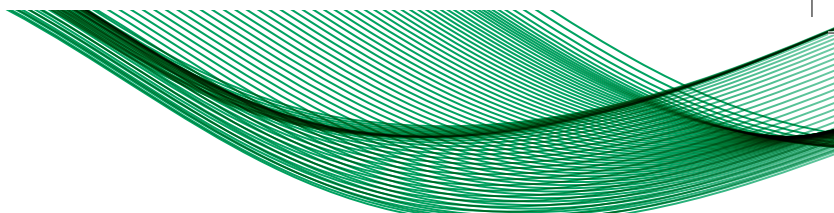




How Women's Justice Journeys are Shaped by Gender-Based Violence, Trauma, and Gender-Neutral Service Responses

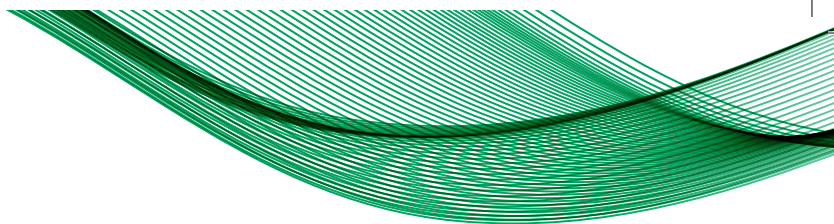
A Discovery Report in Collaboration With West Dunbartonshire Community Justice Partnership, Women's Safety and Support Service, and SafeLives





CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Project Information	4
Introduction	6
Research Objectives and Methodology	8
Analysis	10
The Barriers to Disclosing Domestic Abuse	11
Gendered experiences of justice	11
Shame, blame and judgement	12
Retraumatisation and collusion	14
Violent resistance and counter allegations	16
Motherhood and children	18
What Works?	20
Conclusions and Recommendations	23
Appendix 1:	26
Participant Information Sheet, Question Schedule and Consent Form	26
Participant Information Sheet	26
Consent Form	28
Interview Schedule	29
Appendix 2: Interview Schedule	29



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

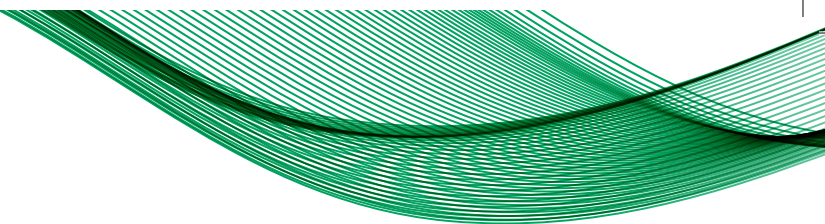
In West Dunbartonshire, we have been working with women in conflict with the law ('women in justice') to better understand the barriers to disclosing domestic abuse and identify what promotes and supports women to disclose domestic abuse and seek support.

What we heard:

- Women's trauma, victimisation and offending behaviours are closely interlinked.
- Women in justice feel shame, blame and judgement as a result of their criminalisation within the justice system. Their label as an 'offender' acts as a barrier to professionals asking about domestic abuse and offering appropriate support.
- Women's poor mental health, substances and/or alcohol use, and other trauma responses compound feelings of shame, blame and judgement from professionals.
- Women's experience of the justice system can retraumatise them and the resulting isolation and disempowerment mirrors the tactics of the perpetrator.
- Women's previous negative experiences of service interventions and the justice journey deter them from reporting and seeking support for domestic abuse.
- Justice agencies do not always recognise or respond appropriately to violent resistance and continue to focus more on physical forms of abuse.
- When women are not correctly identified as the primary victim, formal domestic abuse risk assessment is not always conducted, limiting identification of risk factors and appropriate safety planning.
- Women's fears of losing custody or contact with their children represents a significant barrier to accessing support. Women believe that if they share concerns or seek support, the information may be used to justify separation from their children.

What we suggest:

- **Gender-responsive services**, that address women's trauma and the totality of their experience, are found to disrupt harmful cycles of abuse and offending in women.
- **The establishment of positive and trusting relationships** between professionals and women in justice can promote women's safety and, therefore, desistance from crime.
- **Allocating women in justice a single point of contact** reduces retraumatisation and helps to build positive relationships.
- **Professionals who are proactive and use a trauma-informed approach**, demonstrated by active listening, empathy, and building rapport and trust, encourage women to disclose abuse and seek support.
- **Bespoke training** on domestic abuse, violent resistance, the Safe and Together principles, and the intersection between women's offending and trauma would improve and enhance professionals' responses to women in justice.
- **Embedding Safe and Together principles** into service responses would augment women's trust and engagement with child protection services and systems.
- **Use of accessible communication tools to explain the justice process** would allow informed decision-making and support women to feel a stronger sense of agency throughout their justice journeys.



PROJECT INFORMATION

Project Team - West Dunbartonshire Authentic Voices Research

- Grace McVey (Service Coordinator, Women's Safety and Support Service, West Dunbartonshire Council)
- Dominique Haggerty (Community Justice Coordinator, West Dunbartonshire Council)
- Jen Douglas (Authentic Voice Project Lead, SafeLives)
- Dr Kirsty Campbell (Lead Researcher, SafeLives Associate)
- Sarah Graves (Researcher, SafeLives Associate)

Women with Lived Experience

At the outset, we wish to acknowledge the contributions of the 8 women with lived experience who informed the findings and recommendations of this report. Many of their experiences were challenging and traumatic and recounting their justice journeys was confronting. Their contributions allow us to have a greater insight into what works, what doesn't and – importantly - how the justice journey feels and can impact on every part of a woman's life. We are extremely thankful to the women for their energy and commitment to this research and, in turn, we commit to continuing to work towards achieving the recommendations they have insightfully informed.

West Dunbartonshire Women's Safety and Support Service

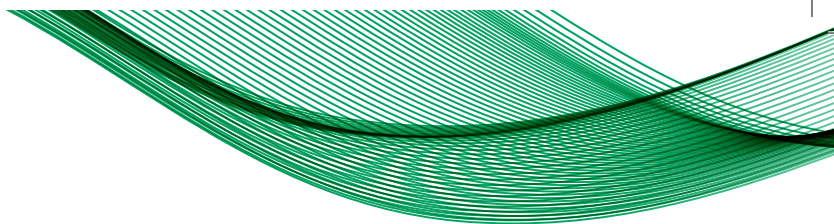
West Dunbartonshire's Women's Safety and Support Service (WSS Service) delivers a range of services for women experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV). Working in partnership, the service assesses, manages and reduces the risks posed to women and children through person-centred, holistic safety-planning and provision of longer-term trauma recovery intervention. The partners of domestic abuse perpetrators and women in conflict with the law who have experienced GBV are identified and supported throughout the justice system. WSS Service is financed by the Delivering Equally Safe Fund, HSCP and (formally) COVID Bridging Fund. In 2024/25 overall referral rates have increased significantly for responding to women whose partners are convicted of domestic abuse offences and the service's support of women in conflict with the law, who are also victims of GBV, has risen considerably.

This project fulfils a strategic objective of the WSS Service: to better understand the needs of women in conflict with the law who have experienced domestic abuse and include their voices in recovery models, service delivery and strategic plans. The work was conducted in partnership with SafeLives Authentic Voices Project and West Dunbartonshire Community Justice Partnership, funded by the Delivering Equally Safe Fund.

Women as part of Community Justice in West Dunbartonshire

West Dunbartonshire Community Justice Partnership (CJP) is the strategic mechanism where multi-agency partners collaborate to safely and effectively manage and support those who have come into conflict with the law and safeguard victims of crime. The role of CJP is to prevent and reduce further offending by addressing its underlying causes. Evidence highlights the intersectionality of offending behaviours with poverty, homelessness, substance misuse, physical and mental health inequalities, Adverse Childhood Experiences, sex, and the impact of trauma; thus, offering a greater insight into what drives and shapes offending behaviour, and recidivism. By tackling the root causes of offending and reducing recidivism, victims are fewer, and communities are safer.

West Dunbartonshire CJP local 'Community Justice Outcome Improvement Plan (CJOIP)' and delivery plan (2024-2027) sets out the local priority aims, meeting the commitments of 'The National Strategy for Community Justice



(2022)' and the 'Equally Safe Strategy: Scotland's strategy for preventing & eradicating violence against women and girls (2023)'. The delivery of the CJOIP is supported and realised by multiagency working groups. The 'Women in Justice' Working Group strives to respond to the needs of women who come into contact with justice services either as a victim or because they have come into conflict with the law.

West Dunbartonshire Community Justice Partnership's 'Women in Justice Working Group'

The group activity is underpinned by a gendered analysis, seeking to better understand the reason for women coming into conflict with the law. The group adopts a 'whole - woman, whole - family, whole - systems' response to service intervention. The group strives to ensure that West Dunbartonshire female residents are afforded the right support at the right time, safeguarding positive outcomes for West Dunbartonshire female residents who come into contact with justice services.

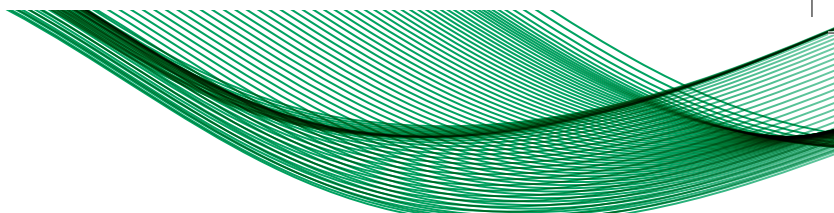
There are two priority aims for the group:

1. To engage in discovery activity to better understand the experience of women who come into conflict with the law, by recognising the relationship between offending behaviour and intersectionality.
2. To engage in discovery activity with women who are victims to address women's safety within the justice setting - specifically seeking to better understand service generated risk, process and protocol generated risk, and systemic risk that act as barriers to women's safety and positive outcomes.

SafeLives

SafeLives is the UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone, for good. SafeLives works with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse. SafeLives adopts an approach that listens to survivors, putting their perspective at the centre of all work; uses robust evidence to make decisions; and learns from the expertise of people working frontline.

This work was supported by SafeLives' Authentic Voice Project, whose aim is to help ensure that local authorities and other community planning organisations have the knowledge, confidence, and tools they need to embed survivor voice into local system and service design processes in a robust, trauma informed and meaningful way.



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, both justice reforms and addressing violence against women and girls have dominated government policy. At their intersection, the need for a gendered understanding of justice and women supported by justice services has been emphasised. We know that a significant proportion of women serving custodial sentences have experienced gender-based violence¹; trauma is more common and severe for women in justice²; experiences of justice can retraumatise women³; and justice responses disrupt women's roles as mothers and caregivers⁴.

Existing evidence underlines the value of holistic, community-based responses to support women who offend⁵, and recent analysis further highlights the need for "deeper and meaningful engagement with women and girls with experience of the justice system"⁶ to improve service responses.

The Women's Safety and Support Service (WSS Service) is a specific service that works with all victims of domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence within a justice context. The service includes systematic service-user feedback to develop and deliver services that are responsive, continually improving and work in partnership with those receiving services. As part of the overall outcomes of the service, understanding the experiences of justice for women has been identified as a specific priority.

