

## **Gendered assisted desistance: a decade from Corston**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of assisted desistance from the perspective of women involved in the criminal justice system. It focusses on two community projects set up in the aftermath of the 2007 Corston Report, Northshire Women’s Centres (WCs) and the Housing for Northshire project. **Design/methodology/approach** – Through analysis of a year of observation in these settings and 23 narrative interviews with staff and service users, the paper notes the differences between risk-focussed and desistance-focussed justice for women.

**Findings** – Neither projects are a panacea; however, they offer an insight into desistance-focussed practice. The findings would suggest that the projects provide social justice as opposed to criminal justice, particularly because of their flexible approach and awareness of the relational elements involved in female desistance. **Originality/value** – The in-depth, qualitative data provided challenges the “payment by results” rhetoric which demands positivist research that promotes an understanding of desistance as a binary outcome. Implications for policy are considered.

**Keywords** Assisted desistance, Corston report, Desistance, Gender, Payment by results, Transforming rehabilitation

**Paper type** Case study

### **Introduction**

It is now a decade since the publication of the 2007 Corston Report, which, following the death of six women in 2006 at Styal prison, considered the vulnerabilities faced by women in the criminal justice system (CJS). The report made 43 recommendations for improving the services for women in the CJS or those at risk of offending. Although women-specific services preceded the report publication, the attention the report garnered was significant. Yet, 2016 saw the highest rates of death of women in prison since records began (INQUEST, 2017). Prison is still being used as a punitive response to low-level female offending and the ambitious recommendations made in Corston have been abandoned (Hogarth, 2017). Additionally the role of the CJS in supporting female desistance is salient at the time of writing because of the changes under the “Payment by Results (PbR)” and the “Transforming Rehabilitation (TR)” agenda which many authors have argued will have significant detrimental impacts on women attempting to desist.

Annison and Brayford (2015) argue that much of PbR and TR will reverse recommendations made by the 2007 Corston Report. Women are a minority within any part of the CJS (Prison Reform Trust, 2014). Under the TR agenda, Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) are likely to concentrate their funds on the majority male clients as this is where they can concentrate on reducing re-offending. This is a particular concern against the backdrop of austerity. Broad and Spencer (2015) argue that policy “silences” around women’s rehabilitation will be likely to persist, amplified again by cuts to services. However, Annison and Brayford (2015) note that this also opens the possibilities for women’s centres (WCs) becoming CRCs, specifically focussed on the needs of their female clients. Nonetheless, a recent (2016) report by the Howard League found that PbR has, in reality, meant watered-down services and a real danger that WCs will close.

Commissioning decisions under TR have been happening from November 2014 under a binary measure of re-offending rates. This measure has been criticised by academics studying the link between gender and desistance (Radcliffe and Hunter, 2013) as lacking recognition of the complex pathways of desistance that women travel and devaluing the incremental moves they may make towards desistance. Desistance for women can be a multifaceted process involving setbacks and disappointments; much like it is for men (Carlsson, 2011, 2012; Healey, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Farrall, 2004). For women, desistance is also situated within the context of gendered inequalities

(Prison Reform Trust, 2014), not least of these cuts to women's services. Desistance can occur in the absence of formal interventions, and formal interventions can be destructive to the desistance process (Halsey, 2006; Halsey et al., 2017). Yet poor services with binary outcome measures can be iatrogenic to women's desistance.

This paper examines two community projects, Northshire WCs and the Housing for Northshire (HfN) Project, both of which were established following the 2007 Corston Report, and both of which include supporting and enabling female desistance as a central aim. It is argued that both projects provide social justice through a desistance-focussed approach to change by focussing on the individual as well as the social/structural factors which promote or stand as barriers to change. These projects provide a tonic to the risk-based, offence-focussed, interventions experienced by the majority of the participants in prison and probation settings. The reasons for this are examined below.

### **Methodology**

The research presented is based on observations conducted from Spring 2014 to 2015 at five WCs located across Northshire, as well as 23 narrative interviews with women with recent convictions (n = 16) and staff members (n = 6)[1]. These women with recent convictions were either part of the HfN Project or were completing/had recently completed Specified Activity Orders at Northshire WCs. Narratives were collected, content-coded and narratively analysed for patterns in tone, theme, plot, roles, value structure, coherence, and complexity (Maruna, 2001), using N-Vivo software. A research diary was kept during the observation period and this research was analysed alongside the qualitative findings from the interviews. The research on which this paper is based was approved by the UCLan Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were recorded using a dictaphone to ensure accuracy. Informed consent was sought and provided at each stage. All women and place names in this paper have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The aims of the observation sessions included scene setting, observing relationships, activities and discussions. The observations also provided a platform to introduce the research and recruit interview participants. Jones (1996) has noted that a feminist methodology must involve a levelling of any potential (not only gendered) power imbalance between the researched and researcher. Narrative methods sit well within the feminist tradition as they offer individuals the opportunity to tell their stories, in their own words, and from their own subjective perspective. Narrative methods give voice to those who are often voiceless, particularly within the patriarchal, increasingly neoliberal, justice system. Many of the women interviewed described the research process as cathartic.

