

# **Separate lives, silenced voices: women offenders speaking out on domestic violence and community-based services**

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## Abstract

The primary aim of this study is to explore women offenders' experiences of, contact with, and delivery of, community-based health and social care services. Women offenders represent a particularly disadvantaged and silent group in society whose views have largely been disregarded in previous studies. More specifically, there has been a general lack of attention to their experiences of trying to meet their welfare needs before and after they encounter the Criminal Justice System (CJS). This research sought to provide a more informed understanding of what participants wanted to convey about their lived realities, the meaning of their experiences of help-seeking and their perceptions of *appropriate* responses to their welfare needs.

The study was local, purposive and applied. It was underpinned by feminist epistemology and qualitative, heuristic and collaborative methodology. Reflexive dimensions were an integral part of the whole research process. It was also strengthened by a wish to change policy and practice as a direct consequence of hearing and taking account of service users' standpoints on experiencing those policies and practices. Of central importance was a desire to view women offenders not as research 'subjects' but as 'participants' in a process which would put their views and perspectives at the centre of the study. Therefore, before embarking on the study, I set up a research advisory group as a means of collaborating with women who had direct and personal experience of the CJS as 'expert advisers', to help guide and develop the research. I also sought ways of working collaboratively with research participants, for example, by utilising research methods such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews and asking participants to provide feedback on how I had written up my interactions with them. I also incorporated participant and gatekeeper evaluation methods to seek their views on their experiences of the research.

The original contributions to the body of knowledge and understanding that this research makes are in the identification of characteristics of a *service generic model of community-based welfare provision*. This relates particularly to the attitudes and behaviours of and delivery by service providers and individual practitioners. It is also framed in the context of participants' shared experience of domestic violence and its impact on their help-seeking from welfare services which was previously hidden and unknown. In addition, the study adds to feminist social research methodology through the development of a *feminist and heuristic approach to collaborative research* that seeks to involve the 'knowers' in an innovative way, that is, as 'expert advisers', throughout the research process. The profound and lasting impact is the clarity of its core findings: what emerge from women who participated in this work are appeals for service providers, individual practitioners (and researchers) to be in relationship with them. Hence, there is a call for the reduction of destructive boundaries in relationships and the integration of reflexive practice, in both the provision of community-based welfare services and approaches to conducting research of this kind.

## **Author's declaration**

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the university.

Signed:

Date: 14:03:03

## **Dedication**

To all the women on the front line of violence, injustice, social exclusion and criminality whose battles against hardship and harm inform every page.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank members of the research advisory group and all the women who took part in this study. Without their courage, sincerity and enthusiasm to share their thoughts and feelings, there would be no thesis. I should also like to thank *all* the staff at the prison, probation service and women's project where I conducted the research, for their commitment, support and co-operation. The University of Gloucestershire have provided assistance in a variety of ways. My supervisors, Karen Ross, Celia Brackenridge and Madeleine Howe have nurtured, challenged, cajoled, and supported me unstintingly. (They have also consistently demonstrated their enduring patience with what we have come to 'know' as my 'idiosyncratic use of punctuation'). I thank them so much for *all* their contributions *throughout* this work. Extra, special thanks to Karen Ross for her patience, sensitivity and indefatigable belief in me which consistently gave me the courage to persist in moving forward until I reached the end of this journey. Special thanks and appreciation are particularly due to Karl Gregory who helped me open the door to my courageousness, end my silence, find my voice and integrate my reflexive self in this work.

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## Contents

<b>Reflexive commentary (1) - Separate and silent: parallel worlds</b>	<b>8</b>
 <b>Chapter 1 – Opening with parallels: locating myself in the research and setting the context</b>	
Introduction	9
Parallel worlds: locating myself in the research	9
Setting the context: providing a route map through the thesis	11
 <b>Chapter 2 - Feminism, gender and welfare policy</b>	
Introduction	16
Exploring feminist thought on gendered social relations	17
Development of welfare services	28
Current issues in providing welfare services	33
Domestic violence policy and practice	39
Conclusion	45
 <b>Chapter 3 - Women offenders: complex lives and harsh vicious circles</b>	
Introduction	47
Explanations for women's criminality	48
How women experience the criminal justice system (CJS)	56
Life on the outside: women re-building their lives after prison	66
Women offenders' actual experiences of accessing welfare services	70
Conclusion	70
 <b>Chapter 4 - 'Doing' feminist, heuristic and collaborative research: doing what 'felt right' and 'made sense'</b>	
Introduction	72
Feminist, heuristic <i>and</i> collaborative methodology	73
Reflexive commentary (2): working with a research advisory group	82
Emergent issues: benefits and problems	85
Conclusion	94
 <b>Chapter 5 - 'Doing' the research: ethics, access and methods; relationships, sensitivity and emotion</b>	
Introduction	96
Research aims and objectives	97
Conducting the study: ethics, access and methods	98
Reflexive commentary (3): dealing with sensitivity and emotion in researcher/research participant relationships	114
Conclusion	121
 <b>Chapter 6 - Katie</b>	
Sarah: 'introducing Katie'	123
Katie: 'telling it like it is'?	125
Sarah: 'reflecting on Katie'	139

<b>Chapter 7 - Complex, chaotic lives: focusing on lived realities</b>	
Introduction	142
Harmed and neglected	143
Harsh judgments, brutal labelling	151
Blocking out the pain: alcohol and drug abuse	152
Coping, surviving and achieving	154
Conclusion	157
 <b>Chapter 8 - Looking from the inside out: exploring experiences of help-seeking from welfare services</b>	
Introduction	159
Positioning help and support in women's lives	160
Straight talking: perceptions of community-based welfare services	168
Shocking and surprising: challenging the taken for granted assumptions about the nature of women's refuges	177
Conclusion	180
 <b>Chapter 9 - Lifting voices: what women most wanted service providers to hear and change</b>	
Introduction	182
Drawing conclusions	183
Recommendations for change	189
 <b>References</b>	193
 <b>Figures</b>	
Figure 1: Helpfulness and support/advice from agencies victims contacted	45
Figure 2: Research design	99
 <b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1: Information about gatekeeper organisations	226
Appendix 2: Ethics addendum	227
Appendix 3: Letter to Prison Governor	230
Appendix 4: Information for potential research participants in prison	231
Appendix 5: Voluntary informed consent form	232
Appendix 6: Prompt sheet for conducting semi-structured interviews	233
Appendix 7: Coding frame: version 9 and worked example of how interview material generated themes and then the coding frame	234
Appendix 8: Sample letter to participants	238
Appendix 9: Individual biographies	239
Appendix 10: Copies of correspondence and feedback sheets on transcripts	245
Appendix 11: Participant evaluation questionnaires (with and without participant observation phase)	249
Appendix 12: Gatekeeper evaluation questionnaire	253
Appendix 13: Findings from participant and gatekeeper evaluations	255
Appendix 14: Example of interview transcript	263
Appendix 15: Participant observation role analysis	278

## **Reflexive commentary (1) - Separate and silent: parallel worlds**

A young child sits, alone, looking out towards the sea. As she breathes in its beauty she marvels at the way the surface sparkles. It's almost as if it is covered in a blanket of diamonds with each one dancing in the sunlight. Most of all, the child loves the pattern and predictable rhythm of the ocean's waves as they move with such regularity and form. Even the sounds she hears, as the pebbles roll back and forth in motion with the water brings comfort and peace. In this place, in isolation, she feels free and safe and, at first glance, she appears to be smiling. Her chin rests on her knees which are drawn upwards in a cocoon. She is 'still', separate and silent, drinking in the warmth of the sun and the breeze on her face.

A closer look at this small child reveals what belies the smile. She is not smiling but crying. Silent tears express her struggle and pain. She often screams and shouts and 'acts out' and yet, unbelievably, she remains unheard. What she learns only too well is that to remain silent and separate, to disappear into her 'self', affords her some safety and a measure of control over the daily chaos, neglect and ambiguity of her reality.

I am this child.



# **Chapter 1 – Opening with parallels: locating myself in the research and setting the context**

## **Introduction**

This study explores women offenders' experiences of accessing community-based welfare services. The thesis gives prominence to participants' voices and therefore contributes to ending the silence that seems to enfold the complex and chaotic lived realities that many of them endure. It also presents my own research journey in exploring and seeking to understand the meaning of their experiences. Portraying the actuality of the journey has been exceptionally challenging, (invariably) frustrating, (at times) distressing and yet, amazingly fulfilling in deeply profound ways. Positioning myself so that I could really hear women's narratives about their experiences, including many that were filled with pain, was personally challenging but vital to the research overall (see Chapter 4, 5 and 9). An account of the place and meaning of my connections to the essence of this work therefore crucially provides the foundation for introducing the study so that there is clarity about my personal involvement in it. An outline of the contents of each chapter follows this and acts as a guide to the thesis as a whole.

## **Parallel worlds: locating myself in the research**

There are inevitably a number of ways in which researchers are connected to the research they are engaged in. Yet, these often remain hidden from view, particularly within traditional positivist, male-centred research, in which the primary aim is to remain dispassionate, detached and objective (see Chapter 4). Whilst feminist researchers have long critiqued such indifference and remoteness and challenged the power relations within researcher/research participant relationships, many have also seemingly avoided exploring and revealing the ways in which they are personally involved in their work. For example, Stanley and Wise (1993) are especially critical of how researcher involvement is frequently invisible in the presentation of research. There are notable exceptions including, Oakley (1981) Smith (1987) Sollie and Leslie (1994) Edwards and Ribbens (1998) and Ribbens (1998) who each argue that the researcher is inexorably linked to the research process. In other words, that she is simultaneously an inquirer and a participant in her world (Morbey 1999).

Reflexivity, a central tenet of feminist methodology, contributes to countering this invisibility. This is because reflexive practice is essential to exploring personal involvement with and connections to social research, both in terms of the processes of the research and the impact on the researcher (Edwards and Ribben 1998; Morbey 1999; Hubbard *et al.* 2001). Thus, reflexive approaches allow explanations of social research to reflect the nature and experience of pursuing such work. Difficulties and challenges are exposed and achievements and successes are also revealed. Thereby, it becomes possible to see the actuality of the research, including the feelings and emotions that it evoked in the researcher. Crucially, the researcher is a *person* and her *personhood* or *self* cannot be left out of the research process

(Birch 1998). Following Stanley and Wise (1993), to deny or omit this presence and involvement is to ensure a betrayal of the realities of conducting social research. Therefore, it follows that, as Smith (1987) argues, an account of the situated nature of the researcher necessarily forms the beginning and basis of studies of this kind.

My opening reflexive commentary represents the culmination of my in-depth reflexive working in conveying the essence of my personal experiences and involvement in this study. With additional support from a specialist counsellor over an extended period of time, I have explored the parallels that exist between myself and the women who have participated in the study so that I can be clearer about how I have come to 'know' about their experiences in the ways that I have (Edwards and Ribbens 1998). Thus, initially, I recognised how the connections stemmed from my previous experiences as Co-ordinator of a countywide women's project that I had been instrumental in developing for a partnership project between the probation service and a centre for voluntary services. The primary aims of the project were to build and extend opportunities for women offenders in their communities and enable them to be more effective in accessing education, training and employment opportunities. My experiences of working in this context provided me with the motivation and reasons for seeking to explore the particular experiences of women offenders as they tried to meet their welfare needs. However, I later became aware of the ways in which my personal experiences as a child and subconscious desire to heal some of the harm I still felt, also underpinned my rationale for conducting this particular study.

Overall, reflexive practice enabled me to develop my understanding about why particular experiences in 'doing' the research resonated in me at such a deeply personal level. For example, there were times when I felt emotionally overwhelmed by some of the literature that informs the study including, Carlen *et al.* (1985) Eaton (1986; 1993) Lloyd (1995) and Devlin's (1998) accounts of the labelling, stereotyping, abuse, neglect and appalling conditions women in prison can endure. Conceptualising and theorising about such experiences can be eminently hard. This is illustrated by my response to Lloyd's research with 'violent' women, which I recorded in my research journal:

*I cried as I read women's testimonies of setting themselves on fire, being placed in solitary confinement with no clothes or blankets or in straightjackets for hours and even days on end. One woman described the way her arm was broken as she was forced into her cell. Another talked about how she was 'set upon' and injected with paraldehyde. I recognised her story. On two occasions in the past I assisted in the pinning down of women who were 'out of control' in a general hospital setting. I did what I was instructed to do. I felt paralysed by my own fear. The paraldehyde was so toxic it couldn't be administered using a disposable syringe. The pain of the injection was unbelievable and the humiliation of being pinned down, assaulted and tranquillised, unimaginable. I can still remember the smell of the fumes of the drug and the sudden stillness and silence as we walked away leaving them unconscious and alone. If placed in the same situation today would I participate so readily again? I don't think so. There are other ways – I know that now.*

I am not proud of my part in the assault of these two women and it is with the deepest possible regret and shame that I look back to that time and space. Nonetheless, it has been so important to look back with a much wiser eye. I know that I occupied a very different space back then. I was the owner of a very different conscience and consciousness. As I reflect, I also recognise my need to celebrate my own development of what is thankfully, a much more sensitive, complex and humane personhood.

Working reflexively also helped me to understand why particular feelings women shared spoke to my core sense of self. These largely related to my personal experiences as a child. Consequently, I have faced a number of dilemmas in deciding how much detail to include about these. On the one hand, I support the need to bring the personal to research (Ribbens and Edwards 1998). However, due to the nature of my experiences and the people that were involved in them, I am also mindful of the need to be cautious. After all, I am not afforded anonymity in the same way that participants have been. Therefore, quintessentially, it is enough for me to state that I 'know' feelings that originate from abusive relationships, not being heard and the absence of caring.

Of central importance to this discussion, are possible criticisms of such involvement and/or presence, for example, in terms of concerns about possible bias and/or over-identification. However, as Stanley and Wise (1993) suggest, I am clear that throughout this study I have been able to identify the still, clear moments when I realised that I actually knew nothing about participants' individual worlds and their actual lived realities. This was especially evident in each nuanced account and every detailed narrative, including for example, those that recounted the rollercoaster of overwhelming crises individuals dealt with on an almost daily basis (see Chapter 7).

In sum, when I came to this study I knew some things about the lived realities and experiences of women offenders because of my previous work, my review of the literature and my personal experiences. Yet, what I also came to know was that I actually knew very little and thus, I came to know much more. Working reflexively enabled me to deconstruct my prior knowledge and re-vision what I previously thought I knew professionally, theoretically *and* personally. Therefore, overall, what I convey in the pages of this thesis are my interpretations of what I came to know about *participants' lives and participants' experiences* through hearing and privileging *their* voices. These are accompanied by reflexive commentaries about *my* personal research journey and what I also came to know about the research process and myself.

### **Setting the context: providing a route map through the thesis**

Chapter 2 begins the process of shaping the study's approach to conceptualising and understanding women offenders' experiences of accessing community-based health and social care services. Characteristics of diverse and often conflicting feminist analyses of



gendered social relations are examined. Recognition is given to some of the dangers of creating typologies of feminist theories, for example, because of the way they can exclude much feminist thinking (Stacey 1993; Jackson and Jones 1998). However, the rationale for approaching the work in this way is also explored in relation to the complexity associated with the diverse ways in which women's oppression is explained. Central to this discussion is an analysis of whether generality or differentiated needs and experiences of divergent groups of women are emphasised in different feminist approaches. The broad historical context of the development of the welfare state is also considered with a brief account and critique of post-war welfare reforms. This is accompanied by a discussion of the impact of apparently opposing paradigms of welfare (Williams *et al.* 1999) and the centrality and importance of gender to the social policy debate (Walby 1990; Watson 1999). To illustrate this, a series of complex factors that currently affect the provision of welfare services more generally are analysed. Furthermore, issues pertaining to the welfare state's ability to meet the specific needs of individuals or particular groups of women are discussed. Finally, some of these issues are illustrated more specifically with reference to domestic violence policy and practice and concerns are highlighted about the general absence of previous work that has recognised women offenders as a distinct group with specific experiences and needs in this context.

A broad outline of the historical context of relevant criminological literature and critique of traditional theories of women's criminality provides the initial focus for Chapter 3. Feminist perspectives in criminology provide the epistemological basis. Explanations for women's criminality are examined in relation to the impact of their life experiences and 'problematic backgrounds'. The emphasis is on how being subjected to poverty, domestic violence and abuse can culminate in criminal activity, often as a means of survival in essentially hostile communities (Carlen 1988; Lloyd 1995; Janeksela 1997; Tyler 1997; Devlin 1998). Furthermore, the effects of women's offending behaviour are explored in relation to how they are often viewed as doubly deviant because of dominant perceptions of them as guilty of ignoring socially constructed gender roles (Lloyd 1995). Developing and building on concepts and theories previously examined in Chapter 2 and focusing particularly on the consequences of criminality for women compared to men, the subsequent impact of the 'othering' of women offenders is also discussed (McCleod 1982; Carlen 1983; Worrall 1990; Chesney-Lind 1997; Danner 2000).

Next, consideration is given to women's experiences of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and how, once labelled, women offenders experience welfare services more generally. Following on from this, society's treatment of women offenders is explored with particular reference to the harsh experiences of individuals who are victims of what Lloyd (1995:36) defines as 'societal disgust'. The rehabilitation of women offenders also provides a focus for attention as well as the particular experiences of women facing life on the outside after custody. The chapter concludes by highlighting concerns about the extremely limited data that currently

exist about how women actually experience community-based welfare services before and after they have encountered the CJS and the effects their experiences have on them as they attempt to meet their welfare needs.

The rationale for placing women at the centre of this study, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the actual position of women offenders within the context of a feminist epistemology, is explored in depth in Chapter 4. Issues pertaining to relationships between researcher and research participant are at the centre of this chapter which is presented in two parts. The initial emphasis is on examining 'traditional' or male-centred research and its critique by feminist researchers, for example, because of its impartiality, dispassion and remoteness (Stanley and Wise 1993). Feminist standpoint theory is examined because of how, in contrast, it situates the research participant as the key player in the process (Harstock 1983; Harding 1987). This is followed by an exploration of participation/collaboration as a paradigm. Feminist models of collaborative research are placed at the centre of a discussion about how some feminist researchers have underutilised collaborative approaches in their work. This is despite how notions of collaboration are often expounded within feminist methodology more widely, for example, by Laslett and Rapoport (1975); Kleiber and Light (1978) and Reinharz (1983). Similarities between participatory/collaborative research and feminist methodology are also highlighted. These are exemplified in terms of their shared focus on involving the people whose experiences are being studied (Reinharz 1992). Following this, the ways that heuristic methodology potentially relates to both participatory and feminist research are discussed. This is largely because of shared concerns about the researcher/research participant relationship and the importance accorded to reflexivity (Maguire 2001) although anxieties about the ethical complexities of such approaches are also illuminated (Oleson 2000). The key proposition that underpins this work is also explored that, taken together, 'doing' feminist, heuristic and collaborative research was the most appropriate approach for this study because it essentially embraced doing what 'felt right' and 'made sense' thus ensuring that the research was meaningful to all involved.

The second part of Chapter 4 integrates the second reflexive commentary for the thesis. The focus is on the rationale for setting up an advisory group of 'expert advisers/knowers', as a means of collaborating with women who have direct and personal experience of the CJS. The group's role in supporting, advising and guiding the research process is also explored with particular emphasis on examining the practice of building long-term relationships with 'vulnerable' groups of women. Both short and long-term ethical issues are considered, for example, the implications of adopting an approach based on reciprocity, mutual disclosure and 'friendship' and the impact of 'role reversal' where it can be the researcher who ultimately feels powerless and abandoned in the relationship.



Chapter 5 is also presented in two parts. The first section focuses on the ways in which the study was conducted. It includes an outline of each stage of the research process, from formulation of the research aims and objectives, through issues relating to ethics and access, to the choice of particular research methods and analysis and presentation of data. Central to this is a discussion about the ways in which collaboration with research participants was maximised, and building relationships prioritised, according to the study's feminist, heuristic and collaborative methodology. Similarly, personal reflexivity is inherent to this part of the chapter and this is reflected in my writing style which conveys expressions of feelings and thoughts so that, for example, the reader can *feel* the moral dilemmas and *be* with my account of how I did the research rather than only *think* about it (Ellis and Bochner 2000). In addition, the meaning of relationships is a theme that runs throughout the study and this is explored in the third and final reflexive commentary which is presented in the second part of Chapter 5. The rationale for this is based on my recognition of how it provides a means of exploring issues pertaining to sensitivity, emotions and potential harm in researcher/research participant interactions in some depth (Edwards and Ribbens 1998; Hubbard *et al.* 2001). Data from participant and gatekeeper evaluations of their experiences of the research process illustrate the value of mutual respect and trust in these relationships. They also further exemplify the collaborative nature of the research. Furthermore, a role analysis is used to illustrate the multiple and complex positions I occupied during the fieldwork phase of the study. Accordingly, I examine the many different ways in which the researcher necessarily fulfils multiple roles when undertaking research of this kind (Homan 1991; Fielding 1993) and, as a result, the extent and type of support she might need.

Chapter 6 is a product of the collaborative and reflexive process. It is one woman's powerful and eloquent account of her experiences of help-seeking by making contact with welfare services. A range of themes and issues emerge to provide the context and framework for subsequent findings chapters. Katie's narrative is highly evocative, both of strategies she has employed for coping with her experiences and of her insights into how others view the choices she has made. Her account is presented in such a way that it 'stands alone' and is deliberately non-interpretive. The aim is to both privilege Katie's voice, learn directly from her about her lived reality at this point in her life and also to make sense of her story for me, the researcher, and the study as a whole. By presenting Katie's narrative in this way, I hope to illustrate the experiences I had in my contact with individual women throughout the study and the impact they each had on me. I also hope to demonstrate the intrinsic value of reading and listening to individuals' actual narratives, because this enables us to gain a much richer and more in-depth insight into their experiences. As a result, we can perhaps work to develop our understanding of their frustrations, struggles and successes in a more profound way.

Chapter 7 reveals participants' outstanding strength, courage, depth of feeling and urgent desire to be heard and understood. In telling their stories they have explored and described



the turmoil and struggle that characterises so many aspects of their extremely complex lived realities. Accordingly, what emerges from within each of them, whilst being both difficult to convey and hear, are shared experiences of domestic violence, harm and neglect, drug abuse and offending, labelling and judgmental attitudes, isolation and invisibility. Equally evident, are examples of women coping, surviving and achieving, despite all the complex barriers they encounter. Together, all their experiences merge to provide unique and meaningful insights into the context within which they encounter community-based welfare services.

Participants' help-seeking experiences provide the focus for Chapter 8. Accordingly, this involves an in-depth exploration of the meaning of their *actual* encounters with welfare service providers and individual practitioners and their perceptions about whether their needs are likely be met in the future. Central to this chapter, is how participants consistently explained their experiences of welfare service providers in relation to the quality of their relationships with individual practitioners as well as aspects of the approach workers adopted with them. As a result, the importance women accorded to being in relationship with individual practitioners underpins the analysis of all the other major themes that emerge from their narratives. These themes are organised under two main headings: first, the focus is on the ways in which participants felt isolated and unsupported and how they attributed considerable meaning to locating help and support in order to meet their needs more effectively. This is followed by an exploration of women's perceptions of their actual experiences of contact with community-based welfare service providers and individual practitioners. Accordingly, attention is paid to the ways in which many participants felt judged, worthless, let down, unheard and uncared for by welfare service providers and individual practitioners. Throughout the chapter, women's perceptions of the consequences of their largely negative encounters and the absence of appropriate support and help are highlighted and discussed in some depth. Finally, and of particular significance overall, participants' insights and perspectives on the nature of women's refuges are explored. Consequently, questions are posed about the quality and extent of support and help that is currently provided in these establishments.

Chapter 9 draws together the various strands from all the preceding chapters and explores their meaning in the context of both my chosen methodology and the themes which emerge in this work. The original contributions that this study makes, as well as potential areas for future research are highlighted. Recommendations for change are made to inform policymakers, service providers and practitioners about what women most need them to hear and subsequently change in order to meet their welfare needs more effectively in the future. Women's voices poignantly illustrate *their* most important messages for change. Finally, and by way of conclusion, participants' propositions about the characteristics of *appropriate* responses from welfare service providers and individual practitioners are presented in the form of a creative synthesis which fuses individuals' perceptions with the whole (Moustakas 1990).

## Chapter 2 – Feminism, gender and welfare policy

### Introduction

This chapter explores different feminist analyses of gendered social relations, in order to shape the study's theoretical approach to understanding women offenders' experiences of accessing community-based health and social care services. The focus is on examining some features of different and often opposing feminist analyses of gendered social relations and their importance in developing an understanding of participants' experiences. Some feminist theorists warn against the dangers of creating such typologies of feminist theories because of the way they can exclude much feminist thinking, ignore the complexities of an individual's work and, as a result, stereotype feminist ideas (Stacey 1993; Jackson and Jones 1998). However, the rationale for approaching this work in this way is that despite the fact that all feminist perspectives question and challenge women's oppression, they differ in their analysis of its causes. As a consequence, they also differ in their proposals for change. No single perspective provides a satisfactory or adequate analytical framework for examining the issues pertaining to the experiences of women offenders that this study seeks to explore. To illustrate this complexity, the different ways women's oppression is explained and the extent to which the generality of women's oppression or the differentiated needs and experiences of divergent groups of women is emphasised in different feminist approaches, are examined and discussed.

The broad historical context of the development of the welfare state is considered by briefly chronicling and critiquing post-war welfare reforms. A discussion of the impact of apparently opposing paradigms of welfare (Williams *et al.* 1999) and the centrality and importance of gender to the social policy debate (Walby 1990; Watson 1999) follows this. To illustrate this; a series of complex factors that currently affect the provision of welfare services more generally are analysed. These include the fundamental connections between the influence of gendered activity in the welfare state and the extent to which the needs of women generally are currently being met (Foster 1996; Hanmer and Hearn 1999). Furthermore, issues pertaining to the welfare state's ability to meet the specific needs of individuals or particular groups of women are discussed. These include the additional barriers to access that some women experience as a result of disorganised, fragmented and, at times, inappropriate services that are delivered in ways that are unacceptable to women with support needs (Taylor 1999). The apparent emphasis on short-term interventions in health and social care (Davis 1996) and the tendency of service providers to individualise problems rather than to place them in a broader structural context are also highlighted (Edwards 1995; Edwards *et al.* 1999). Finally, some of these issues are illustrated more specifically with reference to domestic violence policy and practice. For example, in terms of the apparent uncertainty about whether, even within the refuge movement, some women,



including women offenders, are in danger of experiencing further isolation, frustration and deprivation as they attempt to meet their welfare needs.<sup>1</sup>

### **Exploring feminist thought on gendered social relations**

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to undertake a detailed examination of the historical development of feminist thought. Rather, the aim here is to broadly centre on 'second wave feminism'; more specifically, to use major aspects of Liberal feminism, Radical feminism, Socialist feminism, Black feminism and Poststructural feminism to provide the conceptual basis for exploring women's experiences in this work. This is not to deny or ignore feminist thinkers in the earlier part of the twentieth century but more accurately, to acknowledge that the feminist theory we now know derived from that time. Likewise, it is to recognise that without this ground-breaking work and without, for example, the pioneering activism that led to the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement, none of the theory that is produced today could have been developed (Jackson and Jones 1998).

There are a number of tensions and dilemmas associated with seeking to convey the ways in which each feminist approach contributes to this study's overall conceptual framework. Exploring each theory in turn may invoke a perception of the work as having a 'list-like' quality. This is problematic because of how it masks the sophistication of the construction of the study's underpinning theoretical framework. Yet, approaching the work in this way is vital to being able to understand women's diverse and complex experiences in this study overall. With these tensions in mind, each of the different feminist approaches that are relevant to this work are presented by reviewing the theoretical perspective in general, showing how it relates to the topic and then critiquing it. The synthesis of different feminist influences will emerge later, in the conclusion to the chapter, and this will provide the basis for moving forward in this study.

#### *Liberal feminism*

Since the 1960s and '70s the primary emphasis of Liberal feminism has been striving for equal rights and the equal participation of women in the public sphere to counter the oppression that women experience (Tong 1992). The right to vote, to equal education and equal employment informs the campaigns of liberal feminists (Friedan 1983; Phillips 1987). Their policy focus is on equal opportunities, legislation (sex equality) and ending discrimination through a process of social reform (Hallett 1996). More specifically, Williams (1989) provides examples of contemporary liberal feminist strategies including pressurising local authorities to develop and institute equal opportunities policies and challenging the sexism of those who provide welfare services. Gender

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<sup>1</sup> The focus of this chapter is on the experiences of women in general as service users with some reference to the position and specific experiences of women offenders. A more detailed analysis of the extent to which women offenders' specific needs have been met and the impact of social policy on their lives is developed further in Chapter 3.

inequalities are viewed as being caused by sex discrimination, irrational stereotyping and prejudice (Elshtain 1982). Such strategies perhaps accurately reflect the current position in relation to the liberal ideology that underpins the ways community-based health and social care services are offered and as such provide a useful focus for challenge and critique in the context of this study.<sup>2</sup>

The overall strength of Liberal feminism is the way it is founded on a commitment to action for social justice (Wendell 1987). However, it also has many weaknesses. First, Liberal feminism underestimates structural forces (such as poverty, lack of education and employment opportunities) that restrict women's equality. This is reflected in the way the causes of women's oppression are often reduced to narrow, and therefore inadequate, explanations of inequalities. Thus, inequality is cast merely as the result of prejudice that arises from individual stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes and ideas (Crowley and Himmelweit 1992). By focusing on discrimination in this way, there is a danger that small changes occurring in striving for equal opportunities for women conceal the fact that discrimination is perhaps only a symptom of a much bigger structural problem. Hence, the picture is more complex than such an explanation implies. The private sphere, where personal life is ostensibly protected from the public gaze unless individuals infringe the law (Andermahr *et al.* 2000), also goes unchallenged within Liberal feminism and therefore remains intact (Watson 1999). The inadequacies of this are reflected in how assumptions are made about all women's access to paid work, whereas the experience is very different for the majority of women offenders who encounter high levels of unemployment (see Chapter 3). As a consequence, many women offenders trapped in the private sphere and living in violent relationships are written out of such an approach with the result that their experiences can remain hidden from view (Heidensohn 1985; Eaton 1993).

Differences between women and men are viewed as being of little relevance within Liberal feminism even though acknowledgement is given to the fact that women are the child bearers. However, in the context of pressing for reforms to legislation and policies, Williams (1989) critiques Liberal feminists who argue that women can bring a new approach to dealing with bureaucracy because they are more humanistic, amenable and approachable than men. She highlights the inconsistency here, which is that this actually acknowledges the differences that do exist between women and men. Nevertheless, Liberal feminist ideals are premised on treating women and men fairly and equally but with an underlying expectation that women will adopt male characteristics and behaviours (Charles 2000). What underpins this is the supposition that women should be incorporated into the status quo on an equal footing rather than seeking to change it. However,

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<sup>2</sup> These ideas are explored in greater depth later in this chapter as part of the examination of the development of welfare services.



such assumptions are unrealistic and undesirable, in part because society does not provide the necessary material resources to make equality an achievable ideal (Rees 1999). The counter argument would be that differences between women and men should be recognised to avoid the dangers associated with seeking to treat them in the same way. For instance, there is a danger that women will ultimately experience additional disadvantages as a result of incorrect assumptions that women and men 'share a level playing field'. In other words, there is a need to first redress pre-existing power imbalances.

Finally, one of the crucial critiques of Liberal feminism in the context of this study is the way it fails to acknowledge the material differences in different groups of women's lives (Lorde 1984). This is reflected in how it has focused largely on treating white, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual, and non-disabled women as if they are *all* women (Tong 1992). Accordingly, Liberal feminist strategy fails to acknowledge both the negative impact of structural conditions that impede the success of legislative and policy reforms and the differential impact that such reforms have for different groups of women.

### *Radical feminism*

Radical feminists believe that it is 'patriarchy', defined as an overarching system of male superiority and dominance (Millett 1970) or as 'a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (Walby 1990:20), that provides the most compelling explanation for the source of women's oppression. The perception here is that it is men who hold power and use that power to exploit women in every area of their lives, in both private and public spheres (Firestone 1970). Thus, all institutions, laws and policies are viewed as acting in men's best interests, with men holding dominant positions throughout society (MacKinnon 1983). As a result, a Radical feminist critique of Liberal feminism would include for example, the view that women's liberty should not be premised on entering the male defined domain of work where they are forced into seeking to absorb male, aggressive and competitive values. A Radical feminist analysis of gendered relations would also suggest that as men single-mindedly hold onto their power at all costs, Liberal feminist strategy to achieve equal opportunities is idealistic and unrealistic. Radical feminism therefore, critiques the state for not acting in women's interests, because it proactively reinforces men's power through social structures including the CJS, courts and medical profession (Crowley and Himmelweit 1992). This is also evident in the context of the Radical feminist perspective on male violence against women, which is viewed as a form of social control (Radford and Stanko 1996). Walby (1990) illustrates this by describing how the patriarchal state perpetuates women's experiences of violence because of the widespread failure to support them, either in the provision of welfare, or through interventions to ensure their safety. Following this, there is a danger that women offenders living in violent relationships not only experience the

negative impact of male power from the men who are perpetrators of domestic violence in their homes (private sphere) but also as a result of their contact with the welfare state (public sphere).

Radical feminists have frequently been pioneers in exposing previously hidden areas of women's lives. Moreover, they are largely responsible for one of the central guiding feminist principles which certainly underpins this study, that is, that the 'personal is political' (Millett 1970; Dworkin 1981). In essence, they have politicised issues that have normally been considered private matters (Tong 1992). Radical feminist analyses have been influential in campaigns over male violence, incest, pornography and war and the welfare policy focus has largely been on domestic violence, rape and pornography. One of the fundamental aims is to get rid of patriarchy, by working separately from men. Thus, in a welfare context, Radical feminism stresses the need to stop bolstering men's power and supports the ideals of campaigning and organising separately from them, whilst concentrating on the particular needs of women. Recreating, providing and protecting a special 'women's culture', for women only, is therefore prioritised in such an approach (Millett 1970; Daly 1973; French 1985). This is reflected in Radical feminist campaigning, for example, with the development of alternative models of welfare, such as women-only forms of care, based on feminist principles (Pascall 1997). The impact on social welfare is also evident in the way in which some services, including the women's refuge movement, women-only health screening, counselling services and rape crisis centres have been developed to meet the specific needs of women (Watson and Doyal 1999).

Despite recent attempts by some Radical feminists to analyse changes to the nature of patriarchy over time and the ways in which it intersects with other forms of oppression, a major criticism exists in relation to their historical conceptualisation of patriarchy as universally applicable to all (Bryson 1999). In other words, there is a tendency to assume, as with Liberal feminism, that all women share a common experience of oppression (Barrett and Phillips 1992). As a result, differences between women on the basis of age, sexuality, race, class, disability, or as in this context, offending behaviour, are largely ignored. In addition, recognition has for some time been given to the notion that white women have neither acknowledged nor privileged the influences of race or class, and the racism and imperialism that pervade traditional thinking (Amos and Parmer 1984; Brah 1996; Bhavani 2001). However, the effects of criminality and offending behaviour also seem to have been underplayed and this does not appear to have been highlighted in the same way within broad, feminist social policy literature. Whilst it may be tempting to focus on the similarities between women, as was the case during the first phase of the contemporary women's movement, there is a danger that the divisions that separate us and mark out our lived reality remain obscured (Spelman 1988; Phillips 1992).



Furthermore, whilst the broad principle of providing women-only services may be viewed favourably, there is a sense in which such an approach could be criticised for reinforcing biological essentialism/determinism (Williams 1989). That is, women's special values are emphasised but correspondingly there is a danger of trapping women back into their biology as carers, nurturers and mothers. Williams (1989) goes further in criticising Radical feminism for being 'idealist' because it is founded on the assumption that change will occur as a result of encouraging woman-centred values alone. The fact that such values are contrary to the dominant male values that ostensibly pervade society indicates that this is an unrealistic ideal in itself and would go some way towards explaining the uphill battles facing feminist activists, campaigners and practitioners alike on a daily basis (Griffin 1995). Additionally, the Radical feminist critique ignores the successes women have achieved in mainstream welfare provision, forever positioning women as 'victims' to patriarchy, to be 'saved' only by recourse to a women-only enclave. Again this is idealistic and far from feasible. However, there is clearly a need to examine the rationale for meeting the specific needs of particular groups of women by, for example, providing women-only services, and this provides the focus for the latter half of this chapter.

### *Socialist feminism*

Socialist feminists would argue that Radical feminist analysis and strategy are inadequate in bringing about change to the social or economic structure of society. In contrast, they prioritise the need to not only take account of the concept of patriarchy in providing an explanation for women's oppression and gender inequalities, but also to include capitalism (Walby 1990). Whilst there are many different Socialist feminist analyses, their point of connection is the belief that the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism provides the basis for explaining the causes of women's oppression (Jackson 1998). Further, what most Socialist feminist analyses share at a theoretical level, is an attempt to both acknowledge the institutionalised power relationships that cause gender inequalities between men and women, as well as agree that capitalism results in differential experiences of oppression by women of different social classes (Jackson 1998). This is of particular importance in developing an understanding of the different experiences of different groups of women. For example, Ungerson (1997) highlights the Socialist feminist critique of the way health care is rationed in a public system that develops divisions between women. Evidence of this can be found in the ways that only women who are perceived as 'conventional' and in 'conventional' relationships are able to claim some public services (1997). For example, lesbians, women with disabilities and women without partners can be systematically discriminated against when seeking access to new reproductive technologies including *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF).

At a very practical level, welfare strategy, based on Socialist feminist ideals, involves prioritising the need to demonstrate the centrality of women's issues and struggles for equality. Socialist feminism is also concerned to end the secrecy of the private world by bringing such issues out to the public arena and, like Radical feminism, is underpinned by the notion that the 'personal is political'. This is partially achieved by campaigning jointly with men to combat inequalities as well as via women-only activities and national women's organisations such as the National Alliance for Women's Organisations (NAWO). On-going campaigns for better housing, health care, social security, education and employment for women are characteristic of Socialist feminist strategy (Bryson 1992). However, the emphasis is not only on securing more welfare provision for women, but also for non-sexist, anti-oppressive and non-discriminatory provision. Working inside local government, trade unions and the Labour Party to bring about political change and enabling organisations to perceive women's welfare needs as a central political concern are prioritised within Socialist feminism (Walby 1990). As such, Socialist feminist successes are evident historically, for instance, in the development of equal opportunities units, women's committees and, more recently, the Women and Equality Unit which sits in the Cabinet Office. There have also been calls for anti-discriminatory/anti-oppressive practice, positive action programmes and the expansion of social services (Pascall 1997). Nevertheless, the success of this attempt to move feminist activity into mainstream politics is dependent on grass roots women's organisations impacting on and determining local authority policies. Similarly, it is reliant on political will to listen and then make strategic changes at local level. In the current climate this seems to be increasingly difficult and at times, unachievable. Additionally, accomplishments are also dependent on the premise that women's oppression can be ended by working jointly with socialist men who, as Bryson (1999) suggests, may actually contribute to that oppression in practice.

Another key feminist principle that underpins Socialist feminist ideology is mirrored in this study, that is, concern to break down hierarchies (Williams 1989). This is reflected, to some extent, in the way that Socialist feminist strategy prioritises ensuring that service provision is organised in non-sexist and non-hierarchical ways. The aim is to diminish power differentials between service providers and service users and create potential for greater control of that provision by women themselves. Such aims are admirable but may also be idealistic, particularly in a political climate that apparently perpetuates and condones the notion that all families should take responsibility for their own welfare, regardless of their social circumstances and the inequalities they endure (Tester 1996; Watson 1999).



As previously indicated, the importance of understanding differences between women and men, as well as the differential and shared experiences of oppression of distinct groups of women, are recognised within Socialist feminism. It is disappointing however, that despite this and in accordance with other feminist theory, Socialist feminism has remained seemingly oblivious to the particular significance of Black women's experience and any associated implications for welfare strategy (Bhavani and Coulson 1986). Similarly, as with other feminist theory, Socialist feminism is also apparently heedless to the significance of women offenders' experience and any associated implications of this for welfare strategy.

### *Black feminism*

The first major critique of 'mainstream' feminism came from Black feminists who argued that the position of Black women was ignored by many commentators (Hallett 1996; Jarrett-Macauley 1996). As a consequence, Black feminists organised themselves autonomously and opened up debates about the need to listen to the voices of 'other' women; the voices from the margins (hooks 1981), an idea that is also central to Poststructural feminism. Before proceeding any further, there is a need to define the term 'Black' and acknowledge the many complexities and contentions associated with doing so. For example, there is clearly a need to avoid the use of a biologically determinist or essentialist definition, not least because of the negative consequences for people of dual heritage (Mirza 1997). It is therefore perhaps more appropriate to use the term 'Black' to indicate a political identity that is 'non-white' (Andermahr *et al.* 2000:23) and that incorporates Mirza's (1997:3) definition of the experience of 'being Black' as:

..a state of 'becoming' (racialised); a process of consciousness, when colour becomes the defining factor about who you are.

Black feminism challenged white feminists' ideas and welfare strategies because of their tendency to ignore racial difference (hooks 1986). They contested the notion that any kind of universal solidarity existed between all women as women, suggesting that such ideals lead to a denial of the power differences that exist between women (Lorde 1984; Maynard 1994; Mama 1995). Equally, recognition was given to the differences and divisions between different groups of Black women (Kanneh 1998). According to Hill-Collins (2000) it is important to adopt a multi-faceted approach to understanding how different systems of oppression intersect and support each other. In this way it becomes possible to understand Black women's situation as being made up not of cumulative disadvantages but as the product of multiple forms of oppression. This 'multiplier' approach enables us to see that different forms of oppression interact to mean that gender oppression is experienced by different groups of women in qualitatively different ways (Bryson 1999:35).

There is also recognition within Black feminism that 'universalism' within theories that underpin social welfare often results in inappropriate services being provided for Black people (Nasir 1996:17). Bhavani and Coulson (1986:86) clearly state the need for fundamental transformation within Socialist feminism in the context of being realistic about the challenges of racism. Accordingly, it is possible to quite simply recognise that the state deals with different women differently. There is a need for new analyses of the relationship between the state and the family and how this differs for Black and white people. In turn, Bhavani and Coulson (1986) suggest it is possible to develop an understanding that the welfare state has different strategies for different groups of people. Examples of Black feminist campaigns that sought to highlight such differences include those centred on the rights of Black women to culturally-sensitive health services including those relating to reproductive rights and contraception (Williams 1989). This understanding is crucial in relation to this study where there appear to be many parallels between the experiences of Black women and women offenders. Both groups' experiences have largely been ignored in relation to welfare strategy and both groups have been positioned as 'other' (Lloyd 1995; Nasir 1996). Following this, the parallels become clearer, for example, Black women's relationships to work, family, men, sexuality and the welfare state are simultaneously structured by 'race' as well as gender (Spelman 1988). For women offenders their relationships to the welfare state are structured by their criminality (being an offender) as well as their gender (being a woman). As a result, this potentially renders their experiences as different from those of non-offending women and they are conceptualised in direct relation to what we think we know about how they differ from non-offending women. The consequences of the double discrimination or 'double damning' that ensues are that the oppressions they experience are compounded and reconstituted in many different ways (Lloyd 1995). This is evident in how the state apparently attributes a positive value to women in relation to motherhood, within the ideology of 'familism' (Williams 1989:69). In other words, a set of ideals that characterise the 'normal' family, where the man is the breadwinner and the woman contributes to the household in her role as mother and carer, not as wage earner, predominate (Pascall 1997). But to be an offending mother is not just 'unnatural' (offender) but doubly negative (the reproduction through 'nature' and 'nurture' of more potential criminals). Equally, applying the 'multiplier approach' described earlier it becomes evident that being a Black woman offender adds another form of discrimination since it plays into stereotypes of race and crime.

The focus on the parallels between Black women, women offenders and Black women offenders illustrates how different forms of oppression are interconnected. It also highlights the potential for what hooks (1984) argues for in terms of building solidarity between different groups of women. Her emphasis is not on perceiving their situations and experiences of oppression as identical because this would dilute arguments for recognising difference and diversity. Rather, she suggests



it is important to explore ways oppressed groups might support each other, for example, by forming alliances. This seems plausible, although there is a danger that such a proposition potentially results in a similar dilution of the distinct needs of particular groups of women and a tendency towards bland themes or stereotypes being presented thereby, losing the power of the individual experience.

It is also important to note that some Black feminists, including Mirza (1997:12) express caution in relation to ideas propounding the importance of focusing on and prioritising the particular standpoint of different groups and celebrating the 'right to be different'. She highlights central philosophical concerns including the negative impact of dominant discourses on difference which privilege whiteness and perpetuate racism. Aziz (1997) supports this and highlights tensions associated with perceiving difference as deviance. Conversely, 'postmodernism' is viewed as providing the means by which it becomes possible not only to hear largely silenced groups of marginalised women but also to understand the differences that exist between them.

### *Poststructural feminism*

In general terms, Poststructural feminism draws on the psychoanalytic and linguistic theories of male writers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan and has been expressed by feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. More specifically, Williams (1996) suggests that, like feminism, there are significant ways in which Poststructuralist theory has posed a serious challenge to social and political theories. First, central to Poststructural feminism is the need to challenge the idea that there is any one single theory or grand narrative that can explain women's position or experience. The preference is for little narratives that more closely reflect the perspectives and experiences of particular groups in society (Waugh 1998). Second, it has challenged universalism by proposing that there are no such things as 'scientific answers' or overarching truths. Furthermore, in contrast to focusing on identifying the causes of social problems, the notions of difference, fragmentation, subjectivity and the construction of meaning are illuminated (Hillyard and Watson 1996). Consequently, the emphasis is on how such problems have become defined and constructed in certain ways, at particular times and in specific places. In this way, Poststructural feminism provides the basis for a challenge to traditional theory which is characteristic of social policy thinking, such as, Liberalism and Marxism (Barrett and Phillips 1992).

Poststructural feminism challenges male-centred ways of doing things, values difference and diversity and prioritises the need to not only accommodate differences among women (Hallett 1996) but also to understand how such differences are constructed and constituted (Williams 1996). Watson (1999) suggests that in meeting this challenge many feminists have become more



concerned with specific, local and particular issues rather than searching for the causes of women's wider oppression. It is argued that this is because it enables them to move away from viewing patriarchy as providing the overarching explanation for the source of women's oppression which ignores what Caine and Pringle (1995) would suggest are more complex and fluid ways in which power operates. The result is that, rather than feeling almost entirely unable to change this monolithic 'beast' or get away from it, it becomes possible to look at specific ways in which gender domination intersects, for instance, with class, race, age, sexuality and criminality and therefore seek to bring about change. This focus on the micro rather than macro also enables the 'change' to impact on real women's lives rather than make any grand claims for women's emancipation which are difficult to quantify.

Notions of 'deconstructive' and 'reconstructive' modes within Poststructural feminism (Waugh 1998:182) may also be of relevance to the emerging conceptual framework of this study. In broad terms, 'deconstructive' modes are concerned with abandonment or taking apart what is perhaps taken for granted (for example, in relation to professional practice or values and attitudes), whilst 'reconstructive' modes involve imagining alternative futures which break with what is 'known'. This is examined in greater depth in the context of exploring current issues in the delivery of welfare services. However, 'deconstruction' as an exercise within the 'equality versus difference' debate provides a useful example (Scott 1990). Scott (1990:138) suggests that historically, feminists have been offered opposing choices, hence, they have either been asked to endorse 'equality' or 'difference'. However, these choices can also be framed in terms of sameness (we are the same, so should be treated equally) or difference (we are different and therefore should be treated differently). Deconstruction facilitates a critique of such ideas and the development of a new way of thinking about 'difference' that, for example, explores the interdependence of the two terms, 'equality is not the elimination of difference, and difference does not preclude equality' (Scott 1990:138). There is, however, also a sense in which, 'equality might well be defined as deliberate indifference to specified differences' (Scott 1990:142). What this demonstrates very well are the myriad of twists and turns associated with asserting 'equality' or 'difference' and the frustrations of being placed in the impossible position of working with such choices.

The concept of 'other' is central to Poststructural feminist theory and the discourse of 'othering' is also crucial to this study. Rose (1995:16) has defined constructing the 'other' as:

Defining where you belong through a contrast with other places, or who you are through a contrast with other people.

Aitchison (2000:135-136) also explains that such a process is characterised by 'dualisms' including defining norms and deviants, centres and margins, the powerful and the powerless.

Drawing on Cixous' work, she identifies three fundamental relationships within the process of 'othering':

First, the construction of the Other is dependent upon a simultaneous construction of 'the Same', or something from which to be Other to. Secondly, this relationship is one of power whereby that which is defined as 'Same' is accorded greater power and status than that which is defined as Other. Thirdly, that which is defined as Other is accorded a gender and this gender is always feminized.

What is more helpful and relevant in this study however, is the notion that the opposite of 'other' is not the 'same' but 'us'. Hence, the point about, for example, discrimination and inequality is that because of a perception that someone (the 'other') is not like 'us', they are therefore different and require different and perhaps less favourable treatment. Applying this proposition here; welfare service providers and individual practitioners are perceived as the powerful group. Consequently, if they construct women offenders as 'other', that is, believe that 'they' are not like 'us' and don't share the same values as 'us' (else they wouldn't be where they are), there is a danger that they develop the misperception that 'they' need to be treated differently to 'us'. Therefore, the many ways in which service providers/practitioners engage in this damaging process of 'othering' is of particular relevance to women's ability to access help in order to meet their health and social care needs. As such, the complexities of this process are examined in more depth in Chapter 3.

There are many ways Poststructural feminism can be critiqued. For example, it is often viewed as elitist, an inaccessible philosophy concerned with theory that has no relevance to practice and lived reality and, as a result, endangers the potential for feminist action (Bryson 1999). There also appears to be an underlying assumption within the Poststructural position on power relations that there are no systemic power relations, no overarching system of domination, oppression and power, but only context-specific examples of subordination, opposition and change (Jackson 1998). Additionally, the Poststructural feminist focus on difference and identity ignores the systematic influence of political, cultural and economic factors on the inequalities that women experience. To reject the limitations of Poststructural feminism is to recognise that differences are not necessarily the product of choice or random in nature. Evidence of this can be found in the systematic ways in which women generally have been discriminated against in a social welfare context as well as the distinctive ways women offenders appear to have been written out of social policy (see Chapter 3).

In sum, this exploration of each of the different feminist theories illustrates the complexity of the conceptual framework that necessarily forms the basis for exploring women's experiences in this study. Central to this, are the diverse responses to difference and diversity and the individualistic and structural explanations for women's experiences of inequalities. Fundamental overall, are



notions of the personal as political and the more radical stances that promote the need to deconstruct what we think we know about difference and oppression and engage in visioning as a means of thinking and knowing differently.

## **Development of welfare services**

### *The post-war agenda*

The 1945 post-war reforms included the introduction of the National Insurance system and family allowances; the creation of the National Health Service in 1948; the implementation of the 1944 Education Act and a large council housing building programme. The Seebohm Report (1968) was responsible for shaping the personal social services, as state-provided Social Services Departments responded to the needs of families and incorporated notions of partnership between the state and communities in need (Davis 1996:125-126). All were significant for working-class people, but notably all were devoid of any gendered considerations, with male perspectives pervading all structures of these provisions (Williams 1989). Male perceptions were manifest because men were the decision-makers, responsible for policy development and thus, were unlikely to be able, or interested, to 'think' from a woman's perspective. This is illustrated in the ways women's roles as mother and dependent were reinforced, with motherhood essentially being idealised (Charles 2000). This was achieved, for example, by post-war welfare reforms which came about as a result of The Beveridge Report (1942) and which encouraged women to 'take up the white woman's burden of motherhood' (Dale 1986:62). At a more practical level, it was also evident in the way that family allowance levels were lower than originally proposed and provisions that were recommended, such as communal nurseries, never materialised thereby adding further constraints to women's ability to achieve greater equality.

Reforms in the 1960s and '70s on equal pay, abortion, divorce and sex discrimination were essentially positive. However, what was constantly reinforced by social policies at that time was the need to maintain the normative framing of marriage and the stability and solidity of marriage as an institution and social 'good'. One example of this is illustrated in the ways housing and social security policies reinforced the treatment of women as dependants of their 'breadwinner' partners (Millar 1997). As a result, the welfare state was unable to respond to the needs of women workers, single parents and older people. The nuclear family form was also idealised (Kember 1997); hence, policy and welfare services were planned and delivered with this in mind. The result for those women who failed to conform to this ideal was that they were stigmatised, isolated and marginalised. These women were viewed as problematic rather than as women with a particular set of needs. State provision that did attempt to address issues including meeting their specific health needs, such as for contraception or abortion, also engaged in 'state regulation' of women's lives because of the way they determined who had access to such provision (Williams 1989).

Overall, there seem to have been two contradictory directions in the development of the welfare state since the mid-1970s. There was legislation, such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Equally, there was the development of a plethora of equal opportunities policies: anti-sexist strategies in some Local Authorities (LA) and some LA support for developing local, front-line welfare services, meeting the needs of women in the community. Conversely however, there were welfare cutbacks, an escalation of social need, a failure to stem unemployment or tackle poverty, and wholeheartedly negative 'New Right' influences. Margaret Thatcher was elected on an anti-welfare agenda and successive Conservative governments substantially weakened much of the progress made as a result of policies and ideologies which had been developed with such enthusiasm by the post-war Labour government. It is clear from Charles' (2000) analysis that the deterioration in general material conditions, such as poverty and unemployment, exacerbated gender inequalities. Similarly, the intensification of some aspects of welfare policy, such as Community Care policy, perpetuated and reproduced women's oppression, by suggesting that fundamental changes were being introduced which would empower disadvantaged groups, for example, by giving them more choice. Brown and Smith (1993) propose that far from reducing inequalities, new discourse within such policies merely disguised them. This was further compounded by a significant weakening of attempts to challenge welfare policy, reflected in the way that feminist activism and campaigning became increasingly marginalised (Griffin 1995). Additionally, the ways that notions of 'familism' were reworked over the years apparently served to justify the minimal provision of welfare and the inequalities women endured (Tester 1996).<sup>3</sup> This was particularly apparent in the way that responsibilities for caring for children and other family members remained with women and in how self-help and voluntarism were emphasised (Brown and Smith 1993; Bagilhole 1996; Langan 1997).

#### *Old and new paradigms of welfare*

This brief examination of the post-war agenda provides a broad foundation for exploring a number of other factors including, for example, apparently opposing paradigms of welfare which have had a big impact on the development of the welfare state. Accordingly, what Williams *et al.* (1999:9) refer to as the old paradigm of welfare, that concentrates on the structural determinants of peoples' problems and needs, and on the types of provision that are required to meet them, has been criticised for its one-dimensional perception of human agency (Titterton 1992). In other words, there is an assumption that each welfare policy may be beneficial to all, rather than that certain welfare policies are useful to some people but not to others. Thus, Titterton (1992:2) suggests there is a danger of confining individuals to 'vulnerable groupings' and ascribing them

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<sup>3</sup> Following Williams (1989), the concept of 'familism' refers to contested dominant ideas which characterise 'ideal' family life, for example, where assumptions are made that men will be breadwinners and women will willingly undertake caring work within the home. Being unwilling to fulfil this caring role is viewed as 'unnatural' (Tester 1996).



uniform needs and therefore uniform responses. For example, women's offending behaviour may be explained as being a result of their criminality or deviance, with little or no consideration being given to their individual experiences of, for instance, child abuse, domestic violence, poverty, poor housing and stress. He argues for the recognition of differentiated needs among individuals and the role of human agency in responding in different ways to wellbeing. Implicit is the sense that individuals not only help to create the social forces and conditions in which they exist, but are also constrained by them. He calls for a new paradigm of welfare that takes account of these factors and impacts on policy making and provision by starting with each individual's own definitions, meanings and experiences of needs and risks, as well as the ways they each prefer to deal with these. This, he suggests, potentially places welfare provision more solidly within a user-led approach. He does not however, adequately incorporate gender as a category for analysis and as a consequence, is criticised for not highlighting the ways in which gender impacts on welfare (Hanmer and Hearn 1999).

There are also potential difficulties associated with the notion of human agency in the context of gender relations, power and inequality. This is illustrated in the extent to which some women might perceive that they are able to determine their needs and the responses they would like from welfare services in order to meet them. Some individuals have particular problems in making their needs known (Ross 1994, 1995; Broad and Denney 1996). Historically, previous studies and government policies that looked at the broad areas of community care and user involvement (Croft and Beresford 1992; NHS Management Executive 1992) largely failed to focus on the particularity of women's relationships with welfare services. Similarly, despite the welcome focus of more recent government initiatives on user involvement and participation, little attention has been paid to the specific needs of particular groups of women, especially women offenders (Rumgay 2000). (For examples of recent initiatives, see NHS Management Executive 1998; Consumers in NHS Research 1999; DOH 1999; Hanley *et al.* 2000).