Across 2024/25, the WSS Service commissioned a research project to learn from women's experience of the justice system. The study explores the effects of GBV on women's justice journeys focusing on factors such as access to services, how and when experiences of GBV were considered, and the challenges women experienced in having their needs met and rights realised.

Many of the findings mirrored existing research on women within the Scottish justice system, particularly in terms of the gap between policy aspirations and women's everyday reality⁷, the different needs of women within the justice system⁸, varying understandings of domestic abuse among professionals⁹, and the re-traumatisation caused by systems that do not take account of women's experiences of abuse¹⁰.

Further, this research evidenced the effectiveness of a trauma-informed response, which takes account of the whole picture of a woman's reality, underscoring the need for a 'whole - woman, whole - family, whole - systems' approach to effective work with women in conflict with the law.

¹Scottish Prison Service (2016) Prisoner Survey 2015: Female offenders, Edinburgh: SPS; SafeLives (2020) Whole Lives Project Findings; Scottish Government Women's Justice Leadership Panel (2023) 'The Case for Gendered and Intersectional Approaches to Justice' p. 53

²Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (2023) 'Women and Prison' available at: [Women-and-Prison.pdf](#)

³SafeLives (2022-) Domestic Abuse Court Advocacy Standards project findings.

⁴Home Office (2006) The Corston report, p20, Prison Reform Trust (2017) 'Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment in Scotland?' and (2019) 'Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment in Scotland?' p. 4

⁵National offender Management Service (2015) 'Effective interventions for Women offenders: A Rapid Evidence Assessment' available at: [Effective interventions for Women offenders: A Rapid Evidence Assessment](#); Scottish Government, Women's Justice Leadership Panel (2023) 'The Case for Gendered and Intersectional Approaches to Justice'

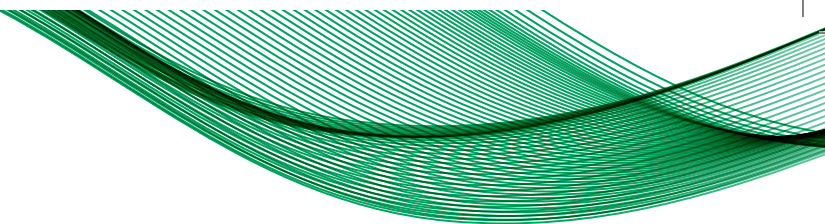
⁶Scottish Government, Women's Justice Leadership Panel (2023) 'The Case for Gendered and Intersectional Approaches to Justice' p. 4; 56-8.

⁷See for example Morrison, F., Friskney R., and Malloch, M. (2021) 'Scottish Government Call for Evidence: Women in the Justice System – a strategic approach' p. 3

⁸Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland (2021) 'Concerns about the care of women with mental ill health in prison in Scotland' available at: [ConcernsAboutTheCareOfWomenWithMentalIllHealthInPrisonInScotland_July2021.pdf](#); Scottish Government (2022) Women in the Justice System: Evidence Review available at: [Supporting documents - Women in the justice system: evidence review - gov.scot](#); Scottish Government, Women's Justice Leadership Panel (2023) 'The Case for Gendered and Intersectional Approaches to Justice'; Scottish prison Service (2021) 'Strategy for Women in Custody: 2021-2025' p. 2

⁹Zane, A. 'Constructions of risk in multiagency risk assessment and management: observations from the Edinburgh MARAC' presentation at Addressing Risk and Protection in Domestic Abuse in Scotland Conference, 3rd December 2024; University of Edinburgh.

¹⁰Scottish Government, Women's Justice Leadership Panel (2023) 'The Case for Gendered and Intersectional Approaches to Justice'



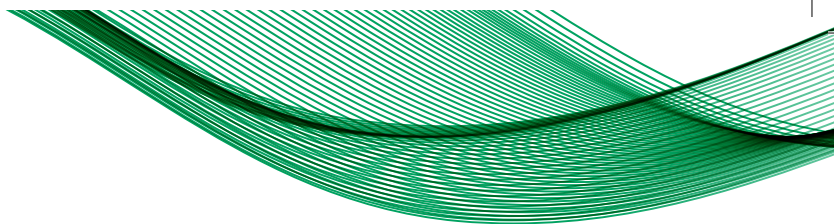
LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

How people with lived experience of domestic abuse refer to themselves is deeply personal. This report focuses on women who have experience of the criminal justice system due to having been charged and/or convicted of committing crimes and who have experiences as a victim of gender-based violence. We recognise that use of legal terminology has been identified as a barrier to engagement by people with lived experience of domestic abuse and criminal justice processes. Throughout the report, we refer to those that have these dual experiences as 'women in justice', but we acknowledge that individuals may not use this (or any) term to refer to themselves.

We use the term 'justice journey' to refer to an individual's specific criminal justice chronology, usually starting from police arrest/investigation, including court preparation and being at court; and their experiences following court and sentencing.

'Justice services' refers to the various agencies an individual may engage with throughout their justice journey, including but not limited to: Police Scotland; the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS); Scottish Court and Tribunal Service (SCTS); and Justice Social Work Services.

Lastly, we refer to the 8 women interviewed in West Dunbartonshire as 'Interviewees' throughout.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

SafeLives adopts a research approach of combining 'data, voice, and practice': combining existing evidence (data), putting the experience of survivors at the heart of every project (voice); and incorporating the experiences of expert practitioners (practice). WSS Service and SafeLives worked together to build on these principles in their research.

The objective of the research was to learn from women in justice, who have lived experience of domestic abuse, about the barriers to disclosing domestic abuse; and what supported them to disclose and seek support. The long-term project aim was to improve outcomes for women supported by justice, impacted by domestic abuse and improving their opportunities to report and disclose domestic abuse and enhance service provision. More widely, it is hoped the findings can inform other local and national approaches to work with women supported by justice throughout their justice journey's.

The research explored the following research questions:

- What was women's experience of justice processes from arrest to prosecution as it related to their experience of domestic abuse?
- What are the barriers for women in conflict with the law to report or disclose domestic abuse in West Dunbartonshire?
- What promotes and supports women in conflict with the law to report or disclose domestic abuse in West Dunbartonshire?
- What additional challenges did domestic abuse create in relation to positive outcomes throughout the justice and wider services journey?

A rapid evidence review (outlined below) was conducted to inform on existing evidence and the policy context. This included both academic and 'grey' literature on women in justice, focussing primarily on the Scottish context while incorporating relevant findings from other international jurisdictions.

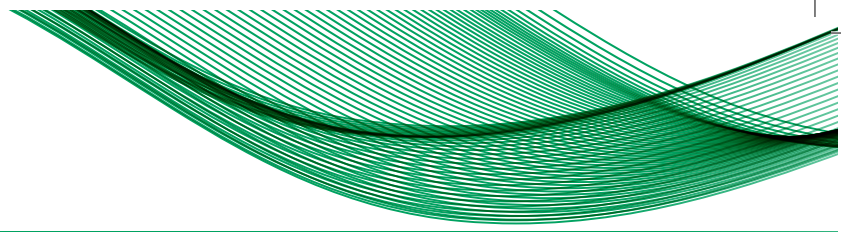
Local managers, Grace McVey (WSS Service Co-ordinator) and Dominique Haggerty (Community Justice Co-ordinator), with expert practitioner backgrounds provided the local policy context and conducted the semi-structured interviews with women with experiences of justice and GBV.

An invitation for participants to take part in the research was sent to West Dunbartonshire's Justice Social Work Team including WSS Service, with a request for the opportunity to be circulated to current women service users with experiences of domestic abuse. Professionals were provided with a narrative detailing the aims of the study, an outline of what was expected and information on remunerations for those identified as suitable to contribute. Risk management and safety planning for participants was paramount. Women who were in crisis or had significant unresolved trauma and those who were deemed at increased states of vulnerability were excluded.

The justice practitioners reviewed caseloads and identified appropriate candidates, who were then approached and research participation was explained in an accessible manner. Once interviewees agreed to be part of the study, the WSS Service Coordinator made direct contact with women, explained the process in-depth and invited women to semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences of justice within the context of being a victim/survivor of domestic abuse.

Between November and December 2024, 8 semi-structured in-person interviews were conducted. The participant information sheet, consent form and question schedule are included within Appendix 1. Thematic coding was used to analyse the interview transcripts and recurring patterns are outlined in the analysis below.

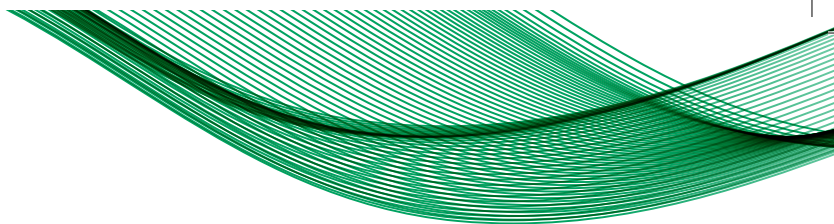
Working alongside SafeLives, the research team ensured interviews were risk assessed, trauma-informed, ethical, and ensured informed consent was established. Follow-up welfare checks were also conducted with interviewees after the interviews.



Research limitations

Several methodological limitations should be highlighted. The sample size of interviewees is small, which may limit the generalisability of findings and application to other contexts. In terms of demographics, all interviewees were female with a male partner/ex-partner and aged within their mid-20s to mid-40s. Interviewees had no known disabilities and did not represent any ethnic minority experience.

The sample also had a potential bias, due to the recruitment process utilised, i.e. participants were self-selecting, and the interviewees worked closely with the justice agencies discussed in interview. The interviewers had existing relationships with one of the interviewees. As the interviews were semi-structured, the gathered data varied across the discussions, significantly in some cases, and there was evidence of confirmation bias in some of the transcripts.

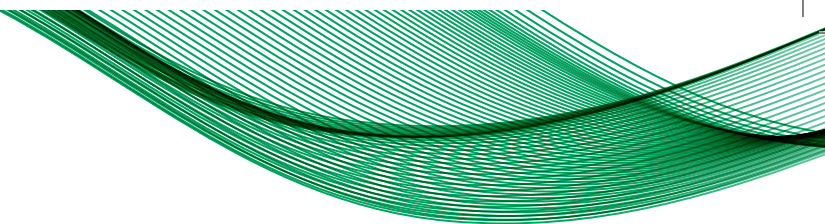


ANALYSIS

The West Dunbartonshire women in justice interviewees exposed some worrying experiences, which are examined below. The main themes emerging from the research related to the gendered nature of the justice system and how these impacted upon women's experiences accessing support. A lack of understanding about domestic abuse and associated risks was also identified. Interviewees highlighted their feelings of shame, being blamed and judged; the impact of justice processes on their role and identity as mothers; and the fear and (re)traumatisation caused by their justice journey. The inability of justice systems to adequately identify and respond to women's violent resistance was also noted along with the implementation of a comprehensive analysis of risk. These negative experiences represent significant barriers to reporting, and deterred women from disclosing domestic abuse again.

