

## Desistance and the Stigma Machine Being a 'Good Woman'

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This chapter presents an insight into the qualitative desistance experiences of criminalised women. We are critical of the way criminalised women are 'responsibilised' to make changes in their own lives, shaped by the inequalities they experience under patriarchy and neoliberalism. The chapter particularly focuses on the concept of stigma, drawing upon the issues raised by Imogen Tyler (2020) in *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality*. Tyler reconceptualises stigma as stigma-power (discussed below). We apply Tyler's theoretical understanding to two desistance narratives of women serving community sentences, Katie and Karen, who are representative of the women we met and interviewed during our respective PhD studies in the North of England. We note that the concept of the 'good woman' present in desistance research, policy and practice is neglectful of the often-overlapping structural conditions that surround both women's criminalisation and victimisation. We argue that criminalised women are stigmatised when they do not live up to the neoliberal and patriarchal expectations of what it is to be a 'good woman' which can affect their relationships and desistance from crime, as well as (and often more importantly) their experiences of harm. To finish the chapter, we consider how positive relationships and solidarity can inform anti-stigma struggles, to provide intersectional resistance to the 'stigma machine of inequality' (Tyler, *ibid*).

At the time of writing, the Conservative Government continues to move ahead with its plan to create 500 new prison places for women. This is despite the conclusions of excellent feminist work such as Baldwin's (2015) *Mothering Justice*, which focused on working with mothers in criminal and social justice settings. The concluding chapter included the proposal to 'reduce the number of women and mothers entering custody in the first instance, abolish short

sentences and restrict remands in custody to only the most essential circumstances' (p. 278). Feminist organizations such as Women in Prison and Sisters Uncut have continued to argue how increasing prison places for women will shatter individual lives and destroy families and communities. Much of the desistance literature has been critical of the role prison plays in supporting criminalised individuals' desistance. As Barr and Hart (2022) argue, imprisonment is antithetical to desistance and entrenches harm. Further, the building of 500 new prison places also flies in the face of the Government's own Female Offender Strategy (2018) which referenced the harm imprisonment can cause to women's lives, families and communities.

As well as the expansion of the prison estate, we are witnessing the domination of neoliberal ideals of 'responsibilisation' and 'individualisation' within the Criminal Justice System (CJS). We saw this in the discourses of resilience that surrounded the Corston Report in 2007, and indeed these were cemented in the Female Offenders Strategy (above). Our combined research has highlighted the marginalisation and subjugation criminalised women face in every aspect of their lives. As is shown by other chapters of this book, women experience abuse, violence, trauma, poverty, shame and stigma before they are criminalised, within the CJS, and indeed following criminal justice contact. Stigma power is an essential component of the responsibilisation discourse and individualisation inherent in State policy around criminalised women. Whilst desistance literature has highlighted the importance of social bonds to friends, families and communities in shaping desistance from crime, these are often damaged by criminalisation alongside previous and current experiences of victimisation (Barr, 2019; Barr and Christian, 2019). However, there is room for hope, we argue, in relationships that challenge and contest this stigma.

## **Desistance and Stigma**

The study of desistance from crime can no longer be said to be based only around the experiences of white heterosexual men. In particular there have been advances in the study of the gendered experience of desistance, largely from examination of women's perspectives (Rodermond et al, 2016; Hart, 2017; Österman, 2018, 2021; Barr, 2019; Barr and Christian, 2019; Gålnander, 2020;

Rutter and Barr, 2021). Critical examinations of the influence of power and social structures have tended to be confined to intersectional feminist explorations of desistance. As noted in Barr (2019), early theories around desistance tended to fall into three categories—maturational theories, social bonds theories or subjective theories emerging from the examination of narratives of criminalised people. Early narrative explanations located the experience of shame and stigma (LeBel et al, 2008). Braithwaite (1989) drew distinctions between re-integrative shame imposed by the CJS, where the internal self-worth of the individual was preserved and stigmatising shame, where both the (criminal) act and the actor were degraded. They noted (ibid) that experiences of stigmatising shame could lead to ‘doomed to deviance’ narratives (Maruna, 2001) which in turn meant it was particularly difficult for these individuals to desist.