Not all women have a voice in the context of user involvement and there is a danger that gestures towards involving service users in service planning and delivery can perpetuate inequalities between women according to age, sexuality, disability, social class, race and criminality (Tester 1996). Woods (1996); Campbell (2000) and Charles (2000) for example, all make what could be described as sweeping generalisations about women being at the forefront of campaigns to bring about change in their communities. This too presumes that all women can work collectively. It also ignores the fact that many individuals and groups of women, including some drug and/or alcohol abusers and offenders, are systematically stigmatised, ignored and isolated in society, thus making it exceedingly difficult for them to engage in collective action. It is also important to note that not all individuals choose to have contact with welfare services even if they are entitled to

them (Ruspini 2001). Equally, as Macdonald (1999) points out, it seems incongruent to call offenders, 'service users', given that, as a group, they often have little or no power to access or make 'service' choices. Hence, perhaps the way forward lies in focusing both on the uniqueness of each individual woman's experience, as well as appreciating the ways in which structural inequalities contribute to the specific social problems which women offenders (as a group) encounter. Consequently, a solution perhaps lies in linking old and new paradigms of welfare (Seymour 1999; Williams *et al.* 1999; Williams and Popay 1999).

Alternatively, as is illustrated in the context of child protection policy and practice, there is a danger that mothers from the poorest and most disadvantaged families will continue to be blamed for the abuse their children experience at the hands of their fathers. Many policies that apparently aim to reduce inequalities adopt such an individualistic stance, that is, they blame the individual woman for confounding what we think we know about 'being' a woman or mother. This is largely due to the fact that insufficient attention is paid to the structures of inequality (Callender 1996) and is illustrated in the political philosophy of successive Conservative governments that appeared content to attribute child abuse to what they perceived as the delinquent characteristics of a small number of parents (Farmer and Boushel 1999). Similarly, the trends in housing policy since 1980 have marginalised women's particular housing needs and limited the choices that are available to them (Woods 1996). Taylor (1999) however, suggests that it is not just the socially constructed structural conditions that result in women's experiences of inequality, but also gender biased policies that are over-simplistic, over-optimistic and beset with explanations based on a preoccupation with prejudice and discrimination. Overall, it is perhaps even more convoluted, given what seems to be reluctance on the part of the welfare state to intervene in women's lives and in particular in what are seen as private troubles. As will be seen later in this chapter when the focus shifts to the specific issues pertaining to domestic violence policy and practice, the consequences of this misperception are wide-ranging and dangerous, potentially leaving substantial numbers of women and children unprotected and unsupported in coping with physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse (also see Chapter 3).

### *The importance of gender*

Consideration of the importance of gender is central to an exploration of the development of the welfare state (Walby 1990). Following Bryson (1999:46) the term 'gender' is viewed as distinct from 'sex':

Sex is equated with the biological characteristics of males and females, and contrasted with gender, which refers to the socially produced attributes of masculinity and femininity and the social arrangements based upon them. This distinction leads to the argument that although there are some fixed biological differences between men and women, many other observable differences are the manifestations of gender; as such, they are



amenable to change.

Specifically, Watson (1999:2) illustrates what she describes as, 'the urgent need to firmly reintroduce and re-emphasise the importance of gender to the social policy debate,' as she refers to the swingeing cuts under successive Conservative governments. During each term they proposed individualism and the end of society on the one hand and a return to traditional gender roles and the patriarchal nuclear family on the other. Inequalities between rich and poor and a society driven by notions of material gain were the legacy of almost two decades of Conservatism and ultimately culminated in the new Labour government being elected in 1997. Paradoxically, one of the first targets of that government's welfare policy was the lone parent, 90% of who are women, as they reduced their benefits in an attempt to encourage them to return to work. However, what was not made clear was that the much-needed employment opportunities were not there (Watson 1999).

There is ample evidence of the ways gender impacts on the daily lives of individuals. For example, despite feminist activism, gender inequalities have persisted with women still taking major responsibility for domestic work, child-care and care of other family members (Bryson 1999; Lister 1999). Women are also still concentrated in low paid jobs, filling lower positions in virtually all organisations and professions and more likely to be working part-time than full-time (Callender 1996). Moreover, they are likely to be paid approximately two thirds of the male wage for full time employment (Land 1999). Women also outnumber men among those living in poverty, have higher chances of being poor and are likely to stay poor for longer (Millar and Glendinning 1989; Millar 1996; Ruspini 2001). Older women are especially likely to live in poverty (Ginn and Arber 1999; Maynard 1999). Poor women are likely to have high levels of ill health, both physical and mental, as they try to cope with the stresses and strains of poverty (Popay and Jones 1990; Edwards *et al.* 1999). Following this, for many women, their social and economic security and even their very survival may still be dependent on the support of a male partner and, as a result, they may also face the threat of physical violence (Doyal 1999). Linked to this is the way in which Pascall (1997) and Watson (1999) suggest 'home' has been constructed as some sort of haven. However, they caution that in unpacking such havens it is possible to reveal the nature of the suburban home as a site, not only of work for women, but also isolation and violence. All are important considerations in relation to the ways some women experience difficulties in accessing welfare services.

Hanmer and Hearn (1999:107) highlight what is a complex and pervasive relationship between welfare and gender and, as a result, point to gender inequalities that they propose are central to welfare research. They call for consideration of the complexities of gender power relations and inequalities in social welfare where 'gender absence' and 'gender neutrality' dominate.



Gender absence differs from gender neutrality in that to be gender absent is to presume to make no distinction between women and men; it is the 'people position'. Gender neutrality recognises that there are women and men, but fundamental interests are conceived as equal or complementary or different but in a fixed or given way, and therefore not in need of further recognition.

Such positions make no sense because they clearly do not eliminate power relations between men and women but merely serve to hide them. In contrast, 'gender presence' prioritises being women and men in social theory (Hanmer and Hearn 1999:107). In the context of a feminist study, its epistemological basis is transformed by acknowledging women and men's differential experiences that are socially constructed through inequality, marginalisation and oppression. This is of importance in this study where one of the aims is to elucidate how gender is embedded in women offenders' experiences of accessing community-based health and social care services. Consequently, there is potential to provide new insight and a new analysis of social policy, so that ultimately it perhaps becomes possible to halt and prevent what Watson (1999:7) describes as 'dominant patriarchal discourses, policies and disabling gendered practices'. For example, of particular relevance in this context are the additional gender implications and specific consequences for minority groups resulting from the shift in emphasis within the welfare state from care to control. Evidence of this can be found in the ever-increasing development of a strong law and order state. This may, in part, provide the basis for explaining why women offenders experience welfare services in particular ways. In essence, there is evidence of society's vilification of them because they are perceived as a threat to social stability and morality (Lloyd 1995). Therefore, their criminality may even challenge the very nature of welfare policy because of the perception that exists of them failing to conform to societal ideals of how women *should* be and how they *should* behave (see Chapter 3).

### **Current issues in providing welfare services**

#### *Gendered action in the welfare state: meeting the needs of women?*

Differences between women and men in relation to welfare services have received some attention in recent years. To illustrate this, Doyal (1999:42) is clear that, in a health context, women are more disadvantaged by current patterns of social organisation: 'they are less valued than men, have less access to a range of resources and less capacity to realise their potential for health.' Furthermore, Foster (1996) suggests that, despite the fact that women are the principal users of welfare services (Davis 1996), health services do more harm than good to them. This, she suggests, is because of inherently patriarchal, sexist and sometimes racist attitudes which seriously affect access to and use of services. In addition, the extent to which the welfare state overall has enabled them to frame and shape services (Hallett 1996) or meet their specific needs, has been extremely limited (Williams *et al.* 1999). Meeting the specific or 'special' needs of women may be viewed negatively; fears might prevail that such an approach will result in their

experiences of discrimination being reinforced (Tester 1996). So, rather than supporting a proposal for developing discrete services or models of service delivery specifically for women, the preferred solution might be to challenge the discriminatory practices of welfare service providers and practitioners. This could be achieved using a radical approach such as 'visioning' (Rees 1999) which would enable service providers and practitioners to deconstruct what they know about the discrimination that women experience and, as a consequence, identify strategies for meeting the needs of women more effectively.<sup>4</sup> This is however, perhaps easier said than done; reflect for example, on the inevitable impact on some women's ability to meet their needs, given what Foster (1996) suggests are pervasive negative perceptions of 'unacceptable' female behaviour by particular groups of workers such as doctors. Women who commit crime would certainly fall under that rubric. Alone, such a simplistic proposal for change would perhaps be inadequate given that there are a number of other complex and crucial issues that need consideration. For example, there may be concern that opportunities will be reduced because of the negative connotations of welfare services focusing on meeting the needs of distinct groups of women such as women offenders.

*Meeting the needs of different groups of women: rhetoric or reality?*

As previously indicated, feminist critiques of the welfare state during the 1970s and early 1980s took very little account of the diversity of experience amongst different groups of women. However, this began to change during the late 1980s and 1990s as the themes of commonality and diversity were increasingly explored, particularly in relation to women's experiences of personal social services (Davis 1996). The impact of this work is crucial because it provided evidence that, far from providing services capable of responding to the particular needs of individuals, families and communities, the welfare state was premised on only providing the most basic resources and services when all else had failed. Consider for instance, mothers of children who have been subjected to abuse at the hands of their fathers. They are often treated as objects of suspicion, viewed as collusive with the abuser or as 'secondary abusers' rather than 'secondary victims' (Farmer and Boushel 1999:91; Hester and Harne 1999). As a consequence, they are often left trying to protect their children with inadequate support from welfare services that are more concerned with the 'regulation of mothering' than the provision of services (Farmer and Owen 1995; Humphreys 1997). This is despite the fact that legislation exists in the form of The Children Act (1989) that clearly states, in Section 17, that Local Authorities have a duty to provide a broad range of services to children in need and this would include family support services. Aldgate and Tunstill (1996), however, point to the fact that it is the Local Authority that determines need and makes decisions about what services if any are provided. Hence, in practice, the financial

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<sup>4</sup> Following Rees (1999) 'visioning' means imagining doing things differently, for example, with the purpose of disrupting familiar patterns of service provision.



restrictions that they face severely limit any provision of services under this part of the Act. There is a whole range of complicated intricacies associated with meeting the needs of the individual woman in this situation. As previously alluded to, what also must not be ignored is the specificity of her position in terms of race, sexuality, class, age, disability, (Hallett 1996) and indeed criminality.

#### *Coping and support: what gets in the way?*

Increasingly, interventions in health and social care service systems seem to be short-term and focused on dealing with crisis situations (Davis 1996). Welfare services are often fragmented disorganised and frequently only offered to individuals when they are perceived as unable to cope (Taylor 1999). This is problematic in that there is evidence that people may be reluctant to be viewed as being unable to cope and consequently are unwilling to accept any help, thereby further compounding their difficulties (Seymour 1999). Women may be particularly reluctant to engage in help-seeking behaviour until conditions are extreme, because they do not want to be perceived in such a negative way (Graham 1982). Moreover, one of the difficulties associated with this is that there is much variation in perception of what constitutes 'coping' and this is particularly evident between workers and service users (Murgatroyd and Woolfe 1982). The relationship between the two perspectives also has important implications for the way people's needs are defined (Bowling *et al.* 1993; Pascall 1997) and the way people experience services (Seymour 1999). This is apparent in the examples used earlier relating to child protection where the worker essentially attributes blame to the individual mother, thereby reinforcing the dominant tendency of service providers to individualise problems, rather than placing them in the broader structural context (Edwards 1995; Edwards *et al.* 1999). Equally, differences in perception are evident in the case of interventions in domestic violence that have focused on maintaining and preserving the family, rather than protecting the woman and her children (Radford and Stanko 1996). As a result, this will determine the support services each woman will get with the worker acting as a 'gatekeeper' to services (Williams 1999:62).

Such conflicting perspectives are also potential sources of stress in themselves and as a consequence may intensify women's problems in dealing with what are already stressful and complex situations. This is visible in the findings of a study undertaken by Edwards *et al.* (1999) that involved secondary analysis of data from the Social Support and Pregnancy Outcome study in 1986-88. They stress the importance of support in women's lives and make particular links to the need for information and knowledge about their own and their children's health needs. Particular case studies illustrate not only women's need for more information, but also for professionals to treat them with respect and sensitivity; to value and take account of their prior knowledge; and to be prepared to develop a social relationship with service users in order to be 'truly supportive'. Of particular prominence was the value service users placed on the need for service providers to

listen to them; the importance of feeling able to talk to professionals; the advice and information service providers gave them and the individual worker's professional credibility and training. Similarities were evident in the perspectives of the service providers who participated in the study. However, there were also some key differences, including that whilst support and listening were perceived by service users as integral to meeting their needs, service providers were ambivalent about whether this was a legitimate role for health and welfare professionals. Such dissonance perhaps reflects key differences in underpinning perceptions of needs from the perspectives of users and providers. Similarly, it emphasises the importance of getting service providers to recognise that they have different views to service users.

Bagilhole's (1996) findings illustrate these tensions very well. She investigated a volunteering 'Home Start' scheme which consisted of voluntary home visiting by mothers to other mothers who were experiencing stress. The emphasis was on providing support, care and friendship for as long as needed. Both givers and receivers of care evaluated the scheme extremely positively and emphasised the crucial need for practical and emotional support for women with young children at home. Their perception of professionals however, was as oppressive and powerful. Receivers of care particularly felt that they did not listen or allow them to feel that they had anything to offer. In contrast, they perceived the volunteers as emancipators, 'on their side' and therefore able to provide appropriate and acceptable support. Many believed that professional workers could not actually provide such care. This scheme appears to have great potential for providing much needed support to isolated women in the community. However, Brown and Smith (1993) would urge caution and critique services being provided to mothers in this way. They would suggest that women were only being offered interventions because of their inability to cope rather than as a result of recognition of the impossibility of their situation, in other words, being trapped in the private sphere. Nevertheless, following Bagilhole (1996), this scheme did work, not only because it enhanced the appropriate care of women in need of support but also because it offered volunteers opportunities to increase skills, improve confidence and develop their own support networks.

Taylor's (1999) proposals relating to meeting the support and care needs of carers are also interesting in this context. They are based around the notion of developing informal support networks as recommended by Sir Roy Griffiths, the architect of the Community Care legislation (DOH 1988: para 3.2) who urged statutory agencies to sustain and strengthen such developments. Support workers played a crucial part and Taylor (1999: 78-79) identifies three key features of their role:

1. 'Psychological maintenance' - alleviating individuals' isolation, giving them a sense that someone is there for them, building a relationship based on trust, sharing the complexities of their individual situation in a non-judgmental way.



2. 'Advocacy' – having an advocate on their side who is independent of health and social services and who has the power to act on their behalf and;
3. 'Negotiating practical services' – doing day to day things, enabling individuals to access health and social care services.

The extent to which such initiatives have been implemented in practice is unclear, despite the fact that they are apparently low cost, highly efficient and highly valued. Whether communities would support isolated women, including women offenders, in this way, given how they are 'othered', is also questionable (see Chapter 3). There is evidence, for example, that particular groups of women, such as lone mothers, are systematically ignored in the allocation of services (Farmer and Boushel 1999). Lack of services is also a feature of sexual abuse cases referred to child protection, where, as soon as women are able to demonstrate that they have separated from their abusing partners, their cases are closed. Hence, any services that may have previously been provided are, in effect, withdrawn (Farmer and Owen 1995).

#### *Barriers to access*

Even if service provision such as this is significantly increased, there are no guarantees that women will access it (Ruspini 2001). In fact, low or non take-up of services is an on-going concern and can be attributed to many different factors such as: lack of knowledge about service provision, inappropriate information giving; inappropriate service provision and racism (Gunaratnam 1993). Overall, however, it is perhaps more complex than such explanations imply. Doyal (1999:45) identifies a range of practical policy implications that are highly relevant in this context:

Health care planners need to ensure that gender sensitivity is built into all services so that they meet the needs of both men and women. This means paying particular attention to questions of access and also to the quality of the human relations that are so central to the process of health care.

In general terms, poor interpersonal behaviour between women and health professionals has been well documented in the medical sociology and social policy literature, but seems to a great extent to have focused on medical staff's sexism and poor communication skills (Wiles 1997). As suggested earlier, the quality of human relationships and worker characteristics in meeting individuals' needs appears vital and yet, at times, seems to have been underplayed in the literature. This may be attributable to the dissonance between the importance that service users and service providers place on these elements of the relationship. Despite this criticism, a number of studies have made reference to key issues underpinning the relationship between service users and providers or practitioners. For instance, social workers have to some extent, recognised their potential to replicate patterns of oppression in their relationships with service users that are apparent elsewhere with serious negative consequences (Langan and Day 1992; Pryke and Thomas 1998). In addition, Handy (1991) has emphasised the importance of focusing on the

workers' relationships with individual service users and considering how these interact with the ideology and structure of the organisation/profession within which they are practising. Levison and Harwin (2000) and Davidson *et al.* (2000) have highlighted the damaging influence of judgmental responses by service providers on victims of domestic violence (see page 42). Similarly, in a health context, Foster (1996) was clear that highly judgmental attitudes of workers towards some women affected their access to services, for example, in terms of worker's perceptions of how suitable they are for some medical treatments, including fertility treatments such as IVF. However, she did not consider the impact of such attitudes on women's own decision-making about accessing health services.

### *Challenging gender inequalities: radical solutions*

Doyal's (1999) emphasis on 'gender sensitivity' in order to meet the needs of both men and women is also important. If however, notions of equality in treatment underpin this, there is a danger that, as previously indicated, little will change the underlying inequality that exists (Millar 1996), because it may mean attempting to be 'gender absent'. In other words, service providers will generally perceive themselves as making no distinction between men and women and therefore assume they are treating them equally, but in so doing they will continue to deny the impact of gender on experiences of accessing welfare services (Hill 1998). Such 'universalism' therefore serves to reinforce inequalities (Williams 1989:106). To counter this, Rees (1999:165) proposes 'mainstreaming', which involves integrating equality into all policies, programmes and actions at all stages in their development. Rooted in postmodernism, this represents a radical, paradigmatic shift in the way in which equality is conceptualised, not only in an employment context but also in relation to service delivery (Rees 1999). Furthermore, it facilitates a long-term strategy involving a process that provides the opportunity for us to rethink our assumptions by deconstructing what we think we know about our practice. Specifically, this would include rethinking the ways in which services are delivered.

It implies stepping back from the way things have always been done, and the assumptions that have always been made, and thinking anew, recognising difference and diversity. (Rees 1999:166)

In addition, 'mainstreaming' potentially prioritises the ideals of positive action and positive discrimination and, as a result, not only recognises the differences that certainly do exist between women and men, but essentially involves striving to build opportunities for women who have 'missed out' in some way. To some extent, Rees (1999) perhaps underplays this in relation to different groups of women by drawing on examples of women-only education and training opportunities that seem to describe the provision of services for women as a homogeneous group. That said, she does nevertheless acknowledge that the process of 'mainstreaming' has the



potential to enable all service providers to focus not only on gender equality but also on class, race, age, sexuality, and (I would add) criminality. Accordingly, welfare services would perhaps be more effective in meeting the specific health and social care needs of individuals. Service providers and practitioners alike could also be clearer about the fact that existing structures are not 'gender absent' or 'gender neutral', quite the opposite in fact as they privilege people with certain ascriptive characteristics (Rees 1999:173) such as, being male, non-offending, middle-class, white. Consequently, as has previously been stated, the welfare state responds differently to different groups of people. 'Mainstreaming' may be criticised for being idealist and therefore unrealistic but it certainly does seem to have the potential to provide a mechanism for challenging current practice in welfare services.

### **Domestic violence policy and practice**

Focusing on domestic violence policy and practice provides a specific illustration of the challenges and dilemmas associated with meeting some women's particular and complex welfare needs. In order to focus the exploration of some of these difficulties in this work, the term 'domestic violence' will refer to the Women's Aid Federation's (2002: <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/about/index.htm>) definition throughout the thesis.

Domestic violence is physical, psychological, sexual or financial violence that takes place within an intimate or family-type relationship and forms a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour. Crime statistics and research both show that domestic violence is gender specific - usually the perpetrator of a pattern of repeated assaults is a man. Women experience the most serious physical and repeated assaults. Any woman can experience domestic violence regardless of race, ethnic or religious group, class, sexuality, disability or lifestyle. Domestic violence destroys both women's and children's lives.

Information about women's experiences of domestic violence is stark and revealing. In brief, the British Crime Survey (1996) indicates that 1 in 4 women have experienced physical assault by a current or former male partner at some time in their lives (Mirlees-Black *et al.* 1996). It is extremely likely however, that this is a gross underestimate given, for example, the difficulties in securing accurate data (Crisp and Stanko 2000; Walby and Myhill 2000) and that only a small proportion of assaults are actually reported (Kelly 1999a). To illustrate this, it is estimated that a woman will have been assaulted by her partner or ex-partner thirty-five times before reporting it to the police (Yearnshire 1997). Women are at greatest risk from male partners or men they know; violence mostly happens in the family home; it may involve physical, psychological, emotional, sexual and economic abuse; physical beatings are severe and sometimes fatal; may also involve rape, unwanted pregnancy, gynaecological problems or sexually transmitted diseases (Mirlees-Black 1999). The effects on women are pervasive and damaging, involving psychological distress and

trauma that may culminate in depression, suicide and substance abuse (Pilchta 1992).

#### *Historical context: progress and change*

It is evident that the women's movement and women's groups generally, have played a major role in attempting to reverse the tendency towards blaming individual women for their 'private troubles' (Hague 1999a). They have been clear that violence against women is a crime (Radford and Stanko 1996) and, equally, that it is a major cause of women's oppression. Accordingly, they have engaged in campaigning that has, to some extent, forced the state to take a more active role in protecting children and supporting women. Since the 1970s in particular there has been a significant increase in awareness and attention to domestic violence. This is evident, in part, in the way in which domestic violence was finally recognised as a major topic at the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women and highlighted in the global 'Platform for Action' that the conference produced (United Nations 1996). The Labour government in 1997 also made its commitment to improving domestic violence services very clear in their election manifesto and their 'Peace at Home' policy document (Labour Party 1995). Before the 1970s however, there was very little awareness and as a consequence there were very few services, including no emergency accommodation whatsoever for women leaving violent relationships. Research contributed to changing this, as time and time again, feminists stressed the inadequacies of services generally and documented their failure to respond to women and children experiencing domestic violence (Dobash and Dobash 1980; Dobash *et al.* 1985; Pahl 1985; Hague and Malos 1993). In fact, changes and radical improvements came about largely as a result of the women's movement, which had a big impact on the development of the refuge movement, Women's Aid Federations and other feminist campaigning groups (Harwin 1999; Charles 2000). Consequently, the 1970s saw the rapid development of both refuges and other services for women and children throughout the country.

More specifically, in Britain in the 1990s, good policy and practice guidelines have been developed (Walby and Myhill 2000; Humphreys *et al.* 2001), multi-agency initiatives have been prioritised (Hague 1999b; Malos *et al.* 1999; Hague 2000) and the need for domestic violence training has been recognised (Davidson *et al.* 2000). Conferences, seminars and publicity campaigns have led to widespread national discussion of the issues (Hague *et al.* 1996b; Mullender 1996). The growth of zero tolerance campaigns has taken place nationally, and local activists have consistently sought to raise awareness of the plight of women and their children experiencing domestic violence. This is illustrated in the way cases of women who, having suffered violence for many years and been driven to murder their partners, have been highlighted by the media. Additionally, further changes are evident in that there are now more than 300 refuges in the country, including some specialist refuges for Black women and women from minority communities. Advocacy and



outreach responses to domestic violence have also increasingly been developed to improve both the accessibility and effectiveness of the full range of community-based services (Kelly and Humphreys 2000). The majority of this work has been co-ordinated and publicised by groups such as Justice for Women, Southall Black Sisters, Women's Aid and Rights for Women. However, it is important to record the range of other statutory and voluntary agencies that have also begun to directly address domestic violence (Malos 2000).

Specialist experimental projects have been set up using Home Office funding, for example, the 'Domestic Violence Matters' project in London (Kelly 1999b) and the Violence against Women Initiative (Diamond 2001). The Probation Service has also worked hard to address domestic violence in recent years, for example, the Association of Chief Probation Officers produced 'Good Practice Guidelines' in 1996 and many individual probation services currently play key roles in multi-agency work (Hague 1999b; Stelman *et al.* 1999). There is also evidence of some improvement in the police response to domestic violence (Edwards 1989; Hanmer and Griffiths 2000; Home Office Circular 19/2000). However, it may be some time before women experience any widespread changes, for example, in the attitudes and values of individual police officers (Mullender and Hague 2000). Much has however, been learned from Canada and the USA and best practice examples of individual projects in the U.K. are now based, for example, on the model developed by the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Minnesota (Pence 1989; Pence and McMahon 1999). Of central importance is the safety of women, which is achieved in many ways. Of particular relevance in the context of this study and central to the approach is the provision of services by local women's groups, such as 'sister support projects' for partners of men accessing perpetrator programmes provided by the probation service.

More recently, there have been changes in social services that historically did not address domestic violence because they had no statutory responsibility for the abuse of women. Such transformations include the way that Community Care and Children's Services Plans now feature domestic violence, some departments also work to policies and good practice guidelines and some are involved in multi-agency work on domestic violence (Mullender 1999; Malos 2000). In the context of health care, special recognition has also been given to the vital role health services have to play in both the treatment of women experiencing domestic violence and in being part of a co-ordinated response to combating it. For example, guidelines have been produced in relation to how health professionals can best respond to victims of domestic violence. Recommendations include: prioritising the need to listen to women, directly asking all women about experiences of domestic violence, avoiding victim-blaming and adopting a sympathetic, non-judgmental and understanding approach (Davidson *et al.* 2000). Specific policies and protocols have also been developed, particularly in hospital Accident and Emergency departments and Primary Health Care

(Williamson 2000).

*Danger signals: 'victim-blaming' is alive and well*

Despite all of these changes, there are still many challenges to face in meeting the needs of women experiencing domestic violence. By way of illustration, Mirlees-Black (1999) suggests that opportunities for offering support are restricted because domestic violence is hidden from public view as a result of women's reluctance to disclose their experiences. This may partially be due to a general tendency of women not to define themselves as abused (Mullender 1996). However, the implications of such views are that yet again, it is the victims who are blamed. In contrast however, there are a number of other pertinent issues that should perhaps first be considered in relation to women's access to a range of welfare services. These include: individual social workers or police officers blaming or stigmatising women experiencing domestic violence when they try to seek help (Mullender and Hague 2000) and women's fear of repercussions from their violent partners and/or family if they try to access services (Hooper 1996). The stigma, shame, guilt and self-blame at the 'failure' of the relationship is also often accompanied by scepticism about whether service providers will believe them or take the violence they are experiencing seriously (Williamson 2000). Equally, given the complex nature of domestic violence, whether agencies are likely to offer consistent, informed, non-judgmental, tangible and meaningful help also potentially restricts or prevents women's access to support to meet a range of needs (Moelwyn-Hughes 1999).

Fears about the responses of welfare services, particularly the police, housing, benefits agencies, social services and health services may be well founded, as these do seem to vary and are often reported as inappropriate and inadequate (Hague *et al.* 1996; Harwin 1999), inconsistent (Moelwyn-Hughes 1999) and even harmful (Pilchta 1992). This appears to be the case despite the recent emphasis on multi-agency approaches to domestic violence which aim, in part, to develop common policy and good practice, thereby improving what are currently fragmented responses to women seeking help (Malos 2000). Hooper (1996), Mullender (1996) and Levison and Harwin (2000) leave no doubt about the consequences of such responses that essentially fail women, including that many see no alternative but to stay in the relationship. Furthermore, it seems that this is compounded to such an extent that as their determination to seek help is consistently frustrated, it declines to the point that they no longer feel able even to ask for help. All of this needs to be seen in the context of research that has consistently found that women want practical support and help (Binney *et al.* 1985; Pahl 1985; Crisp and Stanko 2000; Mullender and Hague 2000; Humphreys *et al.* 2001).



*Needs, experiences and access to services: assumptions prevail*

Despite all of the advances over the last three decades, the effectiveness of many of the developments highlighted here is largely unknown (Grace 1995; Kelly and Humphreys 2000), funding for statutory and voluntary services is at best fragile and, as previously stated, services are often inadequate, inappropriate and uncoordinated. It is estimated that half or more of the women who contact refuges for support cannot be accommodated (Levison and Harwin 2000): refuges for Black women and children are even more under-resourced (Mama 1996; Siddiqui 2001) and outreach and development work is often not funded. Hague (1999a), Harwin (1999) and Kelly (1999a) each pose key questions about just how serious the current government's interest is in domestic violence and how enduring any of the changes they propose will be in the future. Like Radford and Stanko (1996), they are critical of the tendency to emphasise individual criminal justice solutions, at the expense of more collectivist answers involving both social and welfare measures and including the provision of adequate community-based health and social care services which actually meet women and children's needs. Despite these criticisms they do also suggest that such developments are potentially part of a 'real transformation' in political and practical terms. Following Kelly (1999a:128), this may actually be 'gloss', which hides patchy and inconsistent changes. However, describing 'hope' as gloss may be unfair.

Of particular relevance in this context is recognition of the need to document women's actual experiences when they come into contact with services such as women's refuges and advocacy projects that are often missing from literature detailing the successes and challenges in domestic violence policy and practice. It is almost as if there is an assumption that providing more welfare services including safe spaces and a roof over women's heads is enough in itself. In calling for the development of additional refuge accommodation, however, Kelly and Humphreys (2000) do caution against ignoring the vital role of outreach and advocacy work in meeting the needs of women, particularly for those who, without a proactive response, do not access services. Nevertheless, aside from this, whilst reference is made by Mullender (1996), Hague (1999a), Harwin (1999) and Charles (2000), for example, to the vital role refuges play in providing advice and support to women, there does appear to be a gap in our knowledge about women's actual experiences of such services. Mullender (1996:59) does state that women using refuges rate them more highly than other agencies. She points to the importance of the Women's Aid philosophy that underpins their work and which includes prioritising the 'abused woman's perspective' in the provision of services, mutual support from other women and a commitment by staff to caring for women. More recently, she and Hague (2000) have highlighted the frustration of many women who have expressed their belief that their views are not only overlooked by service providers but that they are regarded as not important and are therefore effectively silenced. As a result, Mullender and Hague (2000) state that women have felt unable to achieve the type of service and

policy responses they have sought. Following Mullender and Hague (2000), there is an urgent need for service providers to learn to listen to survivors of domestic violence.

Herein lies a crucial criticism of the current trend towards seeking service user views and experiences and the political and practical focus on user involvement generally. There is perhaps a tendency to quite literally document experiences without exploring the meaning of the experiences for individuals or particular groups of women.<sup>5</sup> The inherent dangers of such an approach are first, that service providers will continue to make generalisations about needs, experiences and access. Second, assumptions will prevail about the high quality of service delivery in organisations, including women's refuges, and finally, user involvement strategies will potentially be criticised for being tokenistic and unrepresentative because the reality of the impact of individual's experiences will remain hidden from view.

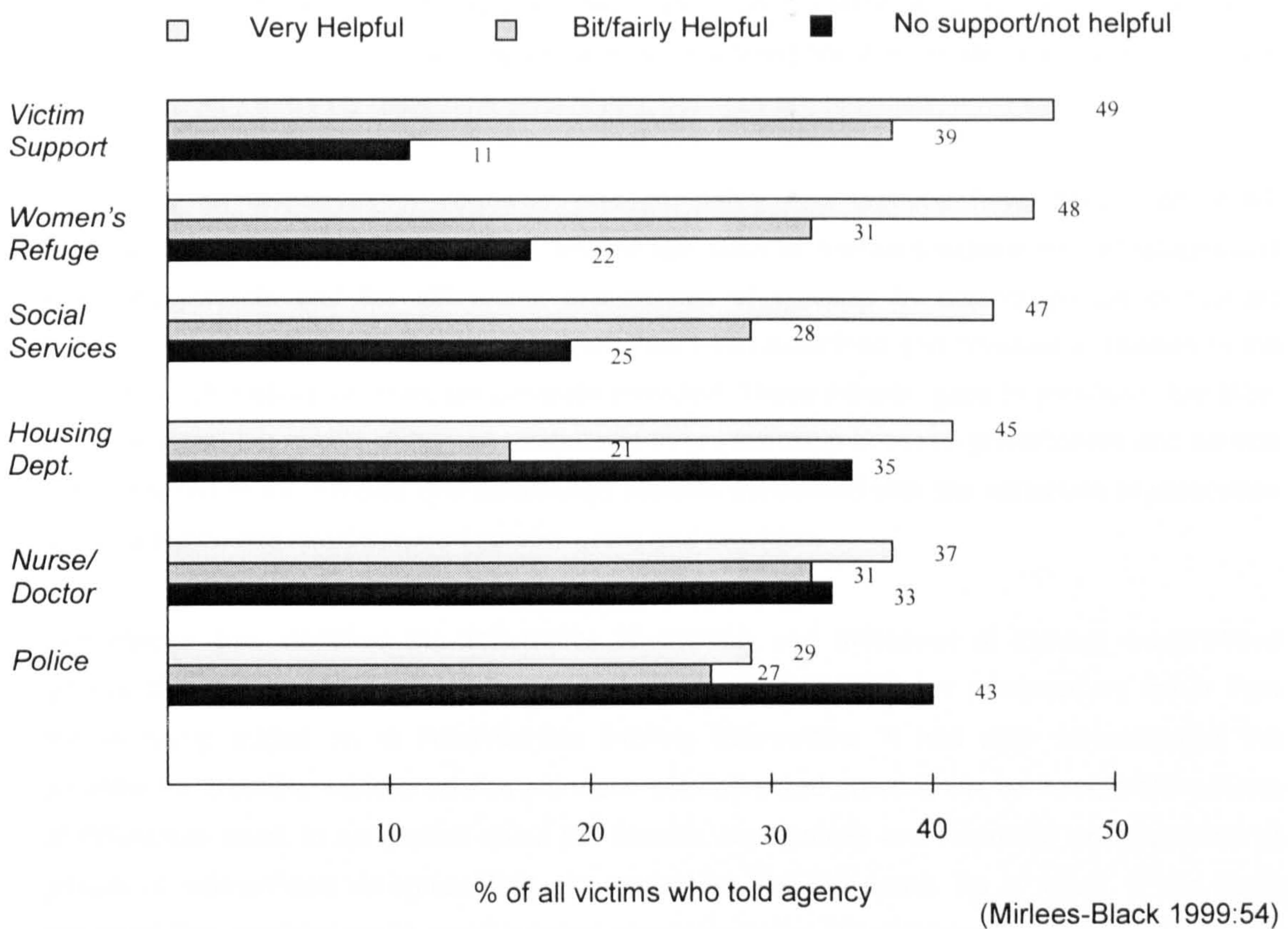
Additionally, there is still an inclination, even in this context, to focus on women as a homogeneous group, rather than on the specific needs and experiences of distinct groups of women. This is, however, with the exception of some studies specifically exploring the needs of Black and Asian women (Choudry 1996; Mama 1996; 2000) as well as some work which explores the social services, health service and probation response to domestic violence, for example, by Mullender (1996) and Pryke and Thomas (1998). Nevertheless, it largely appears that much of the broad literature on domestic violence makes little more than passing reference to the need to highlight the differential needs and particular experiences of services of different groups of women experiencing domestic violence. This is despite evidence that both women from minority ethnic groups and working-class women fear discriminatory judgments by workers, particularly in relation to their parenting or how prepared or able they are to leave their abusive partner (Hooper 1996). Finally, it is also extremely rare for women offenders to be recognised as a distinct group of women with specific needs in this context. The notable exception is Mullender (1996) who at least lists women with histories of offending as one group that might benefit from women-centred mental health services. She also highlights some of the issues for women who may have been sentenced for violent crimes against their male/female partners who have been violent towards them, often over many years. Crucially, she tentatively suggests a causal role between violence from an abuser and a woman's offending behaviour, which is supported in varying degrees in some of the criminology literature (see Chapter 3 for further information about the links between women's prominence in the CJS and their experiences of domestic violence).

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<sup>5</sup> For an example, see Figure 1 on page 45, from the British Crime Survey (1996), documenting perceptions of the helpfulness of support/advice from agencies



**Figure 1. Helpfulness of support/advice from agencies victims contacted**



## Conclusion

In sum, a number of complex, interconnected, at times paradoxical and yet recurring themes have emerged in this chapter, for example, the inadequacy of seeking explanations for women's oppression that effectively result in blaming individuals for the inequalities they endure. Also relevant, is the emergence of the ineffectiveness of seeking to tackle inequalities by adopting an individualist approach such as challenging sexism, discrimination and prejudice alone, without first adopting a more radical approach. This might, for example, involve deconstructing what we think we already know about oppression and inequality. Linked to this, underestimating or even ignoring the structural forces that explain and underpin inequalities has also been highlighted as potentially damaging.

The importance of gender to the social policy debate has been stressed, not least in the context of examining the negativity associated with societal pressures to conform to notions of familism that can result in some women being dependent, marginalised and isolated in their communities. Strong links have been drawn to women's experiences of domestic violence as a result of such



ideology and it has been proposed that women in this situation are often viewed as problematic, rather than as a particular group of women with a specific set of needs. Added to this are the particular ways that women offenders are vilified as a result of their perceived failure to conform to societal ideals of how women 'should' behave. Such altered perceptions also impact on the nature of welfare policy and may determine what, if any, services are provided.

The many developments in domestic violence policy and practice have been highlighted. However, there do appear to be gaps in knowledge, such as women's experiences of refuges and advocacy projects and the differential experiences of services by distinct groups of women including women offenders. A range of issues has been examined and critiqued in relation to the ways in which welfare services are currently provided. These include: gaps in provision, low take-up of services, the quality of human relations in the relationship between practitioners and service users and the more complex and convoluted aspects associated with the variations in perception of experiences and need between service users and providers.

The chapter has identified the importance of diversity and difference in making marginalised groups of women more visible and enabling them to develop their own perspectives rather than merely being added on to inappropriate existing frameworks. It has also demonstrated the potential for enabling welfare service planners, providers and practitioners to incorporate notions of differential need, to be explicit about the specific experiences and needs of individual/distinct groups of women and recognise that all women are not the same. As a result, it has been proposed that services could avoid running roughshod over the multiple differences among and within women and therefore be more effective in meeting their needs. Paradoxically, it has also been possible to demonstrate how crucial it is not to mask either the structural positions of women in communities or the commonalities between them, because it is structural factors that affect such experiences. Moreover, emphasising the commonalities between women may actually result in the development of improved welfare services, because of the potential for marginalised groups of women to join forces in seeking to bring about such change. Overall however, it seems clear that, whilst politically the commonalities between women may be important, an understanding of the specificity of individual women's positions (for example, in acknowledging past discrimination and disadvantage associated with being a woman offender), is vital in relation to her experiences of social welfare. Failure to recognise this will ensure that complex power relations will remain unchallenged and unchanged, disadvantage will be perpetuated and compounded and marginalised groups of women will remain separate, silent and invisible.



## **Chapter 3 - Women offenders: complex lives and harsh vicious circles**

### **Introduction**

A broad outline of the historical context of relevant criminological literature and critique of traditional theories of women's criminality provides the initial focus for this chapter. Particular reference is made to the apparent invisibility of women and how feminist researchers increasingly challenged traditional male standpoints that reinforced this (Carlen 1985; Heidensohn 1985; Smart 1990; Longino 1993; Naffine 1997). Feminist perspectives in criminology provide the epistemological basis. However, the rationale for placing women at the centre of this study, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the actual position of women offenders within the context of a feminist epistemology, will be explored in depth in Chapter 4. Next, explanations for women's criminality are examined in relation to the impact of women's life experiences and 'problematic backgrounds'. The emphasis is on how being subjected to poverty, child abuse and domestic violence *can* culminate in criminal activity, often as a means of survival in essentially hostile communities and how these experiences can impact on their prominence within the CJS (Carlen 1988; Lloyd 1995; Janeksela 1997; Tyler 1997; Devlin 1998). Moreover, the effects of women's offending behaviour are explored in relation to how they are often viewed as doubly deviant, because of dominant perceptions of them as guilty of ignoring socially constructed gender roles (Lloyd 1995). Developing and building on concepts and theories previously examined in Chapter 2 and focusing particularly on the consequences of criminality for women compared to men, the subsequent impact of the 'othering' of women offenders is also discussed (McCleod 1982; Carlen 1983; Worrall 1990; Chesney-Lind 1997; Danner 2000). Of particular relevance is how, as a result, they may be subject to additional discrimination and disadvantage in society. This is illustrated by considering how women experience the CJS and how, once labelled, women offenders experience welfare services more generally.

After outlining the types of crime that women commit, the chapter goes on to explore how the CJS provides what is essentially a male-centred 'service', including the probation service, prisons and the courts (HMIP 1991), and how women experience such provision. The inability of these services to meet individual women's particular needs because of how they are viewed as awkward and difficult to deal with is particularly emphasised. This is done, for example, by highlighting the influence of pre-existing perceptions of women offenders, as women who are failing to conform to stereotypical norms and ideals (Heidensohn 1985; Jones and Thomas 1999). The resulting paradox is also examined, that is to say, it may largely be because of how some women are regarded and dealt with in society that explains why they have contact with the CJS in the first place. Following on from this, society's treatment of women offenders is explored more generally, but with particular reference to the harsh experiences of individuals who are victims of what Lloyd (1995:36) defines as 'societal disgust' (see page 55). Discrimination and structural blocks that predominate in society provide evidence of how

communities may repeatedly fail women offenders and therefore contribute to their 'need' to commit crime (Carlen 1990; Eaton 1993; Janeksela 1997).

The rehabilitation of women offenders also provides a focus for attention, with specific emphasis on programmes of intervention that appear to have the potential to provide alternatives to custody (Carlen 1990) and enable them to re-build their lives after prison (Eaton 1993). The particular experiences of women facing life on the outside after custody are highlighted, leading to an exploration of a number of factors that appear crucial in providing appropriate services for women offenders. These are extrapolated from particular studies that closely relate to the focus of this research and include work by Carlen *et al.* (1985) Eaton (1993) and Devlin (1998). Their findings highlight a number of relevant themes that also pertain to women offenders' use of community-based welfare services more generally. The chapter concludes by highlighting concerns about the extremely limited data that currently exist about how they actually experience such services and the effects these encounters have on them as they attempt to meet their welfare needs.

## **Explanations for women's criminality**

### *Traditional theories of women's criminality*

Historically, there is a paucity of literature pertaining specifically to women offenders, the nature of their criminality and their experiences of the CJS (O'Shea and Fletcher 1997). The vast majority of research was male dominated and male-centred (Heidensohn 1985). For example, theories of knowledge that underpinned criminology and practices that were generated as a result of those epistemologies, were male dominated from the earliest studies of criminality (Sumner 1990; Heidensohn 2000a). Briefly, this includes for example, Merton's (1938) theory of 'anomie' where criminality was seen as being caused by social pressures ('strain theory') and Sutherland and Cressey's (1960) theory of 'differential association' which was based on the idea that criminality is learned in social groups. Also, Cohen's (1955) work on delinquent sub-cultures suggested that criminality was a reaction to being judged, and labelling theory (Becker 1963) emphasised how external social stigma culminate to produce the 'criminal'. It is argued that this is because of how powerful members of society apply negative labels to the powerless, who internalise them and reconstruct themselves accordingly. Also, within these latter theories was the important notion that society creates 'deviants'. In other words, people who are deviant provide a function for the non-offending majority in society. Accordingly, it is important to be explicit about the gender-blindness of these theories.

All early criminological research, such as the studies that sought explanations for offending behaviour, was carried out exclusively on male populations (Heidensohn 1985). There was an expectation that women's experiences could merely fit into what were essentially patriarchal, discriminatory models and theories that did not take account of the gender dimension (Smart 1976; Heidensohn 1987; Eaton 1993). As a result, much of the literature that dealt with crime



and delinquency was criticised because it implied relevance for women despite their absence from the research designs (Tyler 1997). Specific examples of the resulting stereotypical perception of deviant women that was (and perhaps still is) prevalent in society, include the works of Lombroso and Ferrero (1895) Thomas (1923) and Pollak (1950). In these studies, women generally were largely viewed as passive and incapable. Consequently, those who behaved differently from this were seen as deviant and 'other' (Heidensohn 1987). By not conforming to preconceived notions of 'proper womanhood' they were also labelled, for example, as witches and whores, sexual temptresses or evil monsters (Lloyd 1995:49). A fundamentally biological basis also underpinned this research, where explanations about, for example, women who committed violent crime were frequently based on perceptions of them as victims of their hormones (Ussher 1992) or as suffering from a mental disorder (Maden 1996). Following this, the practice of viewing women as inferior *and* unstable, can lead to a perception of them as neurotic, irrational or 'mad'. Thus, as will become clearer later in this chapter, a woman who is violent can end up being labelled mad, with serious consequences in terms of how she is subsequently treated by the CJS (Carlen 2002). Evidence of this can be found in the substantial body of literature about women who commit sexual crimes or crimes against their children (Belknap 2001). This is despite the fact that they account for the smallest percentage of crimes committed by women overall (Tyler 1997). The tendency to focus attention in this way could be explained by criminologists' apparent preference for examining and seeking explanations for what could be characterised as *extreme* examples of women's criminality, rather than their propensity to commit petty crimes (see pp 56-57 for information about the types of crime women commit). However, general and/or media interest in crimes of this kind may also account for why so much attention has been paid to them.

### *Feminist perspectives in criminology*

In general, women's place in previous criminology literature seems to be characterised by contempt and disdain, which consequently places them in a state of 'otherness' (Smart 1976) because of their gender and their deviance (Naffine 1987) (see page 55 for more detail on the 'othering' of women offenders). However, from the late 1970s, feminist criminologists increasingly expressed dissatisfaction with this tendency to marginalise and distort women's experiences. In so doing, they developed and reinforced the critique of how women had been perceived and portrayed as somehow deviating from the perceived human or male norm and therefore deficient in some way (Naffine 1987). They also recognised that it was because of the predominantly 'male-centred' view of crime, that the particular experiences of women had largely been ignored and that research had played a part in perpetuating the invisibility of the experiences of the majority of women offenders (Belknap 2001). Thus, feminist researchers challenged this standpoint as they developed new ways of researching women's criminality (Heidensohn 1968; Smart 1976). For example, Smart (1976), Carlen (1985) and Heidensohn (1985) all advocated what was, at the time, perceived as a much more radical approach to exploring issues for women in a criminological context and one that grew from a broad feminist epistemological basis. The primary aim of these pioneering feminist criminologists was to find a



way of encompassing and representing women's lives specifically, rather than attempting to repeat previous studies undertaken with men. They were clear about the need to hear the experiences of women involved in crime and stressed the importance of researchers connecting what were often perceived as 'private troubles' with what were actually 'public issues' (Heidensohn 1985:14; Naffine 1987). Furthermore, whilst seeking the particular views and interpretations of women offenders was still rare; Carlen's (1985) work, in particular, began to redress this. She called for research that turned to women themselves and sought to explore their individual accounts of the criminal experience. Consequently, new explanations for women's criminality were developed from the standpoint of the female offender (Heidensohn 1995) (see Chapter 4 for more in-depth exploration of these issues in the context of the research philosophy/methodology).

It is important to note that no one set of arguments can be used to describe 'feminist criminology'. Rather, core elements of feminist thinking provide the basis from which to see crime differently (Naffine 1997). This includes: critiquing the stereotypical images that distorted earlier theories, ensuring that gender is a central feature of analysis and working towards the elimination of the collapsing of women's experiences into those of men (Gelsthorpe and Morris 1988). Equally, the notion of feminist criminology has been contested, for example by Smart (1990), who proposed that criminology is too deeply engaged in repression to make the feminist goal of empowering women to be free from male domination an achievable one. Yet, following Heidensohn (2000b), there is also a need for optimism about the possibility of change in this context. Additionally, there is a danger in equating the study of crime with systems of punishment. 'Feminist' approaches may *only* be about hearing and valuing women's experiences and do not *have* to include overt acts of empowerment. This is particularly important, given the contemporary sociological and feminist debates about human/female agency within and throughout resistance and critiques of notions of collective action which may be unachievable for all groups/individuals in society.

#### *Problematic backgrounds: problematic journeys to criminality*

Female criminality had not only been explained by biology, but by other theories such as the 'liberation hypothesis' that was first suggested by Adler (1975), who stated that following the rise of modern feminism, a new female criminal had arrived. She suggested that women were increasingly seeking equality through their criminality and becoming more like men and therefore as they seemingly deliberately sought more masculine ways of being, they were also committing more crime. The evidence, she proposed, could be found in the rising levels of violent crime by women. Following Heidensohn (2000a) however, the connections she made between female violence and emancipation have not been substantiated.

More pertinent to this study are the links between women's experiences of poverty and crime, as well as their experiences of domestic violence and abuse, which have also been examined



to varying degrees, in relation to the search for explanations for their propensity to commit crime. Muraskin (2000) for example, is clear that long before they receive custodial sentences, women are already 'imprisoned' as a result of the discrimination and lack of opportunities that they endure in their communities. Several studies have also made connections to the physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and financial violence that large numbers of women offenders experience *before* they encounter the CJS. To illustrate this, the *HMI Review of Women's Prisons* (1997) found that nearly half of all women in prison had experienced abuse at the hands of their parents, husbands or male partners prior to their prison sentence. Similarly, the Social Work Services and Prison Inspectorate for Scotland (1998) discovered that 82% of the women they interviewed in prison had experienced some form of abuse during their lives. Yet, concerns have also been voiced about gaps in evidence about the links between women's experiences of abuse and offending/re-offending, as well as under-utilisation of existing data (Home Office 2001b).

Research has also consistently shown that most women in prison have suffered poverty prior to engaging in offending behaviour (Mandaraka-Shepherd 1986; Genders and Player 1987; Heidensohn 1987; Carlen 1988; Chigwada-Bailey 1997). More recently, in Tyler's (2001) study, poverty was identified by the greatest number of women as the primary reason for their offending. In addition, writers concerned with researching the lives of women in prison suggest that what they see in the prison context merely reflects life on the outside. In other words, it is characterised not only by poverty, violence and abuse, but by unmet needs, homelessness, racism, escapism, destitution and loss (HMI 1997; Devlin 1998; Prison Reform Trust 2000). Similarly, women offenders' testimonies within a range of literature point to the failure of government policies, legislation, education, health and social care services to meet their wide-ranging and complex needs. For example, many women have experienced problems associated with education and unemployment prior to custody (HMI 1997; Hamlyn and Lewis 2000). This is especially evident in the findings from Devlin's (1998) study of women in prison, which clearly highlight the boredom and frustration many participants had experienced prior to custody, due to a lack of education and employment opportunities. Many women have also been homeless or lived in insecure accommodation prior to custody and substantial numbers actually become homeless or lose all their possessions as a result of spending time in prison (Wilkinson 1988; HMI 1997). Many women offenders have also been particularly disadvantaged in relation to health care, in part because their poor health generally is directly related to their experience of poverty (Payne 1991; Eaton 1993).

High levels of chronic, if not life threatening, ill health among women have been variously attributed to the deprivation both material and social, which poor women experience, aggravated by the stress of caring for others, especially children, with few resources and in unsuitable conditions. (Eaton 1993:75)

Devlin's (1998) findings also highlight a rapid and continuing increase in the numbers of women abusing drugs and alcohol in order to cope with the violence and isolation they have



experienced. To illustrate this, the charity Alcohol Concern estimates that more than half a million women drink at 'risky levels' and reports that the numbers of women drinking above recommended levels rose by 50% between 1984 and 1994 (Devlin 1998). Given the nature of large numbers of women offenders' experiences, this raises questions about whether they also turn to drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms when welfare services fail them. However, given the findings of the *HMI Review of Women's Prisons* (1997), which indicated that a quarter of the women in prison with a drug dependency continued using in custody and stated that they would carry on doing so after release, it is perhaps important not to generalise too much.

Eaton (1993) is extremely critical of government policies and their failure to ensure adequate provision in all of these areas. 'Current policies have created division and difference and then blamed the poor for the place they occupy in the social structure' (1993:77-78). Carlen (1990) takes this critique of government policies and society's treatment of women offenders further. She suggests that it was policies and legislation (Thatcher's law) on welfare, housing, local government, education and privatisation that actually displaced crime and punishment from their 'disciplines of criminology and penology' (1990:8) into the ordinary world of ordinary people. She also suggests that crime and punishment have become 'irredeemably related' to issues of social justice and to the systematic ways in which particular groups of women are 'written out' of social policy and service provision. Despite a change in government in 1997 and the pledges and hopes that came with it, Carlen (1998) is clear that little appears to have changed as women's needs continue to go unmet. Accordingly, the resort of ever-increasing punishment by the CJS serves to amplify women's experiences of oppression even further (Carlen 1998).

What emerges from this is the proposition that women's experiences of repeatedly being failed by their communities actually contribute to their 'need' to engage in criminal activity (Lloyd 1995). This is illustrated by how some women feel forced to resort to benefit fraud (Cook 1987) or prostitution (Edwards 1987) in order to cope with economic hardship. Likewise, many young working class women living in children's homes feel that criminal activity is a preferable alternative to the violence, poverty and isolation that characterises their experiences (Carlen 1987). Lloyd's (1995) description of Terri Simpson's, (co-founder of 'Women in Secure Hospitals' - WISH) experiences as a victim of child sexual abuse, rape, physical abuse, deprivation and neglect illustrate this well. Her abuse was not only inflicted upon her by her family, but also by those responsible for her safety and protection in institutional care settings. She identifies herself as being caught up in a number of vicious circles that involved her in drug abuse and committing violent acts in order to cope with her experiences of being abused.

In sum, it seems clear that the reasons for many women's criminality are rooted, to varying degrees, in the multiple and complex issues relating to problems with relationships, experiences of poverty, discrimination, racism, being in care, self-harm, domestic violence and sexual abuse (Tyler 2001). However, 'explaining' women's offending behaviour in this way may



be problematic if, as a result, women are blamed for the poverty, discrimination and abuse they have experienced, as well as for the criminal behaviour which such experiences produced. It is also perhaps important to stress the potential unhelpfulness of broad, generalised explanations for *all* women's criminality. It is not always under desperate circumstances that some women turn to crime (Prison Reform Trust 2000; Walklate 2001). Tchaikovsky (1985a) for example, expresses her frustrations at the tendency to perceive *all* women offenders as 'inadequate' or 'unstable' victims. This description was incongruent with her 'exciting' experiences as a criminal.

*'Bad' women: guilty of ignoring the social construction of gender roles*

Of specific relevance to this study is how female criminality is examined in relation to women's offending behaviour being viewed as unacceptable. This is because of perceptions of them as guilty of ignoring socially constructed gender roles (Carlen 1985; Allen 1987a; Worrall 1990; Daly 1994). Therefore, they are perceived as 'bad' because they are not conforming to preconceived patriarchal notions of how women *should* be or how they *should* behave (Smart 1992; Stafford 1999), for example, with regard to fulfilling a caring role (Edwards 1986; Naffine 1987; Carlen 1998). In other words, offending behaviour is incongruent with perceptions of what it means to be 'caring'. Heidensohn (1985) highlights the prevalence of advice for women on how to be a good woman, wife and mother, for which there is no equivalent for men. Socialisation also leaves women needing to conform (Naffine 1987). However, this becomes difficult because of how they are presented in dualistic terms as good *and* bad, angels *and* slags (Heidensohn 1985). However, in addition, although the category 'woman' can potentially incorporate opposites, the dualism responsible for labelling women is invoked to put one or other label on to a particular woman. The resulting pressure can be found in two basic themes, 'the bad woman gets her just desserts or the good woman is put in her proper place' (Heidensohn 1985:99). The consequences of the social control of women can be dire for those who dare to misbehave (Edwards 1986; Renzetti 1998) and it is women offenders who pay a particularly heavy price for their failure to conform in a patriarchal society.

Control is maintained by the imposition of deep and damaging stigma on a small minority of women while for the rest a massive 'diversion' takes place as women are exhorted, cajoled and subtly coerced into conformity. (Heidensohn 1985:109)

The impact of the socialisation process on women and the resulting stereotypical perceptions that both women and men have of women's behaviours are equally important. For example, aggression in young men is largely viewed as 'normal' and yet young women who exhibit such behaviour are judged as 'abnormal' females (Edwards 1986; Carlen 1988). There is also clear evidence that the strength of the revulsion, stigma and vilification of women who commit violent crime is far greater than that for men (Lloyd 1995; Belknap 2001). Myra Hindley represented a classic example of this (Barker 2002). In part, she was not released from prison because of how she was portrayed by the media as an almost witch-like, evil monster (Phillips 2000).