Notably, the potential for professionals to improve outcomes in women's lives - via active listening, demonstrating empathy, building rapport and trust and practicing a trauma-informed approach - was highlighted repeatedly. Interviewees were clear on 'what works' - and what doesn't - and this has been highlighted below.

Many of the women described experiences of domestic abuse which, we know from research, are not specific to women in justice but more universal in nature. Women spoke about feeling empathy for their abusive partner and not identifying coercive control and psychological abuse as domestic abuse until the perpetrator used physical violence and/or they received support after separation. Whilst we have chosen not to include these findings into the analysis below due to the existing evidence suggesting they are not specific to women in justice, but a facet of domestic abuse and perpetrator tactics more widely, it is essential that West Dunbartonshire consider these factors in broader responses to outcome improvement planning for women and girls.



THE BARRIERS TO DISCLOSING DOMESTIC ABUSE

Gendered experiences of justice

The criminal justice system was designed and delivered to address men's offending.¹¹ Justice responses continue to react to a definition of abuse that is characterised by men's experience of – usually public – violence.¹² Movements to recognise the gendered nature of the criminal justice system have gathered momentum in recent years. Almost 20 years ago, the Corston report highlighted the need for “radical change” around how women are understood and treated through their justice journeys, calling for a “women-centred approach”.¹³ This report and other research has highlighted that women's vulnerabilities provide the context for their criminality and experiences within justice.¹⁴ Women's offending is driven by different factors than those of men, namely experiences of trauma, gender-based violence, social exclusion, poverty and substance use.¹⁵ The intersectionality of these factors affects women's experience of the justice process and highlight the limitations of how systems contextualise women's lived experience.

Evidence also suggests there are higher rates of domestic abuse for women in conflict with the law compared to the general female population.¹⁷ Women's desistance from crime is also influenced differently from men's, with holistic supports that take account of the totality of women's experience being emphasised.¹⁷ Men's rehabilitation and desistance from crime is supported by family ties and supportive partner relationships.¹⁸ Positive family relationships and social ties are also crucial to women's desistance from crime, however research notes that the harm caused by abusive relationships is often instrumental in women's initial experiences of committing crime and their journey following conviction.¹⁹ Women's experience of domestic abuse often causes isolation from, and decimation of those supportive relationships. Recent research in Scotland concluded that, despite gender being such an important factor in justice social work, it is often a “neglected dimension” of the role, with sometimes limited understandings of the impact of gender-related power and entitlement.²⁰ Gendered experiences of crime and justice should be considered as an overarching theme in this research, impacting on women throughout their journeys, both when accessing support and justice as a victim/survivor of abuse and as women in conflict with the law.

¹¹Scottish prison Service (2021) 'Strategy for Women in Custody: 2021-2025' p. 2

¹²McPherson, R., (2022) 'Women and self-defence: an empirical and doctrinal analysis' (2022) *International Journal of Law and Context* 18:4, pp. 461 - 475

¹³Home Office (2006) 'The Corston report' available at Corston report - review of women with vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system

¹⁴Armstrong, L.M., Malloch, M. (2024) 'Therapeutic or Therapeutic? Conceptualising Community Custody in Scotland' in: Chamberlen, A., Bandyopadhyay, M. (eds) *Geographies of Gendered Punishment*, Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology. Palgrave Macmillan: London

¹⁵Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland (2021); National offender Management Service (2015) 'Effective interventions for Women offenders: A Rapid Evidence Assessment' available at Effective interventions for Women offenders: A Rapid Evidence Assessment Prison Reform Trust (2017) 'Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment in Scotland?' p. 3

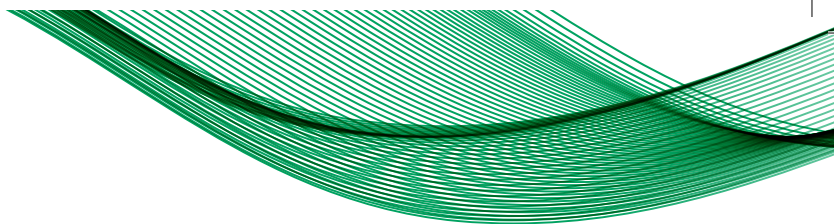
¹⁶House of Commons Justice Committee (2013) 'Women Offenders, after the Corston report', 15th July 2013, p. 78 Prison reform trust (2017) 'There's a reason we're in trouble'

¹⁷Barr Ú (2019) *Desisting Sisters: Gender, Power and Desistance in the Criminal (In)Justice System*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Barr U. and Christian N (2019) A qualitative investigation into the impact of domestic abuse on women's desistance. *Probation Journal* 66, pp.416–433.HM Inspectorate of Probation (2021) 'The evidence base – probation services' subgroup: Women

¹⁸Ministry of Justice (2017) 'The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime' Report by Lord Farmer available at 6.3664_Farmer Review Report

¹⁹Ministry of Justice (2019) *The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime'* Report by Lord Farmer, available at 6.5703 Farmer Review For Women.

²⁰McCulloch, T., Cree, V. E., Kirkwood, S., and Mullins, E. (2021). 'Within my work environment I don't see gender as an issue': Reflections on gender from a study of criminal justice social workers in Scotland' *Probation Journal*, 68: 1, pp.8-27



Shame, blame and judgement

There is an established body of research examining women's feelings of shame, blame and judgement because of their criminalisation within the justice system.²¹ These feelings are complex and interconnected with wider gender-based stigmatisation of women who are single parents, use substances and/or experience mental illness.²²

"because of my drug habits and cause the wains were in social care, it was like folk don't listen"
(Interviewee A, p. 12)

Evidence finds women in justice feel doubly stigmatised: first for being 'an offender' and second as a female offender,²³ particularly in relation to violent crime.²⁴ The concept of violence is gendered, associated far more closely to male identities, so the idea of a woman using violence is often portrayed as outlandish and highly unusual.²⁵ Some evidence finds that the criminal justice system responds to women's violence more severely than their male counterparts, with sentences reflecting women's conflict with the law and transgression of what a 'good woman' is.²⁶ Women's stigma is further compounded if they used drugs or alcohol. There is a body of literature examining causal links between domestic abuse and women's use of drugs and alcohol to cope.²⁷

Several of the interviewees in our research expressed that they felt belittled, silenced or disregarded due to professionals' judgement of their circumstances. Interviewee A (p. 17) stated:

"what was it they said? 'Continual bad decision making in a chaotic lifestyle'; that's what they labelled me. And it was as if, because I've admitted taking drugs...what I think or feel doesn't count. It's like: 'just get yourself off drugs, then we'll think about it'"

Another interviewee described using substances to cope with the abuse and this being "held over" her, with professionals attributing her circumstances to her drug use with no acknowledgement of the abuse.²⁸

"I feel like a lot of people that I spoke to were quite judgmental, quick to assume that I was in the wrong without hearing my story."
(Interviewee C, p. 3)

Interviewees' negative experiences with professionals, who they perceived as judgemental, prevented them from disclosing the abuse and seeking support.²⁹ Interviewees stated they felt judged by professionals who perceived their circumstances with no insight into the challenges they faced.³⁰ One interviewee reported being advised by a professional that they did not join their service "to deal with people like you".³¹ She described that she was "known as a problem" by services and noted professionals approached her with this preconception.³² Another interviewee described a professional

judging the tidiness of her property, despite this being unrelated to the nature of their visit.³³ She described that this approach resulted in her having her "guard up" and responding defensively to the engagement. Interviewee B described her experience of domestic abuse while pregnant, and her worker, who she believed to have never been pregnant or experienced abuse, instructing her on how to feel and behave.³⁴ Their approach made her feel judged

²¹See for example, Rutter, N., and Barr, U. (2021) 'Being a 'good woman': Stigma, relationships and desistance' Probation Journal, 68: 2, pp.166-185.

²²Home Office (2006) The Corston report, p. 10

²³Rutter, N. (2019) 'The Golden Thread: service user narratives on desistance, the role of relationships and opportunities for co-produced rehabilitation'. Doctoral Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University

²⁴McPherson, R. (2022) 'Women accused of killing with others: Experiences of the Scottish criminal justice system' The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 61, pp. 488-489

²⁵McPherson, R. (2022) 'Women accused of killing with others: Experiences of the Scottish criminal justice system' The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 61, pp. 488-489

²⁶McPherson, R. (2022) 'Women accused of killing with others: Experiences of the Scottish criminal justice system' The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 61, pp. 488-489; Rutter, N., and Barr, U. (2021) 'Being a 'good woman': Stigma, relationships and desistance' Probation Journal, 68: 2, pp.166-185.

²⁷See for example, Humphreys, C., Regan, L., River, D., and Thiara, K. K (2005) 'Domestic Violence and Substance Use: Tackling Complexity' The British Journal of Social Work 35: 8, pp. 1303-1320

²⁸Interviewee D, p. 6

²⁹Interviewees C, p. 3; B, p. 4; D, p. 4.

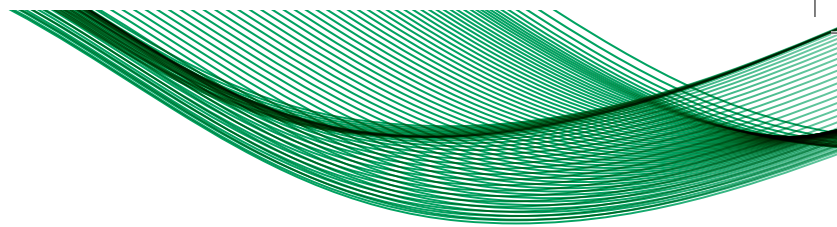
³⁰Interviewee C, p. 4; B, p. 4

³¹Interviewee D, p. 6

³²Interviewee D, p. 26

³³Interviewee C, p. 4

³⁴Interviewee B, p. 4



and as if the practitioner could not understand or help her. Another interviewee mentioned that she had perceived some professionals responded to her reality as if reciting from a “textbook” and making no effort to relate to her.³⁵ She stated, “you feel [t]hat they’re just questioning you to answer a form”.³⁶ One interviewee also mentioned that professionals asking the right questions was important, stating:

“I felt like the questions that they did ask were more like, ‘what do you want us to do?’... They asked me what I wanted them to do, when I felt like ‘I was here for [their] help: Help me.’”³⁷

Reflecting existing research, interviewees felt that the binary nature of the justice system was a barrier to disclosing abuse while seeking support, noting that professionals designated them as either a victim or – in their cases – ‘an offender’. Interviewee C stated that, due to her criminality and the ongoing court case, she perceived that professionals denied her victimhood and didn’t recognise the plurality of her experiences: “you’re the one going through the court case so you don’t need help, you’re not the victim.”³⁸ Interviewee A confirmed that she had never been asked about her experience of domestic abuse from the point of arrest to the conclusion of her justice journey.³⁹ Other interviewees noted that, despite disclosing abuse to professionals, because there was evidence to suggest they had committed an offence, their disclosures were not explored.⁴⁰

Echoing research on the gendered nature of justice, interviewees in the West Dunbartonshire research noted the negative impacts of services not understanding the totality of their experiences. A prominent theme across all interviews was frustration around not being listened to or understood. Women identified factors such as pregnancy, drug use, their partner’s behaviours, their role as a mother, their housing circumstances and their mental health as having a significant impact on their progress, but this being disregarded by some professionals.⁴¹ One interviewee noted that the focus on a singular part of her experience had been detrimental to her engagement with a professional, explaining:

“they just shut me down, quite a lot, as if what I was saying wasn’t important. Because I feel like, if I say one thing to you: don’t just focus on that one thing...I feel like when I was talking to people, I was telling them how I was upset because we broke up, but there was lots of other things going on in my life, like, ...my son got took off me, and [the perpetrator] was being awful to me, and then I was finding out lies, finding out loads of things, like socially about me. But all they always focus on [was] ‘It’s just a breakup, you’ll get over it, you’ll be fine’ or ‘you’ll find someone else’. It doesn’t really expand on things. They’ve just focused on the one thing.”⁴²

³⁵Interviewee B, p. 4

³⁶Interviewee B, p. 4

³⁷Interviewee C, p. 12

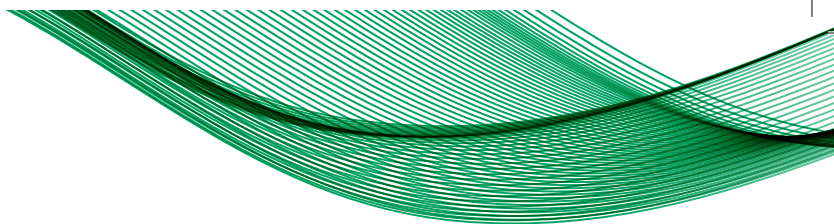
³⁸Interviewee C, p. 4

³⁹Interviewee A, p. 13

⁴⁰Interviewee D, p. 8, 17; Interviewee B, p. 10

⁴¹Interviewees A, B, C, D

⁴²Interviewee C, p. 16



Retraumatization and collusion

There is a body of literature examining the damaging effects of the criminal justice system's response to women in conflict with the law. Literature notes that many women are survivors of abuse and that the criminal justice system can mirror the tactics and impact of the perpetrator, removing women's agency, identity, security and choice, isolating and silencing them.⁴³

*"I didn't even take that at trial. I just plead guilt because I couldn't deal with the anxiety."
(Interviewee B, p. 17)*

Interviewees noted that the court process itself was "traumatising", "scary"⁴⁴, and a number of the women accepted plea deals to avoid attendance at a trial diet, despite considering themselves innocent.⁴⁵

Interconnected with women's feelings of shame, blame and judgement, some of the interviewees described feeling silenced throughout their justice journey due to their label as an 'offender' and other stigmatising factors such as mental health, drug and/or alcohol use. Interviewee C noted that she had been identified by professionals as experiencing suicidal ideation and referred for support during the justice process. However, the cause of her suicidal ideation – which she identified as the domestic abuse – was never explored and she felt retraumatized "having to go over and over the same thing again and again".⁴⁶ She further described the retraumatizing effect of intimate information from her life – directly related to her own experience of abuse – being presented as evidence against her:

*"Court was awful, yeah...Told everybody about my miscarriage, told everybody about my suicide attempts, and I get that ... the judge needs to see both sides. But they read everything out. And I was devastated. I just broke down in the middle of the court in front of like 30 people. [It] was awful, just because I had to relive all that again"
(Interviewee C, p. 18)*

Recent research in Scotland has highlighted the retraumatizing effect of attending the court as a victim/survivor in domestic abuse cases.⁴⁷ Women's experience corroborated these findings, with many discussing the negative impact of their involvement as a domestic 'complainant' in the criminal justice process.⁴⁸ Interviewee B described how her perpetrator had weaponised her mental health, using it to discredit her, which resulted in her not attending trial to give evidence and the case being abandoned.⁴⁹ Another described extreme anxiety due to being in the same space as the perpetrator (and their family) within the court⁵⁰ and a lack of communication around court outcomes, meaning they were not alerted when their perpetrator was released.⁵¹

In their dual experiences as victim/survivors and as women in conflict with the law, many of the interviewees expressed confusion about the complicated justice process, exacerbated by inaccessible legal language. Interviewee A expressed deep confusion about the purpose of engagement with professionals at the court, stating that she felt "lost".⁵² A number of interviewees also noted the significant challenges they face navigating disjointed services across several local authority areas.⁵³ The women recounted a number of similar experiences of feeling isolated and confused while

⁴³Kahn, E. (2020), "The Continuation of Violence: Analyzing the Retraumatization of Incarcerated Survivors of Domestic Violence and Evaluating the Potential of a "Trauma-Informed" Prison Model" Senior Independent Study Theses, Paper 893; Vaswani, N. (2019) 'The trauma, bereavement and loss experiences of women in prison' Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, available at: The trauma, bereavement and loss experiences of women in prison; Sykes, G. M. (1958) Society of Captives: A study of a maximum Security Prison Princeton University Press

⁴⁴Interviewee G, p. 4

⁴⁵Interviewees D, B, E

⁴⁶Interviewee C, p. 7

⁴⁷Forbes, E. (2022) Victim's experiences of the criminal justice response to domestic abuse. Beyond Glass Walls. Emerald Publishing. Available at <https://glasswallsart.com/resources/>; Houghton, C. et al. (2022) 'Domestic Abuse Court Experiences Research: the perspectives of victims and witnesses in Scotland', p48; SafeLives (2025) 'It's like walking blindfolded through a minefield': domestic abuse court advocacy provision in Scotland' available at Resources | DACA Scotland

⁴⁸Interviewees G, D, B,

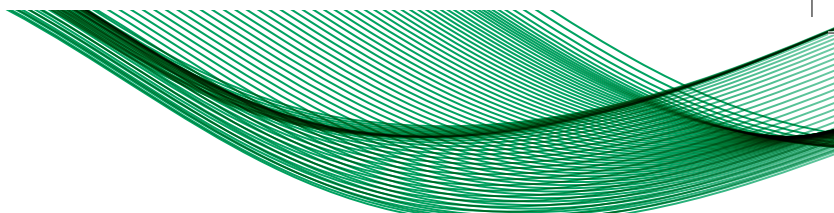
⁴⁹Interviewee B, p. 11

⁵⁰Interviewees B and D

⁵¹Interviewee A, p. 9

⁵²Interviewee A, p. 5

⁵³Interviewees A, p. 11, C, p. 12, D, p. 20, E, pp. 9-10



being directed and redirected to different services, often without accessing the information or support they had hoped for.⁵⁴

Compounding their isolation, women experience a lack of protection from domestic abuse,⁵⁵ made worse by justice outcomes for primary perpetrators perceived as unduly lenient or, in some instances, no legal consequences for the perpetrator due to multiple barriers to reporting. Several of the West Dunbartonshire interviewees expressed disillusionment with justice outcomes relating to their abusive partners.⁵⁶

"I don't know. I didn't even know what admonishment meant, I'm standing there, like 'what do I do with that?'" (Interviewee D, p.7)

One interviewee also described a service's engagement as mirroring the tactics of her perpetrator. She stated:

*"I feel they were trying to control me. I was in a controlling relationship and all, and I feel she's trying to control me or I'd better do what she tells me to. Do you know what I mean? Or I'm going to be grounded or something like that. That's not happening anymore, I'm not letting them walk over the top of me just because they've got a badge on."*⁵⁷

A common theme across the interviews was women's isolation and disempowerment by their perpetrator, and their experiences of justice systems continuing to isolate and disempower them. Viewing justice systems as an unsafe space means women are less likely to access support. So, while there exists a comprehensive framework of public protection mechanisms to respond to domestic abuse and associated child protection concerns, many women in justice, having experienced the criminal justice journey previously, choose not to access the protections available. Interviewee B (p.11) stated:

"I think he would get charged if I'd went and actually just said my statement in the court, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I just, I thought, I'm not putting myself through it again. For it to go back to square one. Do you know what I mean? Because that's what happened with my first partner"

Four of the interviewees⁵⁸ described that, due to their negative experience, they would not consider contacting the police as part of their domestic abuse safety planning. Interviewee E, describing the previous poor response to her experiences of being a victim of gender-based violence, stated: "every other time in my life that I've been abused by a man, I've just got a rigid fear of telling the police and them not caring".⁵⁹

⁵⁴ibid.

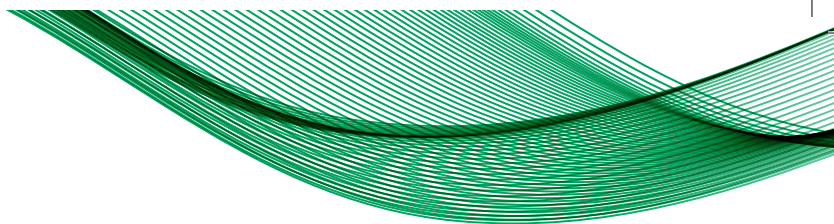
⁵⁵Centre for Women's Justice (2021) 'Women who kill: How the state criminalises women we might otherwise be burying' p. 7

⁵⁶Interviewee A, p. 12; B, p. 21;

⁵⁷Interviewee F, p. 23

⁵⁸Interviewees A, B, E, F

⁵⁹Interviewee E, p. 20



Violent resistance and counter allegations

Michael P. Johnson's typology of violence⁶⁰ describes 'violent resistance' as violence perpetrated by the primary victim towards their (ex)partner, the primary perpetrator, usually in self-defence. In these circumstances, the primary victim of abuse is subjected to the perpetrator's coercive control and domestic abuse and may use violence at points where their usual coping strategies to manage the perpetrator's behaviours have been exhausted or unsuccessful. The purpose of the violence is not to induce fear or control, rather it is for safety and escape. Johnson identified that arrests of individuals exercising violent resistance often had negative effects for them and their families. As domestic abuse is gendered crime, women are far more likely to use this form of violence.

In Scotland, and internationally, the criminal justice response has failed to keep pace with theoretical understandings and applications of violent resistance. Existing evidence suggests that the criminal justice response to violent resistance does not reflect the totality of abuse or women's lived experience.⁶¹ Justice approaches continue to respond to a (male) notion of self-defence that tends to take place in public, rather than privately within the home.⁶² While Police Scotland overtly acknowledge domestic abuse as a form of gender-based violence within their policies and receive training on the typologies of abuse, prosecutions remain evidence-led and thus arrests for violent resistance (that amounts to a crime) are mandatory. Victims who use violence to protect themselves against domestic abuse do not usually utilise the special defence of self-defence at trial; those who do are not usually successful and are rarely acquitted.⁶³ The acceptance of plea bargains and decision to plead guilty rather than face trial, described above, further evidences the barriers for women in justice.

Interviewees described that their violent resistance was not considered in the context of their perpetrator's abuse, but as a standalone crime, often corroborated by the interviewee disclosing full details of their experience within interview as an accused person.⁶⁴

More than half of the women⁶⁵ described their perpetrators' abilities to manipulate, charm and control situations and professionals to "frame"⁶⁶ them. Interviewees emphasised that the police and justice system placed more weight on 'physical' evidence without considering the wider context of their experience, particularly coercive control and other non-physical forms of abuse.⁶⁷ Some of the women were arrested for causing physical injuries to the perpetrator in response to a prolonged assault directed at them.