Feminist theorists such as Probyn (2005) have argued that shame is gendered, particularly the case when women experience abuse, as so many within the CJS have, historically and contemporaneously. Probyn also argued that those who experience shame at a young age are likely to experience it in later life. Further, women are subject to being ‘doubly demonised’ when they are criminalised (Heidenshohn and Silvestri, 2012; Worrall, 1990; Leverentz, 2014) with Baldwin (2022a) arguing that, for mothers, the demonisation is threefold when they are shamed for breaking the social-, gender-, and mother-contract. Therefore, whilst desistance theorists (Maruna 2001; LeBel et al, 2008) propose that internalised stigma can be a barrier to living a crime-free life, feminist theorists add that this can be especially profound for criminalised women. Arguments highlighting that marginalising experience for women generally, and criminalised women (including mothers) particularly, adds to their experience of gendered harm.

## **Desistance and Relationships**

Within early desistance studies, particularly those based on social-bonds theory, there was often reference 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 great detail in these initial desistance studies (Harding, 2017). 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 and/or their histories of victimisation (Barr and Christian, 2019; Gållander, 2020).

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-focused desistance analysis exemplifies this characterisation. As we will see in the narratives that follow from Katie and Karen, it is impossible to 'make the best of all situations' when women are facing intersecting inequalities relating to their experiences of criminalisation and victimisation and the related experience of stigma. The 'good woman' construction also affects their relationships.

Desistance research has evidenced and acknowledged how this journey must be understood within the context of relational networks (McNeill and Weaver, 2010; McNeill et al, 2012). However, research here 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 work 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' within wider society. 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 their responsibility for family members, and the ideals of heteropatriarchy, with Booth et al (2018) raising the importance of considering the diverse forms of 'family' which surround the experiences of criminalised women's experiences. Baldwin (2022a) highlights how motherhood can intersect with desistance, being either a protective and motivating factor, or when children are removed to the care system, a risk factor.

In addition, research has noted that women can be coerced into criminal acts when involved in abusive relationships. Conversely, women can desist from crime entirely when they experience coercive control in abusive relationships (Barr and Christian, 2021). Research has shown the qualities of trust, being respected, not being judged, being understood and the importance of giving

time, as fundamental in relationships that can be supportive of desistance (Rutter, 2019). Therefore, for criminalised women it is paramount to distinguish between relationships that can support desistance from crime and harm, and those that represent toxicity and a barrier to the process (Farmer, 2019).

## **Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality**

Imogen Tyler argues that:

[S]tigma is designed, crafted and activated to govern populations on multiple scales and in diverse sites and...stigma production *from above* accelerates in periods of political and economic turmoil, often in response to particular demands of capital (and capitalists).’ (2020: 269, emphasis in original)

Tyler describes stigma as ‘a governmental technology of division and dehumanisation ...’ that corrodes ‘compassion, crushing hope, weakening social solidarity’ (ibid: 7). In examining stigma, Tyler refocuses the conversation on the production of stigma: ‘where stigma comes from, how and by whom stigma is produced and for what purposes’ (ibid: 8). This refocusing on the origins of stigma is important for critical criminology and desistance theorists in particular.

Tyler is critical of Ernest Goffman’s much-cited work on stigma (1963/1990), noting that Goffman ‘unplugs the concept of stigma from power: both the power-inflected micro-aggressions of the everyday social interactions he was ostensibly interested in, and the larger structural and structuring power relations which shape the societies in which we live’ (2020: 22). By reclaiming the concept of stigma as a tool of power-relations, we can see beyond the interpersonal impacts of stigma and ‘management’ of spoiled identities, towards locating the production and weaponisation of stigma against socially undesirable groups of people (Ballantine, 2020).

Criminology and criminal justice in general, and desistance theory in particular, can learn from intersectional abolitionist feminism, which critiques, and aims 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. It is within the State's interest to stigmatise criminalised women. For example, media crafting of welfare stigma is an essential mechanism of consent for austerity (Tyler, 2020) with neoliberal and heteropatriarchal constructions of 'the good woman' essential to the maintenance of stigma.