Whilst the current study is small and qualitative in nature, the rich insights it provides into experiences of women-centred projects enables a deeper investigation into the "lived experiences" of the women within them than a quantitative measure would allow. Additionally, qualitative research into this area can be seen as resisting results-focussed policy research which promotes a binary understanding of desistance. Denzin notes that in narrative research, "the storyteller should be considered both the expert and authority on his or her own life" (1998, p. 59, quoted in Yar, 2014, p. 13). This research followed this approach. An overview of the two community projects and an analysis of the difference between criminal and social justice in terms of assisted desistance follows.

### **Northshire WCs**

Observations at the WCs took place between March 2014 and May 2015. The WCs provided a "one stop shop" for women entering the CJS as part of the Northshire Women's Specified Activity

Requirement (NWSAR). WCs provided these services after securing a contract through Northshire CRC. Mary, a staff member at the WC provided an overview of the purpose of the WCs:

We don't say we're specialists in everything, we're not specialists in domestic abuse, drug services etc. but we do provide counselling and one to one support and assist with them accessing that. So under that umbrella, where you say "one stop shop" kind of thing, you might get a woman who has an alcohol problem but doesn't quite feel ready [...]it's like, what do you address first? And it might be that you address some of the issues and then if they're ready to go into alcohol treatment afterwards (Mary, Criminal Justice Project Manager at the Women's Centre).

Women were referred from the police, courts, probation and other parts of the CJS. The women spent ten weeks attending weekly two hour sessions at the various centres. The first week involved a one-on-one induction. This was followed by eight weeks of group work sessions and a final, one-on-one, conclusion session on the last week. At the time of the research observations, the topics offered in the group sessions were: substance misuse awareness, health and wellbeing, housing and money management, community and citizenship, employment training and education, thinking and behaviour, victim awareness and family and relationships. These themes follow many of the similar themes found within the desistance literature. For example, the themes covered by McIvor et al. (2004) in their study of youth offending and desistance in Scotland were: education, employment, use of leisure and lifestyle, drug and alcohol use, offending, relationships with family, friends, and partners, neighbourhood, community, and society, values and beliefs, victimisation, identity, and aspirations for the future.

It must be noted that in 2015, the NWSAR was undergoing change. This included condensing the eight sessions into six and allowing the sessions to be used as introductions to the "add on support" that women may need. In the introductory one-on-one sessions, women were given information about the "one stop shop" project and asked to sign a contract relating to their behaviour at group sessions. The contract included an agreement to discuss their offences, take part in sessions and respect others. In reality, the women were not forced to reveal their offences at any time during the groups I attended. Group size varied from ten people (including the group leader) to a one-on-one session.

### **The HfN project**

Rebecca Brown's HfN Project was opened in September 2014. Rebecca described the project as a "supportive, abstinence-based, housing project". The project was divided into services for women and services for men. Rebecca started the project as a service for women only but with help from her partner Paul, has developed a parallel service for men:

So we offer a shared accommodation within community housing so that could be 2, 3, 4-bedroomed units. And for people of no fixed abode. So it is primarily people from prison [...]We're coming from a community standpoint and we're about community regeneration, rather than it being a project for people from prison, which is why the CJS is not mentioned in any of the project vitals. So whilst primarily it is women from CJS, and with men from the CJS, it's not something that is effectively designed towards that (Rebecca, Project Manager, Housing for Northshire).

Rebecca described the project as having a "peer-led, co-operative structure". Women and men from the CJS were referred to the project from police, prison and various probation services whilst non-criminal justice referrals were often self-referrals. Whilst the focus was on housing, Rebecca and Paul also referred women and men into counselling, domestic violence services, health services, as

well as employment and training. Rebecca's office had an open door policy and she herself could be contacted at any time. According to Rebecca, the houses were not set up as permanent accommodation for the women and men but as a stop gap with a view to enabling people to become "responsible, functioning members of society with a view to getting back to work".

## **Desistance**

Desistance theorists have long suggested that programmes for sentenced individuals should have as their basis a desistance paradigm (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Advice from the Ministry of Justice (2012) on working with criminalised women also recommends desistance-focussed practice. Furthermore, there has been a recent call from The Howard League (2016) and Hogarth (2017) to document and support women-centred community projects which enable desistance. This section aims to expound the meaning of desistance and theory surrounding supporting female desistance. Subsequently, the paper considers whether the community projects studied herein are better placed to support female desistance than traditional interventions (prison and probation).