Interviewees felt there was a focus on the use of weapons and visible injuries over more covert forms of abuse. Interviewee A told that, when she was arrested, she had extensive physical injuries, including severely bruised and swollen eyes. On observing her appearance, the police conducted further enquiry, her perpetrator was charged with the primary offences and imprisoned. Conversely, interviewee B described her experience:

"he had phoned the police, he had battered me in the house and all that. And I've chased him out the house trying to get me up with the mop in my hand, and they lift CCTV, seeing me with the mop my hand. So, he phoned the police, 999 call, and was kidding on he was crying and all that. I mean, see while he's on the phone, he's giving me faces and all that, do you know what I mean? He's like videoing my reactions to him like, terrorism it is. And the police come out: I get jailed for hitting him with a mop."

⁶⁰Johnson, M. P (2008) A Typology of Domestic Violence: Intimate Terrorism, Violent Resistance, and Situational Couple Violence Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press; note that there is a body of research exploring the differences in other race/ethnicity group's experiences of violent resistance, and Johnson's work is noted to have more application to white community's experiences.

⁶¹McPherson, R., (2022) 'Women and self-defence: an empirical and doctrinal analysis' (2022) International Journal of Law and Context 18:4, pp. 461 - 475

⁶²McPherson, R., (2022) 'Women and self-defence: an empirical and doctrinal analysis' (2022) International Journal of Law and Context 18:4, p. 470

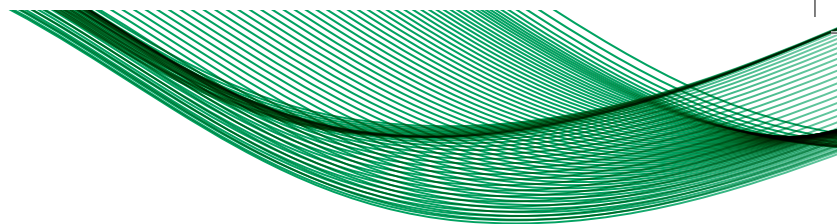
⁶³McPherson, R., (2022) 'Women and self-defence: an empirical and doctrinal analysis' (2022) International Journal of Law and Context 18:4, pp. 461 - 462; 470

⁶⁴Interviewee D, pp. 8; 17.

⁶⁵Interviewees A, B, C, F and H.

⁶⁶Interviewee A, p. 16

⁶⁷Interviewees A, B, D, H



Similarly Interviewee H described:

*"I phoned the police, but he's like grabbed me by the hair, and really, like, fighting, and I threw a bag at him, and there was a bottle in the bag and it's cut his hand. So, when the police have come, I've been crying and that, and he's like that, "she's attacked me", which is absolutely rubbish, I never – he's a big guy, took steroids when he was at the gym – that did not happen. And the police lifted me because he had a cut on his hand."*⁶⁸

Three interviewees described how they had contacted the police due to being frightened of their partner, but were subsequently charged with an offence.⁶⁹ Interviewee D described how she had wanted the police to "come and just get him away from me".⁷⁰ She felt listened to by the response officers who had initially attended, who asked her about her experiences of abuse, however she was subsequently approached regarding allegations made by the perpetrator against her:

*"They didn't believe it. Didn't believe what I'd said, and they were nothing like the two officers who persuaded me to just tell them what had happened, and that's how they knew the full story. So, the other two officers, the plain clothes ones that came out a few weeks later, they were not for hearing me at all. They were nice until they got me to the station, and then they changed. Totally changed."*⁷¹

The interviewees described further barriers to disclosing their experiences of abuse from the point of arrest throughout their justice journeys. One interview described that the police tended to complete the Domestic Abuse Risk assessment⁷² with the individual who contacted the police, thereby labelling them as the perpetrator and not exploring their experience or relevant safeguarding.⁷³ The majority of the women either did not remember or stated a domestic abuse risk assessment was not completed with them at the point of arrest. Interviewee C identified that, despite disclosing the abuse, her "label" as a perpetrator meant she was "brushed off", "treated like the bad person" and not offered support.⁷⁴

⁶⁸Interviewee H, p. 2

⁶⁹Interviewees D, G and H

⁷⁰Interviewee D, p. 8

⁷¹Interviewee D, p.17

⁷²Referred to by Police Scotland as the Domestic Abuse Questions ('DAQ') and by other services as the Domestic Abuse Stalking and Honour Based Abuse (DASH) Risk identification Checklist. The Police DAQ incorporates 27 questions relating to domestic abuse risk and child protection.

⁷³Interviewee D, p. 8

⁷⁴Interviewee C, pp. 3-4

Motherhood and children

Research tells us that women's identity as mothers impacts significantly on their experiences of the justice system and recovery following sentencing.⁷⁵ Fears of repercussions from child protection services is a widely recognised barrier for women disclosing and seeking support for domestic abuse.⁷⁶ Research by the Scottish Prison Service found that women often fail to disclose that they have children at the point of imprisonment, due to fears of how this may impact the family.⁷⁷ These fears are compounded by perceived, and real, stigma and shame for women who have a disability,⁷⁸ use substances,⁷⁹ and/or suffer poor mental health.⁸⁰ Some research has found that women feel blamed and criticised for their choice in partner⁸¹ and there is evidence of victim- and mother-blaming within justice and public protection institutions.⁸² Often, women's beliefs about the potential for their children to be removed are reinforced by the threats, insults and degradation enacted by the perpetrator.⁸³ This toxic mix has led academics to conclude: "When a woman fears that she will be blamed or may have her children removed she is less likely to seek help or ask for support to leave the relationship."⁸⁴

"I wish I could turn back the clocks, honestly, because if I knew it was going to get my other two kids taken off me, I wouldn't have done this. I wouldn't have called the police." (Interviewee F, p. 5)

Child protection case conferences in Scotland consistently identify domestic abuse as the most common risk factor affecting children⁸⁵ and there can be significant professional intervention in families experiencing domestic abuse. All the women interviewed in West Dunbartonshire were mothers, and the majority of the women described fears of losing their children as a significant barrier to accessing support. Several of the women described that they chose not to make disclosures of abuse due to the potential for Children and Families social work to learn more information about them and this being used to justify limited contact with their child(ren).⁸⁶

Other interviewees reported feeling ignored and shut out of their children's lives by Children and Families' social work. Interviewee A felt that, due to her use of substances, professionals identified her (abusive) ex-partners as the protective parent and dismissed her role and identity as a mother. She stated:

*"All they can go on is what they're hearing, and they're not hearing anything from me, but all they're going on is rumours and gossip and what the dads are saying. They're, no they're not even listening, because everyone's kind of wrote you off"*⁸⁷

⁷⁵Baldwin, L. (2018) 'Motherhood disrupted: reflections of post-prison mothers' *Emotion, Space and Society* 26 pp. 49-56

⁷⁶Mason, C., Taggart, D., Broadhurst, K. (2020) Parental Non-Engagement within Child Protection Services—How Can Understandings of Complex Trauma and Epistemic Trust Help? *Societies* 10: 93; Scottish Commission for Learning Disabilities (2021) 'Unequal, Unheard, Unjust: But not hidden anymore' Unheard-Unequal-Unjust—But-not-Hidden-web-version.pdf

⁷⁷Prison Reform Trust (2017) 'Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment in Scotland?' p. 4; Scottish Prison Service (2018) *Women in custody 2017*, Edinburgh: SPS

⁷⁸Jones, J., Roarty, L., Gilroy, J., Brook, J., Wilson, M., Garlett, C., McGlade, H., Williams, R., and Leonard, H., (2023) Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with a Disability: Research report; Scottish Commission for Learning Disabilities (2021) 'Unequal, Unheard, Unjust: But not hidden anymore' Unheard-Unequal-Unjust—But-not-Hidden-web-version.pdf, p. 55

⁷⁹Russell, L., Turner, F., Gajwani, Ruchika, Minnis, H., (2025) "Everything is fear based": Mothers with experience of addiction, child removal and support services' *Children and Youth Services Review*, 170

⁸⁰Bacon, G., Sweeney, A., Batchelor, R., Grant, C., Mantovani, N., Peter, S., Sin, J., Lever Taylor, B. (2023) 'At the Edge of Care: A Systematic Review and Thematic Synthesis of Parent and Practitioner Views and Experiences of Support for Parents with Mental Health Needs and Children's Social Service Involvement' *Health & Social Care in the Community*; Humphreys, C., Heward-Belle, S., Tsantefski, M., Isobe, J., Healey, L., (2021) 'Beyond co-occurrence: Addressing the intersections of domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse' *Child and Family Social Work*, 27: 2, pp. 299-310

⁸¹Ozan, J., Gellen, S., Fox, C., Morris, S., Cargill, R., (2022) 'We can talk about domestic abuse: Pilot evaluation study' *We Can Talk About Domestic Abuse - Pilot Evaluation Report* p. 7;

⁸²Deblasio, L. (2022) 'The re-traumatisation of Domestic Abuse Survivors: The Problem of Mother Blaming in Public Child Law Proceedings' *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 34:1

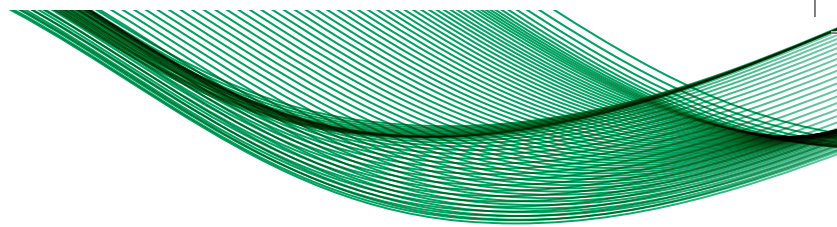
⁸³Donaldson, A (2008) 'Children and Young People Experiencing Domestic Abuse, A Survey of support services in West Dunbartonshire, available: <http://www.albitaylor.com/pdf/childrens%20services%20survey%20report.pdf>

⁸⁴See for example, Beller, L. F. (2014) 'When in doubt, Take them out: Removal of children from victims of domestic violence ten years after *Nicholson v. Williams*' *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* pp. 205-239; Deblasio, L. (2022) 'The re-traumatisation of Domestic Abuse Survivors: The Problem of Mother Blaming in Public Child Law Proceedings' *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 34:1, p. 15

⁸⁵Scottish Government (2021) *Children's Social work statistics: 2019-2020*; (2022) *Children's Social Work statistics 2020/2021*; (2024) 'Children's Social Work Statistics 2022-23 - Child Protection'

⁸⁶Interviewee B, p. 20; Interviewee G, p. 3, 5, 11; Interviewee E, p. 15

⁸⁷Interviewee A, p. 18



Another woman felt that the information she provided social work was used against her, to justify her children being placed in kinship care.⁸⁸ Interviewee F described that she did not feel supported by the social worker to regain custody of her children, stating:

“The social worker that was assigned to it didn’t ever phone me, I never got a phone call. It was my sister that was treated with that respect and dignity and whatever, but I was just completely cut off.”⁸⁹

A common theme across the interviews was the devastating impact of women being separated from their children, and their struggles to re-establish contact. Several of the interviewees communicated their utter desperation around the separation and how this affected their identities as mothers, with some becoming distressed during interview while recounting their experiences. For them, these negative experiences are equated with service involvement, particularly Children and Families’ social work service, and there was evident mistrust among some of the interviewees. When asked her thoughts around service improvements, interviewee H stated:

“There’s no deeper love than a mother’s love, so I just feel like if they supported me more with my kids, moved me away, or kept me safe, they could have done something where we could have been together... None of that was ever offered to me, to come out and put extra locks or something on my door, that would have maybe kept me a wee bit more safer ... I just feel that they could have supported me more, for me and the weans to stay together.”⁹⁰

The trauma and shame of having children removed represents a very clear barrier for women disclosing abuse. Concerningly, interviewee F stated that her experience demonstrated why women don’t access services, concluding “that’s how lassies will end up dead, because of the social work”.⁹¹

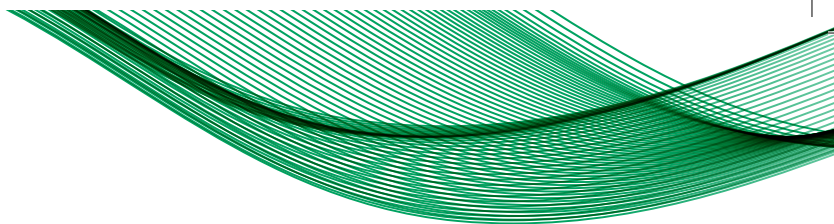
In summary, the West Dunbartonshire interviewees communicated a substantial number of significant barriers to disclosing domestic abuse and therefore accessing effective support. The following section focuses on what works to counter negative experiences, what felt supportive, and what promoted and supported women in justice to disclose domestic abuse.