However, it is also important to be mindful that much as the media *are* culpable, they are not alone in this. 'Society' (that is, 'we'/'us') also tend to regard her as the ultimate abomination of femaleness because of our perceptions of the 'unnaturalness' of women killing or collaborating in the killing of children.

There are also a number of other key differences between women and men in terms of the consequences of their criminality (Morris 1987). To illustrate this, men's criminality may result in enhancement of their sense of masculinity. Conversely, the opposite is conceivably true for women in relation to their femininity, which can be damaged and diminished as a result,

Femininity is diminished by crime, and women who commit crime are reduced as women by the process of criminalisation because they know that they are perceived differently from their male counterparts. Women offenders are thought to have breached sacred notions of what is deemed to be truly female. The phrase 'criminal woman' induces fears of little potential criminals cowering behind her skirts. (Kennedy 1992:19)

However, generalising that *all* crime carries this kind of 'damage' to femininity may be unhelpful, because it hides the complexities that underpin the proposition. For example, it may be that it is only those crimes which appear to be 'unnatural' for women (as mothers/nurturers) to commit, such as abusing or killing children, which cause such harm. Extrapolating from this and applying the biological argument, it becomes possible to suggest that poor women who steal food to feed their children are in fact perceived to be acting 'naturally'. Yet, it is Kennedy's (1992) proposal that *all* women who commit crime are susceptible to prejudicial and harsh labelling, regardless of the type of crime they have committed, that is perhaps more compelling. Pursuing this argument, perhaps all women offenders will have some sense of their femininity being damaged and diminished, as she implies. Yet, Tchaikovsky's criticism of the dominant perception of women offenders as inadequate or unstable, because of how it differs from her own experiences as a criminal, conflicts with this to some degree. Overall, it seems clear that certain notions of 'proper womanhood' are preferred to alternatives that are marginalised and subordinated (Connell 1987). As a result, it is possible to see why women who fail to conform to the stereotypical ideals that society expects may be dealt with harshly (Naffine 1987). The consequences that prevail are therefore wide-ranging. As previously indicated, social injustices pervade and serve only to perpetuate women's experiences of prejudice and discrimination when they encounter the harsh and punitive CJS, where they may well experience differential treatment compared to men (Prison Reform Trust 2000) (see pp 59-61 for more detail on this).

What emerges from the literature is that women offenders *can* be viewed as victims of multiple marginality in society (Vigil 1995). Lloyd (1995:36) elaborates these ideas in relation to violent women and, in supporting the notion that they suffer far more in society because of their gender, proposes that whilst they may not be able to name it clearly, each woman will be fully



aware of the 'societal disgust' that surrounds her. This links to the perception that exists of women offenders more generally as 'doubly deviant' and 'doubly damned'. In other words, they are damned because they are offenders but also because they are women (Heidensohn 1987; Lloyd 1995; Worrall 2002). Examining this further, every individual potentially has to confront, manage and cope with the experience of being 'othered' on an almost daily basis. Developing the concepts and theories examined in Chapter 2, women offenders experience a sense of misplacement because of how society excludes and punishes them from all angles (Eaton 1993). Vicious circles are created and perpetuated as they turn to crime in response to their marginalisation and hence they become even more marginalised. Thus, we rationalise *their* problems as being far removed from *ours*, (*we* being *non-offending* women and men). In essence, they conveniently become invisible (Belknap 2001).

Paradoxically however, it may actually be the pressures that are applied to *all* women to conform to patterns of social control and how these are related to women's crime that demonstrate the wider relevance of female criminality to *all* women (McCleod 1982; Carlen 1983; Heidensohn 1985; Eaton 1986; Worrall 1990). Chesney-Lind (1997) for example, makes the link between 'us' and 'them' and considers what, if anything separates offenders from non-offenders. She supports the view that girls and women offenders are not that different from 'normal' citizens. This is also strengthened by Gibbons (1983) who says they are, 'ordinary individuals who, for the most part, engage in sporadic and unskilled crimes' (1983:3) (see pp 56-57 for details about the types of crime women commit). Nevertheless, if this view is examined in relation to how femininity *can* be damaged and diminished by crime, an extension of the debate here is the suggestion that it is therefore possible to differentiate between public perceptions of different crimes in the context of gender with the same levels of societal disgust being afforded equally to both women and men. However, contrary to this is the proposition that the differences actually lie in how definitions or judgments of girls and women who commit crime are developed in relation to men (Lloyd 1995). Therefore, the implications are that, as a consequence, girls and women have less power and control over their lives and are therefore especially subject to societal disgust if they commit *any* crime. This is *because* they are women. Therefore, following Lloyd (1995), there is a need to both acknowledge how the male powered society can act as the root problem in the context of women's criminality and also to implement much-needed changes to ensure a more just society, regardless of whether or how far these propositions may be criticised for being utopian ideals.

Overall, many of these studies provide insights into women offenders' experiences before and after they encounter the CJS and perhaps reinforce the notion that their journeys to criminality are often influenced by a number of social and economic factors. They also illustrate the impossibility of seeking to identify one universal theory of women's criminal behaviour (Tyler 2001). The indication overall is that it is multi-causal so it is perhaps more helpful to examine the combination of consequences of both the social construction of women *and* their



problematic backgrounds/life experiences, than simply one or other of these. Although, it is equally important to recognise that women's problematic backgrounds/life experiences *also* occur as a direct consequence of the social construction of women. Together, this multi-dimensional approach to exploring these complex issues which intersect to create and perpetuate problems and life experiences, perhaps begins to give a more accurate insight into the reasons for women's criminality (Tyler 2001).

### **How women experience the criminal justice system (CJS)**

#### *Type of offences committed by women*

Male crime rates far outweigh those for women (Naffine 1987) in all countries, for all age groups, for all periods in history and for all crime except, for example, prostitution, infanticide and abortion, in other words, those that are peculiar to women (Janeksela 1997). The most common crime committed by women in Europe is theft, with shoplifting being the most common type of theft. Fraud and forgery are the second most common crimes (Janeksela 1997). Women are most likely to be convicted for TV licence evasion (Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate 1998). In contemporary Britain, as elsewhere, women generally commit far less crime than men (Gelsthorpe 2000; Heidensohn 2000b). To illustrate this, in 2000 19% of known offenders (those who had either been cautioned or found guilty by the CJS) were women (Home Office 2001a). Additionally, in England and Wales in 1997, the general ratio of female to male offenders was 1:6 for serious and largely imprisonable offences (Gelsthorpe 2000). Furthermore, the pattern of women's offending is very different from that of men, for example, note the difference in percentages of serious indictable offences for theft and handling – 60% of female offenders compared with 37% of male offenders in 2000 (Home Office 2001a). Drug related crimes committed by women are increasing. Between 1993 and 1996, 50% of the growth of the female prison population was due to an expansion in the number of convictions for drug offences (including production, supply and possession with intent to supply a class A controlled drug) (Prison Reform Trust 2000). However, in introducing this data it is important to note the substantial increase in numbers of foreign national women who, during this time frame, accounted for approximately 15% of the female prison population, 71% of whom had been convicted of drug offences (Prison Reform Trust 2000).

Compared with men, women are also less likely to be recidivists, are likely to have shorter criminal careers and are less likely to be professional criminals (Heidensohn 1987; 1991). Similarly, evidence indicates that very few women commit violent crimes and the few who are violent, are less so than men (Lloyd 1995; Heidensohn 2000b). In addition, they are violent less frequently than men (Maden 1996); they are not violent in a characteristic, threatening, 'daily' way through domestic violence and most women have been violent in response to difficult circumstances, frequently as a means of survival (Edwards 1986; Lloyd 1995; Maden 1996; Gelsthorpe 2000; Heidensohn 2000b). However, presenting data that generalise about the types of offences all women commit may be criticised because of how it potentially masks



issues such as, how some women can be as violent and dangerous as some men. Therefore, it is also important to note that small numbers of women *do* actually commit almost all kinds of offences (Prison Reform Trust 2000; Walklate 2001), however infrequently (Heidensohn 1987). They can also do so consciously and with intent and can therefore be both dangerous and culpable (Allen 1987b).

#### *Anomalies in the sentencing of women: too harsh or too lenient?*

Extending this focus on the types of crime women generally commit, there often appears to be conflict and confusion about whether they experience differential treatment within the CJS. One example of the seeming contentiousness that pervades the literature about whether, compared with men, women experience the CJS in qualitatively different ways, is located in concerns about apparent increases in female violence. Thus, recently it has been suggested that female violence has increased from 7% of indictable crimes in 1987 to 18% in 1999 (Gelsthorpe 2000). In seeking possible explanations for this, Gelsthorpe intimates, perhaps rather provocatively, that this may be attributable to changing responses to crime, rather than changes in *actual* crime rates. There has been a continual increase in the number of women being given custodial sentences, for example, in 1996 the Prison Reform Trust recorded that the number of women prisoners had doubled over a 5-year period. More specifically, while they currently represent only 5.2% of the prison population overall, between 1993 and 2000 the number of female prisoners rose by 115% (compared with a 42% increase in the male population) (Home Office 2001a). One explanation for this could be that women are being subjected to unfair or harsh sentencing, for example, women have been more likely than men to be sentenced to custody for their first offence (Genders and Player 1987). In June 1995, there were twice as many women serving custodial sentences for a first offence as men (Home Office 1996). Yet, there is potentially conflicting evidence that points to how women are also more likely than men to be dealt with on mental health grounds. Lloyd (1995) for example, suggests that women who commit violent crimes are twice as likely to be dealt with on a psychiatric basis within the CJS.

Women are often thought to be unfit to plead or are found not guilty because of reasons of insanity and, if charged with murder, the offence is likely to be reduced to manslaughter on the basis of diminished responsibility (Allen 1987a). In isolation, these may be perceived to be examples of more 'positive' or less punitive sentencing because women's sex is alleged to act as an advantage in this context. However, one of the consequences of this type of sentencing is that they are also far more likely to be sent to special hospitals (Grounds 1991). The exceptionally punitive nature of this is demonstrated in the subsequent difficulties they are likely to experience in negotiating their release (Stafford 1999; Wassell 2001). It is well documented that women's average length of stay in special hospitals exceeds that of men. For example, in 1996 it was two and a half years longer for women than for men (Stafford 1999). There are also no guaranteed release dates and individuals rely on others discretion about whether they are

'well enough' to be released. This requires arbitrary judgments which, given the cultural backdrop already discussed, are likely to be prejudicial.

It is difficult to be clear about whether anomalies *do* exist for women in this context. A number of studies, however, have explored the reasons for apparent discrepancies in sentencing based on the sex of the offender. Allen (1987a) proposed that the inconsistencies could not be accounted for on the basis of differences in the mental health of men and women, because there was still a discrepancy in patterns of disposal even where men and women had similar diagnoses. She also found that the reasons could not be attributed to the authorities' views of men as essentially 'bad' in contrast to women being viewed as 'mad'. Allen sees the discrepancies for women offenders as part of what she describes as a 'complex and basically unintended interaction between two aspects of the legal and medical decision making' (1987a:xii). First, there are all the social expectations about gender which impact on the interpretations of criminal cases by legal and medical staff. There is also a whole range of legislation and institutional provision that does not apparently seek to favour one sex over the other, but it is the interaction between the two issues that, she suggests, offers an explanation of the discrepancies that exist for women offenders. She states that there is not so much an imbalance, in the sense of women being treated by the courts to excess on mental health grounds. Rather, she suggests that there is a deficiency in relation to men being offered psychiatric disposals. This seems contradictory in that Allen appears to suggest that women are more likely to receive a psychiatric order but *not* on the grounds of gender. Yet, an alternative reading of Allen is that no contradiction exists because courts are more likely to see women as 'mad' and men as 'bad' and therefore women get the psychiatric disposal and men get prison.

Findings from Hedderman and Hough's (1994) study support the proposition that women are not systematically dealt with more severely than men and that they may often appear to be in receipt of consistently more lenient sentencing because of their gender (Hedderman and Dowd 1997; Hedderman and Gelsthorpe 1997). This is reflected in how sentencers apparently try to avoid the use of custody and appear to be reluctant to impose fines on women already experiencing poverty because of the detrimental effects on their children (Hedderman and Dowd 1997; Home Office 2000a). This reluctance, however, may actually have serious ramifications for women because sentencers may use probation which results in women missing a step on the sentencing ladder (Hudson 2002). This carries a risk that if they re-offend they are much more likely to be given a more severe sentence than if they were given a fine in the first instance (Hedderman and Gelsthorpe 1997:ix).

In contrast, Eaton's (1986) comparative study of the treatment of males and females appearing in one Magistrates' Court tested out claims of the lenient/harsh treatment of women. Her findings suggested that if men and women were presented similarly in court, there was no



evidence of discrimination, but this was rare. She found evidence of a model of family life dominating how women and men were presented in court, which was based on women generally being viewed as necessarily 'home-centred' and 'caring'. The outcome of this was especially negative for women accused of committing crimes, because of the conflict their alleged deviance from their consigned roles presented to the court (Worrall 1981; Carlen and Worrall 1987; Eaton 1987; Worrall 1987). Hence, Eaton's conclusions were that women were disadvantaged in court and this is perhaps another example of women being perceived to be doubly deviant and therefore susceptible to being doubly damned (Lloyd 1995). This is supported by Carlen (1998:22), who also points to the differential sentencing of women on the basis of how they are perceived in relation to the nature of their crimes and their personal circumstances, as flawed or unstable rather than lawbreaking women. As previously discussed, this could be interpreted as potentially provoking a more lenient sentence because of the increased likelihood that women will be viewed as 'mad' as a result. However, this can only be perceived as beneficial to women if a psychiatric disposal were in fact preferable to punishment in prison. Given the difficulties that tend to ensue for women, this does not appear to be the case. Additionally, Carlen (1998) highlights the lack of suitable gender sensitive, woman-only probation programmes and non-custodial hostel accommodation for women who have experienced child abuse or domestic violence and for whom mixed provision is therefore inappropriate. This can lead to the most vulnerable women being given harsher sentences if they re-offend because prisons become the only option for sentencers who have few other alternatives.

Altogether, these data highlight a range of complicated and contentious issues relating to what has aptly been described by Eaton (1987) as the illogical and irrational sentencing of women, or by Worrall (1995) as the 'sentencing paradox'. On one side, there are examples of women appearing to be given much harsher sentences than men, despite having committed similar offences (Devlin 1998), while on the other they are also apparently given more lenient sentences than men for serious offences, including violent crime and murder/manslaughter (Allen 1987b; Maden 1996).

#### *Inequalities in design and delivery of services: comparing the experiences of women and men*

Overall, the CJS can be viewed as yet another form of oppression in the lives of all women (Eaton 1987; Danner 2000). This is demonstrated by the way in which recognition has increasingly been given to how women offenders, compared with men, have encountered considerable disadvantage and discrimination within prison and probation services (Carlen and Worrall 1987; Carlen and Tchaikovsky 1996; Prison Reform Trust 2000; Worrall 2002). For example, given that, in the past, the majority of research was male-centred, it is unsurprising that services that were developed as a result of such studies were designed with the needs of men in mind and thus failed to identify or to meet the particular needs of women (Carlen 2002). Heidensohn describes women's position in the CJS as being, 'not so much, when in court, police custody, or in prison, in no-man's land as in too much man's land'. (1985:xi). By way of

illustration, historically, probation services were largely unable to meet the particular needs of women because they were providing services designed for men based on research undertaken exclusively with male offender populations (HMIP 1991). Whilst research was subsequently undertaken identifying the specific needs of women offenders and how best to meet their needs (Austin *et al.* 1992; Eaton 1993; Daly 1994; Caddle and Crisp 1996; Mair and May 1997) the extent to which recommendations were implemented at ground level was extremely limited. Consequently, even now, women still tend to be kept on the periphery within probation services (Roberts 2002) and are often seen as awkward and difficult to work with. This is largely attributable to the numerous and complicated needs they present, including those associated with complex histories of domestic violence, abuse and harm, their primary and often sole responsibility for child care, and general levels of poor health and welfare (Worrall 1990; Wright and Kemshall 1994; Jones and Thomas 1999).

This disadvantage is mirrored in the prison environment, where women seem to become invisible from the moment they are taken in to the prison van that transports them from court to custody (Carlen 1998). Stern (1998) supports the view that this is because women are tacked on to services within the CJS as an awkward afterthought. In other words, they are invisible because they are subsumed into a world that is primarily male-centred and insensitive to their very different needs (Hayman 1996; Devlin 1998). As a result, there is a seeming inability to meet their particular needs (Genders and Player 1987; Hayman 1996; Devlin 1998). For example, compared with men, women have fewer work opportunities and access to fewer resources for rehabilitation and education programmes while they are in prison (Devlin 1998; Hamlyn and Lewis 2000). In addition, not only do prison health care services generally not match up to National Health Service standards (HMSO 1996) but also women encounter specific forms of disadvantage. This is particularly evident in the poor treatment and management of gynaecological conditions, including those relating to menstruation, pregnancy and menopause, and with respect to their psychological health (Carlen and Tchaikovsky 1996; Carlen 1998; Prison Reform Trust 2000). Similarly, HM Inspectors who carried out the review of women's prisons in 1997, highlighted that women prisoners with substance abuse problems had complex needs relating to their experiences of domestic violence and child abuse which were different from men's and that these were not being adequately met.

Carlen (1998: viii) is clear about the negative impact of the Prison Service, stating that it:

..... acts like a sledgehammer – a penal instrument which smashes at the already-smashed and which, in its penal ferocity, is a disgrace to a civilised society. (Carlen 1998: viii).

The counter position to this notion of women's prisons as ferocious and disgraceful may be that prisons are not designed to provide a positive experience. Rather, their main focus should be on punishment and retribution. Yet, this seems inappropriate in the longer term, given



individual's experiences of what can be an especially degrading, abusive, inappropriate and therefore, unacceptable environment for women (and men). Carlen *et al.* (1985), Tchaikovsky (1985b; 1996), O'Dwyer *et al.* (1987) and Carlen and Tchaikovsky (1996) all describe atrocities in women's prisons. These include women setting themselves on fire in their cells, being stripped and left naked in solitary confinement for days on end, being beaten by prison officers and other women, being sutured without anaesthetic and generally using self-harm and violence as their only way of staying alive and staying sane. It is perhaps debatable whether these responses or practices can always be directly attributable to inadequate or inappropriate prison services for women. Conversely, they may be perceived as human reactions to what could be described as an 'unnatural' environment. Nevertheless, women's experiences in secure hospitals also demonstrate how they can be harmed and not helped by their contact with the CJS. For example, Lloyd (1995) highlights how they may be subjected to (further) physical and sexual abuse by the very 'services' that should be providing appropriate care, treatment and rehabilitation for women, before they are released back into their communities (Potier 1993). This has been particularly evident in mixed-sex environments (wards and activities) where women have been harassed and/or abused by men (Stafford 1999). Therefore, it seems that, far from having any positive impact, women are, at times, actually left trying to repair the additional damage done to them by the CJS (Carlen 1998). This is largely because of the ways in which services (prison and probation) have been constructed (for men) and also because of how women are dealt with by those services.

*Inequalities in design and delivery of services: comparing the experiences of different groups of women*

A number of researchers argue that criminal justice processes punish some women more than others (Agozino 1997; Danner 2000). Carlen (1990) highlights the particular experiences of Black women, lone mothers, women in prison and lesbians who can experience a particular sense of isolation within both the CJS and society more widely. It is these women, she suggests, who, once they break the law, are more likely to receive a custodial sentence for minor crimes than are women in families or men, because of the particular ways they fail to conform to notions of 'proper womanhood'. By way of illustration, Chigwada-Bailey (1997) suggests that there is no shortage of evidence to demonstrate how people from minority ethnic groups, and women in particular, feature disproportionately in the CJS. In mid-2000 for example, 25% of female prisoners and 19% of male prisoners were from ethnic minority groups, compared with the much smaller proportion (5.5%) in the general population. Fifteen per cent of women from minority ethnic groups were foreign nationals (Home Office 2001a). This high figure can largely be attributed to evidence that drug offences, particularly importations, account for three quarters of sentenced female foreign nationals (Home Office 2001a).

There is also evidence to suggest that women from minority ethnic groups experience the CJS in very different ways to men or white women. More specifically, the experiences of African-Caribbean women who commit crime, demonstrate particular inequalities and disadvantage within the CJS which Chigwada-Bailey (1997) and Carlen (1998) suggest are largely because of fundamental racist inequities in society, for example, in terms of the disproportionate ways that Black women experience poverty. This is illustrated further by Chigwada-Bailey (1997) who indicates that Black women are treated differently by the CJS because of a widespread tendency in the courts to engage in the racist stereotyping of them as promiscuous, aggressive or qualitatively 'different' from white female offenders. This is further supported by Bush-Bakette (1998) who reports how, when dominant perceptions of notions of women's behaviour as 'good' or 'bad' come to the fore in this way, Black women in particular may be perceived as far more capable of committing crime. Consequently, Carlen (1998) implies that this provides an explanation for why women from ethnic minorities feature disproportionately in the numbers of women in prison. In other words, she intimates that it may be one reason why they are much more likely to be given custodial sentences. However, contrary to this, it could also be argued that there must be some (even if only circumstantial) evidence to link women in this situation to the alleged crime. Chigwada-Bailey (1997) argues that explanations for why Black women are more likely to be given prison sentences also lie in how they experience 'secondary punishment'. In other words, because they are the mothers or sisters of young Black men, they may be more susceptible to 'harassment' from the police, which can lead to false accusations or malicious prosecutions (Chigwada-Bailey 1997: 14).

In recent years there do appear to have been certain improvements in practice in some areas (Chigwada-Bailey 1997), particularly within probation services that have taken steps to remove bias from Pre-sentence Reports (PSRs), by comparing the likelihood of Black and white defendants being referred for reports, or evaluating rates of acceptance of recommendations by sentencers (Hudson *et al.* 1993). In this way, they have been able to begin the process of guarding against discriminatory practice and have taken account of the presence of Black people in their service by developing more culturally sensitive rehabilitation programmes. However, despite progress of this kind, there still appears to be a lack of clarity about the statistics relating to race and the CJS, because of widespread inconsistencies in monitoring and reporting (Home Office 2000b). Also, Chigwada-Bailey (1997) points out that the numbers of Black women (and men) being made the subject of probation orders remains lower than their white counterparts and the numbers of Black prisoners continue to be disproportionate compared with the population overall.

#### *More appropriate alternatives: how to meet the particular needs of women in the CJS?*

The rehabilitation of women offenders has been of particular concern recently and there are a number of texts concerned, for example, with examining alternatives to custody, such as electronic tagging and the provision of specific community-based programmes, which have



been developed for women offenders (Carlen 1990; Zaplin 1998; Prison Reform Trust 2000). Both prison and probation services have begun the process of attempting to identify and meet the specific rehabilitation needs of women offenders (Wright and Kemshall 1994; Hirst 1996; Wilkinson *et al.* 1996; Brown 1997; Home Office 2000a). For example, the Home Office has highlighted progress in pursuing alternatives to custodial sentences for women, improving through-care for women released from custody, improving responses to diversity within prison and probation regimes and broadening the current evidence base on 'what works' in reducing women's offending behaviour (Home Office 2001b). Similarly, training programmes have been developed for custodial and non-custodial members of staff that are specific to working with women in custody (Wilson 2002). Research has also been undertaken to identify the differential drug treatment needs of women prisoners which will inform future development of provision to meet their assessment and treatment needs (Home Office 2001b). Additionally, all probation areas have delivered a minimum of one accredited general offending behaviour programme specifically for women since April 2001 (Home Office 2001b).

Accordingly, probation services have to some extent adopted a number of local strategies to meet the particular needs of women offenders (Wright and Kemshall 1994; Hirst 1996; Brown 1997; Home Office 2000a). This apparently began in local probation service areas with consistent expressions of concern that effective programmes were being designed and run mainly for men; that these programmes were not obviously transferable to women; and that women needed separate provision, because they did less well in mixed groups and were also vulnerable to harassment by male participants. However, whilst these all seemed good reasons for single-sex programme delivery, the extent to which the content was deemed to require gendering, and by what methods this might be achieved, was sometimes unclear and often contested. Additionally, concerns have been expressed very recently that existing programmes, originally developed for men, are still being extended to women offenders in some areas, in order to meet general targets (Home Office 2001b).

In this context, Jones and Thomas' (1999) modular programme of intervention for women who commit offences is interesting. Its focus is on adopting a cognitive behavioural approach to working with women offenders, to enable them to reduce their offending behaviour. The authors have developed a model for practice that identifies a number of essential components. These include recognising the need for sound values and principles that underpin the service; building in meaningful, responsible choice and gender consciousness; ensuring the absence of assumptions/stereotyping; prioritising respect/dignity; and adopting woman-centred, empowerment approaches that are owned by all concerned. More practically, they also advocate the need to have clear goals; to address practical and child-care issues; to adopt a co-ordinated approach that is multi-agency and multi-dimensional (holistic and thereby recognising the range of women's needs); to ensure provision of a safe, stable and woman-centred environment; and to provide follow-up and mentoring opportunities.



Jones and Thomas (1999) also stress the importance of the worker in terms of the style that they adopt and their behaviour. They highlight the value of positive relationships between workers and women and stress the need for warmth and openness. They propose that workers should be 'gender aware' and provide 'positive, enthusiastic, consistent, potent models of the skills the women will be developing' (1999:6). However, in their introduction, they criticise how probation services have historically focused on interventions that encourage women to adjust and conform to conventional female roles, rather than addressing their offending behaviour. There appears to be a danger in placing such an emphasis on worker behaviour because, as a result, they might also fall into the trap of ending up with what is a 'gender contract' rather than an 'offending behaviour contract' (Worrall 1990:33). This may be especially problematic if they assume that all workers delivering programmes are 'gender aware', devoid of prejudice and in possession of a good understanding of the oppression and disadvantage that women experience. This is highly unlikely despite training initiatives that they also recommend. The influence of customary and persistent gender stereotyping on social attitudes towards women and men should not be underestimated. Such attitudes might be shared by the women workers who provide community-based services as much as by anyone else. Additionally, whilst these underlying principles are important, until programmes like these are piloted and evaluated it will remain unclear whether they actually work in practice, in terms of promoting the successful re-integration of women into their communities and reduction of recidivism.

Just as crucial is Belknap and Holsinger's (1998) emphasis on the need for girls and young women to be actively involved in designing their own programmes and services because of how they have previously been unable to express their needs and, as a result, have been systematically disempowered by society.

One worker noted that consistent weekly support groups, where it was up to the girls what they talk about, are more successful than ordering girls into structured programmes. She believed that this was due to these girls' experiences of having been violated so severely that they could not trust something that they had no power over, and that taking part in their own rehabilitation was itself empowering. (Belknap and Holsinger 1998:59)

Involving women offenders in negotiating the content of the programmes they attend may be viewed by some as overly radical or inappropriate, particularly in a political climate that, far from empowering women, seems more concerned with punishing the already punished. Therefore, provision of this kind appears to be rare in the CJS in the U.K. It is also rare for service users in the CJS to be involved in evaluating provision (Home Office 2001b). Notable exceptions include Avon Probation Service which attempted to involve service users in devising criteria that were used to judge the performance of the service (Broussine and Wakefield 1997) and Hereford and Worcester Probation Service's involvement of women in evaluating the effectiveness of their group-work programmes (Rumgay 2000). Nevertheless, it is rare for offenders to be involved in consultation processes. The Government's *New Strategy for*



*Women Offenders*, which emphasises the need for a distinct approach to women's offending through the development and implementation of a new *Women's Offending Reduction Programme 2002-2005* (Home Office 2001b), is based on consultation with statutory and non-governmental organisations: the voices of women offenders are characteristically absent. Again, there are rare exceptions to this, particularly in the voluntary sector, such as the first ever consultation with women patients in secure hospitals that was commissioned by Women in Secure Hospitals (WISH) in 2000 (Parry-Crooke *et al.* 2000).

Overall, whilst any tentative attempts to meet women's particular needs are to be welcomed, they are not without their difficulties. Carlen's focus on the prejudices and assumptions that subvert and undermine education and pre-release schemes in prisons is relevant to this. Prison and probation services alike can engage in 'playing the numbers game': because there are so few women, they do not feel that it is viable to offer them a service tailored to their particular needs. Alternatively, there are examples of how, in some areas, some workers still seem to respond to the notion that 'prisons are for punishment' and that women offenders should naturally be punished and not helped. Equally, the value base of the individual worker or the organisation as a whole may be informed by the idea that women offenders do not want to change, that they should not be educated above their station and should not be led to believe that life can or will be better upon release (Carlen 1990:37). Consequently, the result may be that workers question the relevance or appropriateness of doing anything 'special' for them.

Like Carlen, Tchaikovsky (1997:19) also highlights how remarkable it is that what could be described as 'pockets of good practice' exist at all in women's prisons. She clearly expresses her belief that no-one can be rehabilitated in captivity. She also cautions against claiming that rehabilitation programmes are raising individuals' self-esteem. Rather, she suggests they are just ameliorating the damage that is being done all around them. This especially morbid and negative view of attempts to improve the current services and provision within prisons could be viewed as unhelpful, because of the sense of hopelessness and despair it potentially provokes. Tchaikovsky and Carlen's frustration with the lack of change over the years is especially evident, convincing and understandable. Yet, their apparent tendency towards blanket condemnation of prison services could hinder a process of change. (Interestingly, more recently, Carlen (2002) has written about the tensions inherent within the relationship between critique *and* reform, abolition *and* striving for changes in women's prisons.) The logical extension of their arguments is that the closure of women's prisons provides the only way forward for the future. However, this is both idealistic and largely improbable. More realistically, WISH has consistently campaigned for gender-specific policy and provision, arguing that equality of treatment does not mean uniformity of treatment or special treatment; rather it means different treatment for different needs (Stafford 1999). As has been argued in Chapter 2, without recognition of the differing circumstances, needs and experiences of individual women, there will be yet more discrimination and unfairness.

The issues impacting on the provision of rehabilitation services that have been highlighted within the context of women's prisons and probation services are evident within many different contexts and are not confined to the CJS. However, in exploring alternatives to women's imprisonment Carlen (1990; 1998) includes a cautionary note about how little is actually known about the community-based provision that exists for women offenders and ex-prisoners. Following Carlen, it is important to stress that prison and probation services are not in a position to remedy the almost overwhelming problems women offenders encounter by themselves. These include poverty, domestic violence, abuse, poor education, lack of employment opportunities and unsatisfactory housing. Rather, it is the responsibility of a much wider range of community-based services to meet their needs (Roberts 2002; Lowthian 2002). Many of those running these services may actually be unable or unwilling to work in a gendered way or assess their impact on individuals on the basis of their gender.

### **Life on the outside: women re-building their lives after prison**

Women come out of gaol to a world that has even less to offer than the prison itself. Depressed and alone, some then sink into despair in which they become careless of what happens to them. They re-offend and the circle repeats itself again and again. (O'Dwyer *et al.* 1987:188)

There are many uphill battles to be fought by women offenders as they seek help and support from scarce welfare services in the community (Lowthian 2002). The labelling and negative stereotyping of women prisoners hampers their efforts even further (Pettitway 1997). The resulting stigma and vilification is also amplified for particular groups of women, including those who have been in special hospitals (Stevenson 1989; Andrews 1991; Stafford 1999; DOH 2000). With this in mind, the focus now turns to women's particular experiences as they attempt to re-build their lives after a period of time in prison.

#### *Being an 'outsider' on the 'outside'*

Hicks and Carlen (1985) and O'Dwyer *et al.* (1987) crucially describe their experiences of being released from prison, coping with life on the outside and the obstacles they faced which demonstrate how women offenders can continue to be on the receiving end of harsh treatment long after they have completed their sentences.

The majority of newly released women do not have a home, job and family to come out to. Yet, despite my good fortune, my education and my will to continue with the reconstruction of my life along feminist and socialist lines, my life as an ex-prisoner has been one long obstacle race past prejudice, suspicion, bureaucratic indifference and condescension, often from those organisations whose whole *raison d'être* is supposed to be rooted in ex-prisoners' welfare. (Hicks and Carlen 1985:135)

O'Dwyer *et al.* (1987:187) state that women's chances of survival when they leave prison are 'disgustingly dim' and little seems to have changed more recently. Hamlyn and Lewis (2000)



found evidence of women experiencing difficulties with employment and education, accommodation, lack of contact with the probation service, personal, emotional, financial and domestic problems and insufficient levels of support on their release from prison. Hicks and Carlen (1985) and O'Dwyer *et al.* (1987) propose a number of solutions including self-organisation where women with similar experiences come together to offer each other support in finding alternatives to crime. They suggest that it is perhaps only with an approach based on self-help that women will be enabled to hold on to some optimism for the future. Eaton's (1993) research with women trying to regain/gain sufficient control in their lives so they would not have to return to prison is very relevant to this discussion, since she focuses on the factors and processes associated with women's rehabilitation and/or survival in communities after prison. She describes women's responses to prison in their attempt to cope with the experience, which involves them 'paying a heavy price' as they are forced into 'withdrawal' (withdrawing from unnecessary involvement in prison life), 'retaliation' (displaying childish or challenging behaviour), 'incorporation' (developing hierarchies to achieve a sense of place or subordination) or 'self mutilation' (self-harming in order to exert control over their bodies) (1993:18). She describes how, on their release, women go through the following processes, which all confirm their 'outsider identity' or 'otherness' and perpetuate the harshness of their existence within the community: facing the world, facing the family, finding a place, and embracing media images of deviant women (1993:62).

### *Making changes*

To bring about change, Eaton (1993) suggests there are three main processes that occur in relation to each other, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes sequentially. These are 'redirection', 'recognition' and 'reciprocal relationships'. 'Redirection' concerns the need to develop an awareness of what actions are necessary to return from exclusion, for example, to give up drugs or to leave a relationship. 'Recognition' refers to the need to develop a sense of an 'acceptable self' (1993:20) and to do this women need to feel that others value their presence and contributions. Eaton suggests that it is only through this process of recognition that they are able to reverse the negative feelings they have about themselves and feel able to take charge of their lives and make choices for themselves. Ultimately, 'reciprocal relationships' are highlighted by Eaton as 'the most pivotal of the factors contributing to change' (1993:20). She stresses the importance women in her study placed on moving away from dependent and disempowering relationships into something characterised by equality. However, Carlen (1990) would caution against focusing on this as a prime concern because of how it reinforces women's dependency rather than their potential for autonomy since they may subsequently be viewed as only being able to gain meaning to their lives through their emotions and via dependent personal relationships. Based on what women want, Eaton indicates a number of factors which are significant in enabling them to re-build their lives after prison. Accordingly, they potentially serve as underlying principles in the provision of community-based services. These are summarised here (adapted from Eaton 1993:65-68) and include:

- Providing services/organisations/spaces that are run by and for women who share similar experiences
- Recognising particular women's needs
- Providing a context in which women are not patronised or infantilised
- Believing in the potential of each woman
- Relating to women as equals
- Providing services that are uniquely suited to their needs
- Ensuring a sense of belonging and not perpetuating a sense of difference
- Ensuring a sense of progress/transition
- Ensuring an approach based on empathy
- Sharing experiences – emphasising similarity to counteract feelings of difference, stigma and exclusion that ex-prisoners encounter elsewhere
- Encouraging women to see themselves as capable of moving through difficulties as other women and workers have done
- Encouraging women to be active agents in overcoming difficulties
- Encouraging women to take responsibility and find direction in their lives
- Enabling women to 'construct a sense of an autonomous self, one which relates to others and acts on their and her own behalf'

Finally, Eaton emphasises the need for services to offer discrete, specific provision, regardless of the relatively small numbers of women offenders in any given area. However, whilst all of these factors are perhaps crucial in providing appropriate services for women offenders that will adequately meet their needs, the potential barriers are multifarious and should be identified. This is largely because women's ability to seek help is clearly affected in many ways. Not all are apparent at first glance; for example, women who are drug abusers are perhaps unlikely to seek help if they are single parents. The consequences can be too great, with an overwhelming fear of intervention by the courts, social workers and the medical profession (O'Dwyer *et al.* 1987). As Devlin states, 'They know from the experience of others that their children are likely to be taken away' (1998:212). This is due in part to how they are quickly assessed as inadequate parents, 'irresponsible' and 'incapable'. This is clearly not always the case but, as Devlin (1998) points out, it does not seem to matter that women may have controlled their habit or be clear of drugs. The devastating consequences of losing their child (ren) to care may be just the thing that drives them back to their drug abuse as a means of blocking out their pain. Of course, the safety of children is always paramount but some decisions raise questions about whether 'professionals' are also susceptible to the prejudices and stereotypes that surround substance abusers/offenders and, consequently engage in the potentially damaging process of 'othering'.



All of the interviewees in the HMI Review of Women's Prisons were asked what they felt might help them not to re-offend, 'Of the many who felt themselves to be at risk, their needs following release were likely to be employment, stable relationships, accommodation, proper help and support' (1997:15). However, whether women actually receive this help and support is far from certain. The Review is critical of community-based services and their apparent failure to meet the needs of women and thus prevent their entry into prison. It therefore becomes questionable whether such provision can/will be any more effective once women are released back into their communities. As previously illustrated, women are likely to experience even greater barriers than before because of the additional stigma that goes with having been in prison. Nevertheless, the list of educational needs of women prisoners highlighted in the Review includes specific training to enable them to be effective in gaining access to health professionals and to learn how to make use of community facilities. Therefore, there is recognition of the need for support and training in making effective use of services. Equally, both the Review in 1997 and the follow-up report that was produced in 2001 recommends that women should be encouraged and helped to make contact with community-based services that can help them after their release. It also highlights the need for communities to take responsibility for women offenders and to recognise the disadvantage they experience because of their criminality. However, what resonates from this, and is of particular relevance to this study, are questions about the extent to which women themselves believe that service providers regard them as being disadvantaged by their criminality and, as a consequence, offer real help and support. In fact, one generic issue that has been identified with regard to women's experiences of accessing welfare services generally, is the failure of service providers to fully understand the lived reality of the woman offender in any meaningful way which, in turn, impacts negatively on their interactions with them.

There is a chasm of misunderstanding between the privileged professionals who work the system and the offender bringing up children alone without financial and emotional resources. The misery of that existence and the toll it can take is rarely appreciated. (Kennedy 1992:89)

The Review's recommendations are commendable and demonstrate that those responsible for prison services are beginning to recognise that women prisoners have a specific set of needs peculiar to them and that they should no longer be treated as if they were the same as men. However, as previously indicated in the context of probation services, the extent to which they have been implemented is unclear. Herein lies a criticism; making recommendations without the necessary follow-up and action is inadequate and potentially dangerous because it can lead to a false sense of security that changes will automatically ensue (Chigwada-Bailey 1997). Carlen (1998) echoes this: she praises the comprehensiveness of the recommendations in the Review, but expresses concerns about their implementation and whether they will remain mere rhetoric rather than become reality. After all, the findings are not new; she has been calling for radical reforms to the imprisonment of women in this country for more than two decades.

## **Women offenders' actual experiences of accessing welfare services**

### *Gaps in knowledge*

Despite the growing clarity about how women offenders encounter particular structural blocks in all areas in society and apart from the few studies that have explored women's experiences of re-building their lives after prison, there is limited evidence about women offenders' actual experiences of accessing welfare services. We either have to rely on data about women's experiences generally or delve into literature pertaining to criminality where data can be extracted. For example, in Tyler's (2001) exploration of the reasons for women's criminality, she endorsed the proposal that support from both family and workers is crucial to women's lives, particularly in relation to ensuring lower rates of recidivism. However, in her study, the majority of women who were in contact with social workers, appreciated their help and evaluated their relationships with them positively. This seems incongruent with evidence pertaining to women's experiences of the CJS and the problems they can encounter there. It also conflicts with evidence in Eaton's (1993) study of women trying to rebuild their lives after prison who, she suggested, were likely to have very negative experiences in their contact with social services, particularly in their roles as providers of income as well as 'caretakers' of children. In both contexts they were likely to be experienced as a block rather than facilitator of change (Eaton 1993:73).

Other studies have shown that it is the degrading experience of claiming benefits and how individuals are made to feel by workers as a result, that women generally have criticised more frequently, than the actual level of benefit they receive (Marshall 1972; Cook 1987; Millar 1987; Millar 1991). It is possible to extrapolate from this to inform our understanding of women offenders' particular experiences, given what we know about the levels of poverty they endure. However, what this also indicates is a gap in our knowledge about the specific and actual impact on women as a distinct (but not homogeneous) group.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted how criminological research has traditionally been male-centred and male dominated and how this translates into a CJS that is constructed primarily for men. It has also emphasised how women's criminality is complicated and examined a complex web of factors that surround their propensity to commit crime. In so doing, it has pointed to the apparent widespread failure of the CJS to adequately meet the multiple and complex needs of women offenders, particularly as they try to rebuild their lives after prison. Evidence from the literature suggests that this may be due in part to how they are perceived as 'mad' or 'bad', guilty of failing to conform to societal ideals of how women *should* behave. The combined impact of the socialisation process that women endure and the dominant patriarchal ideologies and models of family life that keep many women confined to domestic, caring roles, isolated, dis-empowered and in danger of being dominated, controlled and abused by their male partners, has been highlighted. The subsequent 'othering' of women offenders has been



emphasised because of how it potentially hampers women in their attempts to rebuild their lives during and after their contact with the CJS.

Finally, the chapter has demonstrated the multiple obstacles and vicious circles that many women offenders experience in their contact with the CJS and welfare services more generally. By way of illustration, potential barriers to offering a gendered service that identifies and meets women offenders' distinct needs have been identified as multifarious, but include misperceptions about notions of equality, concerns about numbers and a general lack of perceived need. It has also been suggested that society, government and local community-based welfare service providers have little meaningful ontological awareness or understanding of the lived reality of 'criminal' women. This gap is particularly illustrated in relation to the links between domestic violence and how this impacts on women offenders' prominence and experiences within the CJS and more widely within community-based services. Accordingly, as individuals try to identify, articulate and meet their specific, complex and numerous welfare needs, their interactions with practitioners may be perceived and experienced by both parties as extremely negative and frustrating. However, it is also clear that research in this area undertaken from the woman's standpoint, is still largely missing from the literature about women offenders. Research that focuses on what women themselves believe to be important in enabling them to make more effective use of services, and what changes they would like to see, is therefore vital for contributing to the development of new knowledge, awareness, insight and understanding: it was out of this desire to tell those stories that this research was developed.

## Chapter 4 - 'Doing' feminist, heuristic and collaborative research: doing what 'felt right' and 'made sense'

### Introduction

An exploration and analysis of issues pertaining to relationships between researcher and research participant is at the centre of this chapter, which is presented in two parts. First, the emphasis is on examining 'traditional' or male-centred research and its critique by feminist researchers, for example, because of its impartiality, dispassion and remoteness (Stanley and Wise 1993). Feminist standpoint theory is examined because of how, in contrast, it situates the research participant as the key player in the process (Harstock 1983; Harding 1987). More generally, the ways in which the study was informed by a feminist epistemology throughout the research process are considered. A focus on power relations in the context of the researcher/research participant relationship is used to illustrate this (Oakley 1981). This is followed by an exploration of participation as a paradigm. Feminist models of collaborative research are placed at the centre of a discussion about how some feminist researchers have underutilised collaborative approaches in their work. This is despite notions of collaboration often being expounded within feminist methodology more widely, for example, by Laslett and Rapoport (1975) Kleiber and Light (1978) and Reinharz (1983). Similarities between participatory/collaborative research and feminist methodology are also highlighted.<sup>6</sup> These are exemplified in terms of their shared focus on involving the people whose experiences are being studied (Reinharz 1992). Following this, the ways that heuristic methodology potentially relates to both participatory and feminist research are discussed. This is largely because of shared concerns about the researcher/research participant relationship and the importance accorded to reflexivity (Maguire 2001), although anxieties about the ethical complexities of such approaches are also illuminated (Oleson 2000). The key proposition that underpins *this* work is also explored that, taken together, 'doing' feminist, heuristic *and* collaborative research was the most appropriate approach for this study, because it essentially embraced doing what 'felt right' and 'made sense', thus ensuring that the research was meaningful to *all* involved.

The second part of the chapter integrates the second reflexive commentary for the thesis. The initial focus is on the rationale for setting up an advisory group of 'expert advisers/knowers', as a means of collaborating with women with direct and personal experience of the CJS. In addition, the group's role in supporting, advising and guiding the research process is explored, with particular emphasis on examining the practice of building long-term relationships with 'vulnerable' groups of women. Both short and long-term ethical issues are considered, for example, the implications of adopting an approach based on reciprocity, mutual disclosure and

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<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this study the terms 'participation' and 'collaboration' are defined in relation to Reason's (1998) participatory worldview in which action, reflection, theory and practice are brought together through a process of participation or collaboration with others.



'friendship' and the impact of 'role reversal', where it can be the researcher who ultimately feels powerless and abandoned in the relationship.

### **Feminist, heuristic *and* collaborative methodology**

#### *Traditional, male-centred research on crime and deviance: feminist critiques*

The rationale for developing a feminist, heuristic and collaborative methodology in this work was based on a number of factors. These included critiques of traditional positivist researchers who entered the world of the 'researched' largely as dispassionate observers (Sumner 1994) and asserted that objective explanations of the world could be produced using rigorous scientific methods (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). In addition, such approaches were also recognised as problematic because of their propensity for androcentricism and gender blindness (Naffine 1997; Oleson 1998). It was not until the early 1940s that American criminologists began to work in a very different way. They rejected the idea that researchers should maintain their position as impartial enquirers and advocated instead an approach based upon active participation in the life of research participants. 'In order to learn about crime, the researcher explicitly adopted the viewpoint or standpoint of the offender' (Naffine 1997:39). This emphasis represented a key epistemological shift away from traditional thinking that was largely based on the Kantian theory that ideas are 'ingested' and 'processed' using the same conceptual framework regardless of our standpoint (Naffine 1997). Thus, this gradual shift in the context of criminology mirrors changes in thinking more broadly, particularly within the social sciences.

Whyte's (1955) study of gang life and racketeering in an Italian slum in America had a significant impact on pushing forward the changes outlined above. Central to his approach was the notion that perspective matters. He unreservedly believed that who does the knowing influences what is known. By adopting the standpoint of people most closely caught up in criminal pursuits, he was clear that it was possible to acquire insights that remained unavailable to the dispassionate and distant observer. A major critique of his work, however, is that, whilst he gave a voice to the men he observed, he failed to give attention to women living in the same community (Heidensohn 1985). Similarly, Becker (1967) also focused on the offender by seeking to uncover the experiences of people who had been labelled deviant and not hiding that he wrote from his own personal standpoint, although, again, women remained largely invisible. Even Foucault, despite his considerable insights into societal discipline (Foucault 1977), failed to acknowledge the gendered character of the disciplinary society (Sumner 1990). As Eaton (1993) indicates, the individual who is disciplined is also gendered and, even now, there is little recognition of this in traditional positivist criminology where gender blindness pervades (Naffine 1997).

It is important to note here that my intention is not to engage in any substantive way with Foucault's work because, from my point of view, his theories are much less meaningful to my work than the epistemological development of feminist thought in relation to criminology. This work had a significant impact on criminological research about women (Gelsthorpe and Morris 1990). Thus, as previously indicated in Chapter 3, feminist researchers contested this predominantly male-centred and gender blind view of crime and increasingly challenged this standpoint. To illustrate this, Carlen (1985) Heidensohn (1985) and Eaton (1986) all promoted what was perceived, at that time, to be a more extreme approach to exploring women offenders' experiences within the broad perspective of feminist work. Their aim was to explore *women's* lives specifically, rather than seeking to repeat research that had previously been undertaken with men. Heidensohn (1985) was especially clear about the need to hear the experiences of women who had been involved in crime, in order to challenge the ways that criminological research had distorted and denigrated their characters. She supported Cohen (1977:14) who advocated the use of women's stories, because of their usefulness in 'unmasking, debunking, reading between the lines'. She was also clear that hearing women's experience enabled researchers to connect what are often perceived as 'private troubles' with what are actually 'public issues' (Heidensohn 1985:14).

Seeking the particular views and interpretations of women offenders however, was still rare (Heidensohn 1985) but Carlen's (1985) work in particular began to redress this. She called for research that turned to women themselves and sought to explore their individual accounts of the 'criminal experience'. In so doing, she also moved away from feminist empiricism and therefore rejected notions of neutrality and objectivity (Naffine 1997). Her research participants were absolutely central to her work, with their accounts being written by them: they were, in effect, co-authors. Therefore, women participants were the 'experts' and the 'knowers' in Carlen's work, because she recognised that it was they who had the real insights into their lives and their offending. As such, she addressed the criticism that as the researcher, it is impossible not to be perceived as an 'outsider'. This has negative consequences, such as being unable to get an accurate insight into women's experiences. Her approach, based on feminist standpoint theory (Harstock 1983; Harding 1986), fits well with this study because of how it places the research participant as the key player in the process. It also concurs with the fundamental motivation underpinning this work which is to enable individuals to speak for themselves and let their experiences be told (Smart 1990). Other feminists have taken this idea of women's 'standpoint' further,

Feminist standpoint theory has been one of the most distinctive and debated contributions of contemporary feminist thought to the theory of knowledge. Its view of knowledge is that women (or feminists) occupy a social location that affords them/us a privileged access to social phenomena. (Longino 1993:201)



Smart (1990) views 'standpoint feminism' as a way of seeing things 'up close' rather than from a distance,

The epistemological basis of this form of feminist knowledge is experience... Feminist experience is achieved through a struggle against oppression; it is, therefore, argued to be more complete and less distorted than the perspective of the ruling group of men. A feminist standpoint then is not just the experience of women, but of women reflexively engaged in struggle (intellectual and political). In this process it is argued that a more accurate or fuller version of reality is achieved. This stance does not divide knowledge from values and politics but sees knowledge arising from engagement. (Smart 1990:80)

However, there are also complications in supporting such a position that apparently 'privileges' women's experiences over men's. Rather, it may be preferable to discuss the differentiations between women and men as dissimilar but not superior (Cain 1990). Yet, the inherent critique within standpoint feminism, of the preoccupation with the viewpoint of men and the underpinning functions in relation to power, lends both weight to the critique of traditional, positivist criminological research and also support for the notion that no single unitary knowledge or understanding exists (Naffine 1997). Naffine suggests that, to a great extent, standpoint feminism's conception of power and knowledge is relatively simple and static; power is wielded by one group over another which subsequently disadvantages the subordinate group. In addition, she highlights propositions by Foucauldian theories of power and knowledge, which suggest that power is not always fixed or stable or just in the possession of one group over another. Rather, power is also viewed as dynamic, flexible and fluid within individuals and relationships (Harstock 1990). It is also subject to change; therefore, Foucauldian views of power would critique an approach that, in isolation, relies on the voice of the research participant and gives it absolute priority. This is because they would also contest the notion, for example, within standpoint feminism, that alone, any individual or group can provide an entirely unmediated standpoint or view of crime. Yet, as Sumner (1990) argues, Foucault represents an intensely masculine perspective and he does not theorise the effects of gender on power or the effects of power on gender (Naffine 1997). As a result, he essentially 'normalizes' patriarchy (Scruton 1990).

Of equal relevance to this study are critiques of standpoint feminism by, for example, Longino (1993) who articulates the inherent dangers of assimilating women into a homogeneous group. This is because of how such an approach conflicts with concerns that were explored in Chapter 2, about the importance of diversity within and between women: one woman's knowledge cannot reflect what *all* women know (Spelman 1988). Nevertheless, standpoint feminism is directly relevant to this work, because of its primary focus on closing the gap between the researcher and research participants and as a consequence, enabling the researcher to gain more evocative insights into their experiences. In addition, because of how

it also supports the notion of 'shared knowledge' (Smart 1990:81), the researcher necessarily plays an integral part in the inquiry, rather than remaining impassive and aloof (Naffine 1997).

This study was also crucially informed by a feminist epistemology more generally and this was reflected throughout the research process. Accordingly, whilst recognising the diversity of many 'feminisms', the study was founded on prioritising and problematising women's diverse experiences, in order to engage with the many interconnected forms of oppression they encounter (Oleson 1998). Following traditional feminist social science, it proved vital to use empowering research strategies that breached the power differentials that existed within the relationship between researcher and research participant. Consequently, research participants became part of the research process, with the emphasis firmly placed on working *with* them, rather than perceiving them as 'subjects' or 'research objects' (Oakley 1981; Hanmer and Saunders 1984; Lather 1988) which, as Stanley and Wise (1993) indicate, is morally unjustifiable. The prime concern was with how research participants were treated and how to accurately represent their lived experiences. I was also mindful of whether it was appropriate to attempt to 'speak for' women offenders as a woman with no experience of being an offender. Of equal importance, was avoiding what Mies (1991:79) describes as 'total identification' in the research relationship, where the researcher seeks to empathise and identify so closely with participants that she takes the view that non-offenders should not carry out research with offenders (see Chapter 5). Likewise, from the outset, I was aware of a number of connections between myself and the women who participated in the study. Significantly however, and as I highlighted in Chapter 1, it was only as a result of engaging in deeply reflexive work that I developed my awareness and understanding of these parallels. I was also attentive to how problematic they could be at times, which accords with the principles of standpoint feminism (Naffine 1997) (see Chapters 5 and 9).

I gave serious consideration to the contradiction that exists between the call for egalitarian approaches to research and a tendency for some feminist researchers to view themselves as members of an intellectual elite – the 'theorising us' as opposed to the 'experiencing researched' or 'them' (Stanley and Wise 1993:7). Whilst recognising that this focus on power in the research relationship was certainly important (Acker *et al.* 1991), I was clear that it was only one component of a methodology aiming to redress power imbalances and bridge the gap between researcher and research participant. By also seeking to ensure that women are central players throughout the process through, for example, the use of 'collaborative interviewing' (Laslett and Rapoport 1975) or 'interactive methodology' (Kleiber and Light 1978), the potential to make more sense of participants' actual position, becomes clearer. It is this emphasis that enables the researcher to guard against what Jayaratne and Stewart (1991) describe as an exploitative relationship between the researcher and research participant.



### *Participatory/collaborative research*

Participation can be defined as a paradigm in itself, 'a pattern of ideas, values, methods and behaviour, which can apply to almost all social activity and spread in all directions' (Chambers 1995:42). Reason (1998) provides a context for what he describes as an essentially participative worldview. He views participation as a means of enabling individuals, through their experience, imagination, insight, thoughts and actions, to co-create their reality. He is clear not only about his professional commitment to working with groups as co-researchers through 'co-operative inquiry', but also about his personal commitment to being an advocate of this emerging participative worldview (1998:262). This emphasis on the personal and professional is perhaps integral to any methodology that prioritises the need to work collaboratively with participants.

Reason (1998:262) also outlines three approaches to participative inquiry as part of a 'robust paradigm of research *with* people', which potentially illustrate parallels with feminist methodology (Reason 1994). First, 'action science and action inquiry', which are primarily concerned with researching practice in any given organisation or group for greater effectiveness and justice (Argyris and Schön 1974, 1978; Schön 1983; Argyris *et al.* 1985; Torbert 1991a). Second, 'participatory action research', which is perhaps the most widely practised type of collaborative research and focuses on working directly with oppressed and marginalised groups and communities to establish liberating dialogue, in order to bring about change (Fernandes and Tandon 1981; Tandon 1981; Hall *et al.* 1982; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Cancian and Armstead 1992; Hall 1993). Finally, 'co-operative inquiry', which recognises that people are self-determining and can play an active part in working together as co-researchers to transform their reality (Heron 1977, 1981a, 1981b, 1992; Reason and Heron 1986; Reason 1988, 1994). However, the concordance between any of these approaches and this study's methodology is quite limited.

Of more relevance was the distinction Nelson and Wright (1995:1) make between participation as a 'means' and participation as an 'end'. Participation as a means encompasses the notion of seeking to accomplish the aims of a project more efficiently, effectively or cheaply, as opposed to participation as an end, where the community or group sets up a process to control its own development. This is a helpful division in the context of this work, because much of the literature on participation seems to focus on participation as an end. In contrast, this study was characterised by participation as a means. Hence, I was concerned largely with striving to be *effective* in exploring the experiences of women offenders in a meaningful way, both to them as individuals and to the broader field of social policy. Defining the approach in this way however, was not an attempt to avoid taking responsibility for action (Schrijvers 1995). Neither was it an attempt to define the study as collaborative and apply what Chambers (1995:30)

describes as a 'cosmetic label', in order to 'look good'. In fact, Baker and Hinton (1999) suggest that participatory models of research emanate from development programmes which aim to enable beneficiaries to control improvements in their situation and question the extent to which researchers can realistically build this type and level of participation into their objectives. Ensuring participation of this kind is both difficult and challenging (Hardimann 1993; Reason 1994) and yet striving to do so within a framework of commitment to the principles and ideals of such an approach is an achievable aim. Reason (1994:2) sums up the challenge that is 'doing' collaborative research:

As soon as we touch upon the question of participation we have to entertain and work with issues of power, of oppression, of gender; we are confronted with the limitations of our skill, with the rigidities of our own and other's behaviour patterns, with the other pressing demands on our limited time, with the hostility or indifference of our organisational contexts. We live out our contradictions, struggling to bridge the gap between dreams and reality, to realise the values we espouse.