Yet, as Tyler persuasively argues, there is resistance to be found in stigmatisation. At the outset of *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality*, Tyler uses a quote from a letter from Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge in 1843:

'Shame is already a revolution of a kind ... Shame is a kind of anger which is turned inward. And if a whole nation really experienced a sense of shame, it would be like a lion, crouching ready to spring.' (Tyler, 2020: xiii)

By listening to criminalised women's narratives, we can locate the stigma-power of capitalist heteropatriarchy in their constructions of 'the good woman'. We can also locate the resistance against this stigmatisation and consider the collective effort required to challenge the stigma machine which creates inequality.

## Background to Our Research

The research from which this chapter is based is discussed further in our *Probation Journal* article on 'Being a Good Woman' (Rutter and Barr, 2021). In brief, it is grounded in our respective PhD studies in the North of England, which both paid attention to the narrative experiences of criminalised individuals. Whilst NR's research employed a gender comparative sample to explore the role of whole relational networks in the processes of desistance, and particularly co-production (Rutter, 2019, 2020), ÚB's focused specifically on the desistance experiences of criminalised women (Barr, 2019). Both projects employed mixed methodological approaches with NB's focusing on conversational interviewing supported by visual and activity-based research and ÚB's employing ethnographic research at women's centres and semi-structured life-course interviews.

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). Harding (2020a) 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. Also that they attend to the views of criminalised women (Burke et al, 2019) as narratives are central to our human experience, constantly changing and evolving over time (Presser and Sandberg, 2015).

Narrative analysis has been a key element of Feminist Criminology (Fleetwood, 2015; Maruna and Liem, 2020) sitting well within intersectional feminist approaches that draw attention to the patriarchal and neoliberal structures and discourse which provide the context to women's criminalisation, victimisation and desistance. Narrative Criminology has been particularly pivotal in explaining the onset and end of offending, with concentration on the relationship between structure and agency. By asking respondents to relate their life-stories, we can see the relationship between often-idealised pasts and imagined futures. We see the construction of the 'good woman' in descriptions of past selves, future selves and ideal others and we can note how these compare with women's understandings of their current identities.

Analysis of interviews with 29 criminalised women conducted between 2014 and 2019 form the basis of the arguments made in this chapter. In our *Probation Journal* article, we employed a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analysis of our interview data, resulting in the emergence of four key themes within criminalised women's narratives in relation to stigma. These were: becoming a 'good woman'; shame, stigma and criminalisation; shame, stigma and victimisation; and relational networks. Conversely, in this chapter, we follow the feminist templates for narrative analysis set out by Carlen et al (1985) and more recently by Baldwin and her colleagues (2021c). We have chosen in this chapter to provide a case-study narrative approach to provide a

greater insight into the experiences of Katie and Karen.<sup>10</sup> Whilst their stories are unique, sadly their experiences had much in common with many criminalised women we spoke to, particularly in terms of their experiences of stigma, criminalisation, victimisation, relationships and the role of stigma power in producing a particular construction of the ‘good woman’.

Katie had no previous personal experience of criminalisation, but for Karen the experience was not new. Nonetheless, their convictions could be described as ‘low level’. Both women were mothers, like most, but not all, of our interviewees, and their narratives were informed by what Baldwin refers to a Mothers Code of Conduct (2017: 30; 2022a), informing their perception of how they as women and mothers should, and importantly should not, behave. Their narratives present pockets of hope for the future through an examination of the small but significant ways the women have resisted stigma power.

## **Katie**

I (ÚB) first met Katie<sup>11</sup> at her last group session at the women’s centre. During both interviews, Katie was very emotional when talking about her offence and cried when relating her story in both interviews. In February 2013, following an arrest eleven months earlier, Katie pleaded guilty to a benefit fraud charge. It was her first and only experience of criminalisation. Since the arrest, Katie had attempted suicide on numerous occasions, her 37-year marriage had suffered, and she had been ‘paranoid’ and experienced panic attacks. At the first interview Katie said that most days she would not leave the house, although at our second meeting, a year into her 18-month supervision order, her mental health had improved somewhat. Katie clearly articulated her feelings of stigma from her experiences of criminalisation in our first interview:

‘I feel like I’ve got “criminal” tattooed on my forehead. That’s how I feel. And I mean I know it’s not murder or anything, it’s not child abuse or anything like, but it’s still, I’ve still fraudulently claimed from the Government. And

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10. Although Katie and Karen were both participants in ÚB’s research, similar narratives were found throughout both our data.