Weaver and McNeill (2010) note, "most criminologists have associated desistance with both ceasing and refraining from offending" (p. 37). It is not assumed that desistance is a simple process which follows a straight and definite line. A consistent, but not unchallenged (for example see Sampson and Laub, 1993 or Giordano et al., 2002), finding in the desistance literature is that there is no specific "turning point" in time where former law breakers become "desisters" (Maruna, 2001; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011). On the contrary, desistance has been likened to a zigzag path (Glaser, 1964). Healey (2012) describes desistance as the area "betwixt and between" crime. Most desistance researchers now recognise desistance as a process or a path rather than a specific event. These definitions suggest that a person may go through many periods of desistance throughout the life course, making it difficult to categorise individuals in terms of "desisters" and "persisters".

Within the desistance literature, there has been a relatively limited investigation into the desistance experiences of women (Rumgay, 2004; Matthews et al., 2014). A recent meta-analysis (Rodermond et al., 2016) of the female desistance literature found that having children and pro-social, supportive relationships, economic independence, agency and an absence of drugs were important for females attempting to travel desistance journeys. These factors are similar to those suggested in the research literature based on male desistance. However, the authors found gender differences in the influence of children (children were more important to women) and supportive relationships (relationship dynamics were arguably more complicated for women). Rumgay (2004) suggests that coping strategies are of particular importance to female "offenders", who are likely to experience material deprivation, social exclusion, and psychological vulnerability. Rumgay (2004) notes that relapse can actually signal desistance each time the severity of the offence decreases, or the gap between offences increases. She argues that social reaction is essential and wider societal recognition that "scripts for change" may take time to have an effect may form an essential element for desistance. Rumgay (2004) argues that these scripts can promote self-efficacy and control through increasing participation in conventional roles and relationships. The de-labelling process is considered central and positive reinforcement of the script can reinforce resilience and survival. This is also a common finding in the male literature (e.g. Maruna, 2001).

Desistance theorists have investigated "assisted desistance" in the male context for decades (Farrall, 2002; Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Farrall et al., 2014; McNeill, 2016). The relational and flexible features of female desistance as described by Rumgay (2004) and Rodermond et al. (2016) have been found to be helpful in this "assisted desistance" context (Ministry of Justice, 2012). Yet, critical desistance theorists (Hart, 2017) argue that desistance happens in spite of CJS interventions and not because of them. The current research proposes that traditional risk-focussed and offence-focussed criminal justice can be damaging to desistance by neglecting the relational elements and flexible

approach needed to support and reinforce desistance. However, the women-centred interventions studied as part of this research contain many positive desistance promoting features. These are discussed further below.

### **Risk-based and offence-focussed approaches to “justice”**

The vast majority of criminological research now widely acknowledges that time spent in prison does not reduce recidivism but in many cases actually has a criminogenic effect (Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Farrall et al., 2014; Cullen et al., 2011). The state too has conceded that there are too many women in prison. Prison has been recognised as an “expensive and ineffective way of dealing with many women offenders” ( Justice Select Committee, 2013, p. 4), something which was made clear in the 2007 Corston Report.

Although the current research focussed mainly on community sentences, many of the women’s narratives were replete with references to imprisonment. 7 out of the 16 women interviewed about their offences had spent time in prison. An additional three women had male family members with prison experience. The majority of the sentences served by the women were short sentences. For example, Paula, served 6 days before her appeal was granted, Michaela served a total of 22 sentences throughout her life; her longest sentence was five and a half months, and Shelly claimed to have lost count of the number of prison sentences she served, particularly in her early life and during the heroin addiction which provided context to her criminalisation 20 years previously.

The futility of women’s imprisonment, and particularly women’s short-term imprisonment, is well known in criminological research (Hogarth, 2017; Prison Reform Trust, 2014; Player, 2014). Quantitative analysis of women’s incarceration does not make for positive reading. Although there has been recent decline, women are still being sent to prison, mainly for non-violent offences and to serve short sentences. In 2016, there was a record high of 22 deaths of women in prison (INQUEST, 2017). In all, 48 per cent of women are reconvicted within one year of leaving prison. This rises to 61 per cent for sentences of less than 12 months and to 78 per cent for women who have served more than 11 previous custodial sentences (Women in Prison, 2017). Certainly, when considered in the light of desistance, women’s imprisonment, and particularly short sentences for non-violent offences, can be wholeheartedly critiqued. The negative effects on mental health, relationships, and employment opportunities were expounded by all women involved in this study who had experienced prison. Hart (2017) persuasively makes the case for interventions concerned with desistance promotion to have at their heart an abolitionist perspective. The narratives of the women in the current study reinforce this argument.