With all of this in mind it is also important that researchers are realistic about what they might achieve and guard against viewing participatory research as some form of miracle solution to bringing about change (Horton 1981; Kanhare 1982).

#### *Feminist collaborative research*

To some degree, feminist researchers seem to have underutilised collaborative approaches in their work and, as a result, have perhaps not always fully involved or empowered participants in the research process in ways that they might have. As such, there is a danger that their concerns about minimising the detrimental effects of power imbalances in the research relationship may actually have contributed to maintaining power and control of knowledge creation in the same way that dominant androcentric, positivist researchers have done (Schrivjers 1993). Nevertheless, there are consistencies between feminist and collaborative approaches to research. In sum, the feminist approach which embraces the need, for example, to abandon control, be open, ensure reciprocity, mutual disclosure and shared risk are all elements of a model of collaborative research that exists to involve the people who are being studied (Reinharz 1992). Similarly, there is shared recognition that participants have power and knowledge that the researcher needs and that the researcher will be changed and affected by the people she is engaging with (Stanley and Wise 1993).

A number of feminist researchers have also contributed to different definitions of feminist collaborative research, for example Reinharz (1983:173), who developed 'experiential analysis,' which she defined as a 'series of interacting components'. These included: developing an understanding of the *assumptions* that underpin the given methodology; ensuring thorough *personal preparation* for undertaking research, for example, by exploring values and prejudices; seeking ways of involving participants in the process of *problem formulation*; *data gathering* in natural settings drawing, for example, on participant observation



and seeking a collaborative relationship with participants; engaging in *reflective data analysis* that is, for example, humanistic, empathic, sensitive and that proceeds with collaboration with research participants; and, giving prominence to a *self-reflective phase* after writing the analysis.

Similarly, in her study with Guatemalan Indian women refugees in Mexico, Lykes (1989) defined feminist collaborative research as 'passionate' or 'engaged' scholarship. Her approach involved changing elements of conventional androcentric research to address the needs of participants, by seeking their views about how the sample was selected and the methods were designed. Cancion (1989) went further and identified four core features of participatory or collaborative research. These included involving political action and individual consciousness-raising; developing democratic relationships, ensuring shared decision making and joint acquisition of skills and recognising that participants are a major source of knowledge.

More compelling was Maguire's emphasis on participatory research as an 'innovative methodology' (1987:2). She highlighted the essentially male bias in previous participatory studies (more recently, in 2001, she again pointed to how some action researchers still remain oblivious to feminist scholarship and how rare it is to find action research and feminist theory engaging with each other). She contested male bias and suggested that adopting a feminist participatory model challenges traditional research power structures and relationships because inherent within it is the need to find a new way of working that quite simply 'makes sense'. Accordingly, the collaborative approach adopted in this study was very closely linked to the 'feminist participatory research' framework that Maguire advocated (1987:96), particularly in relation to her proposal that the development of critical consciousness should be an underpinning aim, that the study should also aim to improve the lives of research participants in some way and that the work should aim to impact upon and transform 'fundamental societal structures and relationships' (Maguire 1987:4). She also helpfully cautioned that participatory research is extremely time consuming and that it requires researchers to show their face as a participant too, which can be emotionally exhausting yet extremely rewarding.

There were also a number of distinct differences. The first was in relation to how she connected her approach to action research, which links more closely to notions of participation as an end. She also linked her work to empowerment although, as Vi Grossi (1981) suggests, there are no guarantees that there will be an increase in power among oppressed women as a result of being involved in an action research project, despite the focus on participation, effectiveness and justice. There may also be a presupposition here that power is a finite resource. In contrast, I sought ways of working with women who had experienced the CJS but who were *not* participants in the study. As a result, I set up a research advisory group comprising women who had previous experience of the CJS as 'expert knowers'. They acted

as advisors and collaborators and were central in enabling me to make more meaningful contact with women whose offending was part of their lived reality. They were key in enabling me to 'bridge the gap' between myself the researcher, and women participants in the study. They helped me to avoid the pitfalls associated with placing women offenders in the victim role, while also ensuring that I did not underestimate the passivity of some women. They also helped me to fully appreciate the extent of some women's disempowerment (Tandon 1985) and, indeed, the chaotic nature of their lives. In sum, they enabled me to redress the dichotomy within the researcher/research participant relationship based on; '*they know, I don't know*', or alternatively, '*they don't know, I know*' (Maguire 1987:46). Thus, following Maguire, we were able to acknowledge that we each knew some things; none of us knew everything; working together we each knew more whilst learning more about how to know.<sup>7</sup>

### *Consistencies and critiques: feminist, collaborative and heuristic approaches*

In developing my approach to this study I recognised other potential gaps in both feminist and collaborative approaches to research. These are illustrated to some degree by inconsistencies within studies that involve building longer-term relationships with research participants and where links are sometimes drawn between feminist ethnography and notions of collaboration. However, in general terms the extent to which ethnography facilitates the active involvement of participants in the research process *can* be quite limited. Rather, the primary emphasis often seems to be on observation rather than involvement or collaboration. Morris *et al.* (1998) for example, suggest that, because the observed are central in ethnography, their work could be defined as collaborative. Paradoxically, however, they also stress the need to ensure emotional detachment in the research relationship, in order to safeguard against going native. In collaborative research there is a sense in which emotional involvement or identification is part of the process, certainly with regard to the need to be clear about the impact of the work, both on research participants and on the researcher. Yet, it is also important not to generalise. In contrast, reflexive ethnographies concentrate more deeply on self/other interactions (Ellis and Bochner 2000) and as such, accord more closely with the heuristic component of my chosen methodology.

In general terms, heuristic methodology can be viewed as being consistent with feminist *and* collaborative research because of the shared emphasis on concerns relating to the relationship between researcher/research participants. More specifically, consistencies are evident in relation to reflexivity which is clearly identified as a central tenet of both feminist methodology (Reinharz 1992) and feminist participatory action research (Maguire 2001). This is illustrated in how it involves the researcher in undertaking a critical examination and analytical exploration of the research process (Fonow and Cook 1991). Overall, a greater emphasis could be placed on the process of reflexivity as a key source of knowledge (Lather

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<sup>7</sup> More detailed information about the research advisory group and the benefits and problems of working collaboratively with them is presented in the second part of this chapter.



1988; Said 1989) within both feminist and collaborative approaches to research.

Incorporating a heuristic methodology, by which I mean an approach that assists the researcher to discover and methods that enable her to explore further by herself, allows for an extremely focused integration of the self by working reflexively *throughout* the process (Moustakas 1981). It also involves the researcher fusing individual perceptions with the whole, for example, by encouraging her to write a creative synthesis within a framework for data analysis (Moustakas 1990) (see Chapter 5 pp114-115). This contrasts with Reinharz's (1983) approach to experiential analysis, where reflexivity was only given prominence after writing the analysis. This is largely inadequate and ineffective, particularly when undertaking research of a sensitive nature, because reflexivity has clearly been identified as a skill that is an integral part of managing and coping with carrying out sensitive research (Lee 1993; Brackenridge 1999). Thus, reflexivity is of particular relevance as part of a survival strategy in dealing with sensitivity and emotion for the researcher *and* research participant. It has also been clearly identified as essential in feminist standpoint research. Smith (1987), for example, suggests that the researcher must not impose the context for research on participants, as is generally the case within sociological inquiry. Instead, she stresses the need for a high degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher, to enable her to locate herself *within* the research in a decidedly visible way (Smith 1992). Heuristic methodology facilitates this process, because it enables the researcher to be deeply exploratory, by encouraging her to immerse herself in participants' experiences. Hence, she seeks ways of 'getting inside' the question/issue by engaging in personal reflexivity so that her beliefs, judgments and perceptions are *fully* integrated into the research process (Moustakas 1990:15).

Such a stance can be criticised in the context of ethical concerns about whose voice emerges most vividly from studies that focus on issues of concern to the researcher (Oleson 2000). Yet, as McIntyre and Lykes (1998) indicate, in exercising reflexivity, researchers overtly interrogate issues of power, advantage and all the social structures that reside in the researcher/research participant relationship. As such, it becomes possible to achieve Mies' (1993:68) conceptualisation of 'conscious partiality' because of 'partial identification' with participants. In other words, a critical conceptual distance exists concurrently within the relationship, facilitating what Oleson (2000:234) describes as 'a dialectical correction of distortions on both sides'. Accordingly, doing research underpinned by these principles contributes to ensuring that the study is meaningful to *all* involved.

*'Doing' feminist, heuristic and collaborative research: doing what feels right and makes sense*

Together, a feminist, heuristic *and* collaborative methodology was *most* appropriate for this study for a number of reasons. This is illustrated in how it was particularly effective in the context of undertaking sensitive research with 'difficult to reach' groups of women, because of the ways it challenged traditional power structures and relationships. Inherent within the research was the need to find a way of working that quite simply 'made sense' (Hill 2003). Of course, it is also important to acknowledge that there is no *best* way to *do* research; each research situation is different and unique and will demand different and unique approaches. It is also important to note that lack of time, insufficient resources and ethical intricacies are features of research strategies that privilege the relationship between researcher and research participant. All these are factors that can coalesce to result in 'ideal' combinations of approaches rarely being achieved. Nevertheless, in certain research contexts, particularly those concerned with exploring the experiences of 'vulnerable' groups in society, I have found that a feminist, heuristic *and* collaborative approach provides an extremely effective means of doing research in a meaningful, informed and critical way. The complexities that are a feature of conducting research underpinned by such a commitment are addressed in the following analysis of the extremely challenging, complex, time consuming, (at times) exhausting, (at times) emotionally overwhelming and yet rewarding process of working with an advisory group of 'expert knowers'.

**Reflexive commentary (2): working with a research advisory group**

*Designing the study, pressures and uneasiness*

During the very early stages of the study I became extremely aware of myself and my position within the research process, as a result of being reflexive in my practice. It was this reflexivity about the series of tensions, pressures and unease that I felt so acutely that led to my decision to work collaboratively. As I developed the research proposal, I experienced numerous distractions away from what I had identified as the primary emphasis of the study, that is, women's experiences. My uneasiness came from the tensions of feeling pulled towards focusing on community-based services or the service providers and thus away from women offenders. This appeared to be the direction in which others were pushing me, for example, to look at models of service delivery. However, I now believe that this tension was present because I came to the study as a practitioner, having previously been active in working with women in the community. I wanted the study to be about and for women, because of what I viewed as a marked failure by services to see things from women offenders' perspectives. I came to the study wanting to bring about change at a policy level because of the experiences I had had as a community worker.



Herein lay the tension. I arrived with my own set of preconceived ideas about what the study would be. My initial ideas seemed to be confirmed as I began to review the literature but as I explored my position as a feminist, I became aware of another source of unease. Here was the opportunity to be exploratory and yet I was writing about the study in such a way that it seemed to focus more on what I and the literature suggested was important, without having first sought the opinion of the expert knowers, that is, women themselves. I rejected the idea that, as a feminist researcher and a woman of a certain social class, I was an expert in other people's lives. Here, it was women offenders who were the expert knowers and therefore I did not feel that I could proceed, without engaging with women who would bring with them the very experiences I wanted to explore in more depth in the research. One possible resolution to this tension lay in seeking to establish an advisory group, comprising women who had had previous contact with the CJS as offenders. Initially, I felt that this group had the potential to provide a forum for exploring ideas and seeking advice to inform the development of the research. I began by sharing the idea and discussing its' viability with Milly, (not her real name) who is an expert knower. As a direct result of this conversation, the scope for seeking not only advice, but also mutual support and skill sharing became obvious. Milly offered me reassurance that my preliminary ideas about the study were not completely inappropriate. She also asked very specific questions about whether I had considered including Black women, women with disabilities, young women and lesbians in the study. She made suggestions about considering the use of incentives to assist in the process of seeking participation from very chaotic women, for example, drug abusers, who may not otherwise be included. The tensions I had felt having first worked in practice and then moved into the academic world had been difficult to reconcile, but this conversation with Milly and my subsequent decision to adopt a collaborative approach, made sense. At this point I could see that it provided me with a way of bringing *these* two worlds closer together.

#### *Developing the research advisory group: a cautious approach*

'Snowballing' was used as a method for identifying women who might be interested and willing to become members of the advisory group.<sup>8</sup> Informal discussions were held with one or two women with whom I had had previous contact as a worker. They went on to approach other women whom they thought might be interested. Workers at a local women's project and two of the county's drugs projects also acted as 'signposters' to women accessing their services. The criteria upon which women were approached by the signposters, to begin the process of seeking their involvement in the group, were developed from informal discussions with workers about women's 'suitability' as potential members of the advisory group. I tried to reach women who had previous experience of the CJS. I stressed the importance of assessing how 'stable' their personal situation was. I also expressed my concern with not exposing women to a

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<sup>8</sup> 'Snowballing' refers to the process whereby the researcher seeks the participation of one or more individuals who each identify other individuals that the researcher can involve in the process, and so on (Robson 1993).

situation where they would be unable to cope because of, for example, very low self-esteem, or especially chaotic drug abuse. It was imperative that I was not setting women up to fail.

During the process of seeking participants for the advisory group and negotiating access via 'gatekeeper' organisations, underpinning ethical issues and dilemmas were also being explored in order to ensure from this early stage that the needs of members of the advisory group would be met. These issues included, for example, discussing how to manage dual roles and previous relationships with some women. This particularly related to those members of the group who had previously known me as a worker, with whom they had a relationship that was based on me engaging in counselling and group work with them. It was vital to ensure an open discussion about this as a possible tension, agreeing the rules of engagement, as well as placing a particular emphasis on issues surrounding confidentiality and anonymity. It could also be argued that the researcher necessarily fulfils multiple roles, for example, in being able to provide relevant information about support services if a woman discloses information of a sensitive nature, such as her experience of rape or domestic violence (Homan 1991). As a feminist researcher, she is also likely to be engaged in facilitating a process of consciousness-raising (Reinharz 1992). This is as part of an emancipatory process of enabling women to gain a deeper understanding of how their experiences fit into and are generated by the 'larger social structure' (Acker *et al.* 1991:135).

As a consequence of the various 'recruitment' strategies, eight women expressed an initial interest in the group. It can be difficult to make contact with women offenders, especially if they are very isolated in their community, because of the stigma that comes with the label 'offender' and if their previous contact with professionals has been negative (Hicks and Carlen 1985). As a result of this negativity there may also be a certain cynicism from women about whether their views will be valued or valid (O'Dwyer and Carlen 1985:178). There is no doubt that it would have been impossible to reach this stage in making contact with women without the active and significant involvement of the signposters. Whilst it is important to consider whether their values affected their selection of women and/or my criteria, I believe that the extent to which this had any kind of negative impact overall, was minimal.

#### *Process: the first meeting commences*

Immediately prior to the meeting, workers from the two drug support projects sent apologies on behalf of three women. Two of them had disappeared temporarily because of issues relating to their drug abuse; the third woman had recently come out of 'detox' and was required to attend a rehabilitation programme as part of a Probation Order. She did, however, express a keen interest to join the group a short time later. Five women attended the first meeting, which was a significant achievement. Participants identified what they hoped to gain from becoming part of the advisory group. For example, seeking support from other women in similar situations; learning about research; giving something back and making a difference to other women;



appreciating support they had received in the past; and furthering their own personal development. Two women clearly had some prior knowledge about research and both seemed confident and highly motivated. Two women seemed unsure about how they might 'fit in' as they had no previous experience of research, but were very enthusiastic about 'giving something back'. One woman's primary need seemed to be to seek support and I spoke with her privately about additional groups and services that she might be able to access. Initially, the mix of motivation levels and range of experiences seemed overwhelming and potentially unhelpful. It certainly presented a challenge in terms of finding ways of enabling all members of the group to feel comfortable about their participation and what they could contribute. At this stage I felt clear that, as the group developed and bonded, it would not be my sole responsibility to support individuals, despite having necessarily occupied the role of leader at this early stage. Nevertheless, I also recognised that all members of the group would have a role and that it was these group processes and dynamics that would perhaps result in women's ongoing commitment to the research.

By the end of the first meeting, I felt that I had laid the foundation for a meaningful dialogue with the group and begun the process of developing a relationship based on mutual respect. I had also achieved my aim of beginning the process of enabling members of the group to identify with and perceive themselves as experts, able to guide, advise and steer the research. Evidence of this came to the fore as individuals began to offer suggestions about actions I needed to take, to provide them with the information they felt they needed to increase their understanding of the broad research area. As a result of their attendance at this initial meeting, individuals were also prepared for making an informed decision about their future role as advisors within the group. I was clear however, that this could only be assessed following the next meeting, when individuals would make their decision to attend or not. It would have been naïve to think that women would do anything other than express their interest, motivation and intent to become involved in a situation as public as this meeting, despite all the efforts that were made to create an informal and equal atmosphere. My own previous experience as a worker told me that often women in this position only feel able to 'vote with their feet', that is, as soon as they are able, they walk in the opposite direction and do not return. I did not believe that this was the case here but recognised that only time would tell.

### **Emergent issues: benefits and problems**

#### *Sussing you out and opting out: group membership*

Following the first advisory group meeting, five women (Milly, Meg, Louise, Jane and Sarah – I include myself as a group member) quickly became established as the core group and subsequently went on to meet every six to eight weeks for eighteen months. However, as I had

initially feared, two women who had attended the first meeting decided not to continue their involvement in the group and both did, indeed, vote with their feet. During a discussion about group membership I later found that this was no surprise to the others.

You'll get your runners – it's a trust thing, you know what I mean? I think if you set up a group then you'll get your runners, they'll come to suss you out and then you might not see them again. (Milly)

Despite strenuous efforts on both my part and the part of the signposters, we were not able to get a clear answer from these two women about their intentions. In fact, one woman repeatedly promised she would be back but never did return. Researchers should not underestimate their power to intimidate and the impact this can have on women, no matter what strategies we adopt to provide encouragement and support (Whitmore 1994). Remembering the gap between research and lived reality is also important here: as all advisory group members would say, it is important to 'get real' about research.

I really don't think that anyone should say anything that they don't feel comfortable about because we're living this and you're just using this for your research. (Milly)

#### *Reversing previous negative relationships: complex issues to consider*

Our relationships with each other developed in many ways during the first year and I think this grew out of the fact that we shared more as women than we perhaps initially thought. I do, however, have some concerns about the generalisations that are often made about the ease with which women researchers are supposedly able to elicit information from women research participants simply by virtue of their shared gender. It is often suggested, for example, that all women welcome the opportunity to have contact with a woman researcher (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984). I have found that, whilst this may be true for some women, it is perhaps not so for others, especially those whose previous contact with women in positions of power may have been extremely negative. As a consequence, they may be very reluctant to build a relationship with any workers in the future.

Well you just don't think that anyone wants to listen do you and you really believe that no one cares. (Louise)

Following Finch (1984), I believe that being a woman is a potential advantage but have also found other complex issues associated with attempting to build rapport and establish a relationship with women offenders. These are illustrated in the following discussion between advisory group members, talking about the context of interviewing women in prison:

Louise: Some women are going to prefer to talk on their own.

Jane: I'd say most of them would prefer it. I mean, you imagine if you're in a prison cell, you're on a wing with you know, twenty-five women and



you're all in prison. You are who you are, and you know if you're in a group you can't sit there and say, "I feel this and I feel that," because of everybody else. And you have got to sit there – and you have got to put on a face because of everyone else in that group.

Milly: Yeah, I mean that's one of the prison rules, I mean you just put on the face, shut up and look back – you're not supposed to talk.

Louise: Yeah I mean you just don't want to talk in a group, not when you're in that state.

Jane: Because it shows your real face – you lift your mask off when you're in that situation.

Louise: Yeah well I preferred to talk in private when I was going through mine, like in a one to one. I didn't have the confidence to sit there and for anyone to listen.

Jane: Well, when you're in prison you're just expected to act out this hard, tough prison image, no-one and nothing touches you, I can get through this, I look after myself. I remember when I was in prison I only cried when I was in bed on my own at night. Otherwise I was saying, "I can take this, I can do this." But I couldn't, it was awful, it was a nightmare.

Milly: Well it is – it is a nightmare.

For Finch (1984), her entrée into her relationships with women in her interviews with them was 'being a woman'. However, in my work I feel that it has been much more complicated than that. The relationship with members of the advisory group and participants in the study has been essential and has perhaps only meaningfully developed by adopting a collaborative approach to the study overall. In addition, utilising research methods such as participant observation enabled me to go through 'trust tests' (Lee 1993:139) and these were therefore important. Many interactions between myself and women attending a probation service women offenders programme illustrate this well. For example, open discussions were held about whether it was 'OK to talk' in front of me, particularly during times spent outside formal sessions, where individuals expressed what they really felt about attending the programme or shared information about violence in their relationships. Incorporating participant evaluation methods to seek feedback from women about their experiences of taking part in the study was also fundamental. Equally, treating every woman I met with respect and positive regard proved vital, but this was not enough in itself. Like Cannon (1989; 1992), I found that the success of the research depended on my ability to form and build relationships with women, gaining their trust and establishing rapport between us (see Chapter 5 for more detail regarding research methods and relationships with participants).

In the advisory group, we used a number of different strategies for getting to know each other better, establishing equal relationships and reducing barriers to effective communication (Sieber 1993). We often ate together and discussed the overall study (Case 1990); we used a

focus group discussion to reduce barriers to communication (Sieber 1993) and to identify relevant questions for participants (Baker and Hinton 1999). We read and discussed a range of literature as well as some of my written work (Bowser and Sieber 1993). We also laughed and had fun together, supported each other through some difficult moments and helped each other out on occasions. In essence we developed a friendship. Acker *et al.* (1991) recommend this as a way of balancing the researcher/research participant power relationship. They also caution against researchers being manipulative to reach their own ends at the expense of others, so that the relationship becomes exploitative (Stanley and Wise 1983). I also recognised the need to be aware of what Stacey (1988:24) describes as 'delusional alliance' within ethnographic studies that can replace the positivist 'delusion of separateness' between participants and the researcher. Webb (1993) also draws parallels between feminist research and ethnography where she says there is inevitably a degree of manipulation, betrayal and inauthenticity. I hope that I at least minimised these more adverse effects, in part by recognising and dealing with the emotional elements of the research relationship for myself, members of the advisory group and women participants. More specifically, I hoped that I overcame some of these negative aspects by exploring the dynamics of the relationships directly with members of the advisory group and participants as well as through my own personal reflexivity about our relationships.

As our relationship developed and the role of the group expanded, I felt increasingly able to share my feelings, ideas, successes and failures openly and candidly. I also felt some confidence that they were not just responding in ways that supported my views (saying what they thought I wanted to hear). Importantly, they began to actively challenge me personally and with regard to my thinking (Fine 1998). They also became protective towards me. In effect, I was forced to engage in introspective questioning as a direct result of discussions with advisory group members.

I mean do you think? I remember you said to me that you were hoping to talk to women in prison – do you think that women there will want to speak to you? I mean you can get some right arrogant people in prison and they're so you know, "Well there's nothing wrong with me and you can't touch me." Do you think that you can get through to people? I'm not saying these things to put you off – it's just that I know that it can be hard just going on my experiences and people act like they are really hard faced and they can be really. I mean I used to be a right hard faced bitch and you couldn't get near me. I used to be terrible. (Jane)

Being challenged, however, is not always easy to accept, as is demonstrated in the following incident. Having successfully used a focus group format with the advisory group to engage in joint problem formulation, I was keen to try another method. My idea was to ask Milly, Meg, Louise and Jane to continue sharing their experiences using either a dictaphone or written diary, but they unanimously rejected this suggestion. They explained that they felt women participants would not want to 're-open the lid' once the focus group/interview had ended. They



also stressed the need for me to take care to ensure closure at the end of any encounter with women participants. They felt that I had successfully achieved this with them and expressed their view that it should end there, unless women agreed to or asked for a second interview. The fact that the group challenged my ideas was what I had been hoping for, but personally I was dismayed by how it left me feeling. I assumed that they would give it a try and then felt let down when they rejected *my* idea. The power balance really did shift after that moment but, after all that I had said about empowerment being my ultimate aim, the instant the group exerted their power, I felt frustrated, even as I recognised the paradox of feelings.

*Reciprocity and mutual disclosure: giving something back*

In the context of power relations, reciprocity is important (Acker *et al.* 1991). However, Brannen (1988) is concerned about researchers who, faced with the difficult task of sharing and hearing women's pain during interviews, want to help. She strongly questions their motives and urges them to resist. In contrast, I believe that when undertaking sensitive research with vulnerable groups of women it is the researcher's responsibility to be willing and able to provide support before, during and after their participation in the study if appropriate. Therefore, researchers might, for example, consider building relationships with individuals to assist them in giving informed consent regarding their participation in the research. Further, they might seek information about support services for women following interviews, as well as ensuring that they have the necessary skills to offer emotional support in some way during the interview itself if necessary. Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) explore this as an ethical dilemma, particularly when researchers are undertaking research of a sensitive nature and where, through the process of exploring stressful experiences, a woman becomes very distressed. Members of the advisory group were very clear about the need to be responsive to participants' support needs during interviews, particularly those women whose disclosures were highly emotionally charged.

I think that when you do actually gain the trust of people talking to you it will be like lifting the cover, then you'll really hear them and you'll need to support them. (Milly)

I return to the underpinning feminist principles, values and beliefs that suggest that reciprocity in the research relationship is, indeed, important. I would also include this type of support under that rubric (Oakley 1981, Cook and Fonow 1986, Reinharz 1992). Meg, Louise, Jane and Milly also had a firm view about the need to find ways of giving something back to participants.

Meg: I think you've probably got to go in prepared to make some effort on their behalf maybe. They might be quite willing to talk to you about their experiences of various services because there's something they need from it.

Milly: It's about playing by their rules, so, what am I going to get out of it?

Jane: Yeah, that's the rule. Like, 'If I sit there and disclose my life to you, what will you give me?'

Options suggested by them included offering help and support wherever possible and finding ways to enable women to feel greater self worth as a result of engaging in something that they would never have previously thought about. The group urged me not to undervalue giving a woman time to talk and 'lift the lid' to someone who wanted to listen. They also stressed the value of providing an opportunity for a woman in prison to get out of her cell for an hour, to be in a different space, looking out of a different window. I later found this to be the case when Katie, a participant, sent me a card to say thank you.

I know that you don't feel that you've done much to help me practically and emotionally, but you have. You're a lovely person and you gave me your time – who could ask for more? (Katie)

There is however, a fine line between ensuring reciprocity and mutual disclosure to assist in the process of building a relationship with women participants, and what Cannon (1989:72) describes as the 'transition to friendship', which can be considered unethical because it may be viewed as transgressing professional boundaries. However, like Oakley (1981) and Cannon (1989; 1992), the fact that I have developed friendships and had ongoing contact with a very small number of women participants has been cause for celebration rather than concern. I also see a difference with members of the advisory group where there was indeed a developing relationship characterised for example, by mutual support. As a result, we all shared information about the experiences that brought each of us to this point of meeting as illustrated in the following extracts from one discussion (all names/pseudonyms have been removed to ensure anonymity),

I was stabbed by a man twelve times with a double ended screw driver, with double points on it, so I had twenty four stab wounds and he was charged with common assault and he got 6 months conditional discharge.

I was raped by my partner six days after I had given birth. I haemorrhaged. I went into hospital. The charges – well, because I had overdosed previously they had given me a big mental health label and they wouldn't even press charges.

My experiences of being abused as a child have affected my life in so many ways. There are times when I still struggle to make myself heard and to believe that I even have the right to exist.

Most of the time I actually used to have a lot of mental abuse. I mean he used to follow me around, throw stones at my house, bang the doors in. There was physical abuse as well. And then he burnt my house down to the ground.

Sharing our experiences in this way enabled us to develop a relationship that was based on



reciprocity in mutual disclosure (Mies 1991). Whilst more traditional quantitative researchers may express concerns here with regard to the possible negative impact of such friendships, particularly their potential for biasing results, it is important to emphasise that the advisory group became even more valuable because they were *not* participants but advisors.

Mutual disclosure does still raise a number of short and long term ethical issues for researchers. Of particular relevance in this context were how to reconcile what could be categorised as indiscretion in sharing my own personal experiences and over-familiarity during times when my role strayed into that of therapist or counsellor. Similarly, how to deal with participants' disclosures of abuse/domestic violence or institutionalised abuse/unprofessional practice if they emerged during interviews. Clear ground rules about confidentiality and good supervision and support were essential. Detailed and accurate assessments of any shared risk were also a key part of the process. At times however, it was not always possible to fully anticipate or appreciate the impact of decisions in this context, as is illustrated in the following example.

At the end of my first year I was keen to create an opportunity for members of the advisory group to meet my supervisory team and fully participate in my progress review. I felt this would facilitate the process of challenging power differentials in my relationship with them and reinforce the considerable value I placed on their input. Facilitating the meeting was a complicated process, not least because of difficulties in identifying a suitable venue. Understandably, Milly, Meg, Louise and Jane did not want to meet at the university although they were also determined not to meet at our usual venue, Milly's flat. After many debates they proposed to meet at my house. Their perception was that they would feel safe there, that it would provide neutral territory and they also confessed their curiosity about what sort of house I lived in. After a full and frank discussion about possible risks with everyone, including my own family, the meeting went ahead. It was a success in countless different ways and challenged many preconceived ideas for all involved. At no point in time did I feel any sense of risk from Meg, Milly, Jane and Louise visiting my home. The comparisons I drew were with inviting colleagues from work for a social event. What none of us anticipated, however, was that the new male partner of one of them would subsequently become extremely violent, threatening and abusive to her thereby making it impossible for her to continue contact with the group because of the risks to our personal safety. As she struggled to end the relationship, I became very worried that I might open my front door and find *him* standing outside it. Consequently, it was only as I worried about my family's safety that I really questioned whether I had crossed an ethical boundary in terms of putting my family (and myself) at risk. Throughout our meetings, however, I remained grounded in my reality which is that I have friends who are victims of domestic violence and this does not prevent me from inviting them to our home.

Despite these experiences and the ethical dilemmas they pose, to have remained remote,

silent and not give something of myself in order to avoid self-disclosure would, I believe, have been inappropriate. As Oakley (1981), Graham (1983) and Finch (1984) all write, to remain dispassionate and remote is to objectify women and perpetuate their silence, denying them the opportunity to express themselves freely. This mirrors and promotes the patterns of social disadvantage that women experience throughout society. Seeking ways to avoid this was fundamental in my decision to adopt a feminist, heuristic and collaborative approach to exploring the experiences of women offenders.

#### *Expert advisers: expert advice*

As a direct result of the ways our relationship developed over time, I gained much expert advice from the group on a range of issues including for example, content, scope and methods.

We know about those people who are more able. What we need to do is to hear the stories from those who are perhaps not so able and I think that that is who you need to target and think about what approaches you can use to talk to them. (Milly)

It genuinely needs to be on a basic level and when you don't know women, on a one to one. When you do actually get to know women and they're at a certain level. I mean we're all at a certain level and we are still sort of struggling a bit, so I think you would have to have a personal development bit to be able to actually run focus groups. (Meg)

They also gave me insight into a world and a set of 'rules' that, as an outsider, I could not otherwise have known.

In my opinion the rules they live by are, "Well if I do something for you, then you do something for me. What am I going to get out of it?" If you're vulnerable and in an isolated position then you always have to get something back. You don't have the luxury of this, this and this. If you give something then you get something back. Only when you've got that initial understanding will you get initial trust because there are always two sets of rules. It's prison or criminal rules and it's society's rules at the end of the day and unless you play their rules then you won't get anywhere. (Milly)

I did not always take the advisory group's advice, however. Sometimes we disagreed, for example, when it came to their views about the use of consent forms, which they viewed as perfectly straightforward - as long as I did not 'whip out the form' too soon and gave women the chance to 'suss me out' first.

Obviously the form is not something you're going to whip out as soon as you meet someone – you need to explain it first. (Meg)

I think it could potentially be a barrier, yeah, especially if you introduce it too soon, but as long as you have talked about it, it's going to be OK. (Milly)



I was mindful of what other researchers, including Brinton Lykes (1989), have said about how detrimental the use of consent forms can be. Participants in Lyke's research expressed irritation at being asked to give written consent when they had already done so verbally. As a result, some women refused to complete the form. Given all that the advisory group had told me, I believed that verbal consent on tape was more appropriate especially in a prison setting where unfortunately I did not have the luxury of time to build trust before 'whipping out the form' (see Appendix 2 for more detail about issues relating to consent). What this demonstrates, perhaps, is an example of where the researcher has to be the ultimate decision-maker in situations where there is conflicting advice or experience.

Overall, what Milly, Meg, Jane and Louise enabled me to do was to go into the field with my eyes wide open, so that potential threats both to me as an individual researcher and to participants were minimised. At times my anxiety may have risen as a result of stories they told me, or advice that they gave, but what I thank them for is that I *felt* so well prepared. I went into the field *feeling* equipped to deal with most things that came my way and knowing just how important my ability to be in relationship with women participants would be.

#### *A twist in the tale*

Meg, Milly, Jane and Louise indicated that they enjoyed their roles in the early phase of the research, seeing it as providing opportunities for developing their self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth, as well as the chance for mutual support and skill sharing. They certainly described feeling empowered by their involvement in the group.

I read the papers you sent me about prison and the testing and I thought that was terrible. People that smoke cannabis and that are tested in prisons are turning to crack and cocaine and heroin because it's easier to get away with it and I think that that's terrible. I think it all goes back to the government and the way the government looks at things. (Jane)

Well I suppose I've had a tad of a difficult day but this has been very productive. Educationally and socially, I've really enjoyed this. I genuinely think that I don't have any issues. I've really enjoyed it. Thank you. (Milly)

Midway through the second year and once the fieldwork was completed I became excited at the prospect of involving Jane, Louise, Milly and Meg in analysing the data. I had not taken their involvement or our relationship for granted; in fact I often reflected with incredulity that we had made it this far. Nevertheless, I was largely unprepared when, during a routine meeting, they announced their decision to discontinue their involvement in the study. They felt they had made their most valuable contributions and gently, but firmly, suggested that it was time for me to go away and get on with the business of doing the analysis and 'writing the thing up'. They were clear that whilst ideally they might have continued their involvement to the end of the process, in reality they felt this would be unrealistic, given the other pressures and

commitments they each had. One of them had become increasingly unwell. She and her children were homeless following an escalation of abuse by her partner. She was also recovering from being hospitalised after having attempted suicide. On a more positive note, the others were both doing well in their jobs but as lone parents were dealing with increasing demands on their time. They were also clear that, as expert knowers, they already had a good sense of what the broad findings would be. The apparent suddenness of their decision which took me by such surprise could be interpreted as me having been oblivious to their needs. Similarly, it could be argued that they must have given me warning signs but, because of my commitment to the research, I continued making demands on them regardless of my awareness of the tensions they were experiencing. However, after *much* reflection, I do not believe that this was the case; rather, as is so characteristic of so many women offenders, their lives seemed to change so rapidly and, as a result, I believe that they had to quickly re-prioritise their needs.

We all promised to 'stay in touch' with each other. However, I have not seen any of them since that meeting. Initially I did write from time to time suggesting we meet up but none of them ever responded and herein lies the 'twist in the tale' because it was me who struggled to come to terms with their decision for some considerable time. Despite all my concerns about not causing harm to any of them, I was the one left feeling powerless and abandoned in the relationship. However, as I reflect back to that time, I feel sure that each of them made the right decision for themselves, for the study and for me. Given the circumstances, it was indeed time to draw our collaborative adventure to a close, it just took me longer to see that and accept that it was time for it to end.

## Conclusion

Working with the advisory group within the framework of a feminist, heuristic and collaborative methodology felt right and made so much sense for so many reasons. Combined with other inclusive strategies, it provided an effective way of empowering 'vulnerable' women in a research context and, vitally, facilitated a process of 'partial identification' (Mies 1991:79). Consequently, I was able to develop my own sense of consciousness about women offenders' or 'other' women's experiences in order to reduce the gap between us. The experience also enabled me to recognise what binds me to other women as well as what separates me from them. In her evaluation of the experience of participating in the research, one of the women I met while I was 'doing' participant observation at the probation service women offenders programme, summed up her perception of me:

You're more like one of us really – but you're not one of us. (Rosie)

Importantly, I was not attempting to *be* like participants who, despite my empathy and understanding, would remain 'other' but, rather, to develop a deeper ontological awareness and sensitivity about their experiences. Without a collaborative approach and without an



advisory group, I would have struggled to find ways to reduce the distance between myself and the women whose experiences I wanted to explore in this work. I would not have been so effective in gaining such rich and intimate insights to the experiences of women participants, who not only wanted to have their say but also wanted to be listened to and heard. I may have had prior experience of contact with women offenders as a worker but what the advisory group gave me was knowledge and understanding at a much deeper, more personal level and I thank them so much for that.

## Chapter 5 – ‘Doing’ the research: ethics, access and methods; relationships, sensitivity and emotion

### Introduction

This chapter is also presented in two parts. The first section focuses on the ways in which I conducted the study. It includes an outline of each stage of the research process, from formulation of the research aims and objectives, through issues relating to ethics and access, to my choice of particular research methods and the analysis and presentation of the data. Central to this are the ways in which I sought to maximise collaboration with research participants and build relationships with them according to the study's feminist, heuristic and collaborative methodology. Similarly, personal reflexivity is inherent to this part of the chapter and this is reflected in my writing style which conveys expressions of feelings and thoughts so that, for example, the reader can *feel* the moral dilemmas and *be* with my account of how I did the research rather than only *think* about it (Ellis and Bochner 2000). In addition, the meaning of relationships is a theme that runs throughout the study and in order to explore this in line with my chosen methodology, I have incorporated a reflexive commentary which is presented in the second part of this chapter. The rationale for this is based on my recognition of how it provides a means of exploring issues pertaining to sensitivity, emotions and potential harm in researcher/research participant interactions in some depth (Ribbens and Edwards 1998; Hubbard *et al.* 2001). Thus, the value of mutual respect and trust in these relationships is illustrated, in part, by data that emerges from participant and gatekeeper evaluations of their experiences of participating in the study. These data also further exemplify the collaborative nature of the research. Furthermore, a role analysis is used to illustrate the multiple and complex positions I occupied during the participant observation phase of the study. Accordingly, I examine the many different ways in which the researcher necessarily fulfils multiple roles when undertaking research of this kind (Homan 1991; Fielding 1993) and, as a result, the extent and type of support she might need.

Before proceeding any further, it is important to convey that writing about this work has involved a significant struggle in seeking to present what was a complex, (at times) confusing and extremely multifarious process, in a coherent and linear fashion. To ‘force’ such logic was contrary to the actual experience of conducting the research, yet I was also mindful of the need to recount, analyse and make the process visible in accordance with feminist principles (Maynard and Purvis 1994). Thus, a number of major themes repeatedly re-emerge throughout the chapter, for example, sensitivity, trust, respect and reciprocity. In accordance with the experience of ‘doing’ the research, these are examined in varying depths that are consistent with the context in which they appeared. In addition, the depth and richness of the experiences I had whilst I was conducting the fieldwork is such, that for reasons of conciseness, it has also been necessary to draw on individual experiences in specific settings to illustrate particular points.



## Research aims and objectives

As previously indicated in Chapter 4, I worked collaboratively with members of the research advisory group to formulate the broad focus of the study and its aims and objectives. I also drew on my previous experience as Co-ordinator of a countywide women's project responsible for building and extending opportunities for women offenders and enabling them to be more effective in accessing education, training and employment opportunities. Similarly, my extensive review of the literature pertaining to women offenders' experiences in their communities overall, further highlighted the lack of attention to their experiences of accessing community-based welfare services. The research design therefore needed to access women offenders' experiences of contact with, and delivery of, community-based health and social care services.

The aims of the research were to:

- a) explore the experiences of women offenders as consumers of community-based health and social care services, and
- b) determine ways in which service providers might, if necessary, re-shape their services to be more accessible and more effective in meeting the needs of this particular group of women.

The research objectives were to:

- a) interview women offenders about their experiences of different kinds of community-based services, for example, social services, housing and health care provision, both before and after their offending behaviour and identify the extent to which their needs had been and were likely to be met in the future by existing welfare service providers;
- b) identify the characteristics of a *service generic model of provision*, that particularly relates to attitudes, behaviours and delivery by service providers and is informed by women's experiences.

It is important to stress that the focus of the research later changed as the findings in Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 will demonstrate. This was because of the important and unexpected emergence of participants' shared experiences of domestic violence and the extent to which these were central to their help-seeking behaviours and contact with specific areas of community-based welfare services. Thus, whilst exploring the experience of domestic violence was not an original aim, it became a fundamental part of the findings and is therefore given prominence in line with its significance within the data.

In sum, the research was purposive and applied. It was underpinned by a feminist epistemology and a qualitative, heuristic and collaborative methodology. Reflexive dimensions were an integral part of the whole research process. It was also strengthened by a wish to

change policy and practice as a direct result of hearing and taking account of service users' standpoints on experiencing those policies and practices. Of central concern was viewing women offenders not as research 'subjects' but as 'participants' in the process (Oakley 1981; Hanmer and Saunders 1984; Lather 1988). Therefore, I not only worked collaboratively with the research advisory group, I also sought ways of collaborating with research participants in prison, probation and a voluntary sector women's project (see Appendix 1 for more information about each of the settings within which I conducted the research). This included the use of research methods which sought to understand women's experiences from their own perspectives including participant observation (where possible) and semi-structured interviews. In addition, all participants were given the opportunity to comment on written work, including transcripts of taped interviews and drafts of the thesis, as a way of further involving them in the process. Consequently, some participants did check their transcripts for accuracy and one woman, Katie, gave feedback on written drafts of the whole thesis (see Chapter 6 for Katie's narrative). In addition, I incorporated participant evaluation methods to seek feedback from women about their experiences of taking part in the study. The primary aim in all these strategies was to ensure that the research was relevant and meaningful both to women participants and the wider field of social policy more generally, as well as to myself.

## **Conducting the study: ethics, access and methods**

### *Ethical standards and review*

The research was undertaken in compliance with the ethical standards of the University of Gloucestershire as laid out in the University handbook; *Research Ethics: A Handbook of Principles and Procedures*. An ethics addendum was written to support my research proposal and my application for ethical approval from the University's Ethics Committee (see Appendix 2). Whilst this process afforded me some structure, guidance and confidence about undertaking the study, the fraught and complicated ethical intricacies associated with undertaking *such* sensitive research with *such* 'difficult to reach' participants was constantly apparent. As previously indicated in Chapter 4, these are illustrated, to some degree, in how I coped with what Lee (1993) refers to as trust tests when individuals discussed their experiences of domestic violence or how they *really* felt about participating in the probation service women offenders programme *outside* of group sessions. However, it is important to stress that ethical complexity and dilemmas were a constant feature of 'doing' this research and therefore, these will be exemplified in some detail throughout this chapter. In brief, accurate assessment of any potential risks and sensitivities proved vital for ethical problem-solving (Sieber 1993) and following Finch (1984), feminist principles provided an ethical framework that made sense in this context. Similarly, working collaboratively with participants was inextricably bound up with the ethical complexities associated with doing research of a sensitive nature (Laslett and Rapoport 1975; Cannon 1989, 1992) (issues pertaining to the sensitive nature of the study are examined in the second part of this chapter). It also enabled me to examine ways in which I could redress the power balance in the research relationship



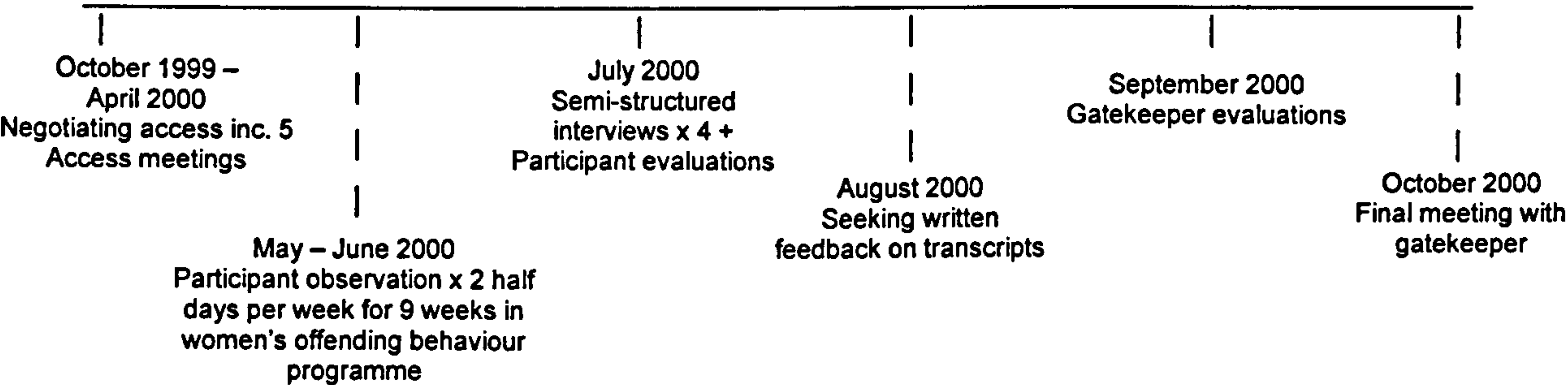
and thus link my ethical commitment to other feminist principles including reciprocity and offering services or materials to participants in return for their contribution (Skeggs 1994) (these have already been discussed in some depth in Chapter 4 and are explored further on pp 104-105).

*Negotiating access to 'difficult to reach' women: dilemmas and tensions*

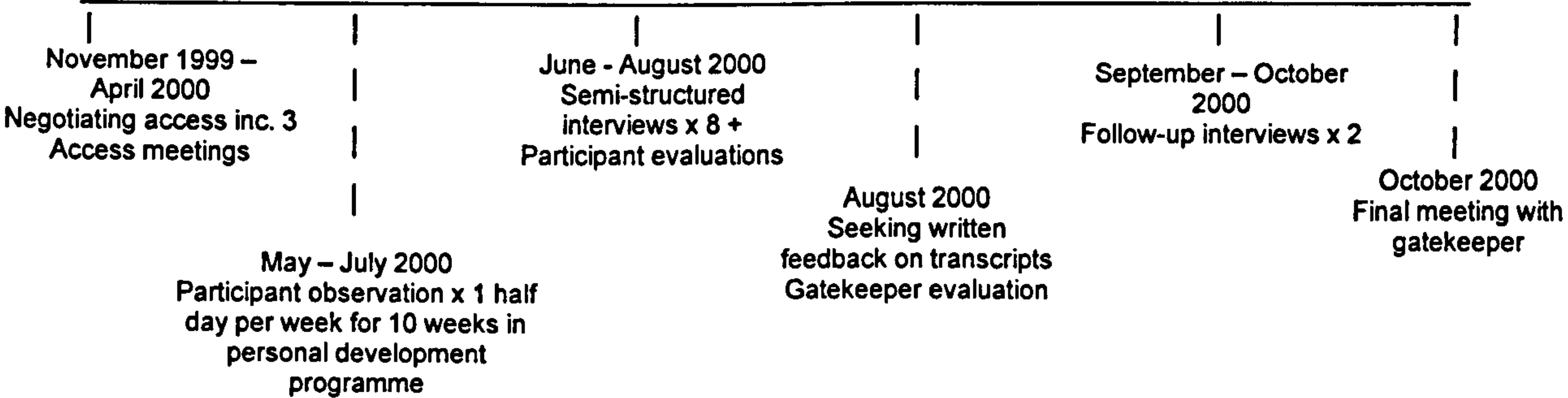
My aim was to make contact with women who had experience of the CJS (as offenders) in a range of different contexts, including prison, probation and the voluntary sector, in order to explore both differences and similarities between and amongst them. The following timelines provide a summary of the different phases of the fieldwork in each of the different gatekeeper organisations. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2. Research design**

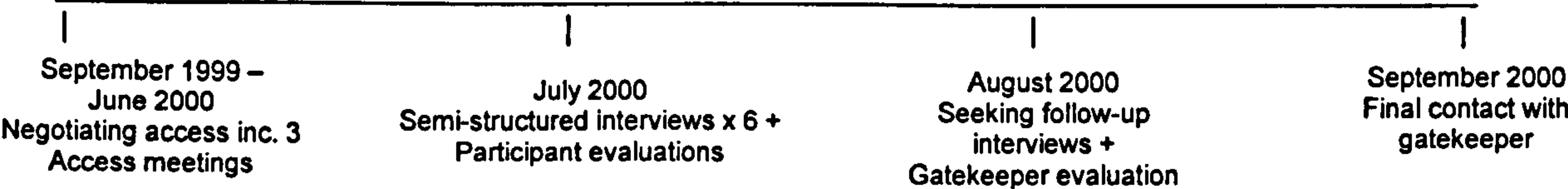
Probation service



Women's project



Women's prison



I recognised that women offenders were a 'difficult to reach' group, in part because the locations in which I was likely to encounter them can be notoriously tough for researchers to access (Medlicott 2001).<sup>9</sup> Overall, my previous contact with welfare service providers in these settings proved to be an asset and my reputation as a worker who would not cause harm to women was also important. As a result, I was afforded what I would describe as privileged access. Yet, despite this, the journey to my first contact with participants was complex and difficult, (at times) disheartening, (at times) full of uncertainty and (often) frustrating. For reasons of brevity, I will not elaborate on the steps that were involved in negotiating my way in to each of the gatekeeper organisations who eventually granted me access. Rather, I present an exemplary case study that incorporates a detailed analysis of my encounters with the women's prison because these are indicative of the fragility and complexity that were common to negotiating access to each of them.

### Negotiating access to the women's prison

#### October 1999

Initially, I wrote to the Senior Probation Officer (SPO) at the prison with whom I had had previous meetings in my role as a worker. She contacted me by 'phone and we began to explore the potential for me to involve women in prison in the study. In broad terms, I explained the approach I wanted to take in exploring women's experiences, including a period of participant observation as a means of relationship-building, followed by focus groups and/or interviews (see pp 107-111). She proposed the idea of a trade off, whereby I would facilitate some sessions for participants and in return, seek their involvement in the research. She suggested that this would increase the likelihood of my access being approved by the prison *and* the women. She agreed that she would seek initial agreement in principle, from both her colleague with whom I would be co-working and the prison Governor. She urged me to pursue her if I did not hear anything from her within the next month. Hence, in due course, I emailed and wrote to her on four occasions before finally meeting her colleague Linda (not her real name), the Drug Through-Care Co-ordinator at the prison.

#### January 2000

Access in its fullest sense involved not merely negotiation with the women and gatekeepers, but also a personal journey. As I sat outside the high walls and barbed wire trying to compose myself before going in for my first visit, I felt sick, weak and overcome by the grotesqueness of the institution. The imagery and powerful messages that emanate from the media and the literature about women's prisons threatened to engulf me. As I encountered the prison officers at the gatehouse and negotiated my way in, I felt full of fear until I caught sight of some women tending the nearby gardens. I remembered that they were the same as

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<sup>9</sup> As indicated in Chapter 4, it is also because of their wariness of people who they perceive to be in positions of (relative) power. However, this is discussed in more depth in the second part of this chapter in the context of the importance of the relationship between researcher and research participant.



me, that they were women first and that I knew how to 'be' *with* them in this way. I recognised that my fear was not of the women themselves, but of the impact of the institution in which they were contained. These feelings are important because, like Lee (1993), I believe that had I not been able to overcome my fear and demonstrate my ability to engage with women in the prison environment, I would not have been successful in negotiating access to them at this early stage. I also recognise that I was being informally assessed in relation to my potential to cause harm to participants and this also had a bearing on my access to them (Lee 1993).<sup>10</sup> This was clearly emphasised by both the Co-ordinator of the women's project and the SPO at the probation service women offenders programme, who stated that their prior knowledge of me in the role of worker gave them added confidence in agreeing privileged access to undertake the research.

During this initial meeting, I was informed that the Governor had given approval in principle to me conducting research in the prison, but that this was subject to certain conditions which I subsequently agreed to. These included that I maintained the confidentiality of women and did not name the prison in the study, that I provided him with a copy of the thesis on completion, made my request for access in writing and provided him with additional information about the nature of the study (see Appendix 3). We discussed my preferred approach to seeking women's participation and Linda concurred that it was important to avoid her selecting women to participate in the research by approaching individuals who she felt were likely to consent to meet with me. Therefore, we decided that I would work alongside her in the voluntary drug testing unit over a period of time. We agreed that my role would be as participant observer in an acupuncture group that met weekly for six weeks and that this would enable me to build a relationship with participants and gain initial trust and respect before asking them to participate in the study. It would also enable me to engage with women informally and discuss a range of issues that were important to them before doing something more focused on their experiences of accessing welfare services.

At this stage, no firm decisions were made about the particular research methods I would use to explore women's experiences, because I wanted to enable them to make their own decisions about this. However, we did discuss the use of focus groups and/or individual interviews as recommended by the research advisory group. At the end of this meeting, we agreed that I would contact Linda again, once I had concluded my preparations for undertaking the fieldwork and I left feeling that I had laid the foundation for accessing the prison and seeking the participation of women in accordance with the principles underpinning my methodology. The importance of meetings like these should not be understated: my ability to communicate and negotiate with the gatekeepers (the SPO, Linda and the prison Governor) was essential to my eventually being given the opportunity to

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<sup>10</sup> An in-depth discussion about potential harm to research participants and the researcher can be found in the second part of this chapter.

conduct the research (Lee 1993). However, as I later found, my ongoing communication and negotiation, persistence, resilience and ability to revise 'ideal' approaches, also proved absolutely vital.

### March 2000

To ensure ongoing contact with the prison, I met with the SPO again to update her on my progress and discuss further actions to safeguard my access. She alerted me to the possible impact of events that were taking place at the prison at that time. Allegations of sexual abuse and rape by staff had been made by a number of women, and some officers and maintenance staff had been suspended pending inquiries. After feeling shocked and dismayed about what she was telling me, my initial anxiety was that this would result in me being refused entry to the prison. However her main concern was not obviously related to access, rather whether women might disclose further information about their experiences during my contact with them. She reassured me about sharing this with her if it was appropriate. I returned to my guidelines pertaining to confidentiality and the rules of engagement which provided me with a framework for dealing with disclosure of this kind of information if it arose: thankfully, it did not. The fragility of my access to the prison is reflected in the immediacy of my apprehension about the consequences of these events. Yet, more revealing was how this information raised my anxiety levels even further. This was because it accentuated my responsibilities in relation to potential harm for both research participants and me as the researcher, through disclosure of particularly sensitive experiences (Medlicott 2001) (this is fully explored in the second part of this chapter).

### April 2000

I re-established contact with Linda in writing and provided copies of my research proposal for her, the SPO and the Governor. We also spoke on the 'phone, agreed that we would meet for a security briefing in May and that I would aim to join the group at the end of the month. It was at this point that I discovered that the circumstances surrounding my access had changed. Unfortunately, despite strenuous attempts on everyone's part, the permission that had initially been granted to engage in participant observation with the acupuncture group had been withdrawn at a late stage in negotiations. Linda's explanation for this was that she had discovered she was pregnant and, as a result, she was viewed as being at greater risk of potential harm from inmates. In practical terms, this meant that she was now required to have an officer present when she had contact with any *groups* of women, which had not previously been the case. My primary concern was with the potentially negative impact that the presence of an officer might have on women's participation in the study. On balance, we both agreed that officers being there would be negative, given that it would have been difficult enough for women to participate openly in the prison environment without perhaps fearing reprisals or receiving derisory or derogatory comments from prison officers about their contributions or participation in the study. Importantly, Linda indicated that this was a



distinct possibility and was clearly urging me to consider an alternative approach. Consequently, we negotiated changes to how I would seek women's participation in the study. This included me writing an open letter explaining the research which Linda then copied and distributed to a number of women throughout the prison, including those who were on remand, serving longer sentences and some who were on the voluntary drug testing unit (see Appendix 4). She then informed me about women who had agreed to participate in the interviews and forwarded a list of names and prison numbers to me. I then contacted the prison to book 'legal visits' with each woman. I was given instructions to say who I was, that I had been cleared by the Governor, that I wanted to book a legal visit and to refer to Linda if necessary. She said that she would ensure that prison staff knew that I had been security cleared and that it had been agreed that I could have contact with women in this way.