11. Pseudonyms are given to the women and places named throughout our research.

that's... And people have said to me, "I can't understand it." And I've said, "Well if I'd had the courage to plead not guilty then this probably wouldn't have happened because I would have really fought... But now I'm struck with depression, anxiety... It's been horrendous, and I've no faith in the police now. Like I said, if somebody had have sent me a letter, I wouldn't have ignored it, I've never been like that. I've always been brought up to you know, know right from wrong. My father, he would never claim benefit or anything. My mother wouldn't, they didn't believe in it you know, so I weren't brought up that way. The only thing I'd ever claimed was maternity allowance, before the end of the nineties, when I went on disability allowance.'

At the time of interview, Katie was 60 years old and had lived in her hometown her entire life, other than a year spent in a nearby town in her teenage years when her father, a miner, had to move for work. Her mother was a weaver. Katie described her childhood as happy but strict, in that she was scared to do anything wrong. Returning after a year, Katie and her younger sister went to live with her grandmother whilst her parents ran a pub. Talking about her grandmother, Katie says; 'She was a big person in my life when I was younger... She was more like a mother really than my mother.' In later years, Katie found out that she had two uncles on her father's side who spent time in prison, but her father no longer spoke to them. Katie performed well in school but was forced by her mother to leave at age 15. She had wanted to go into nursing as a younger woman, but her mother would not allow it.

'She said, "If you live on campus, you'll end up being a prostitute because there's nobody there to tell you what to do and what not to do, so you'll just do what you want, because you're not very knowledgeable about boys." And that was her attitude. It was really difficult, really strict.'

Katie felt that her parents were stricter on her than her younger sister; her mother had explained that Katie had always been the favourite and that was the reason for the caution surrounding her behaviour. After getting married at the age of 22 to a former soldier and long-distance lorry driver, Katie followed the family tradition and became a licensee at a working men's club. She

had three children, all girls. Katie and her husband also became foster parents once they moved back into her parents' large house. Following a hysterectomy, Katie put on a lot of weight. She became diabetic and needed a wheelchair to get about. As a result, Katie had to give up her job and started to claim disability living allowance. Her doctor prescribed a new drug, Byetta, which helped Katie control her diabetes and lose weight. As a result, in 2003/2004, Katie applied to go back to work; she went to college and began a catering course, with a key worker from the Job Centre assisting her. Following the course, Katie was offered a job supervising a cleaning team. Eventually, she started work at a local Michelin starred restaurant and hotel as a supervising housekeeper. Katie told me that, during the job interview, she had stated what she could and could not do and this was cleared with the Job Centre, who stated that she would be on disability allowance indefinitely unless there were any changes in her circumstances. Around this time, Katie began struggling in her work. She described it as arduous, despite being exempt from heavy lifting and buying equipment to help with the work. At home over Christmas, Katie had a fall and as a result started overdosing on prescription painkillers to help with the pain, and to help her do her job.

'I didn't want to let anybody down and I felt "Can I stop work? Can I go back to the way I were before, sitting in a chair and not being to get out?" And I thought, "No, no". So instead of taking six painkillers, I started taking between 12 and 16.'

She was not enjoying the work and felt that the other staff bullied her. Katie left work in March 2012. Two days later, she was arrested. During our first interview, Katie described in great detail the day of her arrest; the knock on the door at 6.30 am and her fear that her husband had been in an accident; her collapse in the police station; vomiting in her cell as she waited to be interviewed for six hours without food or water or access to her medication. During the interview process, she was shown police footage of herself out shopping, in college and taking her daughter to the hospital, walking without a walking stick in parts. She described being aggressively questioned about this for two hours, and eventually released on bail. In the three months following the arrest, Katie lost weight, and she began to get depressed, anxious and paranoid. In June 2012,

she was told that either she would be charged in the next 12 months, or the case would be dropped. In the intervening period, Katie attempted suicide on numerous occasions. After Christmas, she received a letter informing her that she would be charged. Katie had seen a counsellor at this time who advised her that she was not mentally well enough to go through a court case. As a result of this advice, Katie pleaded guilty to the benefit fraud charge brought against her despite the wishes of her barrister. She received an 18-month supervision order, was ordered to pay £145 in charges and to pay back the £12,000 benefit, which she has been paying back at a rate of £5 per week at the time of interview.