Another omnipresent feature of the women’s narratives was the probation system. Some studies have positively linked formal probation with encouraging desistance. Rex’s (1999) study of 60 probationers found that 68 per cent of those interviewed stated they were less likely to offend as a result of the supervisory experience. Rex’s findings were from a prospective, narrative, study. The author (similar to the current study) therefore could not know anything about the outcome of probation intervention. Nonetheless, many of the women involved in this research had positive probationary experiences which they elaborated on in the course of our meetings. On the whole, the positive probation experiences were related to good relationships with offender managers and flexibility in their approach. These relational and flexible approaches are considered key to desistance (Rumgay, 2004).

It has been the concern of researchers that the relationship element has been eroded over time (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). This concern has also been present more recently, related to the current TR rhetoric of binary outcomes (Annison and Brayford, 2015). Nonetheless, there is no “one size fits all” probation officer-service user relationship model; for Shelly flexibility was important,

whilst for Karen, strictness was key. Holly also valued strictness and discipline in her relationship with probation but felt this was not forthcoming. Holly's narrative contained much criminal justice rhetoric about just deserts and punishment. However, she noted what she perceived as a lack of interest in her progression and desistance journey from criminal justice bodies:

And like when I go to probation it's like no help at all really. All they do is ask you how you've been doing, what have you been doing? But obviously I could lie to them and say, "oh I haven't been doing crime," which I used to do and they didn't bother checking or anything. So I just found it all not good, they need more power or stuff like that. And if you got really sentenced for it you'd probably stop doing it, but because they give us so little, we're redoing it again. They just send you in there for five minutes, ask you how you've been doing, ask if you've been keeping out of trouble and you say, "yeah" whether you have or whether you haven't and you just, you're on your way again. So you could be doing all sorts and they don't know. It's not helped one bit (Holly, Age 23).

Mutual respect in officer-service user relationships was important in narratives surrounding probation. Both Marie and Anna described times when they felt this mutual respect was lacking, particularly surrounding attendance and time keeping and lack of flexibility on the offender manager's side:

I'm not so keen on my probation worker really, she talks down to me. She does talk down to me a lot. The one I had before this were alright, she were sound, she understood if you were going to be late and stuff. But this one, I think she's an ex-copper or summat [...] But at the minute, it's a bit like [...] she was fifteen minutes late. And I'm sat there. And she kept me an hour sat there, and she didn't even apologise. And it's like, we're supposed to apologise if we're late, and I agree with that, I think that's courteous, it's natural to say "I'm sorry I'm late." [...] But she just walked in like, "come on Marie!" And I thought, "No I'm not having that." But I didn't say anything [...] I bit my tongue and just went "mmmm". And then she kept me an hour, with my daughter sat outside. It were when I were doing dog walking. My mum's got a dog walking business and we were covering it for me mum. Anyway, and I just thought, "you bitch". You know it's one of them, it's normal, nice and courteous to say, "I'm sorry I'm late." And we would be expected to do it. But she just talked down, right down to you (Marie, Age 40).

Marie felt that the respect she was expected to show was not reciprocated and resulted in an unequal relationship. This, in turn, added to feelings of resentment towards the CJS which created feelings of defiance and barriers to desistance. This was not an unusual finding about women's experiences of the CJS (Smart, 1977; Kennedy, 1993; Jordan, 2004; Davies, 2011). There appeared in these narratives to be a lack of flexibility in probation's approach to women as single mothers with caring responsibilities. This clearly highlighted a lack of gender-sensitive working. It is somewhat ironic that probation created difficulties in furthering employment opportunities as in Marie's case, as social bonds theorists (see, e.g. Sampson and Laub, 2003) have long advocated the transformative power of employment. These narratives reflect Farrall's (2002) finding, of a lack of recognition, on the part of probation, about the social circumstances in which desistance occurs (or indeed, does not occur).

Flexibility and encouraging adoption of "alternative identities" (Maruna, 2001) have been found to be central in any probationary approach aimed at promoting desistance. Anna in particular felt that probation was a negative experience which was unhelpful at encouraging desistance. For Anna, not only did the unequal relationship discourage any chance of "assisted desistance" (Rex, 1999), additionally her probation meetings meant she was regularly meeting with people (usually men) from her "past life" who could jeopardise moves towards desistance by association. This stalled

Anna's chances of gaining new "scripts for survival" (Rumgay, 2004). Additionally, the mixed gendered setting resulted in intimidation and harassment:

Probation? Pointless, really pointless. They stick me in a place where all them nutters go that I've grown up with all my life. So I'm avoiding people and I've got to see them. I'm like, "do I have to come here, really?" 'Cause I don't like it, it's all people from me past. And I don't do 'owt now. Do you know it's a really hard situation? You know, "Oooh there's not many women in here. Are you all right, do you want my phone number?" (Anna, Age 36).