Linda suggested that legal visits would enable me to spend an hour with each woman in the visitors' block, but rather than being in the large open visitors' room, we would be able to talk in relative privacy in a separate room. She reassured me that no officers would be present and that therefore women would be able to talk as freely as is ever possible in such an environment. However, in reality, the rooms in which the legal visits took place were like goldfish bowls, with prison officers able to see everything. In addition, whilst Linda had also emphasised that they wouldn't be able to hear what was being said, I later found that this was not the case, as the sound of voices carried through the thin walls. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that to some extent, these potential privacy problems were overcome by participants who were clearly aware of the situation and there were many occasions when they lowered their voices to whispers during the interviews. The views that emerged from women's evaluations of the experience of taking part in the study are relevant here. Some participants made suggestions about alternatives which they felt would have afforded us greater privacy, for example, Rachel and Nicky both indicated that they would have preferred to have talked with me on the wing. This was because, as 'enhanced prisoners', the facilities to which they had access were more private and therefore, more conducive to having a confidential conversation.

The best thing about taking part in the research was telling someone who is *interested* (emphasised) about my experiences. The worst thing was the environment, the room, the lack of comfort around us. You know what would be good? It would be good if you could come onto our wing. That would be excellent. You know we've got offices all over the wing that we could use and that would be really good. (Rachel)

I don't know why you just can't come in on the wing. I mean this isn't a nice place to tell you my story. It would be better if we were sat in the association room and I mean this is like um, I don't know, it's like (pause), I don't feel comfortable enough. I want to be a bit more relaxed. (Nicky)

However, when I tried to arrange follow-up interviews with three of the women in this way (at their request), Linda made it clear that this was not possible within the delicate boundaries of

my access. This seemed to be because I would need to be accompanied by a key-holder at all times and this was too resource-intensive. It is (almost) possible to identify the moment, immediately after I had completed the first set of interviews, when Linda seemed to draw a line under my access to the prison via her, although it is difficult to be certain about this. Given that the SPO had already left to take up a new post in the community and Linda was going on maternity leave, my way in, other than through legal visits, seemed impossible. Understandably, participants subsequently decided not to proceed any further with follow-up interviews because of the essentially unsatisfactory conditions within which we had begun our conversations.

### May 2000

My security briefing included Linda giving me the following instructions: I was not allowed to take anything into or out of the prison; I was only able to have documentation relating to the interview, for example, copies of the papers relating to procedures for obtaining informed consent (see Appendix 5), my prompt sheet/semi-structured interview schedule for conducting the interviews (see Appendix 6) and a small amount of change to buy tea or coffee from the machine. I was allowed to buy a drink for women and offer chocolate or crisps from the machine but nothing else was acceptable. Linda was emphatic that if, for example, I were to take in cigarettes for women as a gift to thank them for participating in the study, I would not only be breaking prison rules but such an action would also be highly likely to place a woman at risk of being assaulted by other women on her wing. This was because when she returned, she was likely to be questioned by them about where she had got her 'free fags' and not only was she likely to have them taken from her but she was also in danger of being bullied by them in order to see if they could get her to obtain more supplies for them. Given that she would probably only be meeting me on one occasion, further supplies would be impossible and by refusing to do what 'they' wanted, she was likely to end up being harassed and bullied even further. Linda telling me this can be interpreted in a number of ways: she was clearly giving me a warning yet she was also concerned about me causing harm because of my lack of awareness about the possible dynamics of prison relationships. Overall, I was grateful for her advice because I had no sense of the potentially dangerous consequences of what had previously seemed a straightforward means of thanking women for their participation. Linda also suggested that women would probably refuse offers of anything but a drink, but as members of the advisory group had indicated, simply having time out from work or away from their cells would be much appreciated. This was confirmed during the course of the interviews in prison when Kath thanked me for getting her out of working in the gardens for a morning.

Thanks for getting me out of that, it meant I didn't get wet in this awful weather!  
(Kath)



Of particular relevance is that I sought reassurance from Linda that women would not be penalised in any way by meeting to talk with me. For example, arrangements were made to ensure that if they missed work for an hour, they would not lose any payment. My experiences in this context are interesting in relation to the use of incentives. I would include reciprocity here and whilst, for example, Power (1989) would caution against the use of any type of incentive, including reciprocity, particularly with deviant or disadvantaged groups, I would disagree. Given the feminist methodology that underpinned the study, and what members of the advisory group had to say about 'criminal rules', reciprocity and support in my study were absolutely crucial (Cook and Fonow 1986, Reinharz 1992). With Meg, Milly, Louise and Jane's help I had recognised that reciprocity did not have to be cash, but that finding information for someone and making sure they received it is far more valuable to some women, particularly those in prison. There were a number of occasions when I was able to 'give something back' in this way, for example, I sent information about domestic violence support and advocacy services to one woman and posted an open learning package into the prison about disclosure of offences for another participant.

During the course of my security briefing, Linda also acted as the 'go between' with the Head of Security and negotiated permission for me to take a tape recorder into the prison. This was something I had (wrongly) assumed would automatically be possible. However, whilst there was some doubt over this initially, it was eventually agreed. Nevertheless, on each separate occasion that I entered the prison, I had to explain this in detail to individual prison officers who were reluctant to allow me to use it. On reflection, it would perhaps have been helpful to have secured written permission from the Head of Security to avoid these challenges which, as a relatively inexperienced researcher, added to my already heightened anxiety, not least about successfully recording the interviews. This was particularly traumatic during meticulous searches of my person by individual officers who completely dismantled the machine which I had taken such care to prepare in readiness for conducting the interviews. Their suspicion was perhaps justifiable given concerns about drugs being taken into prisons. However, this could equally be interpreted as them not being suspicious of the tape recorder per se but that the function of the search was symbolic. In other words, that they were conveying a message to me about their power and who was in control in this situation. Overall, what this experience reflects is that my preparation for undertaking the interviews had focused almost entirely on the women and, as a result, I was largely unprepared for the variety of responses by different officers who treated me with varying levels of respect and/or disdain during my contact with them. In contrast, participants were more than happy for me to record our conversations in this way.

#### June 2000

Following the security briefing, I booked the series of legal visits. I was offered two slots in the morning and two in the afternoons. Linda had suggested that I went to the prison for

blocks of time so that I could get the interviews done as soon as possible and that women would not be left waiting too long after I had made the initial contact in writing. We had discussed how slowly time passes in prison compared to the 'outside' and how frequently women are moved from prison to prison with little or no warning. We had also agreed that I would aim to interview six to eight women in total. Immediately after I had booked the legal visits I wrote to individuals again, mentioned Linda by name, thanked them for agreeing to take part in the research and let them know the date and time of our interview (see Appendix 8). Ordinarily women were informed about legal visits via a list that was posted on each of the wings on a daily basis. They were not necessarily told who they were meeting so, without prior warning they could potentially have arrived for our interview expecting a police officer, probation officer or social worker. Linda had agreed that this was not a good way to start an interview, with women not knowing who they were going to meet as they were collected en masse and taken to the visitor's block. Unfortunately though, despite the lengths I went to, to communicate directly with women, when I finally met them, four out of six of them said they had not known why they had been called for legal visits or who they were being brought to meet. As a consequence, approximately one third of our short time together was spent with me apologising, explaining about the research and the nature of their involvement and offering to re-book the visit. From this, I was reminded about what we take for granted 'on the out' in terms of basic communication.

It was a bit of a shock this morning when they came to get me and I didn't know why. You do normally get a slip as well, you get a slip under the door and that didn't come. I thought, oh dear who is it? I had the letter from you but I didn't know what it was about or anything. I would have liked more preparation I think. (Stacey)

It was July before I actually met the first woman in prison who had agreed to participate in the study. This was ten months after my initial contact with the SPO. I also want to re-emphasise that at all stages, my access to the prison felt exceedingly fragile and I believe that it was only really possible at all because of my prior contacts with the probation team as a colleague and my professional status as a worker *and* researcher. I recognise that making contact with women as I did, via the gatekeeper, was not entirely satisfactory, in that she did in effect select women using her prior knowledge of them. Yet, given the conversations I had had with her about women's position in prison and the emphasis I had placed on how I had originally wanted to approach them, I felt as confident as I could that she was probably one of the most appropriate people in the prison to do this selecting. I also welcomed her reassurance that she trusted that the women she was thinking about approaching would say no to her if they did not want to get involved. Hence, I was much relieved when one of the women who had initially agreed to participate in an interview with me, refused to come off the wing saying that she had 'changed her mind'. The reason for my relief was located in how, prior to this, my fear had been that because of the restrictions of the prison environment, women would have felt forced to give consent without necessarily wishing to;



but this woman demonstrated that it was possible to refuse me. Overall, I feel fortunate and privileged to have actually progressed to conducting interviews with six women successfully and, despite all the compromises I made along the way, I believe that the study is appreciably richer because of their involvement.

Drawing from this focus on access, a number of themes emerge that were common to my experiences overall with each of the gatekeeper organisations and which have a wider application. These include issues pertaining to privileged access, such as gatekeepers' prior knowledge and experience of the researcher (and other researchers who preceded them), researchers' credibility and professionalism, as well as ensuring ongoing and appropriate contact with gatekeepers throughout the process (Lee 1993). Equally important is the researcher's ability to build positive working relationships, manage her fears and anxieties and be flexible in relation to what she may have specified as her ideal approach, without over-compromising underpinning values and principles. The researcher also needs to demonstrate that she can engage with participants in the particular environment she has identified as her research context, and clearly establish that she can avoid causing harm to the participants, gatekeeper organisations and herself. Finally, my experiences illustrate the importance of the researcher ensuring she is as aware and knowledgeable as possible about the context within which she intends to undertake the research (Sieber 1993). Clearly this can be very difficult for inexperienced individuals and for me; my relationship with the research advisory group was invaluable in achieving this.

### *Research methods*

In response to advice from Milly, Meg, Louise and Jane and in accordance with my chosen methodology, I prioritised finding ways to ensure that women's previous negative experiences of contact with professionals, where the power imbalance had perhaps been impossible to overcome, was not repeated in their participation in my study (Maynard and Purvis 1994). I recognised that several contacts with each individual/group were desirable, with the inclusion of confidence-building and other self-esteem strategies to enable some women to participate in an informed way. I was also aware that this approach could facilitate the process of empathy, enabling candid views to emerge regarding experiences, expectations and women's use of community-based welfare services. My utilisation of particular research methods was crucial to my success in this and in particular, to building relationships with participants and gaining rich insights from them (Oakley 1981). Thus, as previously indicated, I used participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews and multiple interviewing wherever possible. In sum, this combination of methods was vital because they allowed for an exploration of women's experiences and were best suited to this research because of its sensitive nature (Brannen 1988).

### Participant observation

As I stressed earlier, about the need for researcher awareness and knowledge in relation to access in broad terms, Sieber (1993:19) also recommends that researchers are able to demonstrate 'cultural sensitivity'. This refers to the understanding and approaches that enable us to gain access to individuals to learn about, for example, their beliefs, needs, fears and risks, and to communicate in ways that are more likely to be seen as relevant and appropriate. To this end, I spent two half-days a week for two months with two different groups of women in the role of participant observer (see figure 2, page 99). The first was a group compulsorily attending the *probation service* women offenders programme as part of their community sentence. The second was a group of women voluntarily attending the (voluntary sector) *women's project* personal development programme (see Appendix 1).

Accordingly, the primary purpose of using participant observation in this context was as a means of building a relationship with potential participants, to gain their initial trust and enable them to make an informed decision about whether they wanted to participate in the study. However, more specifically, my rationale for its use was also based on its potential to assist me in striving to reach women whose voices had largely been silent in previous studies, redressing the power balance in the researcher/research participant relationship (gaining trust, building rapport and mutual respect), immersing myself in participants' experiences and therefore, gaining a deeper and more insightful understanding of their lived realities (Fielding 1993; Mason 1996). Similarly, in contrast to concerns highlighted by Wright and Nelson (1995) about the incompatibility between participant observation and participatory approaches to research, I found that it provided a means of seeking to involve participants in the research process, managing ethical dilemmas and tensions associated with undertaking sensitive research and engaging in individual consciousness-raising. One of the probation officers emphasised the value she accorded to carrying out research *with* people in this way:

It is a good way of engaging people who may not always find 'interview only' research comfortable. It gives people the opportunity to see the researcher on a different level... Some women welcomed the opportunity to have a say for a change. (Hannah)

Many participants echoed this, for example, this is what Angie and Rosie said:

It made it much easier to talk to you having got to know each other a bit in the group beforehand. It would have been difficult to get rid of the front, the 'face' otherwise. (Angie)

It's a trust thing yeah? Especially talking about something that's close to me, it's hard to speak to people that you don't know. Whereas because you've been in the group and all it's a lot easier. (Rosie)



There was certainly a marked contrast for the women I interviewed in prison, some of whom suggested that they would have preferred to have had the opportunity to get to know me before sharing their experiences:

I think it would have been better to have known you before or to have met you before because I feel more confident with you now – I feel more relaxed. (Rachel)

Whilst the benefits outweighed the negatives, it is important to stress that I also encountered a number of dilemmas in my use of participant observation, including, for example, difficulties in obtaining informed consent, whilst not wanting to define the boundaries of the research too closely. However, I overcame this to a large extent by spending time in the field, giving women space to talk informally and obtaining consent as part of what Wax and Cassell (1979) describe as a developmental process. I also occupied many complex roles during the participant observation phase of the study, which were difficult to manage at times. As a result, I became acutely aware of the many different ways in which the researcher necessarily fulfils multiple roles when undertaking research of this kind (Fielding 1993). This also led to me recognising the extent and type of support I needed to deal with these (these are discussed in more depth in Reflexive commentary (3) which is presented in the second part of this chapter).

### Semi-structured interviews

Having reviewed relevant literature and piloted different research methods with members of the advisory group, we jointly agreed that the most appropriate methods for exploring women's actual experiences, which were likely to be of a highly sensitive nature, was the use of focus groups or semi-structured interviews (multiple where possible) (Oakley 1981). I gave participants the choice over which method they favoured and all of them expressly indicated their preference for individual interviews rather than focus groups. This largely seemed to be because of their perceptions and previous experiences of difficulties associated with being open and the 'fronts' they were wearing to cope with 'being' in the group.

When I'm in the probation group I find it difficult to talk especially about personal differences and experiences so I'd find it better to talk one to one. I think it's about all my emotions. I don't like to show my emotions – like today in the group when I started crying – I just felt like I wanted to run out. (Lesley)

This conflicts, for example, with Madriz (2000) who suggests that, in her experience, women can feel more able to communicate in a group because they can also feel too intimidated and scared of a one to one interaction. However, Rosie referred to the experience we had had with a very aggressive and hostile participant on the programme to illustrate her perception of how impossible it would have felt for her to share her personal experience in a focus group:

Yeah like today, I didn't want to say anything after that girl kicked off because – it's not what she said it's the way she said it. It's the nasty attitude. It's the nastiness and the way she says things, *"I really don't want to be here, I really don't want to do it and no matter what I'm not going to do it."* You don't feel like saying anything, like there's no point in saying anything. (Rosie)

Nevertheless, as previously indicated, in contrast to this, evaluations by women in prison suggested that they would have welcomed the opportunity to get to know me before being interviewed which perhaps supports Madriz' (2000) proposition, because of how a focus group could ostensibly have provided the means for doing this. Of equal relevance is how women were at different stages in the group process and therefore an indicator of preference for the group or individual process may have been a function of this. As such, it is the responsibility of the researcher to acknowledge the absence of control over group dynamics.

Using a semi-structured interview schedule as a guide, (see Appendix 6), I asked participants to 'tell me their story', to share their experiences of contact with welfare services. Even in the prison environment, adopting a semi-structured approach provided me with the opportunity to take time to listen to and hear women (Medlicott 2001). We were able to talk relatively openly and freely and I was able to offer support if they became distressed. In brief, interviews were carried out with six women in prison, four women attending the probation service women offenders programme and eight women at the (voluntary sector) women's project personal development programme (see Appendix 9 for individual biographies for each participant). Two women attended follow-up interviews to comment on the transcripts from their initial interviews. Four women asked for copies of their transcripts to be posted to them so that they could comment on content and accuracy and two were returned (see Appendix 10 for copies of correspondence and feedback sheets).

It is important to stress that it later transpired that of the eight women who I interviewed at the women's project, two did not have experience of the CJS as offenders, therefore, I did not include their experiences in the study. I had explained the focus of the research and emphasised that my aim was to explore women offenders' experiences. Yet, I also wanted to look beyond the label, offender, and hear from women with diverse experiences of the CJS. This included women who did not necessarily categorise themselves as offenders because they had had very limited contact with the police, as well as women on probation and individuals who had served several custodial sentences and were consequently mindful of the offender label they carried. The women's project enabled me to make contact with the former group of women because of the diverse sources from which they accepted referrals for women to attend their programmes. Out of a group of twenty-three women, five had been referred by the probation service, two of whom sought an interview with me during the participant observation phase of the fieldwork. All of the other women had been referred by other



agencies including health visitors, social workers, community psychiatric nurses and domestic violence advocacy and support projects. Six of them requested interviews with me, during which four women disclosed experiences of contact with the CJS (as offenders). As I embarked on interviews with these women I did not know if they had this experience. Most of them disclosed this information early in the interview process but Bianca and Michelle did not. Consequently, I posed more direct questions about this and both were categorical that the only contact they had had was with the police and that this was as victims of domestic violence. Both also clearly wanted to share their experiences of community-based welfare services and this is perhaps why they wanted to participate in the study. It was only much later, as I moved into the data analysis phase of the study, that I made the difficult decision not to include their experiences in this work because of the study's primary focus on women with direct and personal experience of the CJS as 'offenders'.

Difficulties also presented themselves in relation to my use of semi-structured interviews, for example, I initially identified multiple interviewing with each participant as ideal. Like Kirkwood (1993), I later found that whilst this was appropriate for a few women, it was not for the majority of others, especially one or two who experienced their participation as traumatic and, as a result, only wanted one contact with me (see pp 119-120 for more information about this). In addition, the particularly chaotic lifestyles of some women resulted in more frequent contact being too difficult for them to maintain, especially those who were abusing drugs and alcohol and therefore, flexibility was essential. If I had insisted on multiple interviewing with *all* participants, virtually all of the women I had contact with would have been excluded from the study. Accordingly, as Brannen (1988) and members of the research advisory group indicated, endings and closure after contact with women proved to be extremely important. One of the regrets I have about my contact with some of the women in prison is that I felt unable to adequately achieve an entirely successful ending with them. This was largely because of the limitations that were imposed on my access to them and having to rely on writing to them to inform them about not being able to continue our interview on their wing as they had suggested. This felt like an unsatisfactory means of communicating this information to them, because it did not involve us in any form of dialogue, rather it involved one-way communication from me to them. I was also unable to gauge their reactions to the information. In sum, it conflicted with my whole approach to conducting the study, especially with regard to developing relationships with participants and consequently felt difficult to reconcile.

#### *Participant/gatekeeper evaluations*

My rationale for incorporating evaluation by participants and gatekeepers relates to the collaborative approach I have taken in this study and is broadly in line with similar work carried out by Parry-Crooke *et al.* (2000) in their consultation with women in high and medium secure psychiatric settings. More specifically, my objectives were to:

- a) explore the experiences of participants in the research process;
- b) review the effectiveness of the study in seeking the views and experiences of women offenders, including the practicalities of carrying out research in prison, probation and voluntary sector settings.

To meet these aims, the evaluation was designed to collect evidence about the perceived effectiveness of the research process from all participants and the gatekeepers who facilitated my access to women in each setting. Simple tick-box questionnaires with a series of open questions were used to explore their experiences (see Appendix 11 and 12). For participants, these were constructed to ascertain the degree to which they:

- 1. understood the purpose of the research and how their views would be used;
- 2. understood the voluntary nature of their participation;
- 3. feared expressing any apprehensions about their participation, including, for example, fear of reprisals or receiving derogatory or derisory comments;
- 4. believed that their views would be listened to and heard by those who are responsible for making decisions about the ways in which services are offered to women offenders in the future;
- 5. felt supported during the research process, and
- 6. felt positive and empowered about their participation in the research process

For gatekeepers, the focus was on whether they;

- 1. believed that women were appropriately supported throughout the research process
- 2. felt that women had fully understood the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of their participation;
- 3. thought that the research process had impacted on the management of the programme/group/day to day work;
- 4. had received feedback from women to themselves or other staff, including any worries or concerns about the research;
- 5. thought that the research findings would be useful or applicable in relation to their own work practice, and
- 6. felt that the methods I had employed were appropriate. (Findings from participant and gatekeeper evaluations are presented in Appendix 13).

In addition, I consistently sought informal feedback from participants and gatekeepers at each stage of the fieldwork so that their responses could feed into the planning of subsequent phases of conducting the study.



In general, the evaluation process provided a vehicle for ensuring that participants played a part in informing the future direction of the work. It gave me a means of altering my approach if necessary. To illustrate this; after receiving feedback from women in prison, I appreciated more fully the importance of not making any assumptions about how effective my information-exchange had been, in terms of preparing them for making an informed decision about their participation in the study. Consequently, I was able to focus more specifically on this with other participants. In sum, the evaluation process provided me with feedback about my own performance as a researcher and enabled me to examine my chosen methodology and research methods in more detail. Hearing participants' views also provided the basis for making proposals about what are perhaps the most appropriate ways of undertaking research of this kind (Hill 2003).

### *Data analysis*

Whilst I kept fieldwork diaries during the course of the participant observation phase of the study, these were not used as primary data sources for the purpose of focused data analysis. Rather, they acted as a reminder of the nuances associated with my contact with women in the groups and therefore provided opportunities for incorporating illustrative quotes, to further exemplify particular themes that later emerged from the interviews I conducted. Transcripts were generated from taped interviews and these were subjected to a detailed textual/discursive analysis, to identify both unique and common themes and experiences (see Appendix 14 for an example of these). A non-numeric software package, Winmax, was used to store, sort, categorise and code the data, so that themes and patterns could be fully explored without the data-set becoming too unwieldy (Silverman 1995). More specifically, this involved importing data from the transcripts and creating text groups for each of the participant groups, i.e., women on probation, women in prison and women accessing the women's project. Themes emerged through a process of coding text segments and refining these by adding further sub-codes and later merging some codes and sub-codes. Some text segments had multiple codes. (see Appendix 7 for the coding frame from which the themes emerged and a worked example of how interview material generated themes and then the coding frame).

As Ryan and Bernard (2000) indicate, the emergent themes were largely concepts which I identified before, during and after the data collection and these were (mostly) realised through my data analysis. Therefore, I recognise that the literature review and my own experiences also provided sources for themes; nevertheless, the interview texts provided the specific focus for inducing the emergent themes. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), to some extent, my coding was my analysis because of how this inductive process enabled me to not only identify themes, but to refine them using a considerable degree of interpretive analysis, and then subdivide them into series of sub-themes. In undertaking this iterative process, I began building and refining concepts as I explored the themes in more depth (Dey 1993; Bryman and Burgess 1994). I also used memo-ing as a means of writing reflexive commentaries on particular

aspects of the data and in combination with my reflexive journal and fieldwork diaries, these memos provided the basis for deeper analysis. I also sought feedback from Katie, one of the women who participated in the study and who maintained ongoing contact with me throughout the research, in order to verify my interpretations wherever possible.

Following Weitzman (2000:807), the use of computer software (Winmax) designed to facilitate qualitative data analysis was invaluable because it ensured 'consistency' in my coding, 'speed' in searching and sorting, 'real time representation' of my thinking and 'consolidation' of much of my data. However, it is important to emphasise that the software did not *do* the analysis, I did. Therefore, I confined my use of Winmax to coding and retrieving rather than, for example, exploring relations among codes, building classifications or testing theoretical propositions about the data. Sitting surrounded by piles of paper and sheets of flip chart, immersing myself in women's experiences and ongoing personal reflexivity are what led me to a rich and extremely comprehensive understanding of women's experiences.

The framework for heuristic research that Moustakas (1990: 27-32) proposes informed my analysis of women's experiences which involved six distinct stages. First, 'initial engagement' with the issues or area of study, which held key social meanings and personally compelling implications and therefore, required passion and intense attention on my part as the researcher. Second, 'immersion' in the issues which began the inductive process and included time spent exploring the literature and the settings in which the fieldwork was conducted. This 'immersion' enabled me to become more intimately involved with the issues and thus grow in knowledge and understanding of them. Third, an 'incubation' period, where I stepped back from the intense and concentrated focus on the issues and which allowed space and time for thinking. It also provided an opportunity to become more aware of fine distinctions and meanings within the settings and as a result, an ability to encapsulate intuitive insights in order to develop a deeper understanding of women's experiences. Fourth, the 'illumination' phase which allowed for expanding this awareness and essentially involved a considerable degree of reflection in the process. Fifth, a period for 'explication' or describing women's experiences in the study, to develop understanding of all the layers of meaning associated with these. This included focusing attention on my own awareness, beliefs, thoughts and feelings to more fully understand the conversations I had had with participants. 'Explication' ultimately led to a far-reaching portrayal of essential experiences and included the use of narrative depictions and examples. Thus in discussing the work, direct quotes are used as illustrations of ideas and meaning.

Initially, I did not follow Moustakas (1990) in the sixth and final stage, in which he challenges the researcher to write a 'creative synthesis', as a means of fusing the individual's story with the whole. This was largely because I was concerned about the consequent reliance on the *essence* of *all* participants' experiences and to ensure more accuracy, wanted to retain a focus



on the particularities associated with individual experience. Thus, to begin with I focused on conveying the *meaning* of women's lived experiences through explication and a process of interpretation and discussion. Nevertheless, when I reached the final stage of the research, I did concur with Moustakas on the importance of blending the individual with the whole, because of the shared clarity of vision. Consequently, I produced a synthesis of the components of *appropriate* responses from welfare service providers and individual practitioners (see Chapter 9). This represents what participants most want them to hear and then change.

### **Reflexive commentary (3): dealing with sensitivity and emotion in researcher/research participant relationships**

#### *Defining the research as sensitive*

There are a number of different ways in which research can be defined as sensitive, for example, where the primary concern focuses on ethical and professional consequences for the participants (Sieber and Stanley 1988). However, within this definition, attention is directed away from technical and methodological problems which are particularly pertinent to research of this kind (Lee 1993). Farberow (1963) equates sensitive research with taboo subjects that are characterised by emotion, awe or dread. Yet this seems equally narrow in that, as I have found, it may be the location in which the research is taking place that renders the research as sensitive, for example, if it is taking place in a particular socio-political context (Rostocki 1986) such as a prison. Thus, I prefer Lee's (1993:4) definition of sensitive research because of his emphasis on potential 'threats' to all who are or have been involved in the study.

More specifically, he defines threat in three distinct ways: first, 'intrusive threat' which refers to situations where researchers are working in areas that are private, stressful or sacred. This is concordant with my experience of undertaking this work, because my contact with women was largely in situations where they were experiencing stress to a considerable degree, in prison, on probation programmes or attending women's groups for the first time. Because of the nature of women offenders' lives, many participants disclosed information of an extremely personal and sensitive nature, although I also became aware that what is perceived as private and distressing by one person or social group, may not be viewed as such by others. Thus, culture and the context/situation also impacted on the way in which the topic was perceived (Day 1985). In addition, the topic was not so much private as emotionally charged. This was because of the circumstances that had led to women's contact with professionals, because of experiences of child abuse, domestic violence, or their offending behaviour. Similarly, their previous contact with professionals had largely been negative, so many women were hostile and mistrustful of me initially.

At times, I struggled to 'know' my position in the research. This is vividly illustrated in a role analysis which highlights some of the multiple and complex roles I took up whilst undertaking participant observation with women attending the probation service-run women offenders

programme (see Appendix 15). These included, for example, 'chief tea-maker', 'active listener', 'out of place worker/helper', 'overwhelmed and frightened woman', 'PhD student' and 'confidante'. This role analysis can also be viewed in relation to women's acceptance of me, but it is important to stress that in reality this was not a linear process: moving from being an 'observer' to 'participant' was not a straightforward journey and shifting from 'non-acceptance' to 'acceptance' was far from simple. Overall, I would say that, to varying degrees, I did gain acceptance from most women and this is illustrated in part by their willingness to participate in interviews with me. Out of ten women attending the programme, four agreed to be interviewed, two said that I could use participant observation data, but made it very clear that they did not want to be interviewed. One woman requested an interview but was hospitalised during my contact with her, which made this impossible, and three were excluded from the programme because of failing to comply with attendance requirements and therefore my contact with them ended abruptly.

Notably, Rita was one of the women who struggled to accept me, although I did eventually interview her, after having given up all hope of doing so. She often made references to me in group activities as being 'one of them', a 'spy' from social services, someone not to be trusted. In so doing, I often felt that she was undermining my relationships with other women, because of how she seemed to be warning them to steer clear of me. As our relationship developed there were also times when she was extremely hostile towards me, for example, telling me I was a 'fucking useless PhD student'. On another particularly memorable occasion she screamed abuse at me, because I would not give her a telephone number for one of the other women attending the programme. Her outbursts of aggression were always provoked by alcohol abuse and when she was 'dry' Rita talked *with* me, woman to woman, as we discussed friendship and the difficulties of being a mother. There were several times when she confided in me as she wept, following a beating from her husband and after one incident she expressed her shame at having been found unconscious, lying in the street, after three days of binge-drinking. As she recounted another beating from her husband following a visit from the bailiffs, I tentatively suggested she seek help from her probation officer. She agreed to this, but when I returned from setting up an appointment for her, she articulated her regret at having spoken so candidly in front of me. Before I could say anything, another participant, Angie stepped in, 'Oh no, don't worry, she's alright, you can talk to her, I did and she was alright.'

Following this, Rita said that if she could 'stay dry' for a little while, then she would like to talk to me for the purposes of the research. The whole group celebrated with her when she announced that she had been 'booze-free' for fifteen days. Subsequently, she made three separate arrangements to meet me, but failed to keep any of them because of repeated relapses. I reassured her every time that this was alright, that I did not want to put her under any additional pressure and that therefore perhaps we should rethink her involvement. I also stressed the value of her contributions during the participant observation phase of the study. At



the end of the final session of module two and much to my surprise, Rita approached me and asked if I still wanted to interview her. I confirmed that I did and with the support of the probation team I was able to make last minute changes to her transport arrangements, provide lunch and a private space in which to finally conduct the interview. I felt and still feel privileged to have had this opportunity to explore her perceptions and experiences in more depth. This is because I recognise that, as was the case with several other women who participated in the study, had I not been successful in building a relationship with her that was based on trust and mutual respect and that ultimately resulted in her acceptance of me, this study would not have reached precisely those women whose voices tend not to be heard. I will always remain mindful of what Rita wrote about me in her evaluation:

I thought you were a spy from social services, a social worker and there was no way I was going to talk to you. I also thought you were a snob but you have been fantastic and very friendly and lovely to have around.

It is also important to stress that women's acceptance of me was important at a personal level. Whilst there were a number of times that I felt like a 'complete participant' in both groups, I had to work hard to earn this. The processes involved were almost entirely bound up with my desire and ability to be in relationship with them. As such, these relationships were complex, demanding, and dynamic and changed constantly. At times, the changes occurred almost from minute to minute. Of central importance therefore, as Mason (1996) indicates, is that whilst the researcher may *intend* to be a participant, an observer or a participant observer, the *reality* in the field may require her to adopt any one of these roles at any time. In my experience, it was vital that I was able to move constantly between the myriad of roles and had to be responsive to each new situation as it occurred. This is illustrated by how, in the thirty minutes prior to one session, I found myself in the role of 'chief tea maker' as women arrived and 'active listener' as Cassie talked about the letter she had received from the bank and recounted how her partner was demeaning and abusing her. In addition, I felt like an 'out of place worker/helper' because she also asked me for advice about what to do, which involved problem-solving with her. This 'out of place-ness' relates to my status as a student in the group, but my previous experience of being a worker which came to the fore in this instance. However, I was also an 'accepted researcher', which was exemplified when Rosie approached me about taking part in an interview with me. This need to adopt multiple, different roles is further illustrated by two extracts from one of the probation officers' evaluations, in which she describes my role first as 'participant' and then 'colleague':

(Being a participant observer) gave Sarah first hand experience and knowledge of the women in the group. She took part in the same exercises and went through with the women the emotions that they experienced.

The impact for me personally, after my initial nervousness of having Sarah there, was her support at the end of sessions. I valued Sarah's comments on the content of the programme and her assistance to de-brief particularly after difficult sessions. (Gail)

Hence, my experience indicates how impossible it can be to decide on your role before you enter the field and how crucial supervision and support are in dealing with role boundaries (this is discussed in more detail on pp 120-121). I am also aware that my position as a PhD student enabled me to give the necessary time to the fieldwork, given that it took my attendance at eighteen x three-hour sessions over nine weeks to interview four women. Evidently, this was also viewed as a particularly significant achievement by the gatekeepers, as I discovered when the SPO later congratulated me on being so successful. In her experience, succeeding in actually interviewing this number of women was indeed a rare occurrence.

Lee also describes the 'threat of sanction' which relates to, 'the possibility that information may be revealed which is stigmatising or incriminating in some way' (1993:4). Some women did express fear about my presence in the group as a researcher because, as previously indicated, some of them were not sure about my role. This could be attributed to how powerless or disadvantaged they felt or to their fears that they might feel so comfortable with me that they disclosed information, for example, about drug abuse or offending behaviour, that I might then have felt compelled to reveal to workers. Unlike Lee (1993), who stresses the importance of demonstrating the potential benefits of the research to reassure participants, my experience was that, in isolation, this was not sufficient. Rather, as I have already indicated, I found that there was also a need to find ways of redressing power imbalances through reciprocity, trust-building and working collaboratively. Similarly, re-stating my role as researcher at regular intervals was essential, as well as being clear about the rules of confidentiality and engagement, prior to interviews with participants.

Finally, 'political threat' (Lee 1993:4); if research impinges on political alignments it may be perceived to be problematic. Defining 'political' in its broadest sense, I was aware of the potential for this work to be seen as threatening, particularly by people in positions of power within the organisations in which I was conducting the study. Hence, I was very conscious of how the service providers who were supporting the study and facilitating my access to women via their programmes and workers might have felt threatened. This could then have resulted in my access being withdrawn at any time. This 'threat' is illustrated by one of the probation officers in her evaluation:

(I had) reservations initially about an extra person in the group who was there in a more official capacity. To be honest I was worried about my skills being evaluated. (Gail)

To remedy this, I offered the gatekeepers constant reassurances about the focus of the study. I stressed that its primary concern was with women's experiences of accessing health and



social care services generally, not the prison or probation service, although I also clearly stated the potential for women to talk about such experiences as well. Affording the gatekeeper organisations anonymity seemed to allay the anxieties they expressed. Overall, the approach I adopted with them proved to be very effective and evidence of this can be found in the extremely positive evaluations I received from each of them, for example (see Appendix 13):

Sarah was very much part of the 'team'. Probation staff and women felt very comfortable working with her. A good experience all round really.... (Her) style and approach suited this kind of research method. (She was) very supportive of probation staff and women offenders. I would welcome the opportunity to work with her again. (Hannah)

#### *Avoiding harm to research participants and the researcher*

I have consistently emphasised how sensitivity affected the whole research process, from formulating the research questions, through to disseminating the findings (Siegal and Bauman 1986; Sieber and Stanley 1988; Brewer 1990; Lee and Renzetti 1990). As I have already indicated, it was my early recognition of this sensitivity that was central to my subsequent decision to adopt a collaborative approach to the study overall and more specifically, contributed to my developing awareness of the importance of relationship-building between myself and participants. This is due, in part, to how sensitive research impacts on participants *and* researchers. It can also impact on the community and the institutions within it, although this was not the case in this context. As a result, a study such as this requires what Lee (1993:2) refers to as 'methodological ingenuity'. In acknowledging this, I did not perceive the process of carrying out this study as involving what Thorne (1983) describes as an entirely controlled adventure. Nor do I support Lee's (1993:2) description of the purpose of qualitative methodology as a means of 'draw(ing) from people what they may prefer to keep hidden'. My belief is that if the approach made sense in all its complex elements, then participants would only disclose or share what they felt happy and comfortable about. Therefore, in contrast to Lee, I support the notion that that which participants really wanted kept hidden should remain so. In any case, I felt that otherwise I would have been in danger of exploiting them, which would have been inappropriate and unnecessary. Again, it was my feminist principles, as well as the use of qualitative research methods, that provided me with an appropriate framework for undertaking this study. I am clear about how sensitive research also requires researchers to be even more acutely aware of their complex ethical responsibilities than in other areas (Lee 1993). These include possible effects on participants and, as I suggested earlier, this is illustrated in how, at times, participation in the research was stress-inducing for some women. Therefore, on occasions, individuals described feelings of unease, discomfort, emotional pain and trauma, for example, whilst sharing experiences of rape, child abuse or domestic violence. Sandra commented on this in her feedback once she had read a copy of the transcript of our interview:

The worst thing about taking part in the research was the fact that, because I have been so dissatisfied in the past with services, this was the first time that I had spoken about what happened to me in eight years and I found that I was overwhelmed with how I was feeling..... When I left the interview, although I had a cry and did feel better for it, I had met my friend for lunch and there was a great feeling of tightness in my chest and I felt very emotional. I stood waiting for ten minutes until she turned up and I swear if anyone had come up to me and spoke to me I would have burst into tears..... But, it was a very positive experience in the long run as I felt like a cork had popped and I felt like the pressure of the emotional turmoil that I was very obviously suppressing had been given an airing. (Sandra)

This positive response was echoed by several other women and the Co-ordinator of the women's project particularly commented on the value women had accorded to having the opportunity to participate in individual interviews with me.

Women have found the individual interviews very productive and feel a great sense of pride in contributing towards the research undertaken by Sarah. (Susan)

Nevertheless, at times, the responsibility for not causing women harm weighed heavily on me and yet I also recognised that expressions of emotional trauma were not necessarily harmful if I provided participants with acceptable levels of support. Like Medlicott (2001), I recognised the value of talk and what a rare commodity it can be, especially for people in prison. I believe that I did provide appropriate support to the majority of women who shared their pain with me. For example, I wrote to Sandra after I received her feedback, to offer her further reassurance and also provided details about counselling services in her area. I also alerted the Co-ordinator of the women's project to her support needs. The possible exceptions were the women in prison, where I had no way of knowing if support was available to them after their contact with me. Linda agreed to provide support for individuals if necessary, but I do not really know for sure if this was either necessary or forthcoming.

Seeking to redress the many power imbalances in the research relationship that objectify women and perpetuate their silence, because of the impact on their ability to 'have their say' was vital in this project (Oakley 1981; Graham 1983; Finch 1984). Mutual disclosure or sharing my own personal experiences where appropriate was also important especially when, during my contact with some participants, they asked me direct questions about myself. As previously emphasised in Chapter 4, I was also aware of my need to remain clear that I was not one of them. However, the more contact I had with women, the more acutely aware I became of the parallels that existed between us because of my own personal experiences. Dealing with the multiplicity of ethical complexities that ensued as a result benefited both myself and research participants (Brackenridge 1999). Accordingly, engaging in personal reflexivity with additional support from a specialist counsellor was such a crucial part of the process and journey and was integral to the study overall. It was particularly useful in enabling me to explore these similarities whilst remaining focused on participants' experiences in the research itself. Good



supervision was also important, as were opportunities for de-briefing and there are many ways in which contact with participants influenced me at a deeply personal level. Such strategies also further illustrate the need for researchers to receive adequate and appropriate emotional support in coping with undertaking sensitive research of this kind (Hubbard *et al.* 2001).

Developing rapport was also absolutely vital and as I have already illustrated, I had to work hard to earn initial trust from some participants. Reciprocity was essential in achieving this, as well as reducing barriers to effective communication (Sieber 1993). Equally important was how I actively sought opportunities to get together with individual women and discuss the overall study, before even beginning to seek their participation in the research (Case 1990). Consequently, I found that it was important to let women know that I wanted a relatively intimate relationship that was not hierarchical or exploitative. It was also essential to convey my ability to be non-judgmental and non-condemnatory in order to build a framework of trust between us. In addition, as previously suggested, it was important to ensure an inductive process through the use of the semi-structured interviews, which required high levels of confidence because of how this can produce so many uncertainties for the researcher. I believe that all these principles combined to create a safer environment for women and ultimately lead to greater self-disclosure and therefore better data.

Returning to my concerns about avoiding possible exploitation of participants, I was also acutely aware that, in building a relationship with participants over a period of time, there was a risk that they might have felt abandoned or betrayed as my involvement with them came to an end (Punch 1998). So talking with them about this and being clear about role boundaries were important. Yet, fundamentally and following Stacey (1988), I also believe that constantly overstating women's powerlessness places them firmly in the victim role, which is something I (and they) wished to avoid, especially since women could and did resist me (the 'counter hegemonic approach' to research) (Stacey 1988:88).

I also feel that it is essential to emphasise the positive elements of women's participation in the study, such as those who clearly enjoyed the research, as well as the ways in which it provided opportunities for developing women's self-confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, mutual support and skill sharing (Maynard 1994).

I wouldn't change anything. It's been alright – I've enjoyed it. (Nicky)

The best thing about taking part in this research was that for years I have felt that my views were very insignificant and the fact that Sarah actually listened to me. (Sandra)

The friendship I have developed with Katie provides another clear example of this. A year after her involvement in the study, I met her by chance. Since then, we have become friends and now work together on the management board of a voluntary sector project, with responsibility

for working strategically to ensure more appropriate and co-ordinated community responses to domestic violence. She has contributed more to this study than I could ever have imagined possible when I embarked on my collaborative journey, particularly in providing invaluable feedback on written drafts of the thesis and I thank her so much for that.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have recounted the ways in which I conducted this research. I have examined issues pertaining to access and ethics, my choice of participant observation and (multiple) semi-structured interviews and my use of participant and gatekeeper evaluations in accordance with my feminist, heuristic and collaborative methodology. I have emphasised how sensitivity and concerns about harm affected the whole research process. I have also stressed the value and meaning of relationships between myself and research participants, particularly in the context of the multiple and complex roles I occupied during the participant observation phase of the study. Ethical responsibilities relating to support for the researcher who potentially faces a number of consequences of embarking on sensitive research have consistently emerged throughout this chapter, for example, dealing with feeling overwhelmed at times. Understandably, some women were initially hostile towards me, suspicious of my intentions, mistrustful because of their past experiences of 'people like me'. Thus, I was often perceived as 'one of them', in other words, someone in a position of (relative) power. In effect they placed me in a state of 'otherness'. This can be interpreted in different ways, for example, it is feasible to suggest that they never accepted me as one of 'us', rather they came to believe that I was not one of 'them'. Alternatively, that as they compared me to themselves they struggled to see any similarities between us yet, as they got to know me, they came to accept me as being more like one of 'us' than not.

By way of final comment, I want to share my vivid memories of how I felt after my interview with Carol in prison, and how I cried as I drove home. I felt so overwhelmed by her appearance when I met her and found it very difficult to cope with the feelings she evoked in me as she talked about her life and the toll of having used heroin for more than twenty years. Her arms and neck were literally covered with appalling scarring from 'shooting up' and she explained that she had weighed just over five stones when she had started her sentence. I felt so privileged to have had a window of opportunity to really hear her when she was 'clean' and able to communicate about what her lived reality meant to her. As was the case with all the women I was honoured to come to know for brief periods of time, her words remain with me, particularly her response to my questions about what she most wanted welfare service providers to hear and change. The poignancy of what she said is so significant because of how I heard her summing up my endeavour in this work.

They should try looking from the inside out and not from the outside in. Really!  
(Carol)



## **Chapter 6 – Katie**

### **Sarah: 'introducing Katie'**

What follows is a product of the collaborative and reflexive process. It is one woman's powerful and eloquent account of her experiences of domestic violence and help-seeking from community-based health and social care services. A range of themes and issues emerge to provide the context and overall thematic framework for the subsequent findings. Consequently, the essence of Katie's narrative determines the broad structure for the remaining chapters. As indicated in Chapter 5 (see page 97), the important and largely unexpected findings relating to women's experiences of domestic violence determined the focus women chose to explore in relation to specific areas of community-based welfare services and in the study overall. This is reflected in Katie's highly evocative narrative, about her strategies for coping with her experiences and her insights into how others view the choices she made.

The reasons for choosing Katie's voice over all the other women who participated in the study stem from my recognition of the strength and coherence that is so evident throughout her exploration and analysis of her experiences. Hence, it seemed inappropriate to sort, categorise and code what she, in particular, had to say. This is not to imply that other participants' experiences lacked these qualities rather, they tended to focus on particular themes or issues, as demonstrated in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 where their voices will be heard. Katie's narrative should also be read with my intention to involve women with a whole variety of different experiences of contact with the CJS in mind. Shop-lifting at the age of fifteen may not warrant the labelling of Katie as a 'woman offender', yet as she reveals so candidly, her contact with the police had a significant and detrimental affect on her help-seeking behaviour later on when she was a victim of domestic violence.

The text has been edited collaboratively with Katie: however, only very minimal changes have been made to the original transcripts of the two in-depth interviews which were conducted four months apart. Her narrative is presented in such a way that it 'stands alone' and is deliberately non-interpretive. However, my voice is implicitly present, not least because I framed the questions, focused the interviews and largely shaped the narrative that Katie created during our contact with each other. Nevertheless, throughout her account I have refrained from speaking about the meaning of her experiences with the authority of researcher. Rather, I have written myself into the narrative at the end of the chapter, having agreed with Katie the key issues which emerge from her story. The aim is to both privilege her voice and learn directly from her about her lived reality at this point in her life and also to make sense of her story for me, the researcher, and the study as a whole. By presenting Katie's narrative in this way I hope to illustrate the experiences I have had in my contact with individual women throughout the study and the impact they have each had on me. I also hope to demonstrate the intrinsic value of reading and listening to individuals' real narratives, because this enables us to gain a

much richer and more in-depth insight into their experiences. As a result, we can perhaps work to develop our understanding of their frustrations, struggles and successes in a more profound way.



**Katie: 'telling it like it is'?**

*June 2000*

I think I fit into just about every category except 'offender', apart from my shop-lifting I suppose. I was fifteen. I can remember it really well, it was a bad experience, never again, it was horrifying. They told me that if I ever did it again then I would be taken into care. I'd never done it before. I was trying to steal a bra. I got called back in to see this woman who said, 'If you ever do it again you'll go into care'. I spent eight hours in the police station. I don't know if you've been in one but it is not a pleasant place to be. They make you remove everything, take your socks off, take your earrings out, go to the toilet in front of a male police officer. There was no room and you had to go to the toilet in a corridor. I was desperate for hours. I had blood on my knuckles where I'd been bashing at the cell door asking them to let me out to go to the toilet. It was hideous, we were all put in separate cells, the three of us and then eventually they let me go and I had to stand there with nothing on my feet with wee all over the floor with a male policeman, I was fifteen, it was horrendous, absolutely horrible. I'd waited for about four or five hours. I was in so much pain. And they just treated us like the biggest convicts going and you could say that, I suppose that we've never done it again. Although I know that one of the other girls went on to make complete a mess, an alcoholic and what-have-you. So it doesn't necessarily follow does it? Treat us badly, we won't do it again. I was just an innocent girl really who'd gone a bit wrong.

I've had a total fear of the police ever since for anything. If I pass a police car I immediately look at my speedometer thinking, 'what am I doing, what am I doing?' Or if I pass a policeman in the street I immediately feel guilty, or if I go shopping in any shop, I think the security people are watching me. It was seventeen years ago! I know I'm holding my shopping out like this convinced that I look guilty, that they're going to arrest me, all because of that. I need these people to help me out with my domestic violence thing but I've never been able to go to them because I don't feel that they'll be on my side. I've never 'phoned them ever. Because, I was brought up in a violent situation anyway but it was very different then. When my mum used to call them out they used to say that they couldn't get involved because it was domestic and they'd go away again. So that, combined with those other things, made me think that they're obviously on the other side to me. I can't go to them.

All in all services are not good. I mean even now, skipping a big section, with social services, the social worker, when I finally came out with all this truth? She said to me that the one thing she would do to put in place before she closed my case would be to insist that I'm connected up to the police domestic violence unit, and I thought, 'Brilliant idea!' But, how far are we now? Three months on and I've still not had any contact with any of them at all. I've

had no visit from the domestic violence officer at all, 'No, no,' she told me, 'It's got to be set up, that she's going to come out and see you,' especially as I'm still living with my husband. 'She's going to tell you how to deal with living with somebody and the best way to go about it,' and I thought, 'Brilliant, that's a brilliant idea. How much it has changed since I was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen-years old. They're on my side,' but of-course they never got back to me. So now I'm left thinking, 'Well I must be such a low priority I'm obviously wasting their time,' which is a terrible message isn't it? So, my trust in them isn't huge. I did keep telling my health visitor nothing was happening, because she was the one that was supposed to go away and set it up. So she finally got through to somebody last week, who said, 'Oh sorry, it looks like the lady that's supposed to be dealing with it is on long-term sick, I'll give her a ring.' I got home and found an answer 'phone message, this is like three months on, to say, 'I'll ring you again later.' She never did and because I'm running all over the place I've never had an opportunity to phone her back. I must do it but like I say I *feel* like I'll be wasting their time because they obviously don't consider me to be very important otherwise I wouldn't have been put on the back burner.

I was so impressed by social services when my health visitor first offered support to me. I mean, my god, it seemed so different. My mum never had, they were you know, 'Don't make a fuss, stop wasting our time; we've got more important things to deal with, just stop it.' That was the whole attitude. She could go in with black bruises and it was really like, 'Look, no, we don't want to know, it's a private thing.' It was just seen as being domestic, 'So, it's really your concern. You're married to this man. You've got to just put up with it.' So I was just, wow, if I'd known that things had changed like this. I'd assumed it was the same, domestics weren't got involved with. I had no idea that there was a domestic violence unit or any of this. I've never tried to find out.

I've been experiencing domestic violence for ten years. I've been with my husband ten years. I was pregnant when it started. The stupid thing is that the reason I left home was to get away from my stepfather. I needed to get out because he nearly killed me. One time he was terribly violent towards me and our neighbour and the police and because of that they tried to do everything to get it to go to court. It was in the local paper. He sat there and my mother sat there and I feel now that they bribed me into writing this letter saying it was a mistake basically. I was seventeen at the time. I was in the middle of my 'A' Levels. I had a very much younger sister, she was three at the time and she had witnessed the whole thing. Somehow my mother kicked him out and for once we got proper support from the police, they were really good. I suppose because he had hurt one of their own so they don't like that



at all. I mean they treated him badly in the cell and things like that so, and then a few weeks later when the court case came up I suddenly found his solicitor 'phoning me and talking to me and being really nice to me. The next thing I know he wants to move back in, my mum wants to forgive him for the sake of my sister. 'For the sake of our family please write this letter so that he can come back home?' We actually had an injunction against him, where he wasn't allowed in the house but apparently, if I wrote this letter it could be lifted because it was me that had received the violence. So, I had to sit at the table with him there and my mum and he bought me all this stuff, all these nice things and I basically said that it was a big mistake and that I'd exaggerated. You know the fact that I'd been in hospital having cheek bone x-rays and photographs and all this, I had to say that it was a mistake, that I loved him to bits and please could he come home. Then I had to go into court and his solicitor made sure he sat with me so it looked like we were all chummy. This was all in front of a booing audience in the courtroom, all booing him and looking at me as much as to say, 'Bad, bad mistake.' They read out my new statement and he got off with a two-year conditional discharge. He didn't get charged at all, even the fact that he'd hit a policeman, even the fact that he'd hit my neighbour, the whole thing was just dropped and all because of this wonderful letter I'd written.

I believe that my mother was doing what I'm doing now, trying to keep the family together, but it didn't occur to her that I was part of that family and I did say 'If he comes back, I'm going to find it really hard.' I was petrified. But I think, I just think that if things had been how they are now, because it was a very taboo subject, being hit, you just didn't talk about it. I mean none of my teachers knew. I used to be punched in the head and go off to school with a ringing head and not tell a soul. You just couldn't, you just couldn't. So I suppose if my mum had seen the stuff that's happening now, maybe she would have been stronger and if she'd had better support maybe she wouldn't have pushed me into it. But she was petrified and she had no job, because he made sure she had no job, she was totally dependent. My little sister, although she'd seen the whole thing, she was like, 'I want my dad, I want my dad.' And just pressure. And because, you see what I don't understand is why didn't the court follow it up with support for us, why wasn't he? Knowing there was a violent man coming back into the house. A two-year conditional discharge, what's that going to do? With my mum being too weak to tell anybody anyway, he could do whatever he liked and nobody found out. There really should have been somebody that was coming to see us regularly but of-course weeks later I moved out. I couldn't bear it.

I just knew that I had to get out. They moved me to a little bedroom and moved my sister into the bigger bedroom. I just used to lie there petrified that he'd come and get me and in the end I just thought, 'I can't do this.' So I met a man, married him, got out, very, very quickly. He was Mr. Nice Guy and he never touched me once but he just wasn't the right man. So I went plunging into another relationship and then he does it. I don't know how they say it happens but it seems to be that way. We're not deliberately stupid are we? We don't go out there deliberately and say, 'I'd like someone to come and use me.' You just don't. And then once you've been in it for so long, how do you suddenly declare after five years, 'Actually I've let my children be hit by this man,' because that's the worst bit. In the end I became as much of a perpetrator as him because I felt that.... I was too frightened to suddenly declare, 'I do love the children. I don't like what he's doing.' I became part of the dirty secret because I'd kept it.... I sent my son to school with foundation on his bruises to cover for him because he was a school governor. The fact that he was a school governor made it a million times worse because we had this great reputation. We did loads for the school; we had a great public image. The teachers thought he was the greatest guy. As his wife I was the greatest lady and our names would come up in the newsletter every month for all the contributions we'd made and he is brilliant with children. This is the irony, he used to go in and spend hours with the kids, patient as anything, and how can you possibly? You think you're going to be called a liar anyway if you did tell them, if you did say. I have had this actually, people in my own family have said, 'No, I'm sorry but it can't be.' Then we go back to that letter saying I'd exaggerated and in the end you start to think, 'Well am I?' You think, 'I am exaggerating, maybe all women have it,' and if I stay at home, which he's made sure I always have, then I'm not going to come into contact with very many people, so there's less chance of me actually finding out that my life isn't very normal.

He knew about my experiences of violence as a child and that's what the attraction was because I told him and the line was, 'Well I'll protect you, I'll never let him hurt you again.' Because at that point I was scared he'd come and find me, my step-dad. And he would tell me how he was going to look after me and that was so appealing. Then I find out the wife that he left for me had also been beaten by him for the past five years. It's all about him; it must be, because it's too much of a coincidence. But then you could say that about me, why have I been hit by two of my mum's male partners and my husband, so three men? The lady at the domestic violence advice and support place said it's because I don't attract respect, because I don't behave in a way that attracts respect. So I said, 'Are you saying it's my fault?' 'No I'm not,' she said, 'but if you don't demand respect, you won't get it.' That really made me feel quite bad. I mean you can't just not seek respect. I was just me and somebody picked up on



something in my character. Well there does seem to be a pattern. We have now found out that my stepfather's wife previous to my mum, he was violent to her, went at her with a knife, and the wife he's married to now, he's beaten her badly too.

My social worker was a nightmare. She was ah, I don't know if I should say this, but she was a bitch from hell. It's such a shame because I'm very friendly with a lady who works for the NSPCC and she convinced me that the social worker was alright and that she'd be on my side, I was a victim, not a criminal and that it'd be fine. Then Faye, who's training to be a social worker (a student at the women's project) said, 'Really, she's going to be on your side, you don't need to worry.' Really I was in such a state about the interview. This was when I had my husband back three months ago. The health visitor said to me, 'Once you've decided you're going to have him back I need to know because I need to get social services involved because you've got the children.' So, I made that decision and then told the health visitor and then she got this social worker to come round and she came with her. For weeks before I had reams of notes written up and I thought, 'It's ok because she's going to be on my side.' She was horrible, really horrible; she made me feel like a criminal and made me feel like I was as much to blame as my husband. I felt utterly gutted. Two and a half-hours she interrogated me for. I felt absolutely horrid at the end of it. There was nothing that she said that made me feel that I'd done the right thing in coming clean. I started to think I should have kept quiet. She was so horrible, said that the damage I'd done to the children couldn't be undone and here I am desperately running around trying to find therapy and being a good mum and help him be a good dad. I'm thinking, 'Surely I can't write them off at age eight, nine and three?' It was like she was saying, 'Sorry, damage is done.' Well she was just vile and the other thing is that she didn't speak to him, only me. So I had to go through this terrible, terrible interview and he got off 'scott free'. So far, he hasn't had to speak to anybody, to prove anything. The only thing he has had is a visit from a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) because he tried to commit suicide after I told him to get out. So he gets to see the psychiatric nurse. He gets support and I've had to go out and find mine. The only support I've had has been through voluntary groups.

