

Written evidence submitted by Dr Una Barr

To whom it may concern,

I am writing in response to the call for written evidence on improving resettlement support for prison leavers. I am basing my evidence on my PhD research with criminalised women in the North of England, which was published in 2019 as *Desisting Sisters* with Palgrave Macmillan. In the research, I expound upon the findings around the desistance experience for women who have both served time in prison and in the community. I will summarise these findings below. I should add that although these findings are from research begun 10 years ago, the findings are still relevant and significant to the current context. Indeed in the cost of living crisis, arguably these are even more relevant. I also would note that although my research focuses on women's experiences, men's experiences can also be covered by the below recommendations:

Women's Centre Funding must be Ring-Fenced The Female Offenders Strategy (Ministry of Justice 2018a), continuing the rhetoric of the Corston Report (2007), celebrates the role of third sector organisations, and particularly women-only spaces such as Women's Centres, in supporting women with the pressures and challenges in their lives. The *Desisting Sisters* research has further revealed the importance of holistic women-only spaces in addressing harms faced by criminalised women and others.

Domestic Violence Support, Including Refuges, Funding must be Ring-Fenced The Northshire women's narratives pointed to the prevalence of gendered violence and abuse in their lives prior to, during and post-criminal justice contact, even when they appeared to be desisting. However, austerity measures disproportionately affect women on an individual level and on the services they rely on for survival.

Investment into Community-Based Tiered Support Aside from Women's Centres and domestic violence refuges and support services, there are a range of community support systems which have been decimated by funding cuts over the past decade and more. The services are particularly those which support women in difficulties (Mansfield and Cooper 2016; Alston 2018). The Northshire research has highlighted the centrality of tiered support around mental and physical health, childcare, alcohol and drug addiction and positive links with schools, to be central to criminalised women's desistance experiences. Arguably, if the support was in place initially, as Carlen (1990) noted, there would be a lot less criminalised women.

In-Work Poverty Abolished Desistance literature makes much of the links between employment and desistance (Farrall 2002; Maruna 2001; Österman 2018). Yet, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018) has found that in-work poverty is currently growing faster than employment rates, driven by increasing poverty amongst working parents. The importance of meaningful, and often, generative employment experiences to desistance where appropriate is not questioned by this research; however, the meaning and the rewards of work requires a re-evaluation and a drastic change from their current neoliberal form.

Abolishing Universal Credit Although the Northshire research was carried out just as Universal Credit was being trialled, three of the *Desisting Sisters* participants had been criminalised as a result of transgressions related to welfare receipt. Research on the introduction of Universal Credit suggests it is an unsuitable scheme which will disproportionately harm former prisoners and women

in particular. Firstly, former prisoners face a five-week delay upon release to receive their first payments of Universal Credit (Day 2018). This means they are released with £46 only, a discharge grant which has not changed in 15 years. 12-month supervision periods following release, mean it is hardly surprising that people are being recalled to prison at increasing rates. Additionally, it has been found that women are resorting to sex work as they become less well-off under Universal Credit measures and as first payments are delayed (Field 2018). The harms faced by sex workers, including criminalisation, violence, drug use, disease, discrimination and exploitation, have been well documented in feminist research (Sanders and Platt 2017). Finally, a joint report by the Women's Budget Group, Surviving Economic Abuse and the End Violence Against Women Coalition (2018) has warned that by introducing Universal Credit, the state is facilitating gendered violence by putting single payments into the bank and other accounts of partners, which risks financial abuse. Women may feel unable to leave an abusive relationship and the measures could result in carers (usually mothers) losing child maintenance payments.

Affordable Social Housing The lack of provision of secure and stable housing was a key factor in the criminalisation and the frustrated desistance attempts in the lives of the women. In the first quarter of 2018, 26,400 households made a homelessness application at their local authority. Of this, 13,740 were accepted as statutory homeless (MHCLG 2018). The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 requires local authorities to intervene at earlier stages to prevent homelessness and requires local authorities to provide new homelessness services to all those affected, including criminalised individuals. Public authorities are further required to notify local authorities of service users they think may be at risk of homelessness. The issues around housing are pervasive in desistance and gender-based research, as recognised by Carlen (1990). Whilst the problems with Residential Women's Centres, and particularly their scant provision throughout England and Wales, are noted above, as found by the research, the requirement that homelessness in all its forms be addressed at the local level is key to promoting desistance from both crime and harm more widely.

A Continuation of Supportive Staff-Service User Relationships One of the important findings in the research was the centrality of relationships in supporting women's desistance, to include relationships between staff in probation, the Women's Centres and the Housing for Northshire projects. With the introduction of the Transforming Rehabilitation Agenda, and the part privatisation of probation, there was concern that relationships with staff would generally be compromised (Burke 2013); this has been found to be true (User Voice 2016), particularly in the failure to have continuity of relationships. Many of the Northshire women described poor relationships with staff, which were characterised by a lack of respect and consideration for the realities of their lives. Nonetheless, the positive relationships particularly evident were found to be central in supporting their desistance from both crime and harm.

Sentencing Reform and Decarceration Although welfare provision is more likely to affect desistance than penal policy (McNeill 2016; Österman 2018), the research makes clear that the prison criminal (in)justice system itself is a key player in the harm-causing institutions in the lives of criminalised people. One of the most effective supports to criminalised people would be to divert them entirely from the system in the first place. Importantly, the Female Offenders Strategy (2018) notes the place of out-of-court disposals (OOCs) in diverting women if they come into contact with the police, but points out that often these stand only as a warning not to reoffend rather than dealing with the underlying issues surrounding their criminalisation. The decimation of public and third-sector support organisations as a result of austerity measures has not helped this issue. Whilst this research does not support the Strategy's suggestion of attaching conditions to OOCs (which will inevitably

lead in many cases to breach and (re)criminalisation, including imprisonment), it is important that women are offered unconditional support from a range of services at this point.

Closure of Women's Prisons The final, but most important, factor in supporting (re)settlement is the abolition of women's imprisonment. The feminist theoretical grounding for this argument is explored in *Desisting Sisters* and the harms inflicted by imprisonment on criminalised women, their communities (including victims of crime), friends and families. Carlen (1990) effectively considers critiques of this arguably utopian proposal, concluding that only a very small proportion of women in prison pose a danger to the public, and even these women's needs are not best served by the current system. Along with closing women's prisons, the eight measures listed above would go some way to ensuring that both less women (and men) are imprisoned and less women will reoffend.

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