my dad worked; you know normal life. And I'm quite ashamed, not ashamed, I'm gutted that I never got to give them that. It's the choices I've made, the reality of it. (Karen)

As Karen notes above however, the 'firm but fair' relationship with her probation officer was not enough to help her overcome the stigma surrounding her criminalisation and victimisation. Research notes the importance of mutual respect in relationships with criminal justice staff (Barr, 2018).

## Discussion

The responsibilisation discourse (Hart, 2017a) which is present in policy documents from the Corston (2007) to the Farmer Report (2019) is often reflected in criminalised women's own self-narratives which are imbued with conceptions of what it is to be a 'good woman'. When women fail to live up to these idealised white-supremacist, heteropatriarchal, neoliberal constructions, shame and stigma are the result. As our research has shown, these failures emerge not just from criminalisation, but also from victimisation, often linked to domestic violence experiences, particularly when women are seen to be lacking in resilience, and do not identify as 'survivors'. Although desistance theory is concerned with supportive relationships being particularly important, for example in the recognition of relational (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), and tertiary desistance (McNeill, 2016), there is a knowledge gap around how patriarchal and neoliberal structures (as well as white-supremacist, heteronormative and ableist structures) shape criminalised women's relational networks. We therefore argue that there must be both a theoretical and practical acknowledgement of, and resistance to, these constructions of the good woman, through discussing implications for practice particularly around staff and service-user relationships.

As has been discussed elsewhere (Barr, 2019; Österman, 2018; Roberts, 2015) criminalised women are likely to have experienced abuse and violence. The criminal justice process, and particularly imprisonment, can retraumatise victims of domestic and sexual abuse (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). For a number of women, their criminalisation occurred when they alerted the police as victims of abuse (Österman, 2018). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that many women link the

experience of victimisation with shame and stigma (Probyn, 2005). Discourse exists, often from a neoliberal 'feminist' position which encourages women to see themselves as 'survivors' rather than victims (Phipps, 2014). This 'good woman' trope sees victims of violence and abuse as resilient individuals who can overcome victimisation, and implicitly, are failures when they lack resilience, often in the face of overwhelming structural barriers. This can also result in a denial of victimhood. In addition to the shame and stigma emerging from victimisation, exists the well-known presentation of criminalised women as 'doubly deviant' (Barlow, 2015; Worrall, 1990) affecting their desistance from crime (Lageson and Maruna, 2018). Women, even in the absence of criminalisation, are constantly open to stigmatisation, as we have noted in our research, for example around presentations of 'good' and 'bad' motherhood. When women are criminalised, this shame and stigma can increase exponentially. This can affect women's romantic relationships, relationships with children, friends and acquaintances in a number of different ways. Sociological explanations of desistance indicate that this will negatively affect women's ability to desist from crime, it may also increase (re)traumatisation and experiences of harm.

Criminalised women are often ignored and unheard (Fitzgibbon and Stengel, 2018), overlooked in policy, planning and services (Prison Reform Trust, 2016) with desistance studies continuing to focus on the individual desister, at the detriment of both relational and structural analysis (Gålnander, 2020; Hart, 2017b). Simultaneously, we continue to witness the domination of neoliberal ideals of responsibilisation and individualisation within the criminal justice system. The recently renationalised probation service (effective in June 2021) perhaps offers some hope for a (re)focus on the relationship element of community supervision and desistance. As researchers and practitioners, we should take stock at this juncture in service delivery to ensure women are effectively recognised in the developments of a national model. Research is now reiterating the importance and value of relational networks. Here the investment in staffing which focuses on overcoming shame and stigmatisation and challenge patriarchal and neoliberal structures is fundamental. This includes the imposition of neoliberal policies to women's service provision as Transforming Rehabilitation is evidenced to be a failed neoliberal project (Annison, 2019), with a significantly detrimental impact on criminalised women (Cooper and Mansfield, 2020).

Our research has continued to suggest that positive relationships which challenge feelings of shame and stigmatisation are essential to women's desistance both from crime and harm (Barr, 2019; Barr and Christian, 2019) achieved through the qualities of trust, being respected, not being judged, evidencing understanding and the importance of time (Rutter, 2019). With the voices of criminalised women in mind, we repeat Hart's (2017b) call for a critical desistance based on strategies of compassion, love and support rather than responsibility, surveillance, punishment and prison. It is clear that relational networks provide the keys to women's desistance from harm as well as from crime. However, it is important to consider patriarchy when viewing these networks (or indeed, lack of networks) and the impact this can have on both desistance from crime and harm.



## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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