In many ways there appeared to be a lack of connection to the "lived experiences" of the women amongst criminal justice practitioners. Both the WCs and the HfN Project have links with the changes in community provision; both projects are sponsored by the council whilst the WCs are sponsored by the county CRC amongst others. Reflecting the work of Annison and Brayford (2015), there was a feeling amongst both project's staff that this lack of recognition of women's social circumstances was only set to get worse under the PbR agenda as they too are dragged into CJS rhetoric around results and austerity:

I find it an utter travesty what's happening in the probation service [...] and payment by results. I think there's an industry created on the backs of offenders, addicts and alcoholics. We are dealing with an industry here, it's a massive, massive industry. And now in times of austerity where they're putting the pound signs in front of the offenders and the addicts, it's just pure accountancy. So obviously there's going to be massive failures within that industry [...] If you stigmatise and label people, you're never going to get anywhere, you've got to personalise it. This "payment by results", I don't know which joker came up with that and it has to be a joker (Rebecca, Housing for Northshire project manager).

Staff noted that PbR will have negative implications for women attempting to desist as it will encourage labelling and a lack of the available alternative identities which are central to desistance. This sentiment is present in the work of Matthews et al. (2014) and The Howard League (2016) who note that this constant criminalisation through negative labelling of women can effectively act as a barrier to desistance.

Overall, the women's narratives were not sources of evidence of the desistance inducing potential of the traditional, punitive CJS. Interventions which were risk-based and focussed on public protection were not desistance-focussed. Indeed in many cases the interventions were reported to be detrimental to desistance progression. Whilst examples of good practice, particularly within the probation system, were to be found, these were few and far between.

It is also worth noting Farrall et al.'s (2014) finding about the long term desistance potential effects of probation supervision. The authors found that, contrary to their earlier findings, for their male sample, the positive influence of probation on desistance could only become apparent in the long term. Nonetheless, the Corston Report (2007) noted that traditional justice, particularly in prisons but also in the police, courts and probation service, were failing females with convictions. This research found that little has changed, supporting the "five year on" findings of Hardwick (2012), and No Offence (2012), as well as more recent studies (Hogarth, 2017). The TR agenda creates net-widening and a binary measure of success or failure of desistance. These problems are compounded under PbR by the continuing punitive rhetoric and pressure on probation service staff, often discussed in WC conversations between staff, creating further problems for criminalised women attempting to desist. If there is light in the CJS tunnel it comes from the caring nature of its overworked staff (expounded upon for example in Marie's narrative about a past probation officer) and its ability to provide support through alternative means, two of which will now be considered.

The risk-need-responsivity approach (alongside concerns of deterrence and incapacitation) currently advanced by the traditional criminal justice state apparatus has had, on the whole, a negative impact on women's desistance journeys.

### **Desistance-focussed approaches to "justice"**

One of the central findings of Baroness Corston's 2007 report was that more often than not, women with convictions' issues were best addressed outside prison. These findings have been given qualified support above. However, this research has already found that there are issues with probation provision, which are compounded by the pressure of TR and PbR approaches. Nonetheless, a positive impact that probation found to have was the referral of probationers to women-only services. Radcliffe and Hunter (2013) found that women's community services have filled a gap in provision for low-risk females, effectively providing a range of gendered social capital required for effective desistance. This section now moves on to consider these types of alternative community provision, and particularly that experienced by the women in this study, Northshire WCs and the HfN Project, both of which address issues of social justice, as opposed to purely criminal justice through desistance-focussed approaches. The ability to make this distinction emerged from conversations with both staff and service users, particularly during a conversation with a group leader based in Weston, Maria. Maria noted that she would remind the women, "I don't work for probation; I work for the Women's Centre which is more about concern for wellbeing". This contrast was evident in the narratives of the women who attended the WC group meetings[2]; Holly's quote was typical:

Holly: Yeah it's helped, the Women's Centre, cause like they're giving me a course in January so it's helping, that. They should do that, they should get you voluntary work or something, probation, just to make sure you're not going out during the day and doing crime and stuff like that. UB: So if you could change anything about your sentence what would you change? Holly: Just my probation, like come to the Women's Centre instead of all the times I were meant to go there, like twice a week (Holly, Age 24).