I have had to push so hard for any of the services to get involved with us. They weren't forthcoming at all. I mean I said to my husband, 'Go and sort yourself out.' I was just buying time because I didn't know what to do. 'Go and sort yourself out, even if it's just for the children, nothing to do with me.' So he went into the doctors and said, 'Please help me, I'm a violent man,' and the doctor, a male doctor, said, 'Welcome to the male race,' and sent him away. 'Don't worry,' he said 'We're all the same; you're no different to anybody else. Go

away and join a gym.' He sent him packing, so off he went, and so I said, 'Go back again, and go to a different doctor.' He went to a different doctor, again nothing, just not interested at all. Only saying, 'Is it that bad? Is it that bad what you do?' Apparently, he says he described it in detail and that they just said, 'Oh?' He described his violence towards me and to the children in detail and they didn't believe him. So then I went in. I saw a doctor I've trusted for years, really nice lady. Again it wasn't taken seriously. Then he tried to kill himself. Then we got the CPN at the hospital who went, 'Listen everybody, this man's been coming to you for help, he does need it actually.' So then suddenly he had immediate help from a CPN in place and he was put on tablets for manic behaviour. Then I'm told by this CPN, 'Support your husband otherwise he'll do it again.' So then I started 'phoning the doctor begging for help saying, 'This isn't fair, it isn't fair, I've been through this for ten years, why am I suddenly being told to support him because he tried to die?' All my calls were ignored, I didn't get any response at all and then finally, the day after he came out of hospital, I was so frightened and he said, 'Please be strong, I need you because otherwise I'll do it again.' I just completely cracked, went to pieces, screamed down the phone to a G.P, 'I want to die, I want to die, help me,' and so he prescribed me Valium. I threw my kids out to a friend, said, 'I don't know what I'm going to do but I just have to be on my own.' I took six Valium and just wanted to be dead basically. I hadn't spoken to my own doctor once, she hadn't returned any of my calls, I still got no follow-up after that. I didn't die actually but I hallucinated big bad time though. I was on my own; because I made sure that the kids were safe. Then I had all this from my friend saying, 'If you don't pull yourself together you're going to lose the kids, get a grip.' So then I went to my doctor and she put me on Prozac. I tried to explain what was going on and went into detail about being kicked in the kidneys and repeatedly being held against the wall and having my head bashed against it and she just about took notice. That's when she went to the health visitor and said, 'I think maybe we ought to give this woman a check out,' and then once the health visitor came in that was brilliant, she's been absolutely brilliant.

The health visitor has been the best out of everybody and has supported my family in every way, not just my children, not just me, not just in health issues. She has organised everything. She got me to the women's project and she's been totally wonderful, so good and so non-judgmental, and I have been able to be very honest with her. If she'd been like my social worker I wouldn't have said half the things I've said and it would all still be hush, hush because I couldn't open up to her at all, but the health visitor was very good. She said, 'I'm bringing the social services in,' but she always asked for my permission, she never went ahead and did it, she always said, 'I've written this letter, what do you think, is that ok, do I have your



permission?' She was ever so good, but even then, because I go back to the doctor every month now because she thinks I'm mad apparently. She said, 'You are a complete mess aren't you?' So even then when I went back to the doctor and I said, 'Oh, by the way, the social worker's coming out to see me.' She said, 'I don't know how much help they can be actually. I don't think they'll be very interested, it's not a high priority thing.' So that's odd, because I've known this woman for years, but then she's known my husband for years as well and thinks he's a gem. It's like she was saying, 'It's ok, it's only domestic, it doesn't matter.' So, the G.P says, 'How often does it happen?' They think, 'Oh well it's not that often.' They say, 'Well don't worry about it then.' So later on I sat there having been told it wasn't that often, talking to the social worker who said, 'Does it happen that often?' and I said, 'Oh no, not really, only about once a month.' She says, 'What? Once a month!' 'Well maybe once every three months then, four or maybe five.' I'm left thinking, 'Oh god, you're so scary I'll just make it up.' So many things added together to put me in an impossible situation to ever disclose what I was experiencing. It's as if you're stacking it up.

Another good thing about the health visitor is that she came to me. She's always comes to my home. She completely fits in with whatever I need to do and she's said, 'If you've got nobody else to talk to I'll come and see you every week if you like and help with anything you like.' She's really gone beyond her role as health visitor. She's been non-judgmental. She came and wanted to hear me. She hasn't shown any sort of, 'Oh my god what have you been doing?' Also, I mean although she didn't have any contact with my husband, she did bump into him in the hall at one point and she did say hello to him at one point. She wasn't frosty at all and she appreciates that I'm trying to make a go of it, so she hasn't made any judgments at all. There are no judgments on me at all, or about the fact that he's back in the house or anything. I have told her everything. I have been completely honest, so top marks for her and she's not the sort I would have gone to for help actually. It's normally, 'Here's your vitamins and a few Rusks, off you go.' The previous health visitors I've had have been exactly like that, but this one's totally brilliant. It's not necessarily about her as a health visitor, it's more about her as a person. I'm very lucky to have her, she's got all the contacts and she's been able to point me in different directions.

When the social worker first came to see me -. I mean she came in before the health visitor got there and I said, 'Would you like a cup of tea?' and she said, 'No,' and she sat there on the edge of the chair, like this, right on the very edge, bolt upright. I tried to make small talk and she wouldn't at all. The barriers were completely up before we'd even begun. I thought, 'Oh my god, I was not expecting this.' My health visitor came in and I was being all, hello and

cheery but it wasn't at all what I was expecting it to be. You see, I've got a big house, a gorgeous big house that we bought dirt-cheap and are doing up and I think the social worker walked into my big house and thought, 'Right.' I feel she totally judged me, I felt totally judged. She thinks I've got a cushy little number with a husband with loads of money, which is so not true, and that I obviously like my lifestyle and I don't want to put the kids' safety first because I like what I've got. That is the feeling that she gave me as she was looking around the room, and the one room we sat in was the one that we'd decorated. I just felt totally judged. She didn't like me. She didn't like my situation. She had put me in the same box as every other person she'd ever seen and she gave herself away by saying, not that I'm bitter, 'In my experience men don't change.' Now I thought that as a social worker they were supposed to take each experience individually, not sit there and say to me when I'm trying to make a go of it, 'Men don't change in my experience,' because that immediately told me that she'd pre-judged my situation and me. That just took away all my confidence in anything she said. She said there was virtually no chance of this working, that I was pretty much wasting my time and that I would have a honeymoon period of probably a year and then he would start hitting me again and that is what she left me with. She didn't make any suggestions about any support. She just said, 'If I were you, in a year or so, go to RELATE or something like that, but don't do it before then because knowing the two of you, you've got far too much going on as it is.' She was just so brusque, and I said, 'But I must say that he is really trying.' 'Of-course he is, they always are.' She totally swept whatever I said aside. It's like she was saying 'You're on the reject pile for every woman ever and you've just got to be on your own.'

I'd made my decision to stay with him at that time and I still stay with the decision. So far, it's going very well. The only thing that's missing is my love for him and I'm working on that. He is a very good friend and he's been brilliant with me and I just need him around at the minute while I get everything in place for college and things like that. Call it selfish, but for once I'm being selfish and setting everything else in motion behind the scenes, getting everybody in place if I need them again, and then I'll make a decision. I'm just treading water and I've told her this and I don't see what's so wrong in that because the alternative is that I go along to the DSS, possibly leave my house, possibly get the mortgage paid, and I don't want to. I want to be independent. I've worked hard to get what I've got and the only thing that I've got out of this hideous marriage, apart from the kids obviously, is my beautiful, beautiful house and I love it with a passion. It's the thing that keeps me going and if I've got to work nights at 'Tesco's' to keep this house then I will, so why the hell shouldn't I take it on my terms and in my time? Ok, I might still kick him out but I want to do it when I'm ready.



I go to the domestic violence advice and support service and they are very, very good but they're also pushing me big time to get him out of the house and I'm just not. I mean last week the worker there said, 'Come back and see me next week', and as soon as I'd come through and sat down she said, 'Well, have you made your decision?' I said, 'But I wasn't aware that I was supposed to be making one.' 'The decision to get him out,' and I said, 'No, I'm not, I'm just treading water,' that's the expression I used. 'I'm not going to make that decision until I'm ready, I'm too tired. I'm absolutely exhausted.' She's asked me to go back again next week and I will but I think probably if she takes the same attitude again I'll stop because that's pressure and that's not fair. If I'm going to be an empowered woman then it really does have to be my decision. I may come to that decision but if I've made it myself it'll feel so much better.

I'm off to Australia for three weeks in August and I'm starting college in September and I don't let my husband control me anymore. I am gaining control and I've got to do it my way, but I felt that the social worker didn't actually take any notice of my way at all. She was just saying, 'You're talking rubbish basically and it's just not going to work.' She was just dreadful, absolutely dreadful and she's the last person I would go back to if I needed help. Out of all the list of names I've got and all the 'phone numbers she is the one I would go to last and I would tell her the least. I wouldn't be honest with her, and yet, in a sense, in terms of my children, she is a really key person, a very key person. She has reinforced the message I spoke about earlier that what I've been through isn't really that bad because the social services are having nothing to do with me at all now. I mean the health visitor knows the worst, I mean I've had all of that sexual abuse, terrible sexual abuse, terrible physical abuse, terrible emotional abuse, talking to me like I was a piece of filth. I told you last time, he was just treating me like a prostitute. So it really was, actually it was fear, it was bad and I know that now.

The woman at the domestic violence advice and support service also said, 'I can't help you as far as anything to do with the relationship with him because we really are very strict and we have nothing to do with perpetrators.' She wouldn't even give me a number for RELATE. She said, 'I'm sorry, we just don't want to know, because we're encouraging you to get out, basically. So the last thing we want to do is to encourage you to —.' That's what kept me away from them initially because I thought they were just for people who had got out, survivors. I did say to her, 'Is it ok that I'm here?' And she said, 'You're in exactly the right place.' But the push was, 'Have you got rid of him? Are you going to stay with him?' She was trying to get me

to go to work and not go to college. She was trying to get him out, there's no two ways about it.

I want to stress that it's so important that service providers remain impartial. I don't mind people giving me their views because that's really interesting and it gives you something to think about because obviously people do have experience. I do want to hear it because I don't know what I'm doing, but I just don't like being pushed because then there's a sense that if I don't take that decision, I'll lose my support. That's what worries me; that sooner or later I'm not going to be able to go to the people here because they're going to say, 'Well if you're just going to do that to yourself don't expect us to be there.' It then feeds back into all of what I've been describing about what stopped me from seeking help. I think I've just got to shut up about it but then what if it starts again and I think, 'Oh they've been so supportive, I've fought against what they've said to do and now I'm on my own again, I've just got to suffer it.' I don't want that to happen.

The women's project is not like that at all, not at all, which is really important. It's great. It's absolutely great. I don't feel judged in any way in there, by any of the women. At the first session we all sat round and they were all telling these terrible stories, and I'm thinking, 'You poor women,' and it gets to my turn and they're all saying, 'You've got to leave him, he's a bastard, he's a bastard, get out of his life.' I'm thinking, 'But what you've just told me is just as bad in a different way.' I did make it clear then that it was a decision that I'd made and could you just let me be happy with that and since then they've not given me any hassle. The women's project is fantastic. I mean when I went out of that personal safety session because I was so upset by the physical stuff. I mean I'm so good at being, 'Hello, how are all your problems this week? Oh I'm fine thank you,' then Sonia (women's project worker) said, 'this is a great day, a great day, because we finally got through that bright and breezy exterior.' It was so good to get some of it out and it felt fine coming back, it was better actually because I feel now that people are looking at me slightly differently. It's probably totally in my head because I'm a bit paranoid, but I did feel that I was a little bit apart from the others because they thought that my life was cushy. They come up for bus fares, I come in my car. And because I'm turned out all right and I put the make up on and I'm bubbly, I did feel that they thought, 'What's she doing here?' So, I think maybe that helped my case a bit there and they have been a bit nicer, not that they were ever horrible but people are taking time to talk to me now. I think that that was really good and also it means that I feel closer to Sonia and able to talk to her because I was so close to Faye you see. It was terrible when she left. It was a really terrible thing to happen. I had confidence in her so much and I just felt lost. That



personal safety session was the first week without her, which may be why I burst into tears as well.

My biggest fear is that if my husband decides he really can't sort himself, he might just try and finish me off. If the day I say to him, 'Look it's not working, I don't want to be here,' he knows he's got no hope, he knows the authorities are on to him, he knows he's going to end up in a prison cell, then he might just decide to finish me off, or one of the kids. So that is the big fear. It doesn't sound characteristic of him now but then when I see him when he's a monster, when he does that stuff. That man has said to me frequently, 'I'm going to kill you,' so that is the scary thing and so the panic button thing would be a good thing. I'm monitoring his behaviour 24 hours a day, and if he so much as frowns I'm aware of it. You know, if his tone is flat on the 'phone, I'm thinking, 'Hmm, just register that one.' I'm so, I mean poor bloke, he's just being assessed the whole time because I'm just waiting for that signal and it's exhausting, totally exhausting, but that way I'm looking for early signs basically.

Looking back now, I think if I'd had support when he'd first gone I probably may well not have had him back but because I only had support after I'd had him back, my decision was already made at that point and I needed financial support. I didn't know about Working Family Tax Credit. I didn't know about getting your mortgage paid. All I knew was that I depended on this man for everything and the only way I was going to get it was to have him back. I would say, in my experience, that help is only there if you really go and look for it with a fine tooth comb. That is my overwhelming feeling. I've had to make so many calls and really get my guts together to make those calls. The other thing is that making one call doesn't necessarily set the next one in motion. It's still down to you to keep saying, 'Could I possibly? Don't forget about?' You know, I don't think the right cycle is set in motion and if it wasn't for the health visitor I would have a really negative attitude and she's been the saving grace of the whole lot, but I do think it's very disjointed. Nobody seems to be connected, that's my criticism. There's no connection and yet everybody seems to know each other, all of these departments seem to say, 'Oh yeah, yeah, I know so and so,' but there's no connection and you really have to beg for help.

Even now I'm getting no help through the state services at all. When I was fifteen I had a CPN for help with nightmares, now after what I've been through I can't have one because I didn't try to kill myself, officially, because I even had the decency to go and do that on my own. So that's the thing, all of the help I'm getting is voluntary. I know that's because there's a lack of funds but why have I never seen stuff out there? I mean you get little cards in the doctors

saying GUIDE but it doesn't mean anything to me. It just looks like a pretty picture with GUIDE on it. It's still being hidden away and so I think because I'm quite a confident person, I have had the guts to phone up GUIDE, to 'phone up everybody, but there's got to be a hell of a lot of women that haven't. I mean it would be very easy to avoid all those people if you wanted to, because I really could have done you know, and gone straight back into a violent relationship and nobody would have a clue right now because it's really very easy to avoid everybody. Short of being nude in the surgery, no, there's nothing else I could have done, and to still be told, 'I don't know how interested they'd be actually.' As lovely as my doctor is, she's been a complete waste of time in this. She's hopeless, and that's the other thing, it's just not out there unless you go searching and that's wrong because people like me haven't got the guts and the strength, they're just so tired. It shouldn't have to be a case of screaming, it should be a very slight twitter and somebody takes notice. It was also so important that the health visitor came to my house. It's so much better than sitting in a clinical environment and Sonia and Faye came to my house instantly, which was great. If I'd had to come to see them here, I mean this is not a nice room, let's face it, bars on the windows, oh my god, but because they came to me, they were out of the context that you usually see professionals. That's very important.

*October 2000*

That worker at the domestic violence advice and support project that said that the reason for the violence is that I don't attract respect? What a cow! She might as well have said, 'you bad woman. You asked for it, you deserved it.' She hadn't got her role clear and she hadn't been trained properly and she'd not sorted out her own stuff, not at all. She was not well trained that woman. That social worker, god she was horrible and I'd like to reiterate that as well. You know, these things have stayed with me for quite a long time. It's only very recently that I've actually been able to say that I'm glad that I actually came out with all of this even though, after the social worker visited, I started to think that I should have kept quiet. That hung over me for months. We've turned our lives around and I mean I'm glad I have because obviously he doesn't hit us anymore and I have moved on, but it's been a nasty, bumpy ride and with so little help. I can't say I'd ever recommend, at this point I would never recommend anybody to do what I did. I wouldn't recommend to them to shut up either, I just wouldn't be able to comment. I would never be able to say, 'Look this is what I did, I came out with it all and look at the help I got.' I couldn't because it was horrible and that's terrible. I would just have to say, 'you have to do what you think is right,' if I came across somebody else in that situation. I would send them here to the women's project but there's no way I'd send them off to social services.



In my tutor group at college, there's at least three women apart from me that have either got current domestic violence or have had and that's without me even asking. That's just come out. Two of the women in my tutor group have come to me. I never say I go to the women's project as a user because I want to be able to move on. I want it to be known more as voluntary work now so I just say that I go and help there because I do. I mean I do the workshops and things. At least two of them have said to me, 'Oh yeah, we've been recommended to go to the women's project by our social worker, health visitor whatever, but just haven't had the nerve to go.' Then there's another one who actually came once and has since left the course and everything. These people are desperate for help and I say to all of them, 'Come over with me, I'll take you over there,' and I try to persuade them that way, but it's a gutsy thing to do. It's a really scary thing that first time as you're walking in through that door and if Sonia and Faye hadn't come out to me, to my house, I would never have come here. There's no way I could have just walked in off the street. It's also partly because it's so tucked away, it's not like a women's centre where you might think 'I can go in there for help.'

It's very weird, there was this awful explosion of activity earlier on in the year, everyone was trying to meddle with my life and that was the point when I just wanted to shut the curtains and say, 'Leave me alone, I feel totally exposed.' This only happened for a short period and nothing really came out of it. We didn't make any progress. It was just a bit of prying here and there, and now it's as if it never happened. I'm so far back on their agenda or in the past. I suppose I see myself as being fixed up because that's how they see me, as being fixed up. I don't need a little 'phone call to see how it's going. I think that's about them putting their resources into crisis intervention. It's fire fighting – that's what they call it. That's the impression that you get anyway. 'Oh god we've got to deal with that one and this one,' but there's this little person at the back that's doing their best and finding their own help where they can and doing a lot of thinking up here. There's just no time for her and yet, it could rear its ugly head any time, any time.

Overall, I think that it's really important for services to work together to provide a whole package for people. Everyone seems to know each other's names but there's no set formula in place. It's not really fair on voluntary organisations because they're doing their best, but within the actual state services there's no set pattern so people just slip through the net. I still don't know that if it happened again with my husband, I know I would get out of it, I know that, but I don't think I would go to social services. Actually, I know I wouldn't because I'm in

fear of them now just like I was in fear of the police. I'm so scared of that woman taking my kids away. I wouldn't go back to them and I do feel that that's down to that contact I had with her. She was not impressed with me, clearly thought I was hideous and that it was my entire fault. Actually I feel that she thought that before she arrived to see me, she came through that door with a face like thunder and just, oh! So if my husband hit me again, or the children, I would just try and sort it out privately. I wouldn't go to anybody. I'd maybe come to the women's project. I'd tell Sonia. I wouldn't go to the domestic violence advice and support project. I wouldn't go to the police or their domestic violence unit. I wouldn't go to the social services. That's terrible but I don't trust them. I don't trust them to help me. They've not done anything throughout my experiences to gain my trust, not at all. They've just made me feel, a bit like the old days with my mum, 'Oh don't make a fuss.' You know, so that message is still coming through. I guess that overall it's not so bad as it was back then. At least the services are there which is more than they were when I was fifteen, it's just they're not very good at implementing them sometimes. If I was walking around with a burst lip, or lying in a hospital bed or one of my children was really badly hurt, I think it would be there but all of this help is set with the massive assumption that my husband isn't around anymore. Nobody seems able to deal with the fact that you're trying to make a go of the relationship so I feel that there's a real gap in services. That's what they don't take into account and it freaks everybody out. It freaked out the domestic violence advice and support project and the social worker couldn't handle it but it's a reality for many women. They say that you'll get help with services and income support, but come on; the reality is that you can end up giving up everything. I look at women in that room at the women's project and there's one that's living in a bed and breakfast and there's one that's lost her children completely, two that have. There's also one that said that she didn't have anything in her stomach for how ever many weeks because she had no money and I think, 'This is my alternative right now,' and that just brings up a whole different set of problems. It doesn't make my problems go away it just brings me a different set.



### **Sarah: 'reflecting on Katie'**

Overall, clear evidence emerges from Katie about the violence and abuse she has experienced throughout her life as well as the failure of the welfare state to provide adequate or appropriate support for her in coping with this. The damaging consequences she has endured are especially visible in her expression of the extent to which she perceives that her needs have not been met. However, despite this, her resilience to survive, to overcome the difficulties she encounters and to find new ways of coping, often against all the odds, are also acutely apparent and should not be understated.

More specifically, particular issues emerge from Katie's account of her experiences of help-seeking as a victim of domestic violence. These include the detrimental way that some service providers convey their perceptions of such abuse as *only* domestic and therefore not a prime concern. The result for Katie was that she believed that she could not go to them for help because she would be wasting their time or because they would not believe the seriousness of the abuse she was experiencing. She also felt unimportant, worthless and alone. Equally, the experiences Katie encountered at the domestic violence advice and support project highlight serious problems where individual workers seemed to lack the necessary knowledge, training or expertise to work in this specialist field, and could endanger women's continued contact with the service because of the approach they adopt. Consider, for example, how the worker seemed to be placing undue pressure on Katie to make a decision about leaving her husband that she was clearly not ready to make, resulting in her fear that she would no longer be able to access help and support at the project.

I just don't like being pushed because then there's a sense that if I don't take that decision, I'll lose my support. That's what worries me, that sooner or later I'm not going to be able to go to the people here because they're going to say, 'Well if you're just going to do that to yourself don't expect us to be there.' It then feeds back into all of what I've been describing about what stopped me from seeking help. I think I've just got to shut up about it but then what if it starts again and I think, 'Oh they've been so supportive, I've fought against what they've said to do and now I'm on my own again, I've just got to suffer it.' I don't want that to happen. (Katie)

In addition, there are clear signs of Katie's frustration in dealing with individual workers who engaged in victim-blaming. For example, she distinctly felt that the social worker blamed her for her husband's abuse of their children and that the domestic violence advice and support worker blamed her for the abuse she was experiencing because she was seemingly unwilling to leave her husband. Moreover, due recognition to her specific needs as a victim appeared to be lacking in either of the workers, with the result that neither of them adequately supported or protected Katie or her children. Hence, Katie's previous negative experiences of contact with service providers have had a profound effect on her. Indications of this can be found throughout her account but particularly in relation to the deeply entrenched fears she expresses about any future contact with the police or social services in any context and to



meet any need. Such apprehension is understandable given her prior experiences of contact with them both as an 'offender' and as a victim of domestic violence. Of particular importance however, is the implication that, as a direct result of this negativity, Katie is reluctant to ever engage with such front-line service providers again. Furthermore, she is clearly aware of the potential dangers this presents, both to her children and herself, given the risk of repeated abuse by her husband in the future.

The confusion in endeavouring to meet her safety needs effectively and the apparent failure of individual workers to fulfil recommendations regarding the provision of support, are explicitly exposed in Katie's narrative, for example, with regard to attempts to establish contact with the police domestic violence unit.

....the social worker, when I finally came out with all this truth? She said to me that the one thing she would do to put in place before she closed my case would be to insist that I'm connected up to the police domestic violence unit, and I thought, 'Brilliant idea!' But, how far are we now? Three months on and I've still not had any contact with any of them at all. I've had no visit from the domestic violence officer at all, 'No, no,' she told me, 'It's got to be set up, that she's going to come out and see you,' especially as I'm still living with my husband. 'She's going to tell you how to deal with living with somebody and the best way to go about it,' and I thought, 'Brilliant, that's a brilliant idea. How much it has changed since I was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old. They're on my side,' but of-course they never got back to me. So now I'm left thinking, 'Well I must be such a low priority I'm obviously wasting their time,' which is a terrible message isn't it? So, my trust in them isn't huge. I did keep telling my health visitor nothing was happening, because she was the one that was supposed to go away and set it up. So she finally got through to somebody last week, who said, 'Oh sorry, it looks like the lady that's supposed to be dealing with it is on long term sick, I'll give her a ring.' I got home and found an answer phone message, this is like three months on, to say, 'I'll ring you again later.' She never did and because I'm running all over the place I've never had an opportunity to phone her back. I must do it but like I say I *feel* like I'll be wasting their time because they obviously don't consider me to be very important otherwise I wouldn't have been put on the back burner. (Katie)

Likewise, barriers to communication are particularly apparent in her encounters with a range of practitioners, especially the pervasive and harsh judgmental attitudes and demeanour of individual workers, which clearly had a harmful effect on her relationship with them. What Katie's experiences suggest is that some workers may actually be silencing the very women whom they are supposed to be supporting, helping and providing a service for. Katie's descriptions of the constant battles and subsequent exhaustion associated with having to push so hard for much-needed support are profound. Added to this, she stresses how such support is persistently unforthcoming from services that also seem completely unconnected with each other. She poignantly expresses her view that practical help and support is really only available to women who actively go out to look for it. Moreover, she suggests that even when they are successful in identifying a potential source of support, they often have to beg if they are to be successful in receiving it. Similarly, she stresses that for many women, particularly



those who are experiencing domestic violence, adopting such a proactive approach, not only to locating support services in the community but also negotiating the right to access or receive them is exceedingly difficult. This is partly because of the extreme isolation they also endure.

Not all of Katie's experiences of contact with service providers were negative. Indeed, her positive experiences of contact with her health visitor highlight the importance of the relationship between worker and woman. Crucially, it seemed to be the trust they developed between them which proved vital. The health visitor's non-judgmental approach, her willingness to move beyond her professional role and be in relationship with Katie, as well as her openness and care, were all important features of Katie's perceptions of her as effective, honest and kind. Similarly, other more practical performance related actions contributed to making Katie's contact with the health visitor beneficial, for example, her demonstration of organisational skills and her willingness to visit Katie at home were clearly identified as critical, especially for women who are isolated. Additionally, Katie evaluated the women's project extremely positively, in particular because of how at ease she felt both with workers and other women accessing the project. Again, she related this to the willingness of the workers to visit her in her own home, the non-judgmental approach and ambience of the project and the meaningful relationships she developed with individual workers which were based on sensitive and clear communication.

As previously stated, Katie and I have explored her narrative together and agreed that there are three clear, broad themes that emerge from her experiences. Together they provide the framework for the remaining findings chapters. They include the meaning and impact of women's complex and chaotic lived realities which are frequently confounded and devastated by domestic violence. Also, the affects that positive and/or negative experiences of help-seeking from welfare services can have on women's lives and what they most want service providers and practitioners to hear and then change in the future.

## **Chapter 7: Complex, chaotic lives: focusing on lived realities**

## **Chapter 8: Looking from the inside out: exploring experiences of help-seeking from welfare services**

## **Chapter 9: Lifting voices: what women most wanted service providers to hear and change**

## **Chapter 7 - Complex, chaotic lives: focusing on lived realities**

### **Introduction**

Throughout this study, participants have demonstrated outstanding strength, courage, depth of feeling and urgent desire to be heard and understood. Consequently, women have told their stories and I have privileged their voices in presenting this work. As a result, individuals have revealed their pain as they have explored and described the turmoil and struggle that characterises so many aspects of their extremely complex lived realities. Accordingly, what emerges from within each of them, whilst being both difficult to convey and hear, are occurrences of harm and neglect, drug abuse and offending, labelling and judgmental attitudes, isolation and invisibility. Equally evident are examples of women coping, surviving and achieving, despite all the complex barriers they encounter. As previously indicated in Chapter 5, the telling of their experiences does not stem from isolated interviews alone where the researcher perhaps gains a relatively limited view of events. Rather, having spent time with women during the participant observation phase of the study, there were many occasions that I witnessed and often felt almost overwhelmed by an unimaginably complex rollercoaster of crisis after crisis that seemed to plague their day to day existences. Whilst this is exceedingly difficult to express or appreciate in written form: it is illustrated very well by Rosie's story.

### *Introducing Rosie: living with a barrage of crises*

When we first met, Rosie was trying to re-build her life after four years of torture at the hands of her ex-partner who had covered her body in knife wounds in a deliberate attempt to disfigure her. As a child, she had been physically and emotionally abused by her father and mother. She only attended school on rare occasions between the ages of thirteen and sixteen and had never had a job. Rosie had also been raped by a stranger when she was seventeen and consequently became addicted to 'skag' and crack. She was on probation because she had committed actual bodily harm (ABH) against a woman who she said was threatening her daughter and she had also been stealing to get money to pay for drugs; she needed £200 a day to feed her habit. Rosie described how she had to endure appalling conditions in the flats where she lived with her two-year old daughter; surrounded by members of notorious family networks who dominated and bullied everyone; where used needles littered the buildings and surrounding area; where dealers hassled and hustled. Rosie was twenty-one years old.

What follows is a snapshot of events that took place over the two-month period I had contact with her, during the probation service women offenders programme. Particularly devastating to Rosie at this time was that her application to be re-housed was denied for a third time. Resisting the dealers and staying clean was her daily struggle, yet she had been clean for six months when I met her. Sadly, she relapsed during the course of the programme. This meant she had to cope with doing 'cold turkey' (detoxing) again and was in great physical pain much of the time. She would not seek help from a G.P because of previous negative experiences.



Rosie was also arrested for an alleged offence she had committed some time previously and spent one night in a police cell. In addition, her violent ex-partner began stalking her again; he threatened her and beat her because she would not go back to him. Finally, her daughter became unwell during the probation service programme which resulted in her missing two sessions. Combined with the ones she had missed during her relapse, she was in danger of being excluded from the group and having to return to court. Remarkably, Rosie actually completed the programme successfully. She always participated actively in all sessions and was a highly valued group member. During my interview with her, she revealed that she had got an 'A' for GCSE English Literature despite having not attended school for most of the previous three years. This is what she had to say about the future:

I love stories and all. I really want to do psychology, to become a child psychologist because I like kids and I know kids that have really big problems and that can't talk to anyone. Because I didn't go to school people used to say that I would end up with nothing and, "You'll do nothing at all if you don't have an education." And the thing is I know I'm not bright in a lot of educational things but I'm bright in life and I know life. (Rosie)

Rosie was indeed 'bright in life' and the brightness in her shone through in so many different ways. Like the other women who participated in the study, she also 'knew life' in particular ways. There were both similarities and differences between them. However, of particular relevance here, is the barrage of crises that Rosie experienced in such a short space of time. This experience was also evident for the vast majority of women during the participant observation phase of the research. Accordingly, what follows are their deeply moving accounts of how they 'know life' which should be viewed with this in mind. Together, their experiences provide unique and meaningful insights to the context within which they encounter community-based welfare services.

### **Harmed and neglected**

Overall, the extent and pervasiveness of abuse and harm perpetrated against women participants was far greater than previously indicated in the literature. For example, the HMI Review (1997) estimated that nearly half of all women in prison had experienced child abuse and/or domestic violence. Similarly, the Social Work Services and Prison Inspectorate for Scotland (1998) found that 82% of the women they interviewed in prison had experienced some form of abuse during their lives. In contrast, at every stage of the fieldwork, *all* the women I had contact with consistently shared experiences of being physically, sexually, emotionally and/or financially abused or harmed as children and/or as adults. This conflicts, to some degree, with Mirlees-Black's (1999) suggestion that all women are reluctant to disclose their experiences of abuse and Mullender's (1996) proposition that women generally tend not to define themselves as abused. There are a number of possible explanations for why individuals disclosed their experiences to me. For example, some of the women who participated in the study may have done so because they had reached a point in their lives



where they wanted to unburden themselves and, therefore, may not necessarily have been representative of the larger prison/probation population. Yet, this is countered to some degree by the fact that at no time prior to my interviews with them did I mention any specific interest in domestic violence or abuse which might have encouraged women with first hand experience to come forward more than anyone else. Alternatively, participants' willingness and desire to share their experiences of abuse might have been attributable to the approach I adopted and, more specifically, to the importance I accorded to relationship-building to gain trust and mutual respect as well as the open, semi-structured nature of the interviews. Such an approach certainly contrasts to some extent with the methodology employed in the HMI Review which was conducted by inspectors using a structured questionnaire. This latter illustrates concern about difficulties in enabling women to disclose and discuss traumatic experiences and the resultant underestimates of the numbers of women offenders who have experienced abuse (Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate for Scotland 1998). Although I was unable to take time to build a relationship with participants in prison prior to conducting interviews with them, I did demonstrate my willingness to hear their lived realities and, in so doing, heard each one of them clearly define themselves as abused.

#### *Childhood memories: being abused*

Many participants had been victims of child abuse: multiple experiences of abuse by a number of different perpetrators were common. For example, Sandra made links between her experiences of being physically, sexually and emotionally abused by a number of adults in her life, including her husband, mother, other children in care and those who had been responsible for her safety in foster care. Understandably, she described how this resulted in her feeling that she wasn't worth very much.

I'm a single mother of four. I've got a twelve year old, a five year old, a three year old and a nine month old. I've been in and out of care all my life and I've been involved in two domestic violence situations where I've had to go into a refuge twice and I've been in family support move-on twice as well, this is my second time. In February 1999 I was actually, I found myself in the refuge again. I was married at eighteen, I had a baby and, at nineteen, I just turned nineteen two weeks before. I don't know why I really got into that relationship. I just think I was looking for a bit of love really you know? I'd been in and out of care and different things and my mum left me at sixteen and said, "Do whatever you want," and I was going out with this chap for a couple of weeks and he said, "Come and live with me." And he was like thirty-five and I said, "Alright then." And then we got married; he said, "Do you fancy getting married?" And I was like, "Oh alright then." And then there was just jealousy and possessiveness and everything else and well, the violence. I don't know why I got married because he did beat me up before I got married. I just sort of, my mum used to beat me up as well so it was like, it was normal. Even like when I was in care and stuff, like some boys would lie on top of me and I was only nine or ten or something like that. Then when I was in foster care, we were made to eat on the floor from margarine tubs and stuff and after the family had eaten. I was put into care with my six month old brother and they used to lock him in the room and leave him to cry and I used to just run down the bottom of the garden and stay out of the way. It wasn't a really nice



environment. I always thought that when I got older things would be different. I mean even when I was in care, even though my mum used to abuse me it was, my sister was abused more than I was but, my elder sister. And she was put into care and because they wouldn't let her out of care that's the reason my mum dropped us all off in care. She says, "Well if I can't have my oldest daughter then you can have them all." So I always felt that we weren't worth very much. (Sandra)

### *Domestic violence*

Specific evidence pertaining to the incidence of domestic violence amongst women participating in Probation Service programmes is difficult to find. Rather, like the Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate for Scotland (1998) report, concerns are articulated about under-reporting of the prevalence of abuse (Rumgay 2000). However, within the context of small group-work programmes that were supportive and conducive to exploring sensitive issues, women felt able to disclose and discuss very traumatic experiences of being abused and harmed. As a result, every woman I met during the participant observation phase of the study disclosed experiences of abuse during group sessions. This included participants on the probation service women offenders programmes and at the voluntary sector women's project. All the women I interviewed had experienced domestic violence over extended periods of between two and ten years. Some reflected on what their relationships had been like with their male partners when they first met them and considered events that lead up to the abuse. Many went on to share actual experiences of being abused in vivid and intensely poignant ways:

It just was getting worse and worse. He was eventually done for attempted murder which..... He came at me with a fourteen inch machete and he'd engraved the word 'kill' two foot high on the wall in the garage. He'd broken into my house and oh, it was hellish. And I had a four-year old daughter. She was four years old at the time. He stabbed me there and he cut all my hands where I was holding onto the gate. I had so many different layers of clothing on. I had jeans on, he cut through my jeans. I had a bruise, it wasn't a cut. It was a bruise, right up my leg. The police surgeon said that the only reason that I survived was that as the knife was getting, coming down towards me, I held onto it. And so I cut my hands but it stopped him from..... The neighbour, he went and stopped him from harming me any worse as well. My daughter was clamped on his back, so, but oh god..... (Sandra)

I suffered from mental abuse, which just gets brushed under the carpet because they just don't believe it happens, but it does. I've also got a scar on the back of my head where he pushed me, I hit the wall and he battered me with his mum's walking stick on my back and spine. He never touched my face. Never ever. It was always in my head and my hair and my body. He never ever touched my face. Mad isn't it? When I think of all the things, like he raped me as well [pause]...they don't believe rape goes on in marriage, but believe me it does. That's one of the biggest things. (Leanne)

The violence, it escalated and eventually after I'd had my third child to him I just had no confidence, no self-esteem. I was just completely broken. The violence got really, really bad. (Nicky)

I couldn't hold a job down really. I mean I'd go into work with a black eye one day and I'd be feeling really embarrassed, so in the end my confidence just dwindled away. (Rachel)

He'd beaten me do you know what I mean? I've been in hospital so many times. He'd stabbed me and all. He used to do it deliberately to scar me. He didn't want anyone else to want me. (Rosie)

There was a period as well where, when he got heavily into drugs and he was going on crack and heroin, and I thought, I can't be doing with this anymore because he wasn't giving me any money. Me and the kids were sat at home with nothing, starving half the time. I thought I can't have this anymore, I don't care what you say, I thought. He could beat me black and blue and inside out but I'm going to go to DSS and I'm going to make a claim in my own right. I mean he got me into no end of arrears with rent and stuff because when he was using drugs he couldn't be bothered to fill in the housing benefit form. He didn't even bother filling it in. (Ellen)

The majority of studies of the issues surrounding women's actual experiences of domestic violence have tended to engage in *survivor* consultation which implies that they are no longer living with abusive partners, for example, see Sissons (1999); Mullender and Hague (2000); Hague (2001). As will be highlighted later in this chapter, survivors are not necessarily entirely liberated from their abusive relationships, much as they would like to be. However, in contrast, I had the opportunity to engage with women for whom domestic violence was part of their daily lived realities because they were living with perpetrators. Issues relating to help-seeking emerged consistently, as individuals notionally contemplated the idea of leaving their husbands/male partners. It is important to stress that this was not a line of questioning I had previously intended to explore. Like Williamson (2000), I was mindful of concerns about how, as a result of the type of questions they ask, researchers can imply that women are deviant in some way because of their circumstances in 'choosing' to continue living with violent men. In other words, researchers can convey judgments about participants through the questions they pose. Thus, some participants *chose* to explore some of the insurmountable difficulties and hardship they feared they would face in this context.

The impact of repercussions from violent partners who continued to perpetrate harm against them and their children was of particular relevance. This was illustrated, for example, by the effect that incidents of abuse had on some women's ability to successfully complete the probation service women offenders programme. Some participants made links to how their attendance seemed to trigger incidences of abuse and there were occasions when individuals arrived for sessions having been beaten the night before. Their faces were bruised and cut and they were visibly distressed and agitated. Justifiably, this made it exceedingly difficult for them to participate in the group and yet their probation orders included an intensive programme requirement which meant their attendance was vital to successful completion of probation orders. Failure to attend two or more sessions resulted in them having to begin the programme again. Repeated absences or absences without appropriate evidence, such as a



doctor's sickness certificate, ultimately resulted in them being 'breached' and returned to court where some were in danger of being given a custodial sentence. The prospect of prison evoked even greater fear because of how it might cause them even more harm. Given the wealth of evidence that supports this proposition, their fears were warranted, for example, see Eaton (1993) Carlen (1998) and Devlin (1998). Again, concerns about the impact of women's experiences of domestic violence on their ability to successfully complete probation service programmes are clear in the literature but, concurrently, there is a lack of coherent or consistent evidence gathering in this area. Ironically however, for some women, the sentence imposed on them by the courts seemed to be the very thing that had enabled them to access help and support for the first time, no matter how inadequate and fraught with complexities that support was.

More generally, the extent to which repercussions from violent partners prevents women from help-seeking, has been well documented, for example, by Hooper (1996); Mullender and Hague (2000). In addition, women's shame, stigma and humiliation came to the fore on numerous occasions during the research and demonstrated how such feelings can also act as a barrier to them ever feeling able to ask for help. Yet, as indicated by Williamson (2000), it is also important to view this in combination with recognition of the scepticism some women also expressed about whether welfare service providers would actually believe them or take them seriously. (Issues pertaining to women's actual experiences of seeking help from welfare services are examined in detail in Chapter 8). Additionally, the extent of how disempowered some women felt was crucial because of the subsequent influence on their ability to seek help and support. The many times participants described the deeply damaging effects of domestic violence on their self-esteem and self-confidence epitomised this.

I may just as well lie on the floor and let him just wipe his feet on me as he walks in. Although there is a part of me, there is still a part of me, that part inside of me that hates that. I can't do anything about it. I just can't – there is something that, it's my self-esteem, it's just completely gone. (Rita)

Certainly, for a lot of participants, the burden of fear and abuse of power and control was too great to bear, resulting in them being unable to see a safe way out of the relationship for themselves or their children. Their greatest concern was that their husbands/male partners would succeed in killing them. Yet, women can also encounter workers who dismiss or minimise the seriousness of the threats they are enduring. This is despite the fact that they are probably the only ones who can really assess the dangers they face because they know very well how far their partners are willing to go. The fact that two women in Britain are (known to be) murdered each week as a result of domestic violence (Home Office 1999) and that women are at greatest risk of homicide at the point of separation or *after* they have left the relationship (Lee 2000), provides some evidence of how well-founded women's concerns are. Similarly, it is also known that domestic violence often persists and escalates *after* separation (Mirlees-

Black 1999). Therefore, whilst perpetrators are threatening or stalking women and applying pressure on them directly and via their children, it is understandable that many find themselves caught up in a vicious cycle which involves repeatedly leaving and then later returning to their relationships.

I'd left so many times and then, I'd just always gone back because, for whatever reason. It took a long time but I've been... I mean I'd left him so many times, more times than I could count. (Kath)

As will become clearer in Chapter 8, women in this situation also experienced extreme frustration with trying to seek help and encountering a consistent lack of support or practical assistance. Subsequently, this resulted in them feeling forced into making the decision to return to the relationship. Rachel, for example, was clear about the impact of not being able to secure housing:

I contacted the council. I used to go down to the council and I actually got a copy of an injunction that I had from my firm of solicitors and took it to the council and said, "Look I need to be moved out of the area, I'm suffering domestic violence." And their response would be, "Well, there's such a huge waiting list and blah, blah, blah." So in the end I'd always end up going back and just putting up with the situation. It was difficult... it's difficult setting out on your own, being on your own and not having any support from anybody. (Rachel)

This experience was common and echoes the findings of previous studies by Hooper (1996), Mullender (1996) and Levison and Harwin (2000) who also suggest that women's determination to seek help declines as they become more frustrated by their help-seeking experiences. As previously indicated in Chapter 3, concerns have been expressed about the widespread inadequacies of services generally in the broad arena of domestic violence policy and practice (Hague and Malos 1993; Hague *et al.* 1996; Harwin 1999; Mama 2000). The findings of this study support the notion that it is perhaps a combination of women's frustration and the lack of appropriate or adequate help and support that can result in them committing crime, often as a means of survival. To illustrate this, individuals in this study clearly made connections between their criminality and the impact of their partner's offending behaviour. Others developed their ideas about the links between their experiences of domestic violence/abuse and drug abuse and added another dimension by making connections to their subsequent decisions to commit crime:

I'm on a probation order because I was out fraudulently doing cheque books for drug dealers that wanted his money and if I didn't do it then in turn he'd batter me. I haven't done anything wrong since I got rid of my husband right. I've done my community work. I'm on probation. I deserved it, I shouldn't have done it. You shouldn't do anything like that for anybody should you, at the end of the day? But love is a ridiculous thing isn't it? The only reason I was arrested was in actual fact...when I got the injunction on my husband, he threatened me. He said, "If you get this injunction served upon me I will tell the police everything that you've done." I



said, "Then tell them because I would rather go to prison for twenty years than spend another day married to you being Mrs..." And the deeper I got into trouble the more of a hold he had on me. I mean he did have a hold over me once over drugs mind, but I give all of that up four years ago. That was resolved. In the end I'd had that much I said, "Well tell the police then, I don't care." And he did. I mean at the end of the day the only reason I have ever been in trouble in my life is because of who I was married to. I mean I was, the first time I was ever arrested was when I was thirteen and that was because he handed me an ounce of cannabis in a car and he got pulled. And then it was something else and then it was me again, "Oh please do it for me because I'll go to prison." (Ellen)

Overall, there is a general lack of clarity in the literature pertaining to the connections women made in this study between their offending behaviour/re-offending and their experiences of domestic violence and abuse. Likewise, concerns have been expressed by the Home Office about gaps in evidence: more convincing are suggestions that existing data have been underutilised (Carlen 1998; Home Office 2001b).

Some participants were clearly aware of how the vicious circle of leaving and later returning to their partners perplexed and frustrated many welfare service providers and practitioners. They described how they sensed that workers seemed so certain that the simple and only answer was for them to leave their relationships. The connections Hooper (1996) makes to women's fear of discriminatory judgments by workers, in relation to how prepared or able they are to leave their abusive partners, indicates that this perception is common. Yet, the descriptions of how trapped and isolated women who were living with violent partners *felt*, as well as the impossibility of their situations because of how isolated they *were*, clearly illustrate how understandable it was that women believed that leaving their partners was an unachievable aim. For example, many women expressed how they had become isolated to the extent that they felt invisible.

It just felt like I was invisible completely, to everybody and nobody's saying anything, you know? (Sandra)

The essentially hidden nature of domestic violence also further complicated and perpetuated women's invisibility and isolation. In addition, the hopelessness and despair that this evoked was compounded even further by the range of social and economic factors highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3. For example, the majority of women were also enduring poverty, discrimination in relation to education and employment opportunities, poor health, drug and/or alcohol abuse, homelessness and stigma as a result of their offending behaviour. (Issues relating to stigma and labelling are examined in more depth on pp151-152). By way of illustration, I encountered a strong sense of despondency in women in prison about their employment prospects.

I think that as time has gone on, the more trouble I've been in the more I think, "Oh, well I'll never get a job now anyway." Or, "I'll never get a good job". I've always

worked but it's always been rubbish, nothing that uses my brain. And then I think, "Well there's nothing going for me to stop crime and that." Because I think that people aren't going to want to know. I haven't got anything to offer. There are loads of other people out there who've got loads more to offer than me. It's like a vicious circle. (Kath)

There is also an inherent and cruel paradox in applying pressure to women to cast aside the ideals that characterise the ideology of 'family' which so firmly underpin both socialisation processes and the provision of welfare services. As Williamson (2000) indicates, an extremely powerful social discourse dictates that women should keep their relationships and their families together, seemingly at all costs. As such, the barriers, created by these powerful social discourses, prevent women from accessing economic/social independence and, as a result, also perpetuate their dependence on the support of a male partner, regardless of the violence they might endure as a result. Remarkably, most women in this study were trying to re-build their lives after leaving their partners or husbands. Yet, as previously alluded to, what is crucial is how individuals repeatedly asserted their beliefs that, despite all their attempts to end their relationships, they would never be free of fear or liberated from the power and control exerted by the men who abused them. Of particular significance to many of them, was how ensnared and frustrated they continued feeling even though they were no longer living with their husbands or partners. This was largely because some were still being beaten and abused by perpetrators who seemed unwilling to leave them alone, despite having developed relationships with other women. On frequent occasions, women also described how their partners or husbands used their children as a means of regaining contact or inflicting further harm on them, especially after leaving the relationship. Nicky's drug use and offending added yet another dimension to this because it was her husband who was looking after the children and she who was trying to negotiate contact visits.

I took my husband back to court to get proper time with the kids. Every time he bought the kids for contact, I pleaded with the judge not to let him be in on the contact. I said "I don't want him to bring them on the contact visits." But, I wouldn't tell them that I was the victim of violence in case they took the kids off him! I wasn't in a position, I was too screwed up to even consider having the kids, and my life was just a total mess. (Nicky)

Whilst Nicky was unable to care for her children because of her drug abuse, and later because she was in prison, she relied on her husband to look after them and, as a result, felt unable to disclose her experiences of domestic violence for fear that they might be taken into care. She felt certain that her husband had never abused the children but, like many other women in prison, was extremely fearful of any involvement by social services because she believed they would never let her see her children again. This echoes Devlin's (1998) proposition that women in prison will undoubtedly fear the likelihood of their children being taken into care from their knowledge of the experiences of others, which was clearly articulated by a number of women in this study.



They were just sort of going, 'she's a junkie, she's a heroin addict, she's got three kids there, and she can't look after them'. I've got enough friends that have had their kids taken away and they've put them up for adoption whilst they've been in prison. (Carol)

Therefore, women's perceptions in this study were that mothers who abuse drugs are especially likely to be assessed as inadequate and incapable parents, regardless of their success in staying off drugs, because of the judgments that are made about them. These data support findings from Devlin's (1998) study.

### **Harsh judgments, brutal labelling**

Lloyd's (1995:36) focus on women who commit violent crime and how, as a consequence, they can *feel* societal disgust, has been crucial to this study. However, the findings not only concur with her proposition in relation to violent women but also provide insight to how women offenders more generally share this experience of societal disgust. Thus, participants have persistently described their keen sense of how, because of their offending behaviour, they have been labelled and judged extremely harshly by society as a whole. For example, Rosie suggested that the police, probation, all welfare services, the public, everyone, judged her when they knew she was an offender.

I feel that other people look at me and judge me. Lots of people do, like just people you know, people that know what I've done and who I am. Its friends and just people out there, not family, they've never looked down on me. It's people outside the family. They don't know the whole situation, but they know bits of it. They know about my criminal record. So, I do think that my offending changed the way people looked at me and it's hard because a lot of people would say, "Oh she deserved it." And a lot of people have said that. They didn't trust me as much because I stole off of people I know like my parents and all. (Rosie)

In contrast, Rebecca felt her offending was not what had altered other people's perceptions of her because she felt that they were negative long before she committed any crime: "They were already judging me so I don't think it made much difference." (Rebecca)

In addition, some women were not always referring to the experience of being labelled because others knew about their offending behaviour. Rather, they felt that people frequently made assumptions about who they were regardless of what they knew about them:

Often they don't even need to know details about you. There's no trust, no respect; you lose all of that. (Angie)

Angie also suggested that people often expected her to be a certain way and that, as a result, sometimes it was just easier to be like that, to be who they thought she was, and to act how they thought she was going to act. Additionally, participants repeatedly indicated that they had

worked hard to block out their feelings about how others viewed them by not showing that they cared and by shutting people out. Despite this, many women still perceived themselves to be victims of this disgust long after they had committed their crimes and re-built their lives. For example, Sandra compared society's views of male and female lone parents and highlighted her perceptions of the discrepancies that exist for women who become victims of brutal discriminatory views and attitudes.

I get blamed and I still get labelled now even as a single parent by society, "Why hasn't she got a job, she's living off the state, she's lazy sat at home watching television all the time." It's quite harsh. In fact it's very, very brutal. Very. You know, I just feel that if I was a single man sat here with my four children I'd be looked upon as wonderful. (Sandra)

For Barbara, there was a strong sense in which she believed that she would never be free of the tag she'd been given as a result of her offending,

I think that the label I've been given goes with me always, that goes without saying, there's no hope as far as I'm concerned. No hope whatsoever. You've got that tag, you've had it, you know? You're not a functioning, normal human being. It's a tag, its impressions, first impression; it's like a tattoo you know. You might as well go along with a label on your head hadn't you? I mean it's been grim for me as a person. (Barbara)

The labelling and judgmental attitudes surrounding women in relation to their offending behaviour clearly demonstrates a level of awareness about how they have been perceived as not like 'us' (non-offending women and men) and therefore placed in a state of 'otherness'. Accordingly, 'our' perceptions, enhanced by the media, politics, policy and the full range of welfare services, may have compounded the isolation and invisibility that women were already experiencing within oppressive and abusive relationships. On the other hand, their offending behaviour could ostensibly have provided them with an opportunity to become more visible. Yet, in so doing, they are perceived as having defied notions of 'proper womanhood' and are therefore labelled and judged as doubly deviant (Lloyd 1995:36). As Heidenshohn (1985) suggests, the imposition of the associated damaging stigma provides 'us' (non-offending society) with another means of maintaining control over deviant women who have failed to conform to such notions. These data support Kennedy's (1992) proposition that femininity is damaged and diminished as a result of criminality, regardless of the type of crime committed. Yet the data also point to how this damage may have been done long before individuals have committed any crime because of assumptions that prevail about women generally, for example, on the basis of age or class.

### **Blocking out the pain: alcohol and drug abuse**

Returning to Nicky's experience of feeling unable to disclose her experiences of domestic violence, of equal relevance is how her fear patently affected how open she was able to be



about her own needs. The detrimental effects of this inability to disclose her abuse may subsequently have contributed to her continued use of drugs to block out her pain.

I would have an ounce in my hand. I wasn't interested in money or anything. I just wanted that crack. Just to block everything out. I would smoke it until I couldn't smoke no more and then... and then ... (Nicky)

Twelve women shared information about their drug and/or alcohol abuse. Rita was an alcoholic and had been binge-drinking for more than twenty years and Barbara had also been arrested for being drunk and disorderly on several occasions. Angie, Rosie, Stacey and Carol all described themselves as heavy drug users, addicted to crack and heroin. Lesley, Ellen, Leanne, Kath, Nicky and Rachel were addicted to amphetamines. Each of them identified substance abuse as a means of coping with their experiences of child abuse, domestic violence and rape and dealing with their lives. Leanne connected her drug abuse with her experiences of domestic violence.

It's all connected, it's like a circle with the drugs and the batterings and the abuse. (Leanne)

Rosie felt (and was) extremely isolated, alone and unsupported after she was raped and, as she struggled to cope with what had happened to her, discovered that drugs took all of her pain away.

I had a nervous breakdown because of it all. I kept sitting in the middle of the living-room floor, just rocking, just there, not sleeping, not eating, I just sat there doing that, totally mad. There was no one to give me any support at that time. I started using drugs to take it away. It takes all the pain and hurt away. I can't sleep without having a nightmare about it. The drugs took all that away. It's all gone. Do you know what I mean? There was nothing. There's no problem whatsoever and that's it, it all disappeared. There's nothing. You're more confident. You're a lot more confident then you are, than you seem, because you feel like you can take on the world. (Rosie)

Similarly, as Angie's partner became increasingly violent towards her, she said she would do anything for drugs to help her cope with being beaten almost daily, anything to feed a £250 a day habit. She reached a point where, in desperation, she committed sexual acts for money and this was when she realised that she could not go on any more. She knew that she would end up in prison or dead if her lifestyle continued the way it had been. She talked about feeling 'disgusting'. Yet, like other women in this study, her abuse of drugs clearly provided her with a means of coping. This is particularly significant because of how, in general terms; there is a connection to women's need for support and help, neither of which are necessarily available or accessible to them. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that when Angie and Rosie made the decision to come off drugs, they each ended up doing 'cold turkey' alone. (Emergent issues relating to support and practical help are examined in depth in Chapter 8). Neither of them expressed any expectations that circumstances might be any other way. In other words, they

each had a strong sense that the responsibility for getting clean was theirs alone and that they had no right to expect support or help in dealing with their complex needs. This conflicts significantly with the images that are portrayed, for example, by the media, of people who abuse drugs, are unemployed and living on state benefits, as dependent and worthless or 'scroungers' who will take anything they can get.

Of course, coping alone or being unwilling to accept any help may also stem from a reluctance to be perceived as unable to cope as suggested by Taylor (1999). However, more widely, Graham's (1982) suggestion that women generally wait to seek help until the conditions they endure are extreme because they do not want to be perceived in such a negative way, are not entirely borne out in this study. Rather, women's reluctance to seek help can also be attributable to the inadequacies of services. Likewise, following Brown and Smith (1993), it is also important to consider the importance of recognising the impossibility of women's situations in this context rather than offering interventions purely based on an assessment of their inability to cope.