After her arrest and charge, Katie was told she could apply for benefit again but was terrified of doing so due to fears of being re-criminalised. She had been constantly depressed and anxious, receiving a course of counselling at a local mental health unit. Katie and her husband were on an individual voluntary arrangement (IVA) to avoid bankruptcy, something which pre-dated the case. She described her financial situation as:

‘knackered ... Well, we’ve just no money ... we’re paying out £275 more than what we’ve got a month so we’re really in dire straits.’

On the day that we had our first interview, Katie’s youngest daughter was moving back into the home and Katie suspected it was to keep an eye on her, to make sure she did not do ‘anything stupid’. Katie also lived with her granddaughter and two grandsons; her husband came home on Saturday evening and left very early on Monday morning. When we met up for the second interview, her grandson’s friend had also moved in with the family after being kicked out of his own home. At the second interview, Katie’s 19-year-old granddaughter, Gemma, had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Katie was extremely upset by this development. Katie felt her family relationships—particularly that with her husband—had broken down since her charge and arrest. In the second interview Katie described herself as ‘friends’ with her husband but stated that they were no longer in a relationship. Under the terms of the IVA debt solution, they had to live together. She also described a disconnect with her daughters as she felt they did not understand her depression. ‘I said to my daughters; they’re the same, you know, “I don’t feel well”; “Oh get over it, stop being so stupid”.’

Her relationship with her younger sister had also broken down. Her closest relationship was with a childhood friend, Rose.

‘So we [Katie and Rose] went out for lunch and it was really nice. Yeah we caught up on things and we said we’d do it more often, go out once a month at least and so we can have a talk and she’s really good, she’s a really good friend and we’ve known each other since I was nine, so it’s nice. She’s there if I need her you know she’s told me to ring her if I need her she’ll come over. So that’s nice to know that I’ve got somebody there besides the family that doesn’t judge me. My family seem to judge me and “Oh pull out of it, stop being so daft” you know if I keep saying I feel really down today, “Oh don’t be so silly.” It’s like they don’t understand. So she’s got lots of patience, Rose has, and it’s nice.’

Katie was on a myriad of medication including antidepressants, diabetic medication and very strong painkillers. During our first interview, she described not getting out of bed all day most days but, by the second interview, had taken on a part time volunteering role at a local charity shop one day a week, as encouraged by her counsellor. She enjoyed being in the shop, where she managed the till and chatted to the regular customers. During the first interview, Katie stated that above all she wanted to leave England and ideally move to Spain. She had lost all faith in the police and CJS. This desire remained during our second interview but had been complicated by her granddaughter’s illness.

‘I do not want to stay in this country a minute longer than I have to do to be perfectly honest ... I’ve never voted because there’s nobody who I would have wanted to vote for. And after this experience, as soon as I can, live in another country than England ... And I’d rather be Spanish or something than English. I just think it’s not a just [country] ... [begins to cry].’

## **Karen**

Karen was 36 when we (ÚB) met for our interview in the Housing for Ex-Offenders Unit where she was living after meeting the previous week in the

local women's centre where she talked openly about a previous violent relationship within a group session. During interview, Karen discussed her most recent offence, which was a joint enterprise offence for burglary. She had been staying at a friend's house when he woke her in the middle of the night to ask for help moving stolen goods into his flat. Karen had been in trouble with the police throughout her life, from a young age and ever since beginning her heroin addiction. However, this was her first burglary offence, her previous offences were 'just for being petty, just for stupid things ... joy riding in cars, looking up to older lads ... the wildness started really before I got into the drugs'. Notoriety within the CJS had ironically been a protective factor in the sentencing of the most recent offence. Her friend had been trying to suggest that she had been violent and threatening; 'but luckily the police have known me for years and they said, "look you know Karen's not like that". So, they didn't believe it because they know I'm not like that.' Karen received a six months' prison sentence followed by a six months' community licence which included working with probation, the women's centre and a Christian voluntary service once a week (which works to address 'personal, relational or sexual issues'). Karen noted that she had to move from her community where she knew everyone as heroin was an unacceptable drug: 'It's a no no on our estate, like a dirty drug sort of thing.'