Additionally, the provision of both the WCs and the HfN Programmes were seen to be more flexible than traditional justice programmes. Bridget was a 27 year old mother of two. She was one of only two women involved in the research who were arrested for violent offences. She had spent two short sentences in prison. Bridget had severe learning difficulties. She was mentored by Fran, a WC volunteer. At the time of the interviews, Bridget had finished her specified activity requirement at the WC but was continuing to attend weekly group meetings. She met with Fran on most days. The other women in her group clearly looked out for Bridget. For example, during one of the WC sessions when Bridget was running late, there was a fear amongst the group that she was not going to turn up. When she eventually did turn up there was laughing and joking amongst the women. Bridget talked about her desire to move away from her friends who were "a bad influence" on her. It was evident, both in the actions of the women, and in Bridget's narrative, that in Fran, the other WC staff, and her fellow group members she had found an alternative, pro-social relational bond.

Bridget attended money management programmes and was in the process of finding a new house to rent with Fran's help. Although Bridget had recently breached her licence and broken the conditions of her electronic tag, the WC was in contact with the police and magistrates to prevent a return to prison, as there was a general feeling that this was not helpful to Bridget's desistance journey. This close relationship was only possible through an effective women-only provision which was flexible enough not to end when the programme ended. Healey (2012) has noted the importance of beyond-programme help. Carlsson's (2012) and Rumgay's (2004) ideas around intermittency are pertinent here; it was clear the WCs are aware that desistance involves more than the end of offending. Particularly for Bridget, the recognition of her peers within the WC that she had changed and the



sense of belonging this produced was clear, despite the recognition that this was occurring at the same time as breaches to her licence. Additionally, Shelly, Michaela and Kelly-Marie, whose narratives contained examples of intermittent desistance, all experienced an “identity change” (Maruna, 2001) consistent with secondary desistance, largely as a result of the support they received within the HfN Project and particularly from Rebecca.

Farrall (2002) noted that there was a fissure between the social bonds rhetoric of desistance and the actions (or inactions) of the CJS. It is this fissure, that the research found the WC and HfN Projects, to be particularly positive in bridging. As a very brief overview, women involved in this research accessed counselling services, abuse support services, debt management programmes, art and exercise workshops, volunteering experience, college courses, housing, full time jobs and mental health services through both the WC and HfN programmes. The HfN programme was particularly prudent in involving the women’s families in their desistance journeys. Kelly-Marie forged a new and improved relationship with her mother following encouragement from Rebecca. She noted:

Anyhow I got introduced to the Housing for Northshire Project and Rebecca Brown and my life’s finally turned round. I’ve gone full circle, there’s nothing else can come at me now [...] I mean, me and me mum have sat down, we’ve talked. But what we’ve also done is interact; they’ve got somebody to interact with me mum, to explain to her, from a drug addict’s point of view. And they’ve involved her in my recovery and I feel like I’ve got a totally different mum now; I feel like I’ve got the mum I should have had years ago (Kelly-Marie, Age 48)

Community links were a key focus of the HfN provision. Shelly discussed informal soup kitchens and provisions for community members who were struggling, set up by Rebecca and helped by the other women. Michaela was preparing to begin volunteering at a local café. These community links provided sources of “scripts for survival” (Rumgay, 2004).

Both services provided support for cognitive moves towards desistance. Neither service labelled women as “offenders”, their approaches were strengths based. The WC group sessions provided the women with a sense of hope for change, seeing their fellow group members and staff as positive role models. Stigma and shame were overcome by talking methods in both projects, particularly by the discussion of shared narratives in group settings and peer encouragement. This could particularly be seen in shared narratives of abuse, of motherhood and drug and alcohol experiences.

Nonetheless, the provisions of both community projects had limitations. It must also be noted that the WC’s in particular followed a largely individualistic, responsabilisation-focussed approach to desistance (see Hart, 2017 for possible, alternative “critical” approaches). Whilst many of the sessions promoted women addressing issues such as cognitive processes and personal relationships, these require agency. There was a lack of recognition in places of the structural forces (such as patriarchy or neoliberalism) which may impede female desistance. For example, in one session on victims, Sarah noted that she had trouble seeing the victim of her shoplifting offences from large stores which, she noted, did not pay taxes. Jenny, the group leader, commiserated with Sarah’s sentiment but was unable to clarify (understandably) why Sarah’s desistance may have been in her best interests. Additionally, the linkages between many of the women’s narratives of abuse and coercion with their offending trajectories were addressed only on an agentic level. The structural forces of patriarchy were not considered or discussed.