### **Coping, surviving and achieving**

Despite all the obstacles women endured, hidden away in their narratives are numerous examples of how they have coped, survived and achieved. For example, many had managed to leave their violent relationships despite enduring further abuse and hardship. In so doing, this was seen by all of them as a significant measure of their ability to cope and survive. Lesley highlighted the positive changes that ensued for her as a result:

I've got rid of my violent partner. I had a letter this morning from my solicitor saying that the *decree absolute* will be through in about 10 days, which will be good. I'm not scared of him no more. I'm like coping with it now. I don't let him in the house now on his own. Just in case he might turn on me or anything. I don't know, especially, he's worse when he's on drugs. So I just don't let him in now. Now I've got rid of him I feel more positive about myself. My appearance is better, things like that. Because when I was with my husband it was like, get up, I didn't comb my hair. I didn't wash. I didn't clean my teeth. I didn't do anything. I just put on old leggings and old t-shirts. Now I get up, I have a quick shower, wash my hair and brush my hair. I make sure I look more presentable. And when I see my kids with my social worker I'm exactly the same. I'm glad to be strong enough to say, "Look this has got to stop, we're getting divorced" and everything like that. And now I've done it I feel good with myself, I feel a lot happier. I feel much healthier. I'm getting on with my life. I do things on my own. I've painted my house. I do my washing in time. I don't let it stack up high like. I just get on with things now. (Lesley)

For Ellen, it seemed clear that there was no turning back either, especially as she had also just succeeded in getting employment for the first time:

I got rid of my husband two years ago right, so basically then I went through loads of like violence, with him coming and going and getting injunctions and getting my divorce going and all that nonsense. Once I'd settled from all that, my daughter kept



saying to me, "You need a job mum. You need to get motivated again, to get back into normal surroundings with like normal people?" Like not people that are drug addicts. Do you know what I mean, like mixing with that kind of circle instead of the other? All my friends are either drug addicts or you know they're villains or they're in prison. And she said, "Well you need a job don't you, so you can start mixing with like, getting normal friends again?" So I got that job on the 1st November, it was the first job I'd had in twenty-two years. And I love it. I mean, it was hard going first of all, just to get, you know, motivated again. (Ellen)

There were also glimpses of optimism that some women voiced for the future as well as signs of their determination to succeed.

Even though now I've got a prison sentence behind me which I didn't have before and I used to think negatively like that, now I actually think more positively even though I've got this. Because I think at the end of the day I'm going to have to disclose this for the rest of my life, but it's about hard work isn't it and then you might get there. You need to stay away from men and work hard! (Kath)

I'm so damned determined to make a go of my life; do you know what I mean? I mean when my life's been such shit for god knows how many years. I mean my marriage and all that, being beaten and battered and the drugs and prisons and everything that entailed. (Ellen)

#### *Eternal circles: Carol*

The themes relating to pernicious and damaging experiences that have emerged throughout this chapter highlight concerns about how realistic it might be to expect individuals to sustain the changes they have made in their lives. For example, consider the widespread inadequacies in welfare services as well as the uphill battle many of them face in their relationships, their drug abuse, criminality and the full range of social and economic disadvantages they endure. It is perhaps unsurprising that some women end up in vicious circles that are difficult to break. Carol's testimony concludes this chapter because of how she illustrates the complexities of her vicious, eternal circles and articulates how impossible it feels to envision a way out. In turn, this illustrates some of the inherent difficulties associated with notions of human agency which were explored to some extent in Chapter 2. Carol's narrative lends support to suggestions that individuals both create and are constrained by the social forces that surround them (Titterton 1992). Nevertheless, the questions that remain unanswered by such an individualistic and potentially victim-blaming explanation relate to gendered power relations and the specific social and economic problems that provoke a twelve-year old to inject heroin in the first place.

I've been a heroin user for like twenty-one years. Thirty-two I am now. I was like eleven or twelve when I started using. It's just been a lifestyle you know. I've been in heroin addiction for like that long that the life cycle that goes with it is like, it's never ending no matter how you try and get out of it. You slip, you know? And for me anyway, it's the only thing I've ever known is heroin and supporting my habit and offending to do that. It's the only thing I've ever known.



This prison is my rehab. That's the way I look at this. It's my like you know, little rehab that I have to come to maybe once a year for a few months you know. It keeps me alive. I've got to say this; prison's kept me alive for the past three years at least. You know, I've not got to worry about being homeless. I've got a bed. I've got a roof over me. I've got three meals a day. When I came in I was so much under weight you know, like on this sentence I've actually put three stone on. When I come through the gates from the street it is like, I look like death. I just look like so rough that you know, it's a case of like...You know even the chief medical officer here said to me, "Look, Carol it's a good job you came in when you came in because, give you another three months on the street and you wouldn't have been alive."

I wanted someone; because they always seem to be able to get everyone out of jail with fuck all, every year I get thrown out of jail with fuck all. I come in and I get drug free. I put on my weight again. I get healthy. I feel healthy. And then I get thrown back out in limbo. I'm out on the street; I've got nowhere to go. So, I'm thrown out the gate and the problems are there before I've even got up the top of the road. Do you know what I mean? As soon as I'm outside that gate I've forgotten what's gone on in here, I've forgotten all the hard work and all the effort I've put into it. It's like, whenever you come to prison, because you've got clean, because you now feel healthy, you feel that you deserve a reward for doing that. It's like every time I come to prison, my discharge grant is sat out there on the line with four hundred and something in my hand. I know exactly where it's going, up there; do you know what I mean? "I've been to prison now, I'm clean, I'm healthy, I deserve a reward for doing that and my reward is getting off my head." And that's sad but that's realistic. I've tried to think of other ways, like maybe getting out of (area). I look at the photographs of my kids and I think, "I want my kids back, I've got kids out there that I don't even know." There are a lot of things for me and it's, oh, I don't know.

I sort of let myself down more than anything last year, but I tried everything in my power, everything that I could. I'd written to everywhere you could think of. You know, I'd even written a letter to (Chief Probation Officer at the Home Office). I never posted the letter but that's how sort of let down I felt, really, really, because there was just no correspondence coming back from probation whatsoever. I'd done everything in my power and there was just nothing there. Once I'd re-offended then they (prison where Carol was on remand) actually got a phone call from the Probation Service saying, "Oh we feel we let Carol down last year so we want to give her another chance and send her to rehab."

I don't know. I really don't know. It's like you know, every step forward I take, I get knocked back so it's like every year it's like giving up a little bit you know? I do my best out there and when I do I just get kicked in the teeth and get thrown down again so... Although, I take full responsibility for my actions you know, I'm not stupid. I know that I'm doing wrong with stuff but it's just (pause) I keep getting knocked back everywhere and you know you give up. You know, I've done everything in my power really. I've really, really tried.

Last year I was really up for it. I really wanted to get clean and you know it just didn't work. I actually found drugs the day I got released from here which didn't help matters at all, total relapse the same day. Whilst I'm in prison I'm clean, I'm thinking straight. Once I'm out on the street, I'll be using. I can't be arsed to go to probation. I can't be bothered to go to the council. It's too much time consuming you know? So, like I try to set things up for when I'm actually out there and just – it didn't work. I've done my detox here, I'm clean now but that's just it, once you've come in and you've



done that detox and you're clean they've done their job. So once you get back out the gate again, to get that heroin you know like I know that I need that. Like you've got to then relapse, re-offend, get your drug addiction back before you can get that support again. It's like a never-ending story, it's just a cycle that goes round and round and round and round.

I came away from (place) to try and get away from the drug scene which didn't work. I think I've tried everything. I've done a drug testing treatment order. I've done rehab. There's always that little bit of hope there at the end of the day for me to get my kids back and to clean up you know? It's not happened yet but I, hopefully, one day it will happen. I believe that one day I can get clean and I will remain clean. I just keep relapsing but there's going to be a point in my life where I'm going to switch that around and I'm going to stop relapsing like, I believe that. Also, do I want to sit at home and watch the telly 24: 7? Because there's also that little bit there that thinks, "Oh, right OK, you've been an armed robber, you've been a fraudster, you've done everything in the book, what makes you think that you'll ever get a real job anyway? You've done thirteen sentences. Who the fuck's going to employ you anyway?"

It's like twenty-one years; it's so long for me now. It's like sometimes I think, "I'm never going to get out of this lifestyle. I'm just going to be coming in and out for the rest of my life now." I have tried, do you know what I mean, to get out of it. For me, I would say, "At the end of the day, it's not the drugs that I get pissed off with, I love the drugs, it's the lifestyle that goes with it that does me in." Do you know what I mean? I ask myself what's next. I have great hopes of being drug free but then I think, "What the fuck's normal anyway?" I mean at the end of the day, I've been, like a grafter for so long to support my addiction that I am never ever still. I cannot sit still, I've got to move. I've got to be up. I've got to be out. I've got to be doing things. It's like, what would I do then? If I give up the drugs, if I give up the lifestyle, what the fuck do I do?

## Conclusion

Within this chapter, there is evidence that a number of different systems of oppression are intersecting and supporting each other, including women's experiences of multiple layers of discrimination. This is not to imply that these multiple forms of oppression are *creating* discrimination. Rather, discrimination is perceived as one form of oppression which has resulted in the narrowing of options for women in this study. The complexity of these oppressions is illustrated in how individuals 'know life', for example, in terms of their criminality, their experiences of domestic violence, how they encounter structural inequalities such as poverty and unemployment, as well as in relation to their help-seeking from welfare services. Focusing on Carol's narrative, it is also important to stress that this cumulative effect is not *inevitable*, especially given the importance of acknowledging that responsibility cannot lie *entirely* outside of her, given what she said about 'loving' the drugs. Her choices were very narrow but they were nonetheless autonomously made. Therefore, conceivably it is more accurate to view the multiple forms of oppression women experienced as driving them *towards* disaster and crime and increasingly *narrowing* their choices. Of particular significance however, was that being confined to severely restricted choices was perhaps the most pernicious consequence of oppressions which robbed women of their self-esteem and worth.

Following Hill-Collins (1999), it also becomes possible to see how complex forms of oppression interact and can therefore result in women offenders experiencing oppression in fundamentally different ways to non-offenders. For example, consider the rollercoaster of complex crises that Rosie experienced during the relatively short period of time I had contact with her and how characteristic this was of many other participants. However, there is also a need for caution here because, like Aziz (1997) and Mirza (1997), I recognise the danger of perceiving difference as deviance which can perpetuate and compound discrimination. Participants' particular experiences of being labelled and judged on the basis of their gender and their criminality illustrate some of the consequences of this very well, for example, with regard to how stigmatised, isolated and marginalised they became. Yet, as Sandra points out, none of the women in this study set out with the intention of constructing their lives in the ways I have highlighted here:

Life isn't like a book of instructions; you live by the mistakes, you know what I mean?  
It's like you try not to make the mistakes but sometimes you do get it wrong.  
(Sandra)

Participants' experiences have provided insights into the complexities that potentially influence their help-seeking in a welfare context. Being systematically abused, disempowered and disadvantaged, for example, impacts negatively on individuals' access to community-based services. Accordingly, I now turn to exploring women's *actual* experiences of encounters with health and social care services in their communities.



## Chapter 8: Looking from the inside out: exploring experiences of help-seeking from welfare services

### Introduction

Insights into the complexities that influenced participants' help-seeking have clearly emerged in Chapter 7. Of particular importance is how experiences of being systematically abused, disempowered and disadvantaged had a negative impact on women's propensity to access welfare services. Similarly, when they did seek help, the extent to which their particular needs were actually met was often limited and fraught with difficulty. Participants' help-seeking experiences now provide the focus for an in-depth exploration of the meaning of their *actual* encounters with welfare service providers and individual practitioners and their perceptions about whether their needs are likely be met in the future.<sup>11</sup>

### *Overall structure and the importance of being in relationship with individual workers*

Although some women described their experiences of welfare services as mixed, ranging from extremely damaging to relatively constructive, negative experiences were the most prominent. Thus, participants' initial responses to my explanations of the broad focus of the research were both powerful and derogatory regarding welfare services generally. This was particularly evident in a group context where my explanations evoked discussion and broad agreement that their experiences had mostly been very damaging. The descriptions individuals used illustrate this well; 'crap' (Leanne), 'they don't have a clue' (Stacey), 'diabolical' (Ellen), 'useless' (Rita), 'not nice' (Lesley), 'really terrible' (Kath) and, 'really shit' (Carol). Many women struggled to identify any beneficial or helpful encounters.

I don't think I've got any good memories or thoughts of services - I can't think of anything unless there are any other services that I haven't talked about. (Kath)

Central to this chapter, is how participants consistently attributed the reasons for their experiences of welfare service providers to the quality of their relationships with individual workers as well as the approach workers adopted with them. Thus, in broad terms, the themes that emerge here all largely agree with many previous studies that have been undertaken with women generally, for example, by Edwards *et al.* (1999), Davidson *et al.* (2000) and Levison and Harwin (2000). This is particularly illustrated in relation to participants' perceptions of the importance of individual practitioners' willingness to be in relationship with them and the value they attributed to having opportunities to talk and be listened to by individual workers. Similarly significant, were non-judgmental attitudes, trust and respect in ensuring effective interactions

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<sup>11</sup> The terms 'welfare service providers', 'welfare services', 'individual workers' and 'individual practitioners' are used throughout the chapter; therefore, it is important to highlight the distinctions between them. 'Welfare service providers' and 'welfare services' relate to instances where individuals referred to, for example, social services, the probation service or DSS in general terms. 'Individual practitioners' and 'individual workers' are used to highlight examples relating to participants' accounts of their experiences of individuals working within these services.

and genuine support from individual practitioners. More specifically, they support Eaton's (1993) proposition that 'reciprocal relationships' are perhaps the most pivotal factor in enabling women offenders to change and take control of their lives (see page 180). In contrast, the importance women accorded to being in relationship with individual health and social care service practitioners underpins the analysis of all the other major themes that also emerge from their narratives.

These themes are organised under two main headings: first, the focus is on the ways in which participants felt isolated and unsupported and how they attributed considerable meaning to locating help and support in order to meet their needs more effectively.<sup>12</sup> This is followed by an exploration of women's perceptions of their actual experiences of contact with community-based welfare service providers. Accordingly, attention is paid to the ways in which many participants felt judged, worthless, let down, unheard and uncared for by welfare service providers and individual practitioners. Throughout the chapter, women's perceptions of the consequences of these largely negative encounters and the absence of appropriate support and help are highlighted and discussed in some depth. Of equal relevance however, are women's (rare) positive encounters with some individual practitioners which also contribute to developing our understanding of what participants especially valued in their contact with welfare service providers more generally. So, rather than exploring women's positive experiences in a discrete section, they will be examined throughout the chapter as they pertain to major emergent themes.

Finally, and of particular significance overall, women's insights and perspectives on the nature of women's refuges are explored. My justification for including this as a separate section is that, with the exception of some references to the voluntary sector women's project within which I conducted part of the research, the vast majority of experiences that participants recounted related to statutory sector welfare services. The notable exception was women's refuges which were not necessarily perceived by participants as the safe and supportive environments that, for example, Mullender (1996); Hague and Harwin (1999) and Charles (2000) imply. Consequently, questions are posed about the quality and extent of support and help provided to *all* women in these establishments.

### **Positioning help and support in women's lives**

During the time I spent with women at all stages of the study, we discussed the full range of voluntary, statutory and private sector services. These included housing, health services, DSS, probation, police, social services, voluntary projects such as drug support initiatives, domestic

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<sup>12</sup> Whilst I did not explore the meaning individuals attributed to the terms help and support, it seems that they used them interchangeably. In other words, support was perceived to be synonymous with practical help and vice versa.



violence advice and support projects, and women's refuges.<sup>13</sup> Extensive and frequent encounters with services were common. Angie, for example, identified the following agencies with whom she had had contact in the previous three years: college of further education, police service (both as a victim of domestic violence and as an offender), drug support project, probation service, prison service, addiction treatment unit, local hospital (Accident and Emergency Unit, Gynaecology and Obstetrics Department), community midwifery service, GP, health visitor, solicitor, barrister, courts, housing department, housing association and DSS. The nature and scale of this contact was also familiar to members of the research advisory group; between them, Louise, Meg, Jane and Milly identified 51 different welfare service providers with whom they had had contact in the previous year.

Women in prison also explored their experiences of attempting to meet their health and social care needs within the prison context. Similarly, they shared their experiences of living and 'being' in custody which were quite varied. At one extreme, for example, Rachel and Nicky both described how, in other prisons they had been in, their experiences had been so bad they had wanted to die. Yet, individuals also shared positive experiences of having been given opportunities to participate in education and rehabilitation programmes which they did not believe would have been possible 'on the outside'. Nevertheless, it is also important to stress that the process of accessing these programmes was still problematic much of the time. For example, opportunities to attend rehabilitation programmes were frequently limited, resources for distance learning courses were often unavailable and, despite referrals from psychiatrists, some participants suggested that individual counselling had not been provided. In sum, their experiences concur with those already highlighted in Chapter 3 and for which a deal of evidence already exists. Therefore, in-depth accounts of these encounters are not included here. Whilst I feel some personal unease about excluding what women had to say about their lived realities in prison, the primary focus of *this* work is on exploring the meaning of their experiences of contact with community-based welfare services. Given the previous lack of attention paid to research in this context, this is arguably where participants can make their most significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding.

### *Feeling isolated and unsupported*

The absence of helpful and supportive relationships in women's lives and their consequent perceptions and feelings of being left to cope alone, emerged constantly and throughout their narratives. For example, having no immediate friends or family to turn to for support or help was frequently identified by participants:

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<sup>13</sup> Despite their primary function as the controlling arm of the state (Radford 1987), many participants seemed to equate the police with welfare service provision particularly regarding their perceptions of them as having a significant role when women sought help following incidences of domestic violence. Because of this, I have incorporated some of the data pertaining to women's experiences with them in order to further illustrate particular points. This is despite the fact that the police are generally not perceived as welfare service providers within the CJS by other professionals.

I had absolutely no one to turn to. I had no friends - no one to go and ask, "Listen could you mind the kids for me?" It was really hard. I needed a break, I needed out. I had no one. No one knocked on that door. I thought, "Well who do I turn to? Like my kids need clothes. What am I supposed to do, go and steal them?" There was no help. I had no one to help me out. I had no friends which I still haven't got today either. (Rita)

The majority of women also recounted a general absence of practical help and support from the full range of welfare service providers including, housing, social services and health services, as well as the police.

As far as getting any support – there was nothing. In fact there wasn't anything anywhere I don't think – places to go to. You just had to get on with it I suppose. (Leanne)

This corresponds with what Hague *et al.* (1996) and Harwin (1999) found in relation to women generally and their experiences of help-seeking as they tried to leave violent relationships. It also concurs with, for example, Carlen (1990; 1998) and Eaton's (1993) findings and initially seems to provide further evidence of the extensive failure of government policies in ensuring adequate provision for women offenders in each of these welfare services. However, it is also arguable that the failure is not entirely in the *provision* of services because some clearly *do* exist. Rather, it could also be attributable to women's take up of what *is* on offer to them. Therefore, more convincing explanations are perhaps rooted in how women experience welfare service providers and individual practitioners when they try to meet their particular needs. In other words, participants' encounters here lend support to the notion that women offenders are using existing services but experiencing them as unhelpful, unsupportive and, at times, abusive. However, because of the social and economic deprivation they experience they often have little choice about continuing to use these services to meet their welfare needs. Some of the multiple complexities many of them had to deal with as they *tried* to seek help are illustrated in Carol and Rachel's experiences.

I wrote to the council. I wrote to probation. I wrote to the drugs project. I wrote everywhere. I wrote to the drugs project and I said, "I don't want to go to rehab. because I've done six months in jail and I'm clean, but I want to remain clean. Can you set me up to do my meetings and whatever?" They wrote back and said, "Basically it's impossible." It was to do with transport and stuff and where the meetings were being held. They said that it just couldn't be done and that was (worker) I spoke to. And then I wrote to the probation service that do the drug testing and treatment orders and I spoke to (worker) and I said, "Look is there any chance I can come to the Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO) voluntary, you know, I want to stay off of drugs, I want to be able to keep myself occupied and stuff." "No, you can't come, very sorry but you have to re-offend before you can get back on the programme." I said, "OK then." The college thing went way out the window as well because there was just no support there for me outside whatsoever. And you know like I'd be on the probation officer's case and like, "You've got to find me somewhere to live, I've wrote to the council and I'm getting no correspondence



from them whatsoever." You know they didn't even write me a letter to say they'd received my letter. They didn't even send me a list of B&Bs or whatever, because really, at the end of the day, that is all I was expecting. I wasn't expecting no house to go out to or nothing because that's just not realistic but you know I expected some kind of correspondence to say, "Look, we'll set you up a meeting with the homeless officer." Or, you know whatever. And there was nothing there, a hole, nothing. I just don't get anything back, I write to them and I don't get any correspondence back. (Carol)

The council make it so difficult for you. There's no support there. There's just nothing there at all. It was like, "No we don't want you to move from that area." Or, "There are too many people on a waiting list." Or, "You have to go through this procedure and that procedure and that procedure." And how can you do that when you've got to do it behind this person's back because it's all got to be kept secret and you've got to keep it low key.... (Rachel)

This is exemplified by Rebecca who was also clear about the dearth of appropriate support in keeping her children safe, protected and together as she tried to break free from her violent relationship. She described how the social workers she had contact with threatened to place her children in care if she did not comply with their demands. Like other women in the study, she described how she had been given explicit instructions to remove her violent husband from her life or face the consequences which would involve her children being placed in care. It is clear that demands like these positioned her in an even more impossible situation given her experiences of what she described as non-existent support and help from social services. This further illustrates suggestions by Farmer and Owen (1995) and Humphreys (1997) that welfare services are more concerned with the 'regulation of mothering' than the provision of accessible and appropriate services to women. Lack of support should also be viewed in relation to how *some* women are systematically ignored in the allocation of services (Farmer and Boushel 1999). As previously suggested in Chapter 2, this is particularly evident in relation to mothers, who, once they have proved that they have separated from their abusive partners, find that their cases are closed and any limited support they may have been receiving is withdrawn (Farmer and Owen 1995). Hence, once women have seemingly brought themselves into line and become self regulating, service providers can lose interest in them and stop monitoring them so closely. This is no reason to withdraw much-needed support that would enable them and their children to rebuild their lives simply because they seem to be doing what the service providers want. Welfare services' apparent preoccupation with controlling the family through monitoring rather than supporting women with complex needs is therefore viewed as inappropriate in this context.

#### *Emphasising the importance of help and support*

Whilst participants reported an absence of help and support, they also ascribed great importance to the need for assistance in dealing with the complexities of their lived realities. However, as previously indicated, their perceptions of the widespread lack of support could also be challenged on the basis that there is not necessarily an absence of help. Rather, what

emerge are women's criticisms of the *level* and *form* of support that welfare service providers generally offer. Hence, it is important to differentiate between nothing being provided and the offer of something which, in their experience, is inappropriate. This is demonstrated by how particular types and levels of support and help featured consistently in some women's accounts of their positive experiences of contact with some welfare service providers. For example, individuals repeatedly expressed confidence and optimism about probation services, family centres and the women's project because of the levels and forms of help and support individual workers had given them. This is further illustrated by some women's expressed beliefs that some individual workers had demonstrated their willingness to move beyond what participants generally perceived as their professional roles in order to help them in particular ways. Practical instances included health visitors giving help in negotiating with DSS and housing, supporting them in accessing opportunities for education, training, counselling and leisure activities and encouraging them to take time for themselves away from their children.

The worth women attributed to help and support also supports what Bagilhole (1996) and Edwards *et al.* (1999) found in their studies with mothers of young children. It is further typified by Rebecca who had been attending the women's project for eighteen months since she had been referred there by her probation officer. She was serving a two-year community sentence with a probation order for a first offence, driving without tax and insurance. She described how the judge had made it very clear that he was making an example of her when he sentenced her. She said that six months into the order, she had made such good progress that her probation officer had suggested she would arrange for her to go back to court to get her sentence revoked, but Rebecca had asked her not to. This was because she felt that it had only been since she had been on probation that she had received any *real* support. This had mainly come from her probation officer and through attending the women's project where she felt she had gained so much, not only from the workers and from participating in the programme but also from women who shared comparable problems and experiences to hers. Having the opportunity to meet others in similar situations was also highly valued by a number of other women and corresponds with, for example, what participants in Eaton (1993) and Devlin's (1998) studies identified as an essential part of their rehabilitation after being released from prison.

The probation group has been my best experience because of meeting people who have got the same problem as me and I know that I'm not on my own. They're offering all sorts because I've gone into things that I didn't even know existed. They've opened up doors for me. (Rita)

I like the women's project because it does make me feel like I'm not on my own and I'm not abnormal. (Sandra)

The contribution of probation services, which enabled women to access help and support for the first time was highlighted in Chapter 7 (see pp 146-147). Particularly notable was how



other women also shared their perceptions of probation services as their *only* source of support. Thus, it was *only* when they ended up on probation that they felt they received any meaningful or appropriate assistance at all. Ellen was insistent about this and emphasised how vital tangible help and support were to her. She also articulated her disbelief and relief when the co-ordinator of the women's project had arrived at her home with a bag of shopping after she had 'phoned her in desperation:

I was so ill and depressed. I had nothing around me, nobody helping me. And then there was that day when (women's project co-ordinator) helped me when I was here and all and I didn't have any money. I rang her and within half an hour there was somebody outside my door with a bag of shopping and I was like, "Bloody hell." You know? I didn't get any help anywhere else. It was my only bit of help and it was well appreciated. (Ellen)

In the context of help-seeking as victims of domestic violence, some women stressed the importance of workers' willingness to support them by directly exploring issues relating to their experiences of abuse. Implicit within this was the need for them to demonstrate that they care about them as people and about what happens to them in the future. Rather this, than merely treating them as 'bodies' that need to be 'stitched up'.

The last time he beat me he -- oh I had stitches and all sorts, I was smashed to pieces. And while the nurse was stitching me up at the hospital, I had concussion and all that, and she said, "Ellen, how much more of this can you put up with?" She said, "Why don't you please get an injunction because this man is going to end up killing you." I thought, "But who is she, I don't even know her." And I was like -- and she was stitching up my arm and I'm like, "How do you know me so well?" She said, "Because it's usually me that's here to pick up the pieces when you've been battered, or you've got concussion or you need stitches." She was like saying, "She's here again, busted ribs this time, concussion," and her actually saying that to me brought me to my senses having someone else, a total stranger like her. I mean she was a total stranger to me but she knew of me because she'd stitched me up and she'd seen me battered so many times and she said, "Please promise me, when you leave this hospital, just get an injunction." She said, "Promise me." I said, "OK. I promise you." I bet she thought, "OK then." But I did it. I didn't go home. I went down the road to a friend's house. Got a solicitor, caught the bus the next day to (solicitor), got an injunction, blah, blah, blah, blah. I was so scared. I thought, "I can put up with being scared, I'm not putting up with any more of that anyway." (Ellen)

In accord with McGee (2000), openly enquiring about issues relating to domestic violence was perceived as particularly necessary considering the inherent difficulties some women also experienced in determining their needs and the responses they might want from welfare service providers because of how generally disempowered they felt as a result of the abuse they were experiencing. Individual workers who adopted a holistic approach were important to women because this enabled some of them to be effective in help-seeking to deal with their experiences of domestic violence. This is illustrated by Rachel who described how difficult it was for her to contact anyone for help because of the control her husband exerted over her.

However, when she encountered the family planning clinic she felt that the staff had looked beyond her need for contraception.

The fact that they didn't just talk about family planning, they wanted to know about *other* (emphasised) aspects of your life, which was really nice because it makes you feel more relaxed. And if they saw that there was a – if you were talking and they think, "Hey up – there's some kind of problem there", you know they would advise you without coming straight out and saying, "Hold on mate I think you've got a problem." (Rachel)

As individuals recounted their experiences of seeking help and support from welfare service providers, some began to explore explanations for why so many of them had been so negative. Several participants blamed themselves,

I think that it was mostly me. I think that they were just trying to help me at that time and I didn't want that help. (Stacey)

What could be construed as another form of self-blame also emerged from other women. As previously indicated in Chapter 7 (page 151), individuals made connections to their low self-esteem and how they had lacked the confidence to ask for help and support which clearly had a negative effect on their ability to meet their needs. They also spoke with clarity about their awareness of the need to take responsibility for help-seeking and how impossible this felt because of the nature and extent of the abuse they were experiencing.

If you don't go in for that help you're not going to get it. You have to go and look for it. It's not going to come to you. (Leanne)

Another dimension to earlier discussions about differentiating between an *absence* of services or support and criticisms of the *form* of support is illustrated by Nicky. Like Leanne, she believed that support and help were available but that she just could not reach it. Again, this supports the notion that the *type* of support that is available to women in violent relationships is an essential consideration. As such, this adds to concerns previously raised by Kelly and Humphreys (2000) about ignoring the role of outreach and advocacy work for women experiencing domestic violence who, without a proactive response from services, will not seek help. This is particularly pertinent for women offenders as a heterogeneous group, experiencing different types and extent of abuse.

It's out there if you want it, but you've got to be able to get from there (pause) to there to get it, which is so hard when you are in a violent relationship. I just couldn't make that move to get it. I knew that it was there but it was so hard to get from there to there. (Nicky)

It is therefore important to be mindful of the particular support needs of those women for whom domestic violence is a daily part of their lived realities. In addition, and as discussed in Chapter



7, it is also essential to restate the dangers associated with victim-blaming. This is particularly important if victim-blaming stems from perceptions that support from welfare service providers is available, but that 'some' women seemingly 'choose' not to access it because they are 'choosing' to remain in violent relationships. Perceptions like these could ostensibly enable welfare service providers and individual practitioners to continue avoiding responsibility for ensuring *appropriate* responses to women experiencing domestic violence.

Participants' expectations about help and support were generally very low. Some women seemed to blame themselves as they explained how not being helped and supported had resulted in them learning to give up hope of finding a way out of their criminality, drug use and experiences of domestic violence. However, perceiving the absence of help and support in this way is rendered problematic. This is because of how self-blame is not necessarily the only way to describe women's acknowledgment that they were too 'messed up' to even think about help-seeking. Rather, this may simply reflect their reality. In other words, whilst some women suggested that they could have sought help but that their lives were too fraught to do so, then it is perhaps inappropriate to conclude that service providers failed to support them and therefore contributed to their struggle to seek alternative and more positive life-styles. The comments Katie (in Chapter 6) and Ellen made about how frightened they felt after encounters with individual social workers are especially relevant. This is because of how their experiences resulted in them being unwilling to make further contact with social services. The consequences of essentially low expectations *and* fundamentally negative experiences become clearer when some women feel that they *have* to deal with their problems alone. (Further evidence pertaining to the negative nature of women's experiences of contact with welfare services is discussed below). Accordingly, on frequent occasions, individuals explained that the reasons for their reluctance to seek help from welfare service providers were related to a combination of previous harmful experiences *and* being unable to rely on welfare service providers or individual practitioners to do anything to help.

I've had such bad experiences of services in the past. I'm wary of them and all. I prefer - I mean you can't rely on them anyway - so basically - it's like I am wary of them. (Rosie)

This finding echoes that of other commentators (Hooper 1996; Mullender and Hague 2000; Levison and Harwin 2000) who propose that it is a combination of frustration at the inadequacies of welfare service providers and the lack of support and help, which results in some women being let down, further abused and feeling so mistrustful in their help-seeking in general. Recognition of the need for *appropriate* levels and types of help and support, by welfare service providers and individual practitioners, is clearly imperative and of grave concern to women. The alternative is that the suffering they are enduring in their relationships will continue unabated, they will not seek help and some of them will die as a result. This is powerfully illustrated by Sandra who explained that after four years of enduring "torture" at the

hands of her husband, she had sought help. It had taken a further two years to get any. She expressed how this had resulted in her believing that she should just accept what was happening to her.

### **Straight talking: perceptions of community-based welfare services**

#### *False hopes, false promises: feeling let down*

Participants in this study generally perceived the police as unhelpful and ineffective in protecting, supporting or helping them deal with domestic violence. As previously indicated, whilst the police cannot necessarily be described as welfare service providers because of their primary function as a controlling arm of the state (Radford 1987), participants did see them as such in relation to their role in providing support and help in this context.

I never saw a domestic violence officer. I was never offered a domestic violence officer – it was just a general officer and you'd get, "Oh well you'll have to make a statement about him love. He's abused you, he's battered you again, ----". "Come back when you've got another black eye and we'll raise it one step higher." But they didn't understand that when I leave this police station – where am I going to go? What am I going back to? And if he gets charged with this I'm going to be really –. I'm going to get it worse! (Rachel)

More support from the police would be nice but the way they treat me it's like, "Oh well he hasn't done anything much, call us when he does." You know, but by then it'll be too late - I'll probably be dead or very seriously hurt but they can't see it that way. When I phoned them up recently it took them about an hour to come to the house but I would have thought it would have been straight away. I was like kicked, punched, kicked in the groin. I was bleeding. I was cut. But I was just left on the floor. They didn't respond quickly enough. He went as soon as he saw the blood - he left. But the police response is so slow. (Lesley)

He'd beaten me do you know what I mean? I've been in hospital so many times. He'd stabbed me and all. All they'd say was that there was nothing that they could do to help women and there was nothing they could do when he was coming out and hurting me and all. They just didn't help - they weren't helpful. With domestic violence they're still pretty, don't want to be bothered with it, do you know what I mean? They want to leave it where it is. They act like that sometimes. There's nothing they can do - just get out an injunction and it'll be OK. It doesn't work like that. You have to keep going through it. They have to bring it to court five times - before they can actually go to jail for it. What's the point? (Rosie)

It is arguable that the police do have a duty to ensure women's safety and yet, not only were there a number of incidents to which individuals said the police had arrived too late, but sometimes they had not arrived at all. This failure to protect women, prevent violent crime and support them in dealing with domestic violence resulted in them feeling (and being) let down by the police. Likewise, some participants expressed this same feeling in other contexts; for example, Rosie felt that they had not done anything to support her after she had been raped.



Many other participants in this study also expressed how let down they felt by other welfare service providers, especially social services. It is interesting to note that these experiences conflict with what Tyler (2001) reported in her study of explanations for women's criminality; participants in her study constantly evaluated their relationships with social workers positively. Explanations for this disparity are difficult to assess and there could be any number of reasons for it. For example, her sample base was not the same as mine and the primary focus of her research differed. Nevertheless, there were a number of occasions when individuals expressed confusion and disappointment about the unreliability of some individual social workers who failed to help when they said that they would. This is illustrated by Kath who, as a lone parent, prepared for the custodial sentence she knew she would get. She decided to take what she perceived to be a risk and involve social services in the arrangements she was making for the care of her son. Initially she found they were unhelpful:

Social services now, I went to them myself before I came in. I knew I was coming into prison and I wanted to prepare my son as best I could. And it was sorted out that my mum was going to look after him. But I didn't know if it was legal just to hand your child over to someone so I thought, "I want to do it properly." So I went to social services and I told them what I'd been up to and I said, "I think I'm going to get a sentence." And stuff like that. And told them my plans and asked if it was legal to do it and they were totally unhelpful yet again! (Kath)

Her perceptions changed when she met Tim, a social worker, who, much to her surprise, seemed helpful, at least at first. In spite of this, her opinion of him soon altered because the help he said he could give to her and her son was not forthcoming:

I thought, god, he seemed to be - he made me feel so much better. He said, "You know it's not the end of the world, we've heard worse things from people. You're being responsible in coming to us." And stuff like that and I thought, "He really knows what I'm on about." But as time has gone on, he's been totally bloody useless and unhelpful. I really thought that through him, social services were actually going to give me support in this and if Ryan showed any signs of distress and that, which he did - before I came in, he started wetting the bed, and he didn't want to go to school. It was horrible really. All of a sudden, as soon as things started to go wrong, they didn't want to do anything. And I said to him, "Tim, you were so helpful at the beginning, congratulating me on coming in and everything - you know, why aren't you doing what you promised you would do? I didn't ask you to do this stuff; you volunteered this stuff to me." (Kath)

Kath found it difficult to explain why Tim had not delivered what he had promised. When she asked him directly about this, he had become defensive and tried to emphasise all that he *had* done for her family. Yet, she also recounted how he seemed unable to identify any concrete examples for her. Rather, he made reference to having a file at the office that was full of things he had done for her and her family. It is impossible to accurately assess what actions Tim had or had not taken with regard to providing Kath with support and help without involving him directly. However, the reasons for his apparent failure to deliver could be interpreted in a

number of ways. For example, individual practitioners may make promises to women as a means of getting them out of their offices or enabling them to move on to deal with the next case. This seems rather cynical but women with such complex needs can be difficult to engage with, for example, because of their frustration at what they perceive to be unhelpful and inappropriate responses by welfare service providers. Consequently, they may become very aggressive in their communication with individual workers.

On many occasions, particularly during the participant observation phase of the study, I witnessed the devastating effects of negative encounters with individual workers, as some women arrived for the programme directly after having had contact with them. Cassie's experience is particularly memorable. She had become increasingly frustrated with DSS workers as she tried to explain her need for her giro which, for no apparent reason, had failed to arrive in the post. Her boyfriend had stolen her credit card and the small amount of money she had been trying to save, she was being bullied by 'loan sharks', her electricity, telephone and gas had been disconnected, she had not eaten for two days and this was her third visit to the DSS offices in a week:

I am so fucking mad, they treat us like fucking shit, like we're nothing. What do they expect us to fucking do; I'd like to see them go without fucking food. I wanted to fucking hit her, smash her in the face, how dare she treat me like shit. I'm fucking desperate; I don't know what to do. It's their fucking fault that I've got no fucking money, they've admitted it's their fucking cock-up but they won't do fuck all to help. Then they wonder why people go in there so fucking angry. What do they do? They get security to remove me from the fucking building – bastards! (Cassie) Fieldwork Diary 15.6.00

As she slumped down into a chair, she began to cry. Her anger slipped for a moment as she looked at me and said: "What am I going to do now? I don't know what else I can do?" Like other women I met during the participant observation phase of the study, Cassie was not always easy to communicate with, for example, because of the responses she conveyed in group-work. Thus, as I highlighted in Chapter 5, I frequently experienced how difficult it could be to engage with some women at times. In Eaton's (1993) study of women offenders' responses and resistance to prison and their attempts to rebuild their lives after they have completed their sentences, she highlights 'retaliation' as a coping strategy.<sup>14</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3 (page 67), 'retaliation' can involve women displaying challenging behaviour to exert some control over their lives. It is conceivable that this could also be applied to women's experiences of trying to meet their welfare needs in the community. For example, Cassie was perhaps exhibiting a violent response to what she perceived to be negative forces that were acting on her very sense of self. If consideration is given to the ways in which women offenders are punished or controlled more severely because of the process of double damning

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<sup>14</sup> Whilst I am mindful of the possible relevance of literature pertaining to 'coping', for reasons of brevity, I will not be discussing it in any depth here.



concerning their behaviour, then Cassie's experience could be interpreted in terms of her having been the victim of undue discipline/control because of the way she was transgressing gender norms and legal rules (Eaton 1993:42). Alternatively, her response to the DSS worker could be perceived as little more than a hostile and defensive reaction on her part and therefore indicative of difficulties with being assertive (Hargie *et al.* 1994). It may also be suggestive of a type of inauthentic communication or 'false self' which people can use as a means of defence (Dorpat 1999).<sup>15</sup> However, in pursuing this line of thought, there is a danger, yet again, of engaging in victim-blaming rather than focusing on the skill deficits of individual practitioners in communicating *appropriately* with *all* service users, regardless of the 'fronts' they might wear. It also masks other issues including, for example, those surrounding environmental cues (Breakwell 1989), such as Perspex partitions and bolted down chairs and tables in DSS offices which can promote the acceptability and *expectance* of aggression in claimants. More convincing is that Cassie may have been trying to preserve some sense of self-dignity. Following Eaton (1993), she was in danger of paying a heavy price as a result of feeling 'pushed' to retaliate in the way that she did, including further labelling, stigma and vilification.

Other explanations for women's perceptions of welfare service providers failing to meet their needs perhaps lie in individual workers' frustration about the limitations that are imposed on their ability to adequately support women, for example, because of the size of their caseload. They may also make promises to act in all good faith but later find that they are impractical: for example, the decisions may be rescinded by their line managers or simply unachievable because of a lack of resources. Lastly, explanations may be rooted in how the circumstances of women's lives may change so much in such a short space of time that the promises individual workers make to them are impossible to keep. However, in examining different interpretations of these experiences, it is important not to lose sight of how feelings of being let down by individual workers were common for women in this study. Their experiences also raise questions about whether women's hopes of gaining support and help from welfare service providers are perhaps too high given the difficulties that exist in relation to welfare provision that were highlighted in Chapter 2. For example, interventions in health and social care services tend to be short-term, focused on dealing with crisis situations (Davis 1996), fragmented and disorganised (Taylor 1999). This must have a negative impact on how women experience their contact with individual workers. Similarly, providing the help and support that women want may be viewed as being beyond their remit and outside their role (McGee 2000). In turn, this may lead to a perception that other welfare service providers will necessarily meet women's needs in this respect. However, it is also vital to stress how women's expectations about welfare service provision overall, were very low. Many of them seemed resigned to being let down and feeling unsupported.

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<sup>15</sup> Similarly, I am aware that, in making connections to notions of the 'false self' I am suggesting that they are important concepts in interpreting women's experiences in this context, therefore, I could elaborate them even further



### *The importance of listening, trust and respect in building positive relationships*

Throughout my contact with participants, the importance of effective communication between workers and women emerged consistently. For example, individuals described how difficult it was for them to talk about being abused and harmed. Yet, they also constantly expressed their desire and need to tell someone about what was happening to them and engage in a dialogue about their needs. (What women most want is highlighted in Chapter 9). The lack of opportunities to talk, be listened to, heard and cared for by health and social care workers was emphasised repeatedly. Sandra's narrative poignantly illustrates how women's isolation and invisibility can be compounded by experiences like these. Such encounters contribute to their feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and despair.

Even my health visitor, sometimes like, I was thinking about this on the way to coming to speak to you and I thought, "What's she going to ask me?" And I thought about my health visitor and I was thinking, I know they're busy and things but sometimes when they see me walking up the road in the rain with four children, and they come out. I reach the surgery, I go in there, I'm drenched or something because I - I've been down the doctor's surgery I don't know how many times in the last four weeks and I just like. I said to the doctor on Wednesday, "you should take shares out in my children - the amount of times you've seen them." And he just laughed. He says, "Oh it's alright, there's four of them." And he listens to me that doctor. But my health visitor - she sees me coming in the rain, with the children and she sees me sat there for an hour waiting for my appointment turn to come round, the kids are jumping all over the show, my baby's crying and she comes up and says, "Alright Sandra?" "Well actually er." "Oh I've got to go now." And I'm thinking, "Why won't you just sit and talk to me? You're not listening to me." It's like they're looking through me. (Sandra)

Sandra's experience of her health visitor and GP seems to conflict with general perceptions of these two professional groups. Whilst health visitors' communication has not always been evaluated entirely positively, they have fared better than GPs, who constantly seem to have been maligned in the literature for their poor interpersonal skills. Similarly, they have been criticised for having too little time to communicate effectively with their patients and therefore unable to be wholly effective in relation to health care (Hargie *et al.* 1994). Possible explanations for Sandra's experience lie in earlier propositions about the significance of the individual worker and their willingness to be in relationship with service users, rather than merely attributing variations in interpersonal communication to their particular professional background (Williams 1993). Thus, whilst there may have been differences in Sandra's expectations of each professional, this particular GP clearly demonstrated his enthusiasm and will to hear her and, as a result, she felt supported, valued and respected by him.

This point is further illustrated in relation to women who had had positive contacts with the police. They explained that individual officers had not only helped and supported them but had



also listened to them. Angie shared an experience of one occasion when she had been in the cells and the police officers on duty had let her out to have tea with them when they need not have done so. Similarly, whilst she was 'clucking' (experiencing early stages of withdrawal, needing a fix) one time when she was in court, a police officer had taken her to one side and urged her to stop using. She said that she had hated him at the time but, with hindsight, could see that he was demonstrating that he cared about her and was really only trying to help her. Thus, in the context of the relationship between worker and woman, workers' willingness to take time to talk and listen was identified as crucial:

There was one social worker who was great, she was Welsh. She was down to earth, really approachable and really easy to talk to. It was her that helped me go to the Family Centre. (Rebecca)

Probation listen to what you're saying more than anything you know? I mean DSS, they must just think that everyone that goes in there is lying. They must look at everybody and think, "They're drug addicts or they're alcoholics or", you know? (Ellen)

My GP is brilliant because he listens and he takes time as well, he doesn't rush me in and out. He's so nice - he just says, "I tell you what girls, what about this piece of paper and this pencil - why don't you?" And he says to me, "How are you then?" "I just need some injection to get me through this." And he says, "They will get better Sandra - are you really ok?" And I says, "I am alright." And I just think to myself, just asking me genuinely, am I ok? Sometimes people say it but their words just mean nothing. (Sandra)

Lesley explained why she felt so positive about her social worker:

She involves me more. She told me straight why - if I have him back then I'll lose the children for good, which - I've said to her that I like people to be up front with me. It's a lot easier to deal with. (Lesley)

Some women accorded particular importance to the fact that the worker was nice, easy to talk to and able to demonstrate how they valued them as individuals.

I mean probation have been good to me. My probation officer has been very good. She's really easy to talk to. She's always praising me and she says, "You're really bright." She seems to value me. (Rosie)

She is so nice. She's great, I mean as far as probation officers go, she's got to be one of the best. I mean she did listen to me good and proper. I mean when she did my actual report for court - it was like - I could tell by the report that she'd listened to what I'd said. (Ellen)

Being straight, 'telling it like it is' and involving individuals in decision-making were also appreciated by a number of women, particularly in relation to their contact with probation

services. This is consistent with what Belknap and Holsinger (1998) found in their work with young female offenders who felt unable to trust any type of provision where they encountered difficulties in exerting any power, for example, in some probation service group-work programmes. Belknap and Holsinger (1998) attributed this to how the women had been violated so severely in their past. This is particularly pertinent given the pervasiveness of participants' experiences of abuse that were highlighted in Chapter 7. Equally, as I stressed in Chapter 3 (page 64), it is also important to be mindful of the political climate that seems more concerned with punishing the already punished rather than involving, supporting or empowering them in any way.

These 'positive' findings also support those highlighted by Bagilhole (1996) and Edwards *et al.* (1999), who both argued, for example, that listening to and direct involvement of service users in decision-making are crucial in enabling women generally to feel appropriately and acceptably supported within the frame of a meaningful relationship with individual practitioners. It seems to be a combination of factors that can make women's encounters positive and this is illustrated by Angie talking about her midwife:

She has never judged me - even though she knows all about me. She's knowledgeable about drugs, about what it's like being on drugs; she's experienced and she's not ignorant. She's taken time to get to know me; we've got to know each other; she's relaxed and informal; I can talk about anything to her; she sees me for who I am now not what I used to be or who I was. (Angie)

There is an important issue of respect within Angie's narrative, a theme that runs throughout women's positive encounters with individual workers and further exemplifies the importance of the relationship between practitioners and service users in enabling women to meet their welfare needs more effectively. Again, this supports Eaton (1993) and Devlin's (1998) proposition that reciprocal relationships and approaches based on equality and respect are crucial in enabling women offenders to rebuild their lives after prison. Of particular relevance to women offenders more specifically are the links a few participants made between the importance of communication in their relationships with workers and issues of trust and vulnerability. For example, Rosie spoke with great clarity about the barriers she had erected because she believed they helped to ensure her safety:

There's always a barrier. There's always like – no one gets too close - it's like crying and all, I never cry in front of other people. It's part of - someone would see that they'd broken me down and that makes me feel vulnerable. My fear about trusting people is that they'll hurt me in some way. (Rosie)

Following Eaton (1993), Rosie's narrative could be interpreted as a form of 'withdrawal' which provided her with a coping strategy to keep her safe and preserve her sense of self. She seemed to have learned how to avoid the pain of feeling unsupported and uncared for after she was raped, by distancing herself from relationships with her family, welfare service



providers and the police (through her drug abuse). However, this had consequences later when she needed help as a victim of domestic violence. It could also be interpreted in terms of the false self that people can present as a means of protection (Dorpat 1999). In other words, by coping alone and keeping her barriers in place, she could present herself as someone who did not want or need support or help. Yet, given the opportunity to 'lift the cover/front' she revealed that she was vulnerable, mistrustful, afraid and deeply hurt.

Knowledge and understanding of the nature, extent and impact of women's fear and mistrust in relation to how some of them respond when they have contact with welfare services seems absolutely crucial to ensuring appropriate responses from individual practitioners. Furthermore, it is interesting that women's positive experiences seem to indicate that individual probation officers, social workers, police officers and project workers can be in relationship with 'difficult to reach' women, can communicate effectively with them and, in so doing, can meet their needs successfully. This raises questions about the negative experiences women have conveyed in this study. Partial explanations may lie in the judgmental values and attitudes that individual practitioners can ascribe to women who commit crime, abuse drugs and/or alcohol or seemingly 'choose' to continue living with violent husbands/partners.

#### *Being judged and made to feel worthless*

One of the most vivid themes to emerge from participants' narratives overall was the way practitioners made negative judgments about them as a woman offender, drug addict, alcoholic, or even victim of domestic violence, that resulted in destructive and unhelpful contacts with welfare services. Some women seemed to attribute this to how individual workers 'fixed' them into a particular state of 'otherness'. In other words, some women described how individual practitioners seemed to bracket them together with what they thought they knew about *all* women who commit crime, and, as a consequence, labelled them harshly because of how they fail to conform to preconceived notions of womanhood (Lloyd 1995). This links to previous discussions of how women offenders can *feel* societal disgust of them and is also reflected in how welfare service providers and individual practitioners can communicate this to them. The following extracts from my fieldwork diary illustrate the responses of a group of women attending the probation service women offenders programme, to my questions about what they believed the dominant perceptions of them were in this context and how they had come to feel this way:

They look at you as unfit mothers; drunks; crack heads; smack heads; dirty; scum; worthless; they look down on you. They have no respect for you; you can tell by the way they talk to you and treat you; trust goes, support stops; you lose a lot; you can feel their disgust of you; they don't necessarily have to say anything; they don't want to know you. (Cassie, Melanie, Rita, Rosie, Lesley, Angie, Helen) Fieldwork diary 16.5.00

In seeking medical help as a victim of domestic violence, Rachel explained how she was sure that nurses in the accident and emergency unit knew how she had sustained her injuries but that this was unspoken. She attributed this to the judgments she suspected they made about her and explained how unjust this felt.

It shouldn't have been unspoken really but in saying that his presence obviously made them feel standoffish or maybe disgusted because maybe they thought I'd brought him with me because I wanted him with me. Not the fact that I was being brought there by him. (Rachel)

Rebecca also believed that the majority of social workers were far removed from her world and that this gap between them was reflected in the way some of them looked down on her. This corresponds with Kennedy's (1992:89) description of the 'chasm of misunderstanding' that exists between professionals and women offenders.

This one social worker came into my house, she took one look, looked down her nose at me, judging me all the time. Said my house was dirty and that I was putting my son's health at risk. I'd asked for help from them because I had nothing. No food in the cupboards, no Hoover, nothing. I told her to get out of my house and not to come back. How dare she? I was trying my hardest. (Rebecca)

This can be interpreted in different ways but it seems that the particular chasm of misunderstanding between Rebecca and her social worker includes the social worker assessing her as not being a good mother/housewife and labelling her accordingly rather than giving primacy to the impact of her experiences of poverty and domestic violence. There may have been concerns about child protection, but the social worker seemed to widen the gap between her and Rebecca and evidently lost an opportunity to work *with* and *support* her in either caring for her children or affording them a place of safety. Women's experiences are of particular relevance given the importance participants generally accorded to being in relationship with workers. This is largely because of the impossibility of achieving this with someone who conveys such negative attitudes that *feel* so personally damaging, especially when they resort to victim-blaming: blaming the victim works very well, so long as you are not the victim.

Participants also explained the negative effects that workers' judgmental attitudes, values and behaviours had on their ability to state or meet their individual needs. This is largely in accordance with previous studies undertaken with women (as a homogeneous group), by Foster (1996); Davidson *et al.* (2000) and Levison and Harwin (2000), which found, for example, that inherently judgmental attitudes and pervasive negative perceptions of what welfare service providers and individual workers deem to be 'unacceptable' female behaviour can do more harm than good to women. It can also seriously and detrimentally affect their access to and experience of services. As previously alluded to, the consequences for women



in violent relationships may be that many feel forced simply to accept what is happening to them.

A number of women indicated that the professional background of the worker was irrelevant in the context of judgmental attitudes and values. Of more importance appeared to be the way in which the worker seemed as a person and their willingness to build a relationship based on trust and mutual respect, thereby diminishing the power differentials that existed between them. Ensuring that service user/provider relationships are respectful is fundamental. Without this, interactions are likely to be counterproductive in enabling women offenders to achieve success in rebuilding their lives after they have encountered the CJS. Likewise, it is important to consider how women offenders' relationships to the welfare state are structured by their criminality (being an offender) and their gender (being a woman), and are therefore conceptualised in relation to what workers think they know about how they differ from them. The multiple oppressions they experience are compounded and reconstituted as a direct result of harsh and discriminatory judgments (Lloyd 1995).

### **Shocking and surprising: challenging the taken for granted assumptions about the nature of women's refuges**

The majority of women in this study had experience of accessing refuge accommodation and two individuals expressed their appreciation that it had provided a place for them to go in crisis.

I've gone to women's refuges all round England when I've had bad beatings. I've gone to (place). I've gone to (place). I've gone all over the place. I mean thank god for those women's refuges mind, some of them are not exactly fantastic but at least it's a bloody safe place to be. (Ellen)

Voluntary sector women's refuges have consistently been reported as safe and extremely positive by women, for example, see Mullender (1996) Hague and Harwin (1999) Charles (2000) and Harwin and Barron (2000). However, many participants in this study disclosed very different experiences which were generally very damaging. Rachel, for example, explained what being and living in a women's refuge was like for her:

I mean can you imagine? You are just taken out of this relationship? OK, you're relieved that you don't have to answer to anybody and you're not sat there shaking because you think, you know... "Any minute now I'm going to get a punch in the face or a black eye." But then you're thrown into a situation where you're sat there in a room with minimal furniture, minimal accessories for you to do your cooking and you've got this little kid running round or whatever. You feel quite desperate, you know, you're on your own, there's nothing to do. And then outside of the room it's just like mayhem, you know? I also felt that there were too many restrictions around and I felt like I was too limited. I was (pause) I don't know how to describe it. It was a horrible feeling when I think back to it. I didn't, no it wasn't good. (Rachel)

This negativity was further illustrated by individuals who expressed their disappointment that the lack of practical help and support they had experienced in their contact with other agencies was repeated in refuges. They explained that this was because of how their *actual* experiences seemed to conflict with how refuges had always been portrayed, for example, by the media, social workers and health visitors, as supportive environments, set up specifically to meet their needs. It could possibly be argued that women had *unrealistic* expectations about what the type and level of support would be in refuges but this raises questions about why they came to perceive them in particularly positive ways. The role of welfare service providers and the police in seeking to tackle domestic violence by urging individual women to leave their violent relationships is relevant here. It is understandable that welfare service providers want women to leave abusive relationships and be safe, yet it also seems vital to ensure that they do not raise women's expectations about what they are likely to encounter in so doing. There is also a fine balance to be struck here because accurate information about just how difficult it is likely to be for them to rebuild their lives could be the very thing that keeps them separate and silent.

This conflict between what women felt they 'knew' about the nature of women's refuges and the actuality of their experiences is illustrated in a number of ways. For example, Sandra described how she experienced difficulty in securing a place at her local refuge because they had no spaces and how, as a result, she returned home.

I just went there because I knew where it was and the whole place was full and I said, "Is there nothing else you can do?" And they said, "No there isn't actually." They didn't give me any numbers I could ring or anything. (Sandra)

The lack of resources is unsurprising; Levison and Harwin (2000) estimate that half or more of the women who contact refuges for support cannot be accommodated. More confounding is how unhelpful workers appeared to have been in assisting Sandra to find an alternative. Given the role and function of the Women's Refuge Movement (Harwin and Barron 2000), hers is arguably a very reasonable expectation. In addition, being left to cope alone once in women's refuges was also common. For example, Leanne said she was left to fend for herself and expressed an opinion of refuges as being little more than bricks and mortar. She also described the workers she had encountered as 'useless' and was emphatic about the absence of support and very limited information being provided about other sources of help.

As far as getting any support – there was nothing. They put these houses up and we were just left there to fend for ourselves and it was wrong. It was wrong. (Leanne)

Rachel's experiences were similar and she also described how 'out of place' she had felt as she struggled to cope with living with other women who were also abusing drugs and/or alcohol.



I went into a mother and baby refuge, I couldn't stand it, I couldn't stand it at all. It was; I don't know, it just felt. I didn't feel right. I didn't feel like I belonged there. Some of the women there were really quite rough and the language that they used... I just didn't feel comfortable at all. The last thing you need is to be put into a hostel where there are all these women that are taking drugs or shouting and swearing and 'f'ing and blinding and their kids are running round with runny noses and dirty faces. And – *oh* (emphasised). Honestly it's - that's not what you need. (Rachel)

Refuge accommodation itself was also often reported as being in a poor state of repair and facilities were extremely limited. Some participants suggested that this had contributed to their decisions to return home.