⁸⁸Interviewee H, p. 16

⁸⁹Interviewee F, p. 11

⁹⁰Interviewee H, p. 20

⁹¹Interviewee F, p. 16



WHAT WORKS

In Scotland, there have been several advancements to address the institutional barriers that have deterred women in justice from reporting and accessing support. Awareness of the impact of trauma has increased amongst public professionals and associated trauma-informed practices are improving across services and systems.⁹² Recent research that included West Dunbartonshire found that professionals are aware of how service-user trauma can impact individuals' engagement with services, and identified a widespread willingness to learn more and respond effectively.⁹³ The research, conducted by NHS, found that justice social work staff expressed the most interest and willingness to embed trauma-informed practice, but also experienced more severe challenges in operationalising the approach due to the penal nature of their work, which restricted flexible approaches.⁹⁴ Across the West Dunbartonshire interviews, women in justice identified numerous positive effects of their justice social workers' engagement, with evidence of well-embedded trauma-informed practices across the service.

Since 2019, Police Scotland have also embedded specialist domestic abuse training and internal structures to improve frontline response to domestic abuse. Since its inception, officers highlighted their increased awareness of violent resistance and primary perpetrators masquerading as victims, as well as improved understanding of coercive control tactics.⁹⁵ A number of the interviewees described positive experiences with Police, where they felt protected and listened to.⁹⁶ Interviewee G found the consistency of Police Scotland's response supported her to report, meaning she knew what to expect when police were called, particularly that she and her partner would be separated and officers would take measures to "diffuse the situation".⁹⁷

In terms of offering a gender-responsive service, many of the interviewees in West Dunbartonshire noted the benefits of professionals looking at "the bigger picture of a person".⁹⁸ One interviewee suggested that engagement and support work should take account of a woman's experience all the way from her childhood onwards, explaining that this would provide professionals with an insight into her behaviours and circumstances.⁹⁹ One woman described how their justice

"I fell through the cracks, and I've had a hellish time. But, I mean, see if it was no for like [Justice Social Worker] and [Women's Safety and Support Worker], I don't know where I would be, because I'm really telling you, I wasn't in a good place last year at all with all this, really. So it makes the world of difference. When you've got people like that, round about you, it really does."
(Interviewee B, p.22)

social worker had secured housing for them and how beneficial she had found this.¹⁰⁰ Another interviewee emphasised the significance of having a justice worker who listened, even when there was no obvious solution to their problem: feeling heard was therapeutic.¹⁰¹ Interviewee E noted the huge benefit she had experienced of being referred into a trauma recovery service during her justice journey, noting that it had allowed her to identify and understand her experience as a victim of domestic abuse.¹⁰² Addressing sources of harm and insecurity in all areas of women's lives lowered the risk of further abuse and acted to build trusting relationship between women in justice and professionals.

⁹²NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (2018) 'Trauma Informed Practice Training Needs Assessment: Executive Summary' available at <https://www.stor.scot.nhs.uk/entities/publication/80f67fd0-3200-4436-b87e-3c23cc7e3cef>

⁹³Ibid, p. 3

⁹⁴Ibid, p. 4

⁹⁵SafeLives (2020) 'Domestic Abuse Matters Scotland: Evaluation report' available at Domestic-Abuse-Matters-Scotland-Evaluation-Report.pdf

⁹⁶Interviewee A, p. 8; Interviewee F, p. 10, Interviewee G, p. 7

⁹⁷Interviewee G, p. 7

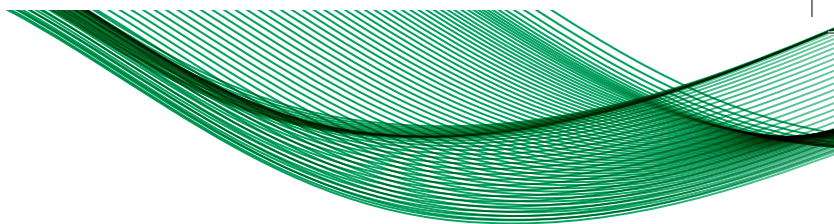
⁹⁸Interviewee D, p. 28

⁹⁹Interviewee D, p. 28

¹⁰⁰Interviewee B, p. 2

¹⁰¹Interviewee A, p. 22

¹⁰²Interviewee E, p. 19



“she always asks, like, how I am and if I need, if I need anything, and I feel like she, she actually listens to me. Whereas any other person I’ve spoke to about it, they kind of brush it off, because they just see me as being like the bad person” (Interviewee C, p. 3)

In other research, positive relationships with women’s allocated justice workers were found to have a significant influence in a woman’s protection from harm and, therefore, desistance from crime.¹⁰³ Interviewees in West Dunbartonshire also discussed the beneficial effects a trusting relationship with their justice social workers could have. Interviewee B stated that establishing a positive relationship with her worker had supported her to disclose the abuse from the perpetrator.¹⁰⁴ She stated that, on being allocated a worker who displayed empathy and understanding “you felt you were actually getting somewhere”.¹⁰⁵ Interviewees felt that, where

they perceived professionals as empathetic, ready to listen, and understanding of their personal circumstances, they were more likely to be open and honest.¹⁰⁶ Two of the interviewees noted that their justice social worker’s flexibility around appointments, which took account of their current circumstances, was extremely supportive, with one woman noting it facilitated her separating from her abusive partner.¹⁰⁷

Women also noted the strengths of having a single point of contact who proactively reached out to offer regular support. Interviewees who established an ongoing relationship with the same worker described the associated benefits,¹⁰⁸ while those who were not allocated a consistent worker described the negative impact of “talk[ing] about the same thing over and over again”.¹⁰⁹ Four interviewees noted the value of their justice worker reaching out to them by phone or text for regular check-ins, describing they felt as if someone cared. Frequent engagement coupled with positive relationships with women’s allocated justice workers were found to have a significant influence on a woman’s protection from harm and therefore, desistance from crime. Women reported feeling a sense of achievement, more confidence and more socially connected.¹¹⁰ Interviewees also described the positive impact of professionals being accountable. Three of the women provided examples of their worker contacting other professionals and navigating systems to “get answers”¹¹¹ for them, describing that this built trust.¹¹² Interviewee B further noted how her justice worker’s informal approach had put her at ease, allowing her to identify their commonalities, build rapport and therefore support her to be more honest in her communication.¹¹³

Clear and consistent communication from professionals was also identified as a supportive factor for women, allowing them to manage expectations and maintain a sense of agency. Interviewee G provided that she felt more in control at the point of her arrest as the process was explained clearly to her by police.¹¹⁴ Similarly, interviewee E described how her justice social worker had provided clear information, allowing her to feel informed and know what was expected of her in contrast to her poor previous experiences.¹¹⁵ Research has concluded that engagement work that challenges women’s feelings of shame, blame and judgement positively contributes to women’s reoffending rates and their vulnerabilities to other harms.¹¹⁶ Facilitating women’s sense of agency and building their confidence to navigate the justice system contributes to the reversal of these negative feelings. Interviewee C, who described she

¹⁰³HM Inspectorate of Probation (2021) ‘The evidence base – probation services’ subgroup: Women

¹⁰⁴Interviewee B, pp. 3-4

¹⁰⁵Interviewee B, p. 4

¹⁰⁶Interviewees B, p. 12; C, p. 3,

¹⁰⁷Interviewees B and D

¹⁰⁸Interviewee B, p. 23

¹⁰⁹Interviewee C, p. 13

¹¹⁰Interviewee B, p. 3, 22; Interviewee A, p. 5; Interviewee G, p. 19 and Interviewee H, p. 7

¹¹¹Interviewee B, p. 5

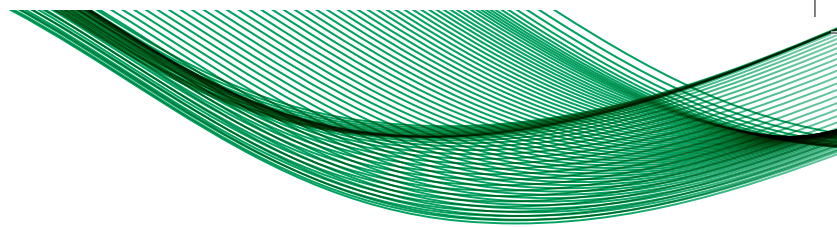
¹¹²Interviewee A, p. 22; Interviewee B, p. 5, Interviewee E, p. 12

¹¹³Interviewee B, pp.22-3

¹¹⁴Interviewee G, p. 4

¹¹⁵Interviewee E, p. 12

¹¹⁶Barr U (2019) Desisting Sisters: Gender, Power and Desistance in the Criminal (In)Justice System. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Barr U. and Christian N (2019) A qualitative investigation into the impact of domestic abuse on women’s desistance. Probation Journal 66, pp.416–433.



had been “branded” as the perpetrator throughout her justice journey, highlighted how her justice worker was the first professional she didn’t feel dismissed by, as they listened and offered her effective support.¹¹⁷

Because gender impacts so significantly on women’s justice journey, rehabilitation and support for women in justice is most effective when it responds to the specific nature of women’s experiences. Contemporary research promotes a reframing of women’s experiences of criminality to understand women’s safety from harm as a causal factor in their desistance from crime.¹¹⁸ Research from England and Wales has argued that engagement work with women who have offended, which does not take account of their experiences of domestic abuse, should be considered “incomplete”¹¹⁹ and the West Dunbartonshire interviewees corroborated this claim. Gender-responsive support that addresses women’s trauma is found to disrupt harmful cycles of abuse and offending in women.¹²⁰ Programmes that consider the totality of women’s experience, in terms of challenges faced around trauma and abuse, accessing safe and secure housing, reducing substance and alcohol use, improving their mental health, rebuilding confidence and re-establishing strong family links, are concluded to be most effective in keeping women safer and offering them pathways away from offending.¹²¹

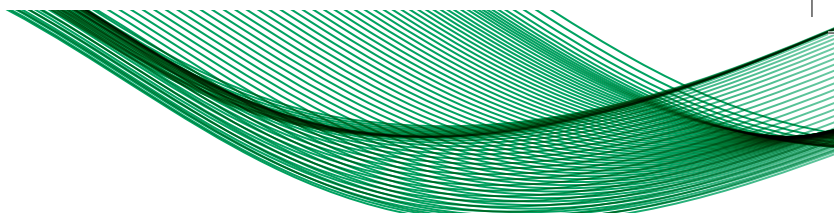
¹¹⁷Interviewee C, p. 3

¹¹⁸Barr Ú. and Christian N (2019) A qualitative investigation into the impact of domestic abuse on women’s desistance. *Probation Journal* 66, pp.416–433.