Although the HfN Project was able to work with the family and community, the same was not the case for the WCs. Weaver and McNeill (2014) have highlighted the relational aspects of desistance. The volume of women in the WCs as compared to the HfN service meant that this could not be catered for on the whole. WC staff would, for the most part, deal with women in a group setting and

could not for example, provide homeless women with housing directly. Mary, Criminal Justice Project Manager at the WCs, reported housing to be one of the project's central issues as her experience highlighted housing as a crucial element in desistance (see, e.g. Ellison et al., 2013). These findings echo The Howard League's (2016) findings about watered-down women-focussed support in the light of austerity.

The group provision of the WC was criticised even amongst staff members for not being suitable for every woman. Maria recalled a woman with dementia, referred from probation to the group provision, and the difficulties this posed for the group setting. Many of the women, Maria noted, required more one-on-one mentoring than the WC was often able to provide in the two week induction and conclusion. Certainly, group sessions were witnessed in the course of the observation research where one or two women in the group did not contribute at any stage. As noted previously, the size of the groups varied from week to week. This had an effect on the way the groups were run as when only one woman turned up, a role play, for example, could not be completed, whereas in one session with ten participants, the staff did not have enough time to go through all the activities.

Jenny, another group leader, noted that the structure of the provision was often very rigid; women had to "go through the motions of all the different courses". Many of the women were enrolled on a comprehensive education and employment course provided by the WCs yet also had to cover this topic as part of their specified activity requirement. Sometimes the women confided in me that they found some of the sessions irrelevant to their lives, or covered topics which they found to be "common knowledge". To this end, the WCs were responding to this criticism, and Mary outlined developments which were forthcoming:

The plan is, obviously you still need your induction session, but to make, rather than eight sessions, some that are a bit fluffy [...] put it into six sessions, condense it a little bit and make it more meaningful and make the add on support, like the housing and debt, the access to benefits; [...] {making it} more of an engagement tool, helping them recognise what the issues are 'cause they may well not know what their own issues are because everything just becomes a big bubble of loads of issues and how do we address that? So just making it more condensed, more meaningful, to give an added value to the add on support as well, that's kind of what we're looking at (Mary, Criminal Justice Project Manager at the Women's Centre).

This flexible approach from the WCs meant that it was somewhat adaptable to change and able to recognise and amend its faults in a meaningful way.

There were only three women interviewed who were clients of the HfN Project as well as two members of staff. The project is very small and to take a sceptical position would be to suggest that it is because of this small sample number that there were no critiques or complaints about the service from either staff or service users. On the other hand, the focussed, one-on-one mentoring, and the housing model as provided by the service was difficult to critique. As Shelly noted, Rebecca was available for her clients 24/7. Certainly, the service would not be suitable for all women with convictions. Many of the WC group had minor offences or were one-off offenders with stable housing and good community and/or family support. Nonetheless, for the more prolific offenders and for homeless women, the support offered was crucial to the secondary/tertiary desistance narratives of Shelly, Michaela and Kelly-Marie, which are testament to its successes.

Again, noting the structural factors involved in offending/desistance trajectories, the main challenges faced and anticipated by staff in both projects were surrounding TR and PbR. The changes as a result of TR and PbR were underway at the time of the research. Although funding for the WCs

came partly from the local CRC, Christine sensed that this would create a worrying potential for them to be swept into the system of putting a price on the head of each potential “desister”. In this way, it appears that drawing Maria’s line (discussed above) between the “wellbeing-focussed” elements of alternative community provision and the traditional, risk-based punitive justice system is becoming increasingly difficult to map out:

I think as far as barriers [to desistance] go, there is danger that we increasingly become part of the system. And I think the contract environment pushed us towards that, we’re much more target-focused, data-focused, measurement-focused. I would say as a manager there’s benefits to that; it helps us get control of the process, really look at what’s working and what isn’t working, you know grow the skill set of the practitioners. But it can feel that there’s more assessments and those can be barriers, and questions asked of women can be barriers (Christine, CEO of the Women’s Centre).

The staff in the WCs also noted that the introduction of PbR would allow less time for staff members to work on the important relational aspects of desistance with the women. Again, TR was seen as contributing to the stresses of working in such a setting, ultimately putting a strain on the desistance potential of the sentenced women.

Overall both programmes provided women-only “desistance structure” or “space” by engaging with both cognitive level themes and social/structural elements which have been shown to be conducive to desistance journeys (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Rungay, 2004; Rodermond et al., 2016). The importance of engaging with the social/structural as well as the cognitive was summarised by Jenny, a group leader in the WC:

It’s very rare that you would find a woman that goes out and thinks, “You know what I’m going to go out and I’m going to punch someone in the throat.” No they don’t do that, they don’t go out and think, “I’m going to go out and rob summat”. No, there’s always an underlying issue and whether that is housing, accommodation, substance misuse problems, mental health problems, you know a bad relationship and things like that, there’s usually something underlying that needs dealing with (Jenny, Group Leader, Women’s Centre).