Karen's family—her parents and her younger sister—had moved from Scotland when she was 'six or seven'. Karen's mother had given her father an ultimatum to leave his friends, Karen described the friends as 'gang-related'. They went to live with Karen's grandmother who was working in the local hospital at the time. She describes her family as a 'good Catholic family.' She did not speak to her sister and described their relationship as 'like chalk and cheese'.

'She's got everything that I wanted. At 36 I feel like I'm not going to get it now. 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, in Bridgetown and things that. 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. You know the choice I made to let my kids go to my mum's, I made that choice because it was best for them. If I had have dragged them from house to house ... Paul [Karen's ex partner] was smashing houses up.

The kids were very close together, two of them are the same age now, they're both seven but they're not twins. So ... age three and under you know 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.'

Her relationship with her mother had been rocky and at the time of meeting Karen her mother had custody of the younger three of her four children. Karen described herself as being a 'boisterous tom boy' as a child and 'hard work.' She was excluded from high school at an early age and was out of education for a year before the education department forced her mother to send her on a residential course or else risk a fine. Karen ran away to London and lived in a property, which was attacked by 'yardies', it turned violent, and Karen ended up in custody. She stated that she was lucky to get out of London alive.

Karen had her first son with her partner of five years, Tom, at age 18. During this time she 'never went out, I was quite family orientated.' With the breakup of this relationship, however, she restarted offending and 'basically re-living my youth'. Karen also began forced street prostitution for drug dealers. She then met Sean and had three further sons during their ten-year relationship. Again, she 'settled down' for a few years, but, over time, Sean began to abuse Karen physically, mentally and sexually. Although the police were informed, Karen did not press charges 'so it looked bad on me for the children.' She was in and out of refuges at this time. She later went to live with her mum and three youngest children whilst her oldest son went to live with Tom's parents. Karen's mother then kicked her out of the house because of her drinking. Her children often blame Karen's mother for kicking her out and this resulted in Karen being unable to see her children.

'I've not been seeing them now because my mum doesn't like me seeing them, they get upset, they don't want me to go, and then they just take it out on my mum. Because they remember me and my mum arguing because my mum doesn't like me drinking.'

Nonetheless, Karen felt that her mum had been doing 'an amazing job' at raising her children.

'I'd love to move out of here, start having the children at the weekends and as they're obviously getting older they'll be able to make a decision you know, if they want to stay with me. But my mum is very strict, 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.'

After recently splitting up from Sean, Karen was not interested in getting into a new romantic relationship, as she was scared of what he would do if she were with a new partner.

'I'm too scared about him kicking off anyway, it just wouldn't be worth the hassle. But no it's not something... the relationship I want is that relationship with my family and my kids, that's all I want back.'

Karen does not work due to her health; she has deep vein thrombosis and anxiety issues with panic attacks which she related to being raped and locked up for two weeks by Sean. Karen appeared to shoulder the blame for all her 'decisions', particularly not leaving Sean when he was violent.

'I choose my paths. You know, I went seeking this different life, you know. When I first split up from my eldest son's father I sort of like went off the rails then as well... I know the choices I've made have had a domino effect on me and everyone around me, my whole family and friends. And I realise that now but it's a bit too late, I can't take those memories back for the kids, you know I can't... I've not been seeing them now because my mum doesn't like me seeing them, they get upset, they don't want me to go, and then they just take it out on my mum. Because they remember me and my mum arguing because my mum doesn't like me drinking. I'm quite confrontational when I've had a drink. So my mum kicked me out basically. And my kids were aware of that, they were hearing things so they resented my mum for that. She's done so well. She's done an amazing job. The kids are great. My eldest son, he's at his dad's mum's, and he's spoilt rotten, the conservatory is his games room, he's got a big 50-inch TV, but he doesn't

want that, he wants to be with his brothers, he wants the family, and I've took that away from them through stupid choices I've made.'