¹¹⁹Barr, Ú., and Christian, N. (2019). A qualitative investigation into the impact of domestic abuse on women’s desistance. *Probation Journal*, 66:4, pp.416–433.

¹²⁰McKenna, N. C., and Holtfreter, K. (2020). Trauma-Informed Courts: A Review and Integration of Justice Perspectives and Gender Responsiveness. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 30(4), 450–470;

¹²¹Messina, N. P., Esparza, P. (2022) ‘Poking the bear: The inapplicability of the RNR principles for justice-involved women’ *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 140; National offender Management Service (2015) ‘Effective interventions for Women offenders: A Rapid Evidence Assessment’ available at: [Effective interventions for Women offenders: A Rapid Evidence Assessment](#);



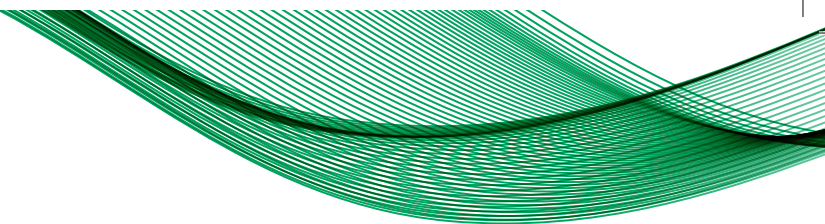
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has highlighted a series of barriers that prevent women in justice reporting, disclosing and accessing support for domestic abuse. Of concern, negative previous experiences with services deter women from engaging with existing public protection systems to keep themselves and their children safe from abusive partners. Some women in justice remain disenfranchised from the systems designed to protect them.

In partnership, SafeLives and West Dunbartonshire's Women's Safety and Support Service suggest the following recommendations to counteract women's negative experiences and embed existing good practice:

- **Shame, blame and judgement:** The West Dunbartonshire interviews correlated existing research, underscoring the need for professionals who engage with women in justice to challenge notions of blame, shame and judgement attributed to them and consider their holistic experiences of abuse. Addressing women's offending involves ensuring women's safety and supporting stability and empowerment across other areas of their life. Social work and para-professionals require effective leadership and ongoing support to undertake relational work with clients, working in flexible ways, and ensure they are gender-responsive at the frontline.
- **Trauma-informed practice:** Widespread domestic abuse competencies across staff and systems are necessary so that professionals understand the multi-layered and gendered experiences of women in justice. Justice and other public protection services require to continue to dedicate time, energy and resources to embedding trauma informed practice and promoting the domestic abuse competence of their workforces.
- **Violent resistance:** The criminal justice system does not adequately recognise or respond to violent resistance. Frontline services need to continue to explore incidents of domestic abuse carefully, in order to correctly identify the primary perpetrator, and offer support to the primary victim, even where the primary victim is arrested and charged. Domestic abuse competent systems, which are trauma-informed, can act as a counterbalance to the rigid justice system in relation to violent resistance. It is essential that professionals raise their awareness of counter allegation's guidance and embed processes to correctly identify the primary perpetrator and primary victim, alongside necessary criminal justice proceedings. Ongoing 'Domestic Abuse Matters' training for Police Scotland should highlight the potential for perpetrators to manipulate professionals at the point of arrest. Further research is required to identify how legal representation can safely respond to cases involving violent resistance and offer safe representation to women who are accused of violence in response to their perpetrator's abuse.
- **Legacy experiences of justice and service involvement disenfranchise women:** Some women in justice are marginalised and do not access support for domestic abuse as they perceive the criminal justice system to be an unsafe space that retraumatises them and poses a risk to their role as a mother. Awareness-raising of the spectrum of options available for women to access support through different entry points is essential, including West Dunbartonshire specialist and confidential services, multi-agency forums, and national responses such as SARCS.¹²² Domestic abuse helplines/phone support and mainstream service such as housing, financial support, and primary healthcare require to be included as part of awareness raising activity, ensuring the visibility of all available supports whether universal or specialist. Professionals' knowledge of what is available in their local area is crucial, along with ongoing and consistent service promotion for both national and local service provision in various and accessible ways that enriches the 'whole - woman, whole - family, whole - systems' approach.

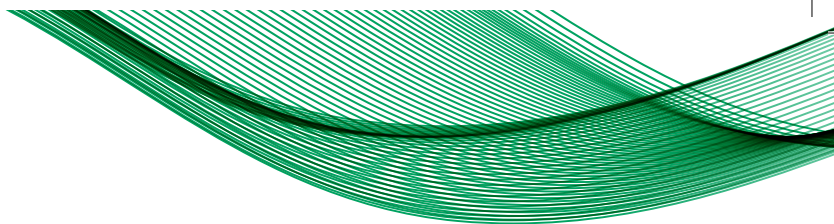
¹²²Turn to SARCS | NHS inform

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- **Multiagency training and routine enquiry:** One of the interviewees identified that a “protocol for someone from the services to reach out to that woman at the time [of arrest] to offer them support or guidance in terms of facing what the problem is” would be beneficial for women at crisis point. Standardised processes that give professionals frameworks for asking about domestic abuse and provide women in justice a safe space to disclose should be embedded throughout the justice journey. Asking about domestic abuse requires a good baseline knowledge of the dynamics of domestic abuse and its impact on the adult victim. The approach therefore relies on professionals’ improved knowledge of coercive control and violent resistance, which would encourage a less binary approach of the women being designated as “the perpetrator” and their exposure to abuse overlooked. Training to improve professionals’ knowledge of domestic abuse, its impact on the adult victim and children/young people, and use of the DASH Risk Assessment tool is key to embedding routine enquiry and effective safeguarding responses.
 - **Safe and Together:** As part of embedding a trauma-informed approach, in line with National direction and best practice, West Dunbartonshire is encouraged to continue exploring how Safe and Together guiding principles can be included in service responses. The inception of the Safe and Together programme began in 2014 in Scotland and aims to embed tools and interventions to allow professionals working in child protection to be better informed about domestic abuse and its impact. The programme responds to international evidence around victim-blaming and poor practice among professionals responding to domestic abuse, promoting a strength-based approach whereby professionals ‘partner’ with the adult survivor. Existing evaluation evidence provides that the Safe and Together model helps to reduce women’s feelings of shame and stigma and thereby improve relationships and engagement with Children and Families social work, as well as other services.¹²³ Many of the women identified their involvement with Children and Families’ social work represented a barrier to disclosing or seeking support for abuse, with some women feeling reprimanded, blamed or excluded by their allocated worker.
 - **Accessible information:** Women in justice described feeling confused, alienated and isolated by complicated legal language and disjointed services across their justice journey. Use of accessible communication tools to explain the justice process would allow informed decision-making and support women to feel a better sense of agency and engaged in their justice journeys. This empowerment acts to challenge notions of blame, shame and judgement. To be most effective, information must be gender-responsive, aimed at addressing the ‘whole picture’ of a women’s circumstances and be inclusive of those with additional support needs.

Across their experiences with service engagement, the interviewees communicated the benefits of professionals demonstrating domestic abuse competence and an understanding of how domestic abuse and other trauma could impact an individual. Interviewees who felt heard, understood and respected reported much more positive outcomes in terms of disclosing abuse, seeking support and having open conversations about their needs. Where women felt alienated, ignored, silenced, judged, blamed and shamed, they were less likely to disclose abuse, or seek support again in the future. Being labelled as ‘the perpetrator’ often negated their opportunities to seek support. Perhaps the biggest barrier to disclosure is the fear of how it will impact on women’s rights as a mother and contact with her children. Some work is required to rebuild women’s trust in existing public protection mechanisms and their efficacy. However, this research has demonstrated that there exist numerous examples of gender-responsive services that support, understand and restore women’s confidence to disclose and report across West Dunbartonshire.

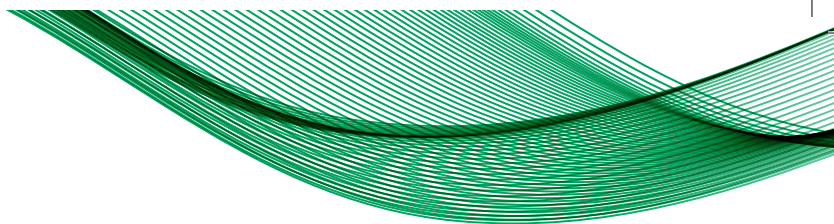
This research project forms part of ongoing work by SafeLives and WSS Service to embed the voice of women with lived

¹²³See Safe and Together approach | Iriss for an overview of existing evaluation evidence and for other examples Safe and Together Institute (2018) ‘Safe and Together Overview and evaluation data briefing available at https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/OverviewEvalDataBriefing_A4_r3.pdf; Safe and Together Edinburgh Implementation report (2018) available at [Safe_and_Together_Edinburgh_Implementation_Report-2017.pdf](#)



experiences into service development and change. The input of the interviewees to this research has been invaluable, corroborating existing research, raising new ideas, and underlining the need for continuous improvement to achieve the best outcomes for women affected by abuse and trauma. We conclude the report with enormous thanks to those eight women for their input.

"I've noticed a major difference in it...Everybody's getting heard now, and it's like eventually people are starting to listen to try and make changes." (Interviewee B, p. 25)



APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET, QUESTION SCHEDULE AND CONSENT FORM

Participant Information Sheet

Information sheet

The Women's Safety and Support Service (WSS) are doing a piece of research to learn from women about their experience of telling professionals within a justice setting, about domestic abuse and what - if anything - helped make them feel safer.

We want to learn what worked well, what gaps in services there were, to help improve outcomes across justice systems for victims of domestic of abuse in the future.

Introduction

Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand why this interview is being held, and what it will involve. Please listen to this carefully and ask Grace or Dominique if you have any questions (we will also give you our contact details in case you have any further questions after our meeting).

About us

West Dunbartonshire's Women's Safety and Support (WSS) Service offers a range of services to women who are or have experienced domestic abuse, including women who are going through the justice system for offences they have been charged for, or as witnesses in cases where their partner/ex-partner has been charged with domestic abuse. The WSS Service have expertise in supporting women in many different, sometimes difficult circumstances and if you have any questions about the service or what we provide please just ask.