Through providing a holistic women-only service, these two projects are largely dealing with exactly the issues outlined by Jenny above. Whilst neither project was a panacea for all women, there was recognition present amongst staff of these issues and attempts to overcome them. The ability to be flexible was evident in both projects and meant that “assisted desistance” (Rex, 1999) was possible to some extent. To echo Baroness Corston’s (2007) findings, communitybased approaches tailored towards the gendered needs of women, enable women to feel supported at turning their lives around. Both projects studied in this research provide a tonic to the malefocussed, risk-based, punitive traditional system. This research echoes that of Hogarth (2017) and The Howard League (2016) in that women-centred services must be free to continue this holistic, social justice, desistance-focussed provision in spite of wider changes within the CJS. However, the changes under TR and PbR in particular were worrying staff members at both projects. There was a real concern amongst staff that the community projects would become “an extension in the network of control and regulation” (Gelsthorpe and Wright, 2015, p. 51) of the wider CJS.

It is worth noting again that the current research is small scale and qualitative in nature. The study was prospective and, although some useful follow up interviews were conducted, these were not put in place to measure desistance outcomes, but to trace the desistance journey. The reason for this was the recognition that desistance was not generally a linear process but, as was established in most of the women’s narratives, can involve setbacks and relapses. Whilst quantitative analysis of

women's assisted desistance experiences is welcomed in the future, this research must be cognisant of the nature of desistance which may involve non-linear pathways. Future research is also recommended to follow up on the impact of TR and PbR.

## **Conclusion**

Young (1991), in his explanation of left realist approaches to crime control, noted that "crime cannot be simply explained in terms of crime control agencies, and [...] the agencies involved in crime control are much wider than in the CJS" (p. 152). Nonetheless, this paper has noted that "control agencies" can play a central role in the encouragement of desistance journeys, particularly through engaging with the social/structural as well as the individual. Traditional, risk and offence-focussed justice systems, this research has found, have often done more harm than good in enabling desistance. There is a lack of understanding, on the part of the CJS, about the contexts of female offending. Just deserts and punitive rhetoric will not support female desistance journeys (Radcliffe and Hunter, 2013). Certainly prison has a limited, if not detrimental, impact on desistance. Particularly, short sentences for non-violent offences are more likely to have a detrimental effect on desistance attempts (Corston, 2007). Probation relationships, where they are flexible and encouraging, with an understanding of the social/structural barriers to desistance, can be a source of hope nonetheless. Whilst there is no one-size-fits-all relationship model, there is a continual worry amongst practitioners and academics alike (Annison and Brayford, 2015) that the changes under the TR agenda may make flexible and supportive relationships less likely where the focus is on a binary measure of results, and does not recognise incremental moves towards desistance.

In terms of policy implications, this research has highlighted that women-centred and desistance-focussed programmes with through-the-gate and post-programme support (Healey, 2012) can help produce assisted desistance. Programmes should be aware of the social/ structural circumstances in which desistance does or does not take place (Farrall, 2002), and should support pro-social roles whilst recognising and applauding incremental moves towards desistance (Carlsson, 2012; Rumgay, 2004). In particular, WCs which are ideally placed to recognise the fullness of a women's life should be supported as desistance mentors. Desistance, as measured in the PbR paradigm, as a binary outcome, must be strongly contested. Many of these features reflect what has already been considered as part of a male desistance paradigm and it is clear the male system can learn much from female successes. Many of these features are present in both the work of the WCs and HfN Projects studied as part of this research. Whilst neither programme is a panacea and neither provide a "one size fits all" model, the acknowledgement of what is "known" both about desistance and female involvement in the CJS, provide them with a template to work from.

Parliament UK (2014) requires the justice secretary to make arrangements to meet the needs of females with convictions. Many of these needs could be garnered from the aforementioned projects. Yet in times of austerity where women's services and mental health services are first on the line to go (Ryan, 2017), alongside "crackdowns" on benefit fraud and reductions of the welfare system, women are likely to continue being criminalised due to poverty, abuse and mental health issues. These issues are not only confined to women with convictions but are gender-wide issues of inequality and discrimination. A justice system which replicates these inequalities is damaging to women's desistance prospects and, importantly, to their lives more generally. Women-centred services which encourage desistance and decriminalisation in a supportive, holistic and flexible environment must be championed and supported.

## **Notes**

1. One woman, Rebecca, fell into both categories.
2. The Women's Centre provides a number of services to women caught up in the formal CJS, from avert schemes at the point of arrest to through-the-gate services for women coming back to the

community after imprisonment. This research focuses on women provided with specified activity requirements but it is clear additional research surrounding the effectiveness of all these services is required.

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