Karen had been living at the accommodation for ex-offenders in the four months since her release from prison but hoped to get permanent accommodation soon. However, she felt that there was a lack of support for her from the agency who she felt were not doing enough to help her by getting her on housing lists for social housing, 'I feel like I have to tell her [accommodation staff] what to do which is shit really'.

Whilst in prison during her most recent sentence, Karen met a woman, Louise who was critically ill with cancer. Louise moved to Karen's unit two weeks after she came to prison. Karen was not happy with the treatment Louise received in prison. Because of, as Karen felt it, prison staff shortages, Karen effectively became Louise's carer:

'And one of the governors took a liking to me and basically said he respected the fact that I was sticking up for Louise because she used to be a very feisty woman but she was unable to do it for herself at that time. So, her medication got put up and things like that, she was more comfortable and that. And it made me take a big, big look at my life. I watched her kids come to see her, and her 12-year-old daughter, her youngest, you know she had to tell her daughter on a prison visit, you know, "I'm dying". And you know, it was horrible.'

Karen cared for Louise in prison, washing her: '... and basically just getting her up and back, getting her in the chair and making her feel like one of the girls for as long as I could. I used to take her round, push her round the prison.' Karen described this experience as 'an eye-opener ... You know just seeing her losing her family you know, seeing that she didn't have a choice.' Karen noted that her probation officer was '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.' At the end of the interview, she broke down crying saying:

'I just put a front on all the time, and it's hard work, it's horrible. Deep down I'm so soft ... I've to keep this front on because of the lifestyle that I've lived and I'm tired of it now, I'm drained, I've had enough ... I'm living day to day at the moment, I'm not even thinking about the future. 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. And I just feel like, my path was set out at a young age, and I followed it, and here I am now, you know in a train wreck.'

## **Discussion and Concluding Thoughts**

Katie and Karen had very different histories with the CJS. Whilst the benefit fraud charge was Katie's first offence, the CJS was omnipresent in Karen's life from young adulthood and intensified at various points in her life. They lived in different accommodation and had varying levels of support from family members. They had different relationships with friends. Karen experienced horrific domestic abuse. Katie had not. Whilst Katie experienced the CJS as an unjust system, beginning with her arrest, Karen had some positive experiences with the police, in prison, and with her probation officer. Nonetheless, both described unjust experiences with the criminal justice and social justice agencies with whom they were in contact. Both women were mothers, and both had other caring roles, Katie for her grandchildren and foster children, and Karen in prison for her friend. Both women experienced problems with addiction and poor mental health. The clearest connecting theme of their narratives however was their experiences of stigma. This stigma related not only to their criminalisation, but was also experienced in connection to claiming benefits, using drugs and present in their narrating of experiences of motherhood, victimisation, and poor mental health. In particular, stigma connected to the apparent inability of the women to live up to the 'good woman' ideal set by society, and which is also present in the desistance literature. Stigma left the women feeling hopeless. As the desistance literature argues, this could pave the way to the 'doomed to deviance' narratives presented by Maruna (2001). Yet more importantly for Katie and Karen, was desistance from harm, including

the harms of the CJS and their previous victimisations. Talking particularly about her experiences of criminalisation and the injustice she felt at her arrest and sentencing, Katie said:

'I go to see my probation officer and she says, "Oh take deep breaths in the morning and don't think about it." But if you're taking deep breaths not to think about it, you're thinking about it. And it's there all the time, it's always at the back of my mind. It just won't go away (starts crying), I keep thinking, "How long is it going to be for me?" Because I keep thinking, "What could I have done differently that I hadn't already done?" But it is, it's weird really, it still feels like a dream, it still feels like I'm going to wake up and it's not happened.'

What is clear is that there was a lack of holistic structural support available to Katie to help her deal with the trauma and stigma of her experience within the CJS. This mirrored Karen's traumatic victimisation experiences. Her experiences of domestic violence and the stigma she carried as a result of not leaving her ex-partner (as if this was a simple 'choice') created a hopeless 'doomed to harm' script which had real implications. Karen's narrative is replete with references to her offending being a personal choice. Yet it is difficult to locate within this narrative of abuse, rape and alcohol and drug addiction any moments of clarity, which would have allowed a rational choice to occur. It often appears that Karen's narrative is shaped by the discourse of others. Certainly, within the women's centre group sessions, which were observed as part of our research, there was, at times, a presupposition that crime was a rational choice for the women involved. The 'responsibilisation' of women and the discourse of 'choice' were particularly clear in observations of the 'Thinking and Behaviour' session where offending linked to 'quick and seemingly easy decisions' to solve problems and emphasis was placed on problem solving. At times, this led to overestimation of the choices and agency that the women had by women centre staff (see also Clarke and Chadwick, 2018). 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. We see this reflected in criminalised women's own narratives.