Why have I been invited to participate?

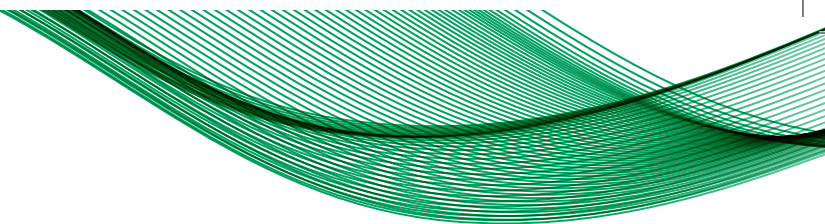
You have been invited to take part as you have experience of telling professionals about your experience of domestic abuse and the justice system. We want to improve our knowledge and understanding, and identify gaps in provision, to improve outcomes across justice systems for victims of domestic abuse in the future.

Do I have to take part?

No, whether you take part is entirely up to you. Please take your time to decide. You can decide not to take part or to ask us not to use your information up to 2 weeks after your interview takes place. If you decide you don't want us to use your data, then please contact us, we won't use any of what you tell us and your information will be completely deleted. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form, which we'll explain in a moment.

What will happen during the interview?

- The interviews will take place at [location].
- The interview will last approximately 1 hour.
- You won't be asked to share any personal experiences of domestic abuse during the interview - we are interested in how professionals supported you and we will focus on what happened when you told someone about your experience.
- The interview will be audio/voice recorded.

- 
- You don't need to answer questions if you do not want to.
 - You can leave the interview at any time – this will not impact on any support you are receiving or might receive in the future from WSS Service.
 - Immediately following the interview, if you would like to talk to a support worker, this can be arranged.

What will happen with all the information collected?

- The information you tell us may be used in various reports written by WSS Service, but we will make sure it will not be possible to identify you from the details you give.
- We are working with national domestic abuse charity SafeLives to analyse the research.
- Personal identifiable information (e.g., audio recordings of your voice, your name, contact details) will be securely stored by WSS Service and SafeLives following our strict Data Protection Policies, kept for up to 12 months and then securely disposed of.
- The research notes will be securely stored in an encrypted analysis software which follows GDPR guidelines.
- The interview will be confidential unless you disclose something that tells us that you or someone else is at risk of harm.
- If a personal disclosure, poor practice or developmental need is disclosed, this information will not be shared without your consent, unless a significant/safeguarding risk is identified. The project team will discuss this with you before telling anyone else.

What will happen after the interview?

Following discussions with you and other people with lived experience, we will bring the information together into a report with our findings and some recommendations. This might be published online and used to help other areas improve their services, as well as help us in West Dunbartonshire.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided any incentives to take part in this research. However, we will reimburse you for your time.

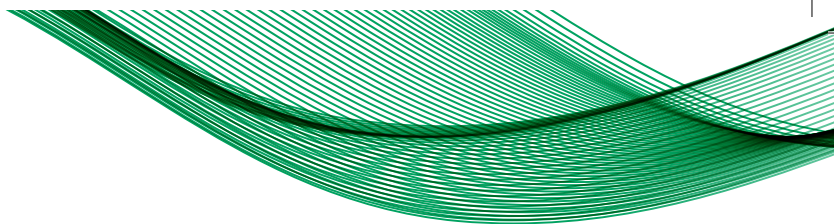
What happens next?

If you're happy to take part today, then please complete the consent form below. If you have any questions or concerns at any point, please contact the project team. Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Project team

Grace McVey: Grace.McVey@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

Dominique Haggerty: dominique.haggerty@west-dunbarton.gov.uk



CONSENT FORM

Interview type	Lived experience – In person
Participant name for research purposes (e.g. initials, nickname, “participant number 1”)	
Project team members present	Grace McVey; Dominique Haggerty

Please circle YES/NO for every statement below.

YES/NO I have been read and understand the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

YES/NO I agree to anonymised research data from the interview (including anonymised quotes) to be used in reports for Women’s Safety and Support Service. These reports may be published on online, and maybe shared on social media and used for future research.

YES/NO I understand that I can withdraw consent at any time before, during the interview and up to two weeks after the workshop. And that I can choose whether or not to answer all questions.

YES/NO I understand that my personal information will be kept safe and secure, and it will not be shared with any other organisations, the only exception to this is if Women’s Safety and Support Service or SafeLives staff become aware that a person is at risk of serious harm; in this case they would have a duty to share information without consent.

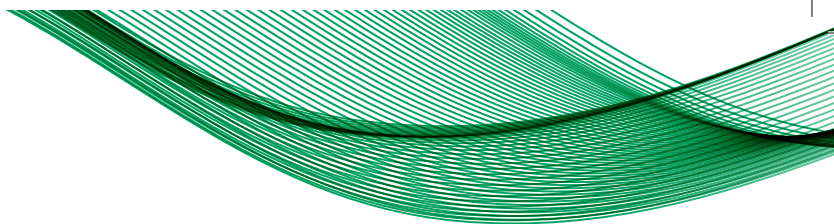
YES/NO I agree to take part in the interview.

YES/NO I know who to contact if I have any questions or concerns.

Signature of participant	
Date	

Please enter your email address below if you wish to be kept up to date with the WSS Service project

Email address	
Mobile number	



INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

Introduction and rapport building (5 minutes)

- Thank the participant for attending.
- Briefly introduce yourselves.

Information sheet and consent form (10 – 15 minutes)

- Talk through either Information Form A or B, give the participant the opportunity to ask questions.

If they are happy to continue,

- Talk through the Consent form with the participant. If they are happy to proceed, they will need to circle all the YES's and sign/date it.

Interview

Review consent (5 minutes)

Inform the participant:

- The interview should take approximately 1 hour.
- You will not ask about their personal experience of domestic abuse. Questions will relate to their experience of telling professionals about domestic abuse and the support they received.
- They do not need to answer a question if they do not want to. They can ask for a break or stop the interview at any point.
- At the end of the interview, the participant will be given a de-brief sheet.
- Immediately following the interview, if the participant would like to talk to a support worker, this can be arranged.

Ask if the participant understands, and if they have any questions.

Ask the participant if they are happy to proceed.

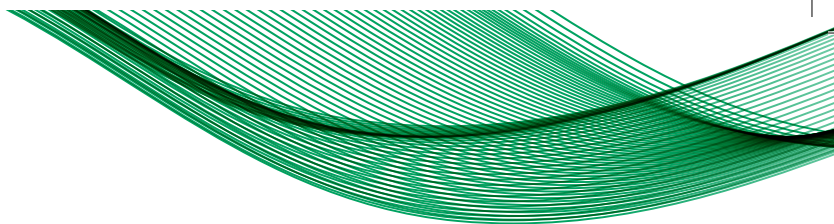
If yes, state: **we are going to begin the interview now.**

Start recording the interview.

Warm up questions (5- 10 minutes)

1. Tell us a little about yourself.

Prompts: Where do you stay? Who do you live with? How do you find that? What are your interests? How would you describe yourself? What is a day in your life like?



Main interview questions (45 minutes)

Experiences of the Justice System

2. We want to know a little about why you required the support of justice services? How would describe the offer(s) of support you received?

Prompts: How were you responded to/ did you find you were able to form helpful relationships? Did you feel you understood the processes? Any challenges?

3. Has your experiences of domestic abuse created additional challenges for you in your journey as a justice service user? If yes, how?

Experiences of Reporting Domestic Abuse

4. Have you reported domestic abuse to police? Y N

Prompt: if Y what was reporting like for you? Did it make a difference to you? How did it impact you? Was a formal risk assessment used?

If N what discouraged you from reporting? Barriers such as fleeing, fear of perpetrator, historical poor experiences of reporting etc.

Experiences of Disclosing Domestic Abuse

5. Were you ever asked about your experiences of DA by professionals from the point you were arrested and/or throughout the justice process? Y N

Prompt: If Y Who asked? How did they ask? Did you feel supported to disclose?

what influenced your ability to disclose? Was a formal risk assessment used? What was disclosure like for you? Were you asked if you were safe or needed immediate safety assistance?

If you did not disclose domestic abuse would you have welcomed being asked a direct question about your experiences of domestic abuse? Y N

If you were asked but did not disclose, why did you choose not to?

When do you think would have been the best time in your justice journey to be asked about domestic abuse?

6. Did you have the opportunity to tell any other professional about your experience of domestic abuse? Y N

If YES: which professional? Did they ask or did you tell? Do you know what they did with the information you shared? what was reporting like? Did it make a difference? How did it impact/help you?

7. How did you feel about the responses you received?

Were you satisfied with how your disclosure was responded to?

Y N – if no can you tell us more about how your disclosure was responded to?

Prompt: Describe what happened after you told someone about the abuse.

Prompt: Describe what happened after you told someone about the abuse.

Did it make a difference to you? How?

Are you aware of which agencies were involved in your support?

Do you know if you were referred to MARAC? If Y, what was your experience of MARAC?

Were adults or children's social work services involved? If Y, what was your experience of Adults/Children's social work?

Were mental health/health services involved? If Y, what was your experience of mental health/health services?

Were housing involved? If Y, what was your experience of housing services?

Supports Offered

8. Throughout the justice process, have you been offered specialist supports related to the impact of domestic abuse?

Y or N

Prompts: VAWG Specialist service, addictions, mental health, ASP

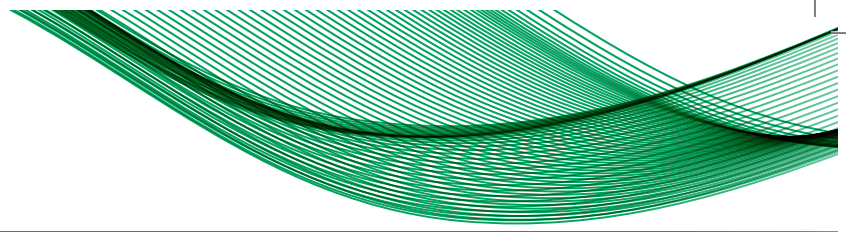
9. Can you tell me about the kinds of supports and your experience of how effective those supports were/are?

Prompt: Did you feel safe and/or understood when accessing services? How helpful/effective were these support services? - Very helpful- Somewhat helpful - Not helpful at all. What made the difference in how you rated helpfulness/effectiveness? Was accessing supports easy? What challenges did you experience/what made it difficult to engage with support? What additional support services do you think would have been helpful? Were you offered any other, more general, services that you found helpful?

Recommendations

10. What suggestions would you make that would improve the justice system's response to women who have experienced domestic abuse?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience? Anything we have not asked that you would want to speak about?



After the interview

Closing

- Say that the interview is finished Stop recording
- Thank them for their openness and willingness to share their experiences.
- Give the participant to ask any questions about the interview or project.
- How are the feeling, do they want to arrange a talk with a support worker? What are there plans following the interview – ensure their welfare.

Debrief (5 minutes)

- Talk through the debrief sheet, give them a copy to take home.



West Dunbartonshire Health & Social Care Partnership