Katie and Karen's narratives are also shaped by patriarchal and neoliberal constructions of the 'good woman'. The ever-present 'good woman' in Katie and Karen's narrative was not a benefit claimant, a drug user, a victim of domestic violence nor a 'criminal'. As we have argued above and elsewhere (Rutter and Barr, 2021) the dichotomy of offender/'good woman' is rooted in stigma politics and the operation of stigma power is clear in criminalised women's narratives. Stigma is not created in a vacuum nor in isolated social spaces. Stigma emerges from, and is reproduced by, structures of power including, in this case, hetero-patriarchal capitalism (Tyler, 2020). For criminalised women, society, and the CJS measure desistance by conformity to traditional feminine roles (Parry, 2013). Desistance is often associated with becoming 'an agent of neoliberalism' (Sim, 2018; see also Cederstrom and Spicer, 2015). We see this in liberal feminist constructions of 'empowerment' within practice, which individualises change and responsabilises criminalised women (Elfleet, 2021). We also see it in the desistance literature with its focus on paid work, which does not challenge the unpaid work of carers and voluntary workers, nor offer solutions to those who cannot work or are not given the materials needed to be able to do so. Further, male-focused desistance literature often places the burden of male desistance on their female partners (Rutter and Barr, 2021; Barr and Hart, 2022). This is clearly grounded in hetero-patriarchal constructions of the role of women in romantic partnerships.

Faith (2011) considers the bonds women make with other prisoners as a form of resistance, resisting 'prisonisation' and maintaining dignity (see also Baldwin, 2022a). For Karen, caring for Louise and her feelings of hope from being able to help make Louise's life more comfortable had a significant effect on resistance. Not only did she experience her own agency, but she also describes a 'wake-up call' regarding her own offending and drug use. However, once outside of prison, Karen's continuous victimisation at the hands of the CJS, her former partner, her accommodation providers and lack of family support at times diminished all self-efficacy which emerged from this 'defining moment'. The breaking of the stigma machine (Tyler, 2020) which Karen was able to achieve whilst in prison became a temporary solution once in the community and faced with the realities of stigma power.

Nonetheless, there are pockets of hope and resistance to the stigma machine in both Katie's and Karen's narratives. These emerged in both cases from their friendships with other women, Karen with Louise, and Katie with her friend Rose. These small packets of hope in interpersonal relationships alone were not enough for the women to move into a life free from stigma, as indicated in the final quotes of their narratives. The lack of structural support for the women to resist the stigma machine was evident in both narratives. Although deemed essential to desistance from crime, criminalised women often experience a lack of strong, positive relational connections (Singh et al, 2019) providing the context and environment for abuse, victimisation (Barr and Christian, 2021) and dysfunctional relationships (Booth et al, 2018). McNeish and Scott (2014) highlight that 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).

Missed and lost opportunities to support women mean that women are regularly criminalised for being in poverty or 'offending' in the context of trauma (Baldwin, 2022a). The CJS must not be a place where women can go to receive help. It is a dangerous, violent system that lessens chances of receiving employment and family support, even where women are given community sentences. This is particularly true for women, and mothers, whose experiences of stigma are affected by gender dynamics. When women do receive community sentences, the focus must be on providing structural support to resist the stigma machine, challenging stigmatising understandings of the 'good woman' emerging from heteropatriarchal capitalism, encouraging friendship, love and support as well as the practical matters of housing, employment and trauma-focused support for victimisation. Desistance from harm is a collective struggle in breaking the stigma machine. Individualised responsabilisation, grounded in patriarchal and neoliberal arguments, must be resisted at all costs. We call, more widely for a 'reparative justice that supports the building of solidarity movements [in which we] ... rise in rage together against the stigma machines' (Tyler, 2020: 271).