It was freezing, I just left. My son was only a couple of months old and it was too cold. There was no central heating or anything. It was really cold and grim, on the top floor, an attic, with no lights. (Leanne)

Some participants discussed how they had assumed that refuges would afford them some safety. However, whilst this was the experience of a few individuals, it was not always the case because several women's husbands/partners seemed to locate their whereabouts with relative ease and continue to perpetrate harm against them.

Each time I went he'd find out where I was. That's why I left them all and had to run. He'd get on the phone there. (Leanne)

Kath's experience raises serious concerns about the messages workers can give to women, even when they seek help from specialist agencies including women's refuges. In accord with Katie's experiences of contact with domestic violence advocacy and support services in Chapter 6, she expressed her frustration, confusion and anger at the response of the worker at the refuge who did not seem to understand her needs.

I've been to a refuge and the workers were *terrible* (emphasised). I mean I went there - well I went to my friends actually but I couldn't stay there because he knew where my friend lived and he'd already been there and threatened her. So she said, "You're going to have to go down to the battered wives place." And so I went there, I rang them up and I told them everything that was going on and they said, "Right come down - it's a secret address," blah, blah, blah. Found it and the woman who let me in, well, I just didn't feel that she was any help to me - (pause) *at all* (emphasised). You would expect them to welcome you in with open arms and everything. She just went, "Right, come in and we'll have a chat." And she was saying, "do you think you could talk to him?" and stuff like that and I was saying, "NO!" Things were the *most dire* (emphasised) they had ever been - it was like - I definitely couldn't go back to the refuge after that day. (Kath)

Women's negative perceptions of particular workers, the level and type of support available in (these) refuges and the nature of the accommodation led to individuals feeling that they could never return there and, instead should just cope on their own. In exploring this overwhelming

negativity, I have frequently returned to the original interview transcripts to try to convey at least one or two positive experiences.

I wouldn't say that the refuges were 100% positive but they were better than staying in what I had, you know what I mean? (Rita)

The staff were all right – they did as much as they could do in spite of all the rules and regulations and stuff. (Nicky)

Yet, positive comments were difficult to find. Overall, women's experiences epitomise concerns that emerge from this work about whether women's refuges and specialist support and advocacy projects are entirely safe and supportive environments that are appropriate for and accessible to *all* women. Consequently, tensions come to the fore because of the inherent negativity which appears to be so at variance with the literature. Possible interpretations include suggestions that the negative comments were about local/particular refuges however, this was not obviously the case. Participants had accessed refuges all over the country at different times in their lives. My line of questioning could also be challenged on the basis that I inadvertently encouraged women to focus on their negative encounters, yet I consistently posed questions that encouraged them to recount positive experiences as well. In contrast, the degree of variance may be attributable to a gap in research in this area or an unwillingness to listen to negative experiences. Colleagues I have had contact with in refuges/domestic violence support and advocacy projects (on an informal basis) have not been surprised by these findings. Rather, they have articulated their awareness of a general reluctance to critique the undoubtedly great achievements of pioneering feminist campaigns in domestic violence policy and practice. They have also expressed their fears about 'telling it like it is' because of what this might provoke, for example, the loss of much-needed, hard-won, if poorly-resourced, provision for women. Especially compelling, is the concern that if women do talk to other women about their negative experiences of refuges that this may serve to create, or rather maintain, silence about domestic violence.

## Conclusion

These findings seem to confirm Walby's (1990) suggestion that the patriarchal state is instrumental in creating and perpetuating women's experiences of violence because of its failure to adequately help them through the provision of *appropriate* support from *accessible* welfare services. The discrimination and disadvantage they are suffering is being compounded and continued by the very services that *should* be providing them with *adequate* and *appropriate* support and help. Additionally, what clearly emerges from women's narratives are their perceptions of welfare service practitioners functioning as a powerful group who construct them as 'other' and engage in the damaging process of 'othering'. Whether this is as a direct result of practitioners' misperception of them as different to 'us' and therefore in need of different treatment, remains unclear. Eminently apparent, however, is how stigmatised,



isolated and marginalised virtually all of the women who participated in this study felt as a result of their contact with workers. They believed that individual practitioners had let them down and conveyed harsh judgmental attitudes and values. In sum, participants' experiences in this study can be seen in relation to Bhavani and Coulson's (1986) suggestion that the welfare state has different strategies for different groups of women.

Women's positive encounters with individual practitioners have also provided valuable and essential insights into what makes a difference to the quality of interactions and interventions in their lives. Worker's willingness to move beyond their professional roles, engage in assertive, sensitive outreach work to support women in seeking help and directly explore issues relating to their experiences of domestic violence were all identified as fundamental. Similarly vital was the worker's proclivity to be in relationship with individuals; this crucially involved non-judgmental listening and really demonstrating that they had heard women's voices. Central to this was the need for workers to treat them with respect and communicate with genuineness and care. In pursuit of identifying ways of working with women offenders through the provision of more *appropriate* services that are delivered in more *acceptable* ways, Chapter 9 discusses what individuals most wanted policy makers and service providers/practitioners to hear and then to change in order to meet their needs more skilfully in the future.

## Chapter 9: Lifting voices: what women most wanted service providers to hear and change

### Introduction

My thesis began with a personal reflexive commentary which highlighted my awareness of some of the parallels that existed between my own and participants' experiences. My consciousness of these similarities came about as a direct result of engaging with members of the advisory group, the literature, and ultimately the women who participated in the study. In turn, this led to the inclusion of a rationale for bringing the personal to the research which provided the frame for doing so in this work. Accordingly, there are reflexive dimensions to the whole research process but the reporting of it has largely been in the style of presenting substantial and detailed reflexive commentaries integrated in both Chapters 4 and 5. My decision to set them out in this way stemmed from my recognition of how those commentaries provided a means of exploring pertinent themes relating to relationships between members of the advisory group/research participants and myself as the researcher. Following this, the emphasis then moved towards focusing on the particularity of *participants'* experiences and, whilst it is arguable that the parallels between researcher and research participant are ever present in research of this kind (Ribbens and Edwards 1998), my endeavour was to illuminate, explicate and interpret *their* experiences.

Inevitably, though, given that I explicitly wanted to lift *participants'* voices to the forefront of readers' minds and in so doing, close this chapter in *my* life, this left me with a dilemma about how to end my personal involvement in the work as I wrote this concluding chapter. Hence, in this final piece, my reflexive self is necessarily integrated throughout so that *I* can bring *our* collaborative adventure to its end. To do this, I begin by highlighting the ways in which the study's original aims and objectives were met and giving prominence to what fundamentally changed during the research process as a consequence of undertaking the fieldwork. I draw together key emergent themes and emphasise their meaning in relation to particular aspects of the theoretical and methodological debates that underpin this work. I also highlight areas for future research and convey the notable contributions that this study makes.

Finally, to make the findings of this study explicit, I conclude the thesis by presenting a series of recommendations for practical change. To support this, I have also incorporated illustrative quotes from women to further exemplify and illuminate my interpretation of their experiences and their proposals for change. In addition, I have followed Moustakas (1990) by drawing together propositions women made about the characteristics of *appropriate* responses from welfare service providers and individual practitioners. These are presented in the form of a creative synthesis which fuses individual perceptions with the whole. Using a language that has the potential to reach a diverse audience, the synthesis conveys what women most wanted policymakers, service providers and individual practitioners to listen to, hear and then change in the future.



## Drawing conclusions

### *Closing the loop: corroborations and challenges*

As I indicated in Chapter 5, (see page 97), in exploring women offenders' experiences as consumers of community-based welfare services, the unexpected and important theme of a shared experience of domestic violence and how it influenced their help-seeking behaviours considerably altered the way in which their experiences were subsequently interpreted and framed. Consequently, domestic violence became an absolutely fundamental part of the findings and was therefore given a prominence appropriate to its significance within the data. In broad terms, this was evident in women's accounts of their complex, chaotic lived realities that were explored in depth in Chapter 7 and in their help-seeking experiences which were analysed in Chapter 8.

Crucially, in accordance with the original aims and objectives, participants also gave prominence to their offending behaviour and its impact on their experiences of accessing welfare services. This was illustrated, for example, in Chapter 7 where participants explored the impact of harsh judgments and brutal labelling before, during and after their offending behaviour (see pp 151-152). It was similarly in evidence when some women talked of the contribution of probation services in enabling them to access appropriate help and support for the first time (see pp 146-147) and in providing their *only* source of help and support (see pp 164-165). It was also clear in Cassie's experiences of feeling let down by DSS workers which provided a focus for exploring issues relating to women offenders' use of resistance and the 'false self' as a means of defence (see pp 170-171).

From the outset, an array of complicated interrelated, (at times) paradoxical and yet recurring concepts emerged to provide the theoretical framework for the study (see Chapters 2 and 3). As such, the synthesis of different feminist influences that I highlighted there has been further explicated during analyses of women's experiences in Chapters 7 and 8. These include the inadequacy of seeking *individual* explanations for women's experiences of oppression and abuse by blaming them solely for the lives they endure. For example, victim-blaming had an extremely negative effect on Katie's contact with her social worker (who was concerned about child protection) and resulted in her reluctance to seek help from social services again in the future. This study also makes clear the need for due recognition of the *structural* forces that are evidently so damaging in women offenders' lives, for example, societal pressures on women to conform to notions of 'familism'. Thus, participants poignantly conveyed their experiences of the combined impact of structural inequalities, such as poverty and lack of educational and employment opportunities, together with the dominant patriarchal ideology and models of family life that confine many women to domestic, caring roles. The resultant isolation, feelings of disempowerment and loss of self-esteem from being dominated, controlled and abused by their male partners, have also been exemplified in this study.

More specifically, the ways in which participants encountered a whole range of systems of oppression were illustrated in how individuals 'knew life' in terms of their criminality, their experiences of domestic violence, their encounters with structural inequalities as well as in their help-seeking from welfare services. Participants' experiences of further complications when they were help-seeking, particularly when they were coping with domestic violence are especially relevant, for example, in relation to the negative impact of fear, frustration, shame and stigma. However, what also emerged was the possibility that many of these difficulties stemmed, in part, from individual practitioners not being *effective* in helping them through the provision of what *they* perceived to be more *appropriate* support from more *accessible* welfare services. Following Hill-Collins (1999), we can envision these multiple forms of oppression as cumulative and interactive, resulting in women offenders experiencing oppression in fundamentally different ways to women without an offending history. The complex crises that many participants experienced during the short time I knew them serve as stark reminders of the complex and chaotic lives that many women offenders and ex-offenders lead. However, their *different* lives are often interpreted as *deviant*, as Aziz (1997) and Mirza (1997) suggest in relation to the particular experiences of Black women in their communities more generally, and as I argue in Chapter 7. Women's experiences of being labelled and judged by individual practitioners, on the basis of their gender *and* their criminality, illustrate this propensity very well, leaving them feeling even more stigmatised, isolated and marginalised.

Building on this, collectively, participants' experiences provide insights into the negative impact of domestic violence, of being systematically abused, disempowered and disadvantaged, and its effects on their access to community-based welfare services. However, it was only in exploring women's *actual* experiences of encounters with health and social care services in their communities, in Chapter 8, that it became possible to understand the meaning and consequences of these. Hence, this study has clearly demonstrated the multiple obstacles and vicious circles that many women offenders experience in their contact with welfare services generally: participants have conveyed their perceptions of how (in accordance with propositions that were made in Chapter 3), welfare service providers and individual practitioners seem to have little meaningful ontological awareness or understanding of their lived reality as *criminal* women. Consequently, individuals have articulated how, as they tried to identify, express and meet their specific, complex and numerous welfare needs, they experienced the majority of their interactions with practitioners as extremely harmful and exasperating. This was poignantly illustrated in the way that individuals shared their awareness of how they are vilified and 'othered' as a result of pervasive perceptions of their failure to conform to societal ideals of how women *should* behave. Hence, the many ways participants felt the effects of judgmental attitudes and disregard in their relationships with individual practitioners have been rendered visible in their testimonies throughout this work.



Strong propositions were made in the literature review about the apparent widespread failure of the CJS to adequately meet the multiple and complex needs of women offenders, particularly as they try to rebuild their lives after prison. In contrast, *some* women in this study indicated that where they *had* felt supported, it had *only* been as a consequence of their contact with the CJS, that is, by staff from the probation service. However, the subsequent influence of the 'othering' of women offenders once they had been labelled was also discussed because of how it hampered women in their attempts to rebuild their lives both during and after their contact with the CJS. Hence, the solution, by which I mean relying on 'supporting' women by punishing the already punished within the CJS, effectively becomes part of the problem because of the consequent labelling. Herein lie some of the inevitable contradictions which have been illustrated throughout this study. More particularly, these are evident with regard to the social and economic deprivation women experienced before they encountered the CJS and how this was compounded even further once they had been labelled 'offender'. Women's experiences in this research have emphasised the vital importance of *appropriate* responses to diversity and difference in making marginalised groups of women more visible without further compounding the sense of their difference being perceived as deviance. The critical work of Williams (1989; 1996) and Black feminists such as Bhavani and Coulson (1986) Nasir (1996) and Bhavani (2001) is relevant to this because of how they reveal that it is the assumption of universalism within theories of social welfare that result in inappropriate services being provided for *some* but not other women. This is also supported by findings from the current study.

It seems clear that universalism promotes a 'one size fits all' approach to welfare which cannot, therefore, take account of difference. It also perpetuates the invisibility of women offenders who, like Black women (Nasir 1996), have largely been ignored in relation to the provision of specific welfare responses (Lloyd 1995). Universal approaches to welfare cannot adequately redress the negativity associated with how *some* women are 'othered'. Consequently, the potential for welfare service providers and individual practitioners to incorporate notions of differential need is important. Likewise, there is a need to be explicit about the specific experiences and needs of individuals/distinct groups of women and recognise that all women are not the same. Moreover, the (theoretical) tendency to emphasise the commonalities between women because of the potential this offers for marginalised groups of women to join forces in seeking to bring about change, seems unworkable in practice. This is mostly because it is their very marginality which makes vulnerable women invisible. Overall therefore, it seems clear that whilst politically the commonalities between women (and men) may be important, an understanding of the specificity of individual women's positions, for example, in acknowledging past discrimination and disadvantage associated with being a woman offender, is vital in relation to her experiences of social welfare. Participants' experiences in this study illustrate how failure to recognise this simple difference ensures that complex power relations remain unchallenged and unchanged, disadvantage is perpetuated



and multiplied and marginalised groups of women remain separated from society, silenced and invisible.

The many developments in domestic violence policy and practice have been welcomed by women in this study and it is important to stress how they demonstrate their awareness that some (general) support services *do* exist. Interestingly, at no point did they call for *more* funding or for the provision of *more* services, but rather what emerged from their narratives was a need to *feel* more supported and helped by the services that *already* exist in their communities. What this implies is that their needs *could* be met more effectively if current service providers and individual practitioners adopted a more *appropriate* and sensitive response to their needs. This was a common theme that emerged from all the experiences women shared about their encounters with individual practitioners, which frequently left them feeling judged, uncared for, let down and unsupported. A particularly vivid example of this was located in women's experiences of refuges and advocacy projects and their differential experiences of these services, as discussed in Chapter 8. Notably, it is also important to stress the need for more appropriate training for service providers and individual practitioners to enable them to provide more appropriate and sensitive responses to all service users and this may cost more. Consequently, the need for increased resources is perhaps implicit within this.

#### *Further research themes*

It is important to emphasise that, for reasons of brevity, it has not been possible to discuss the more complex and convoluted aspects associated with the variations in perception of experiences and need amongst service users and providers because of the primacy afforded to women's encounters, in this research. Thus, I am mindful of the potential for future research that, for example, might explore the views and experiences of both women offenders and the particular welfare service providers they encounter. Ideally this could be conducted concurrently in order to examine both commonality and difference in their perceptions of the importance and mutual experience of their interactions. Additionally, there is much scope to develop a service generic model of delivery relating to attitudes and behaviours that is informed by women's experiences and can be evaluated by other women as well as welfare service providers and practitioners. In turn, there is potential to explore in more detail, possible strategies for bringing about much-needed change in this area in the future. For example, conducting a more focused and detailed analysis and evaluation of a radical process of deconstructing what we think we know about the way we communicate with each other or the importance of being 'in relationships'. Similarly, there is scope for an exploration of Rees' (1999) suggestions, (highlighted in Chapter 3), about visioning professional practice.

This work has highlighted the need to recognise that, at the very minimum, *all* women have the right to be afforded dignity and respect. Hence, future research that examines the *social* rights afforded to women offenders, as welfare service users, may also be pertinent to this debate.



Broad and Denney (1996) suggest that the social rights of offenders are one of the two most important sets of rights to consider in relation to the probation service user and that these are inextricably linked to the notion of citizenship (the other being the legal rights that govern citizenship). Importantly, Coote (1992) makes a distinction between 'substantive' and 'procedural' social rights. 'Substantive social rights' relate to the receipt of actual services and benefits whilst 'procedural social rights' are concerned that the experience of individuals when they come into contact with service providers/practitioners is fair and just. Thus, what emerges from this is the potential for further exploration of the notions of social/user rights in relation to the particular ways that women offenders experience welfare services. To illustrate, consider how women offenders are perceived in society as doubly deviant and the possible danger that they are therefore viewed as having forfeited *all* of their rights. In other words, they are perhaps not seen as being entitled to welfare services because they are not thought of as 'full citizens'.

### *Methodological innovation*

In Chapter 4, I highlighted the potential for this research to make a contribution to feminist social research methodology. This is because of, amongst other things, my approach in working with an advisory group - within the framework of a feminist, heuristic and collaborative methodology - whose members could guide the research. Combined with other inclusive strategies such as the use of particular research methods and participant/gatekeeper evaluation questionnaires which I explored in Chapter 5, it provided an effective way of empowering 'vulnerable' women in a research context (Hill 2003). Vitally, it also facilitated a process of 'partial identification' (Mies 1991:79) because of how it enabled me to identify the parallels that existed between members of the advisory group, the women who participated in the study and myself (the researcher) (see Chapter 4). These similarities are illustrated in our shared experiences of being mothers, dealing with prejudice and previous harm. Consequently, I also developed my awareness about women offenders' or 'other' women's particular experiences and the differences that existed between us without allowing the disparities to create unhelpful barriers in our communication. The dissimilarities were particularly evident in relation to living with the offender label, being in prison or on probation, abusing drugs and, crucially, dealing with the scale of structural inequalities that the majority of participants were enduring.

More specifically, one of the examples I discussed in Chapter 4 illustrates the importance of acknowledging and working with difference to bridge the gap between the researcher and research participants in research of this kind. This was when Jane challenged me about whether I believed that I could really be successful in getting through layers of arrogance and 'hard-faced bitch' behaviour, which she suggested many women displayed to help them cope with being in prison. The experience enabled me to recognise what connected me to members of the advisory group and the women who took part in the study, as well as what distanced me

from them. On reflection, I am clear that without a collaborative approach overall, and without the advisory group in particular, I would not have *sufficiently* appreciated the absolutely central importance of trust and mutual respect in communication with women offenders whose particular views I sought in this work. As a consequence, I would have remained largely oblivious to the vital need to determine ways of reducing the apparent gulf between myself and participants in the study because of our differential experiences.

Importantly, I consciously did not endeavour to *be* like the women who participated in the study who, despite all the empathy and understanding I tried to convey, remained 'other'. Rather, I developed a deeper ontological awareness and cultural sensitivity (Sieber 1993) about *their* experiences through listening to and understanding their stories with a sensibility developed through my prior working with the advisory group. Thus, my overall approach was extremely effective in gaining rich and intimate insights into the lived realities of the women who took part in the study. I do not believe that I would have elicited the same level of candid disclosure had I not used this particular methodological approach.

#### *Personal reflexivity*

Throughout the study I have been intensely aware of issues pertaining to sensitivity and concerns about harm, which, as I indicated in Chapter 5, affected the whole research process. This was especially evident in relation to participants but also in my own development and acute awareness of the parallels that existed between myself and research participants because of identified shared experiences. Finding coping strategies was vital to my own survival, particularly given the ethical demands that were made on me by the disclosure of *their* experiences and my own self-awareness of mutual histories. This was especially evident in terms of how I then had to face up to and deal with the feelings this evoked in me. Accordingly, engaging in personal reflexivity, together with good supervision and additional support from a specialist counsellor, were vital and fundamental to the study overall, not least for my own sense of self. Most importantly, the support of a trained counsellor was particularly valuable because it allowed me to explore issues raised for me personally whilst remaining focused on participants' experiences in the research itself. Of wider relevance are the many ways that contact with some women influenced me at a deeply personal level and how this illustrates the need for researchers to receive adequate and appropriate emotional support in coping with undertaking sensitive research of this kind (Hubbard *et al.* 2001). Consequently, there is scope for my thesis to inform the development of a 'model' for practice in terms of 'supervision' in similar contexts.

#### *Notable contributions to the field*

This research has *expressly* challenged the notion that women offenders, by their criminality, or by their experiences of domestic violence, have forfeited their rights and particularly their right to be heard through a process of involvement and collaboration in a research context.



Therefore, the significant contribution that this study makes to the literature and more widely to the body of knowledge on the topic is in how it provides a more informed understanding of what participants have conveyed about *appropriate* responses to women offenders' welfare needs. Of equal significance is the exploration of how women offenders experience welfare service providers and individual practitioners. Also important are the connections I have made, between how research of this kind can be undertaken, the need for the boundaries in research participant/researcher relationships to be broken down and for reflexivity to become an integral part of professional practice for both service providers and for researchers.

### **Recommendations for change**

The following recommendations for practical change represent my overall interpretations of what welfare service providers and individual practitioners most need to listen to, hear and then change in order to meet women offenders' welfare needs more effectively in the future. They close the final loop in relation to the second of the two original research aims by making explicit the ways in which service providers might re-shape their services to be more accessible and more effective in meeting the needs of this particular group of women. To do this well, I have had to suspend the women's voices that I have held in me in order that my own intimate and generative understanding of their lived realities and experiences throughout this research journey could emerge. This has been necessary in order to now close this work using a language that will enable policymakers, service providers and individual practitioners to hear them well too. Crucially, women's voices accompany my words.

#### *Re-shaping welfare services:*

1. Recognise that women's offending behaviour may be directly related to their experiences of domestic violence and ensure that appropriate opportunities are provided for them to explore their support needs in this context.

Know that it's so difficult to make that first step to seek help. You just think, "Just, just, just, I'll take you somewhere else," (in a whisper). And you're sat there and you're thinking "Just take me somewhere else and I'll tell you all about it," (laughing) But they don't – they just stand there and the guy is sat right next to you and oh! *It's so frustrating* (emphasised). Now you see – in that situation, if I was sat there and I had a serious stab wound and a male nurse asked my partner to leave the room he probably would have left the room. But there's no way I'd have been able to tell a male person what's happened because if they didn't act upon it or they didn't do anything and I had to walk out of that cubicle with him – go back to him (pause). I would have got an absolute smashing around the face because of the male (pause). He would have accused me of giving the male nurse you know, signals to, you know, send him out of the room so he could get up to some sexual – you know – that's how his mind would work! So, know how to deal with the situation with the most discretion, definitely. If there'd been somebody there in that hospital that could have known, that could have seen the picture. I mean surely they could tell by body language or, you know. I mean there

must be something they could pick up on. Whether they just don't care or whether they really genuinely don't know? (Rachel)

2. Take account of the combined impact of domestic violence, criminality and structural inequalities on women's help-seeking behaviour.

I want them to be more understanding really. (Rebecca)

3. Consider re-shaping universal approaches to providing community-based services by developing specific welfare responses that are based on differential need.

When I'm in crisis I want to go and hide, to run away from it all, but maybe if someone came to my home and offered support but appreciated that I needed to talk in my own time. If there was someone there when I needed them, it'd be good to know because then I would know that when I was ready, that person would be there for me. When someone came the first time I might tell them to shove off, so it would be important for that person to keep coming back again, not be put off. (Rosie)

4. Avoid interpreting *difference* as *deviance* by supporting practitioners to develop their understanding of the lived realities and specific, multiple and complex needs of individuals/distinct groups of women, including women offenders.

I would say treat me more with respect. Don't treat me like an animal. Treat me like a human being. Basically I just want to be treated like a human being. (Lesley)

5. Acknowledge past discrimination and disadvantage associated with 'being' a woman offender/victim of domestic violence and identify strategies for overcoming the negative impact of labelling and judgmental attitudes by policymakers, service providers and individual practitioners.

Don't be judgmental or anything, just sit there and listen. (Leanne)

6. Provide opportunities for individual practitioners to deconstruct what they think they know about how they communicate with 'others' and re-think what it means to be in relationship with service users.

(You) should try looking from the inside out and not from the outside in. Really! Do you know what I mean? That's the only thing that I would say. (You) need to put yourself – try to imagine yourself in that kind of predicament and how you would go about dealing with it. (Carol)

7. Challenge power relations in service provider/individual practitioner/service user relationships and be open and responsive to the notion that each individual has the



capacity for vilifying and 'othering' 'others'.

I would like them all, all of them to know what it's like to be on drugs - to live like that. They think it's easy, they're ignorant. It's not like that at all.  
(Angie)

8. Ensure the participation of women offenders in user involvement initiatives to end their silence and invisibility and develop a shared understanding of their perceptions of appropriate, effective and accessible community-based welfare services.

Sit down – sit down and actually *talk* (emphasised) to people a bit more – again – I think that could help. (Stacey)

*Identifying the characteristics of a service generic model of provision: a creative synthesis*

The final task involves identifying the characteristics of a service generic model of provision based on attitudes, behaviours and delivery by service providers and individual practitioners that is informed by women's experiences. Overall, these exist in my interpretations of the most important messages that women wanted to convey to service providers and individual practitioners. They are seemingly uncomplicated because of how they are premised on participants asking welfare service providers/individual practitioners (and researchers) to be in relationship with them and thereby narrow the gaps and eradicate the barriers that frequently cause harm. Yet, as has been revealed so candidly by women in this work, this is full of complexity. Importantly, the profound and lasting impact of this study resides in the connections that exist between the appeals to both break down boundaries in relationships and to integrate reflexivity in approaches to welfare service provision *and* research of this kind. However, as has so clearly been illustrated in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, women offenders' voices are seldom heard, let alone listened to. This is despite the fact that the nature and essence of *appropriate* responses have been voiced so clearly by women in this study. Therefore, following Moustakas (1990), what brings this collaborative research journey to its close is a creative synthesis of the voices of each woman as they convey what they *most* wanted service providers and individual practitioners to listen to, hear and then to change. These words are accompanied by great hopes that they *will* be listened to and that ultimately things *will* be altered as a result.

Care for me with respect and positive regard  
Don't judge me or blame me  
Be more approachable  
Be straight with me  
Talk to me and hear me  
Help me to trust you  
Give me a chance  
Recognise that I am a woman and that I have particular needs  
See me as an individual  
Support and help me

Be there for me  
Come to me and work with me in my home  
Don't give up if I don't let you in straight away or if I am angry  
Provide time and help to think and explore what's happened to me  
Improve your responses to domestic violence and child abuse  
Be more knowledgeable and understanding  
Ask me, but know what to do if I tell you the truth  
Don't give up if I don't tell you straight away  
Believe me and give me a chance to get away  
If I stay, know there is a reason and remain close by me

In essence, *be in relationship with me*



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## **Appendix 1**

### **Information about gatekeeper organisations**

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#### **Women's Prison**

A purpose built prison that was originally built as a facility for boys before being re-designated as a multi-functional establishment for female offenders. Additional living units have been added over the years to increase capacity. The female prisoner population included un-convicted, un-sentenced and sentenced women, including a significant number of juveniles, young prisoners and adult women. Like all establishments in the female estate the prison regularly operated close to maximum capacity due to the current disproportionate increase in the population of women offenders. It had a large catchment area and also held foreign nationals from a large number of different countries.

#### **Women offenders probation service programme**

A national probation service 'Women's Work' modular community programme for female offenders under supervision. This included topics relevant to their offending and lifestyles, for example, specific sessions focused on societal expectations and pressures on women, helpful and unhelpful influences, thoughts, feelings and behaviours, understanding offending behaviour and characteristics for change. Good contact with community-based services and part of a partnership initiative with a local women's project.

#### **Voluntary sector women's project personal development programme**

A community women's project that provided a supportive environment in which women offenders were given opportunities to meet other women who shared similar experiences to theirs and participate in a group work programme which included a variety of confidence building activities. In addition, project staff provided individual counselling and advice services. They also enabled individuals to make contact with representatives from various community groups to meet their education, health and social care needs. Lunch and support with child care and transport was provided to all participants.



## Appendix 2

### Ethics addendum

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This addendum addresses issues pertaining to ethical considerations inherent within the research process. An outline of the major issues arising from an ethical review undertaken as part of completing the RD1 is given with reference to supporting documentation, including an informed consent form (see Appendix 5).

#### 1. Ethical standards

This research will be undertaken in compliance with the ethical standards of the University of Gloucestershire as laid out in the University's handbook, *Research Ethics: A Handbook of Principles and Procedures*.

#### 2. Ethical review

##### 2.1 Investigator

Women offender's experiences will be central to the study and will be explored in a number of ways. Some of the information that participants share may be of a sensitive nature. Individuals might, for example, disclose their experience of domestic violence; physical abuse or rape and it will therefore be crucial to ensure that relevant information and support is given by referring women to appropriate support networks or agencies (Homan 1991; Renzetti and Lee 1993). My previous experience as a practitioner, working with women offenders in the community, enables me to feel confident in this area, particularly in respect of having a good working knowledge of the support services that are available and the range of possible referral routes and procedures that exist.

##### 2.2 Research participants

The physical, social and psychological well being of the research participants is paramount and therefore it is important to consider their particular characteristics and any issues for concern (May 1993; Maynard and Purvis 1994). This is especially relevant in this context because participants are 'offenders' and are also perhaps, drug or alcohol users or victims of domestic violence. In addition, some women will be accessed via statutory agencies including, the probation service and women's prison, where there is a clear power imbalance within women's relationships with 'workers'. Despite these factors, participants are not perceived as 'vulnerable' as defined in the university handbook on ethical principles and procedures in that volunteers who are able to give informed consent to their participation will be sought and all participants will be free to leave the study at any point.

### 2.3 *Informed consent*

Prior to seeking formal consent, all participants will be given full and detailed information about the research, in an accessible form, as part of the process of seeking their participation in the study (Singer and Frankel 1982; Robson 1993). In recognition of the nature of this particular group of women's lives and experiences, free and informed consent will be sought in two ways. Firstly, by using an informed consent form for those women who are known to statutory probation and prison services and secondly, via a process of verbal consent for those women who are accessing voluntary sector support agencies.

The rationale for this relates to whether services are required to have knowledge of the individuals' personal details, including their names. In addition, some studies suggest that there are adverse affects on response rates as a result of the use of consent forms in particular areas (Singer 1978; Kimmel 1988). If participants are being reassured about anonymity and confidentiality then it seems contradictory to require them to give a signature on a legal statement of consent: for example, women who are drug abusers and accessing voluntary sector projects are likely to view participation in the study as 'too risky' if they have to sign forms (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Kimmel 1996). The feminist ethical perspective also dictates that all efforts are made to redress the power balance in the research relationship (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984). Therefore, the use of a consent form may be perceived by some participants as something that implies that they are engaging in a study where they are merely the passive recipients of 'treatment' rather than as active partners in the process (Rubin and Rubin 1995).

In seeking verbal consent, potential participants will be given all relevant information which appears on any consent form. Discussions will be held regarding; the nature and purpose of the study, background details about the researcher, practical details about what women's participation will involve and how and to whom any results will be disseminated. It will be made explicit that; participation is voluntary, information will be stored securely and anonymity and confidentiality within the boundaries of legal frameworks will be ensured. Confidentiality may however, have to be breached if, for example, information is disclosed that indicates that a woman is putting a child at risk. Any risks including those associated with disclosure of sensitive information will be discussed fully with participants.

In recognition of the position of women in prison or on probation, it is important to stress that participants will not be pressurised into giving consent. Building a relationship based on mutual trust and respect by seeking more than one contact with participants and integrating confidence building activities will in part encourage women to understand that they do not *have* to take part in the study. Consent will also be re-negotiated at appropriate stages so as not to assume ongoing consent over a period of time.



#### ***2.4 Confidentiality and anonymity***

With regard to confidentiality, the research will be undertaken with reference to codes of conduct specific to the 'gatekeeper' organisations. This is because different agencies such as, individual voluntary sector projects and the probation service adopt different positions in relation to their confidentiality policies. This is illustrated by how, within the probation service, any disclosures of new offences must be reported, whereas at a local drug support project, only offences of a drug trafficking nature must be reported. All agencies work under the same child protection legislation, so these safeguards are jointly shared.

Participants will be afforded anonymity at all times. Names will be altered to protect participant's identity within written work and all information will be carefully stored. Although unlikely, advice will be sought from the supervisory team if information is given that is viewed as being 'too sensitive' to record. Data will not be shared or divulged to other researchers without prior permission although participants will be informed about potential uses of the data, for example, in publications and as part of conference papers and presentations, but again, where anonymity is protected by the use of pseudonyms.

Prior to all interviews and focus group discussions the 'rules of engagement' or 'ground rules' will be discussed and negotiated with the individual and/or group thus providing a further opportunity to address issues of confidentiality and anonymity.

#### ***2.5 Research advisory group***

Attention will be paid to the needs of the research advisory group as members of the broad 'research team' in order to anticipate and guard against any harmful consequences for them in undertaking their role. Recognition is given to the fact that they bring their own experiences of their contact with the Criminal Justice System and that they may well also share information of a personal and sensitive nature.

The same principles and procedures with regard to informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity apply to all members of the research advisory group.

### Appendix 3

#### Letter to Prison Governor

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University of Gloucestershire

The Governor  
HM Prison

Date:

Dear \*\*\*\*

I gather from \*\*\*\* that she recently spoke with you about my discussions with her to explore the possibility of accessing \*\*\*\* to seek women's participation in my research for my PhD.

I am currently a full time research student and lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire and took up my post there in September 1999. Prior to that I was the \*\*\*\* Co-ordinator and was largely responsible for the development and management of a specific service initiative for women offenders. The project is a partnership between \*\*\*\* Probation Service and \*\*\*\* Centre for Voluntary Services aiming to build and extend opportunities for women offenders in their communities.

During my time at the project I undertook a pilot study of community-based health, education and social care service providers on their approach to meeting the needs of particular groups of women including women offenders. In addition, I ran one focus group with a small number of women offenders to compare the findings. There were some key differences resulting in a recommendation being made to carry out a more detailed and extensive exploration of the experiences of women offenders in identifying their needs and accessing services.

The aim of my study here therefore, is to explore the enabling and inhibiting factors that affect women offenders' abilities to identify their education, health and social care needs and successfully make use of community-based services. There are clear links to the work of the \*\*\*\* Project and the experiences I had there working with women who repeatedly described the often harsh and negative treatment they experienced when they tried to take steps to access, for example, health care services and mainstream college courses. A number of women also had very positive experiences which I am also keen to explore.

I would like to involve women who have contact with the criminal justice system in a number of ways. That includes women on probation, women in prison and women who are making use of voluntary initiatives such as the \*\*\*\* Project and the county's drugs projects and I wonder therefore if it might be possible for me to seek women's participation via HM \*\*\*\*?

\*\*\*\* Probation Service and the voluntary sector project are keen to be involved in the study and have formally granted me access. I am currently in the process of establishing an advisory group of women offenders who will play an active part in guiding the research and am hoping to be able to begin my fieldwork early in the summer of 2000.

I very much hope that it will be possible for me to undertake this study in collaboration with you and look forward to hearing from you. If you would like any further information or would like to meet to discuss the project in more detail – please contact me. My telephone number is \*\*\*\*.

Yours Sincerely,

Sarah Hill



## Can you help?

I am a research student working on a study that is about women offenders' experiences of making use of services like health centres, social services, housing departments and colleges. The aim is to find out how to improve these services.

Would you be willing to talk with me about your own contact with services like these?

What do you think about the way services are offered?  
Are they easy to use or is it an uphill battle?

- The information you give will be treated in confidence
- Your name will not appear on any paperwork
- The information you give will be used for the research only
- All information will be securely stored

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything, please contact \*\*\*\*\* - \*\*\*\*\* based at \*\*\*\*\* opposite the dining room

Thanks  
Sarah Hill

**Appendix 5**  
**Voluntary Informed Consent Form**

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**Voluntary Informed Consent Form**

You are invited to take part in a study about your use of services like health centres, social services and colleges

The purpose is to find out how to improve these services for you

Any information you give will be useful

Please help by taking part in an interview/group discussion with me

**Confidentiality Statement**

- The information you give will be treated in confidence
- Your name will not appear on any paperwork
- The information you give will be used for the research only
- All information will be securely stored
- The tape(s) will be destroyed after the project

***You do not have to take part in this study***

***You can withdraw at any stage***

If you have any questions or you would like to discuss anything, please contact me, Sarah Hill on Tel:

**Consent**

I agree to take part in this study and fully understand my involvement in it. I understand that I can leave the study at any time.

Signature-----Date-----



## **Appendix 6**

### **Prompt sheet for conducting semi-structured interviews**

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#### **Prompt Sheet for Individual Interview**

1. Explain research – purpose/aim/outcome
  2. Discuss ground rules – agree them with the individual
  3. Seek consent - pay particular attention to confidentiality and anonymity
- ☐ Begin by asking participants to 'word-storm' the range of services they have had contact with – Record and ask them to indicate where they have had their most positive/negative experiences (Can keep returning to this if discussion loses focus or dries up)
  - ☐ Ask participants to spend a few moments reflecting on their earliest experiences of contact with community-based services of any type – education, health or social care and then describe these
  - ☐ Overall, how would women describe their contact with services? Positive/negative? Ask to elaborate
  - ☐ Ask women to say something about their worst experiences of contact with services and why they were negative
  - ☐ Ask participants about the impact of their offending on their contact with services – did they notice a change once they were carrying that label?
  - ☐ Ask women to consider their most recent contact with services – have things changed at all? If so – why? Is it because of them or changes in the services?
  - ☐ Ask participants to share their positive experiences of services – discuss what it was that made the experience positive
  - ☐ Ask women to say what they would like to see done differently by services in the future
  - ☐ Ask about user involvement if appropriate, so would they like to be able to take part in planning services, to 'have their say'
  - ☐ Ending the interview – thank women and offer the opportunity to contact me again if they would like to discuss things in more depth; offer the opportunity to look at written work somewhere down the line (get contact details if appropriate)
  - ☐ Ask women to evaluate their participation in the study using open questions/questionnaire

## Appendix 7

### Coding Frame: Version 9 and worked example of how interview material generated themes and then the coding frame

#### Process

This coding frame was developed using Winmax. Interview data was imported from transcripts and text groups were created for each of the participant groups, i.e., women on probation, women in prison and women accessing the women's project. Themes emerged through a process of coding text segments and refining these by adding further sub-codes and later merging some codes and sub-codes. Some text segments had multiple codes.

<b>Chaotic and problematic lives</b> Alcohol Abuse Rita's story Drug abuse Links to offending Looking after kids No access to G.P No way out To cope after being raped Trying to get clean Doing it alone Knowing what to do Letting myself down Need right script Need support Need to be ready Need to relocate Links to domestic violence No support whatsoever Consequences Rehab Too many barriers Education Achieving against the odds No support/help Employment No hope Feeling judged Don't care now Isolated and invisible Links to child abuse Links to drug abuse Offending behaviour A gradual process Altered perceptions Influence of friends Link to domestic violence Links to being let down Losing everything Making changes Partner also offending Type of offence  <b>Health services (general)</b> Negative experiences Attitudes-Felt like an animal Negative atmosphere Neglect Not interested in me Not listening to me Positive experiences A holistic approach Believed me GP listens and takes time Importance of confidentiality	<b>Domestic Violence</b> A taboo subject Coping alone Cultural differences Description of d.v Duration Emotional/psychological abuse Financial abuse Physical abuse Power and control Impact on access to services Links to children They never leave you alone They take everything away Sexual abuse Trying to protect the kids Vicious cycle Reasons for going back What lead up to abuse Difficult to talk about Experience - welfare services Consequences of-ve experience Tessa's story DSS Health services Housing Lack of services No help or support Too many barriers Victim blaming Experience of police Impact of past experience Ineffective - they do nothing Make you feel worthless Overall impression of police Slow response They abused me too Tried to offer help Experience of refuges Negative experiences Coping with 'different' women Cultural difference No interpreters Lack of info about support Lack of support No help - consequences No safe space Poor accommodation Too many restrictions Workers were terrible Positive experiences Family support Provides a safe place Tried to offer protection Links to drug abuse
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<p>Non-judgmental in approach Putting in a good word for me Referred me to SS for help</p> <p><b>Children</b> Care by family member Couldn't look after kids Want to see kids Impact of offending Lucky to have children Visits in prison</p> <p><b>Police (general)</b> Negative experiences Poor treatment + shock tactic Dangerous consequences They do nothing for you They judge you and don't believe you and pick on you and put you down Positive experiences Trying to help and support Want to listen to advice What women want from police Fair treatment Mutual respect To sit down and talk to me</p> <p><b>Prison life</b> Consequences of custody End up being labelled End up homeless again Hate myself Lose possessions Lose the kids Positive change Worst experience Coping with custody Desperate measures Wanting to die Keeping busy + working hard Need to manage own time Keeping yourself to yourself Need hope Need some control Need to be assertive Particular difficulties Accessing counselling Being in lock up Being 'super enhanced' Being with co-accused Contact with other women Don't want any help Limited funding for education Moving to a new prison Poor health care Select who to talk to Positive experiences Feeling better Getting help and support Prison staff On the same wave length Length of sentence Harsh sentencing Life after prison Keep being knocked back Consequences - giving up Links to the outside Examples of good links No flexibility No help No responses Setting things up pre-release</p>	<p>Links to self-harm Links to exp. of child abuse Links to offending Tangled web - abuse of kids Making changes I realised I had to get away Patterns of abuse Support from family What women want - d.v A chance to get away Counselling Government to listen/discuss Improved police response Increased awareness of dv Independent specialist agency More publicity about support More support From a 'survivor' Not from a 'survivor' Ongoing change Pro arrest procedures Someone to talk to in refuges Time to think and explore To be relocated and housed To change everything Workers 2 be proactive + safe Workers to just ask about dv Workers to be middle aged Workers to be non-judgemental Workers to be women Workers to go to women</p> <p><b>Probation service</b> Negative experiences Feeling let down Overall impression Negative Positive Positive experiences Doesn't hide anything Doing all they can Makes me feel valued PO easy to talk to PO is so nice PO listened to me Prepared to take a risk Sometimes it doesn't work Providing practical help Help with housing Helping through counselling Setting up interviews Trying to help and support Probation programmes Best experience Doesn't really help Putting on a front Hard to begin with Importance of knowing someone</p> <p><b>Social services (general)</b> Contact Didn't want contact Low expectations Minimal contact Negative experiences Feeling let down by SS Judging me all the time Messing me about No help at all No support Overall impression Childrens homes Foster care Positive experiences Feels like she's on my side</p>
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<p> Need to think positively  Need to work hard to succeed  And stay away from men  Nothing to go out to  Problems are still there  Feel despair  Very frightened  Quickly forget good work  Rebuilding relationships  Relying on support by family  Support  Lots of support  No support outside  Links to repeated drug abuse  Only support from probation  What women want after prison  Access to probation progs  Education and support outside  Employment  Help and support  From probation  Need to like worker  Through care and follow up  Housing  Help finding accommodation  New place to get clean  To put prison behind me  Practical help on the inside  Achievements  Counselling  Education  Prison as rehab  Prison to stay alive  Programmes  Feeling stronger as a result  Pre-sentence fear  Prison environment  Good facilities </p> <p> <b>Welfare services (overall)</b>  Frequent use of services  Gender of worker  Help seeking  Didn't want help  Impact of past experience  Low expectations  No confidence, self esteem  No-one comes to you  No-one to turn to  Role of mutual respect  Trust and vulnerability  Trying to cope  Drugs to take it all away  Mixed experiences - good/bad  Negative experiences-general  Feel let down by all  No positive experiences  Self blaming  No support  They turn you away  Workers are judgmental  Workers don't care  Workers don't listen  Positive experiences  Getting support now  Worker listened  Worker non-judgmental  Worker open and honest  Worker was really helpful  Vicious circles - an example </p>	<p> Involving me  Putting in extra time for me  SS Family Centre  Trying to help me  Taking the kids away  Biggest worry and fear  Maybe for the best  Not involved in decision  Over my dead body  What women want from SS  Appropriate help - an example  Quick response  To be approachable  To sit down and talk </p> <p> <b>What women want - general</b>  Be treated like a human being  Contact with other women  Empathy  Follow up and action  For government to hear them  More funds from government  More services  Positive regard  Provs.2 imagine 4 themselves  Support, talk and help  Worker to keep coming back  Time on my own  To be given a chance  To be listened to + heard  To demonstrate  To end isolation  To improve women's lives  Trust and confidentiality  Worker to be on woman's side  Worker to take responsibility  Workers to be non-judgmental </p> <p> <b>Women's project - vol sector</b>  Anxious about going there  Positive Experiences  Building trust with others  Hearing other's experiences  Helped me  Made me think  So different  Reasons for going  What women want WR  Less talking, more practical  More time </p>
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## Worked example of how interview material generated themes and then the coding frame

### 1. TEXT from transcript: Women in Prison. WPKD96.txt (lines 420/422)

I'd left so many times and then um – I'd just always gone back because, for whatever reason. It took a long time but I've been... I mean I'd left him so many times, more times than I could count.

### 2. CODING

CODE: Domestic violence

SUB-CODE: Description of domestic violence

SUB-SUB-CODE: Vicious cycle

### 3. DISCUSSION IN THESIS (See pp 147-148)

Certainly, for a lot of participants, the burden of fear and abuse of power and control was too great to bear, resulting in them being unable to see a safe way out of the relationship for themselves or their children. Their greatest concern was that their husbands/male partners would succeed in killing them. Yet, women can also encounter workers who dismiss or minimise the seriousness of the threats they are enduring. This is despite the fact that they are probably the only ones who can really assess the dangers they face because they know very well how far their partners are willing to go. The fact that two women in Britain are (known to be) murdered each week as a result of domestic violence (Home Office 1999) and that women are at greatest risk of homicide at the point of separation or *after* they have left the relationship (Lee 2000), provides some evidence of how well-founded women's concerns are. Similarly, it is also known that domestic violence often persists and escalates *after* separation (Mirlees-Black 1999). Therefore, whilst perpetrators are threatening or stalking women and applying pressure on them directly and via their children, it is understandable that many find themselves caught up in a vicious cycle which involves repeatedly leaving and then later returning to their relationships.

I'd left so many times and then, I'd just always gone back because, for whatever reason. It took a long time but I've been... I mean I'd left him so many times, more times than I could count. (Kath)

As will become clearer in Chapter 8, women in this situation also experienced extreme frustration with trying to seek help and encountering a consistent lack of support or practical assistance. Subsequently, this resulted in them feeling forced into making the decision to return to the relationship.

**Appendix 8**  
**Sample letter to participants**

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University of Gloucestershire

Ms.  
HM Prison

Date:

Dear \*\*\*\*

Hi – \*\*\*\* phoned me today to let me know that you have agreed to meet me to talk about your experience of contact with services for my research.

I wanted to write to thank you and also to let you know that I have arranged a legal visit for \*\*\*\*\* at \*\*\*\* am.

Looking forward to meeting you then and thank you again

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Hill



## Appendix 9

### Individual biographies

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#### **Women attending the probation service women offenders programme**

##### *Angie*

Angie was twenty years old and pregnant with her first baby when I met her. Her partner had died recently from a drug overdose. He was a user and a dealer. She was missing him terribly and talked about how she had left him immediately prior to his death. She said this was because, whilst he had *always* been abusive and violent, of late, his violence towards her had escalated to such a great extent that she was suffering almost daily beatings. Angie had met him when she was seventeen and working at a department store. Within a short period of time she had also become an addict and described how she would do anything for drugs, feeding a £250 a day habit. She said she had reached a point where she had sunk so low that she had committed sexual acts for money particularly during a time when her partner had been in prison. With support from an obstetrician and midwife she was using methadone as an alternative to street heroin. Angie was serving a three-month deferred custodial sentence for theft and a twelve-month probation order which she had almost completed. She successfully finished all modules of the women offenders programme.

##### *Lesley*

Lesley's offence was 'driving whilst disqualified'. She described herself as a 'bad mother' and said that she was trying to change. When I met her she was pregnant with twins but during the time I had contact with her she miscarried one of the foetuses. On a previous occasion she had had stillborn twins and had suffered a number of other miscarriages. She also had four other children who were all in foster care because of concerns about child protection. Lesley was abused as a child and had been a victim of domestic violence for many years. She had also been addicted to amphetamines in the past. She was in regular communication with her children via supervised contact visits. Her only hope was that they would be returned to her care but she recognised that this might not be possible even if she could demonstrate that she had successfully separated from her husband. In the short term, she was aiming towards securing more frequent and unsupervised contact visits with them in the future. During the short time I knew her, her husband broke into her house and smashed up her furniture. A chance meeting in a pub resulted in him punching her in the face and some time afterwards, despite having had no contact with him, he reported her for allegedly 'knifing him' which resulted in her being arrested and having to spend a night in police cells.

### *Rosie*

Rosie was twenty-one. She was a lone parent with a two-year old daughter and was living happily with her new boyfriend. She had been abused as a child, raped when she was seventeen and her previous partner had physically, sexually, emotionally and financially abused her for about two years. The injuries he inflicted on her were so severe that she said she couldn't wear clothes that showed any part of her body except her forearms because she was covered in scars from stab wounds, especially on her legs. She was very focused on trying to get re-housed because of fears for her safety after he had located her whereabouts and begun threatening and stalking her. This was not the first time this had happened. Rosie was a drug user and had been addicted to heroin and crack. She had been 'clean' for six months when I met her. Unfortunately, she relapsed during the short time that I knew her but detoxed again and was trying to stay 'clean'. Rosie was serving a two-year probation order for causing 'Actual Bodily Harm'. She also had a history of committing theft and credit card fraud. She successfully completed all modules for the women offenders programme.

### *Rita*

Rita had three children who were all living with her. She was a lone parent but was in contact with her children's father. She was abused as a child and had been a victim of domestic violence for many years. Several times during the course of the programme, she arrived at the session having obviously been physically assaulted (black eyes, bruised cheeks and split lips) the night before. Rita had been an alcoholic for more than twenty years. She was trying to 'dry out' but frequently returned to well known patterns of binge drinking for several days at a time. She was very reluctant to even consider rehab and was arrested twice during the course of the programme for being drunk and disorderly. Her children had been removed from her care by social services on more than one occasion and concerns were being expressed about their current safety. She often articulated her despair and lack of hope for her future. Rita was serving a two-year probation order for shop-lifting and being drunk and disorderly.

## **Women in prison**

### *Stacey*

Stacey was twenty-one years old. She had been a victim of both child abuse and domestic violence. She had lived in a social services run children's home from the age of eleven and had been committing crime since that time. She had been abusing drugs and shop-lifting to raise the money to feed her habit. She described how, prior to going to prison, she had been close to death and how she believed that being in prison had saved her life. Stacey was sentenced to a six-year custodial sentence for 'drug related offences'. She was preparing for her release after having served three years and three months and was hoping to get a job in catering 'on the out'. She was looking forward to re-establishing contact with her two children who were six and four years old.



### *Kath*

Kath was twenty-five. She had one son who was seven years old and she was a lone parent. She had been given a three-year sentence for 'drug related offences'. She had been in prison for thirteen months and was expecting to do another five months. She described how she had begun to have community visits and home leaves and how much she appreciated the opportunity these gave her to be with her son. She was missing him very much and was worried about his welfare, although she believed that her family were looking after him well. Kath had had several periods of time living in children's homes from the age of seven and she had been a drug user since she was a teenager. This had lead to her shop-lifting and doing cheque book and credit card fraud. Kath described how she felt she had begun to change her life eight months before going into prison. She had been a victim of domestic violence for three years but had left her husband and found work again. She'd also stopped taking drugs. However, a few months later she had re-established contact with certain friends, relapsed and committed a number of offences. Kath did not feel hopeful about her future prospects in relation to employment because of the nature of her offences.

### *Carol*

Carol had been in prison for four months and was due out in six weeks time. She was in for theft and, not counting remand, this was her thirteenth custodial sentence. Her other previous convictions included shop-lifting, fraud and armed robbery. She described how, every time she went into prison she lost her property and all her possessions and how she had often been homeless. She had two sons and a daughter who were living with family and she rarely had any contact with them. Carol had been injecting heroin since she was eleven years old. She had been a victim of child abuse, had lived in children's homes and had been physically, sexually, emotionally and financially abused by a number of male partners. She was thirty-two when I met her. She described prison as having kept her alive for the previous three years at least. On this sentence she had only weighed five stones when she arrived at the prison. She talked frankly about how she loved the drugs but hated the lifestyle that goes with them. She had tried doing rehab several times and, whilst she expressed despair about future employment prospects or potential to access education or training opportunities, she still had some hope that one day she might be drug free.

### *Nicky*

Nicky grew up in a loving family with four sisters and one brother. She married when she was eighteen and had her first child soon after. She left her husband two years later and worked as a secretary for a number of years. She met her second husband when she was twenty-five and had three children with him. She described how soon after meeting him her life had started going wrong. He was a drug user and dealer and over a period of eight years he controlled her, eroded her self-esteem and was extremely physically and sexually violent towards her. During this time she also became addicted to crack cocaine and began

committing cheque book and credit card fraud. She had served two previous custodial sentences, one for fraud and one for importation of drugs. She began self-harming by pulling her hair out and cutting up and was using more and more drugs to block out her pain. She described her life as a total mess. When I met her she was in prison for another importation. She had been given a sixteen-year sentence and had done three years and six months so far. She had recently become a 'listener', was hoping to be given the opportunity to participate in more therapeutic programmes and was aiming towards going to open prison as soon as possible.

### *Rachel*

Rachel was doing fifteen years for being knowingly concerned with drug importations. She had been in prison for three and a half years. She had identified, what for her, was the best way of dealing with prison life by doing education and giving herself the opportunity to obtain the GCSE's that she had failed to do at school. She described how she was addicted to studying because of how it enabled her to manage her time and take her mind out of the prison. She was also hoping to do 'A' levels and then maybe begin an Open University degree course just prior to her release in four years time (if she was successful in getting parole) that she could then complete at university. She desperately wanted a degree. Rachel was twenty-seven when I met her and had one child. She had used drugs for about two years before going into prison and had been involved in a violent relationship from the age of fifteen to twenty-three. She had only recently arrived at this prison and had had very negative experiences of the other prisons she had been in. She was still in the process of 'settling down' but was beginning to feel more secure in her surroundings.

### *Leanne*

Leanne was forty-six years old when I met her in prison. She had four children aged between twenty-eight and eleven. She had done three years of a seven year sentence for importation of cocaine and cannabis and this was her second sentence for similar offences. One of her daughters was also in prison for doing importations, another daughter had also served a custodial sentence for importing drugs and her son-in-law had been murdered the year before in a drug-related shooting. She was abused by her step-father when she was a child and had been a victim of domestic violence for about ten years before divorcing her husband. He was a drug dealer and user and she had also used drugs. He had never allowed her to work. She felt she was really being given help through a volunteer counsellor in the prison and was enjoying doing a range of programmes in the prison including an offending behaviour programme and thinking skills course.



## **Women at the women's project personal development programme**

### *Rebecca*

Rebecca had been attending the women's project for eighteen months, ever since her probation officer had referred her there as part of a two-year community sentence with a probation order for a first offence, driving without tax and insurance. She had four children and was living with her husband who was violent towards her and the children. The children's names were all on the 'at risk register' and social services were encouraging Rebecca to access a local family centre. She was very positive about the women's project because of how supported she felt by them.

### *Katie*

Full information about Katie is presented in her whole narrative in Chapter six.

### *Ellen*

Ellen had been referred to the women's project by her probation officer. She had been sentenced for doing cheque book fraud and was given a one-year probation order and forty hours community service. She said that she had narrowly avoided a custodial sentence. She was a victim of domestic violence and had divorced her husband two years earlier although he was still stalking her and had physically assaulted her on a number of occasions since their separation. He was a drug user addicted to crack and heroin and a dealer. She had been addicted to amphetamines for years but was 'clean' when I met her. She described her life as having been surrounded by drug addicts, dealers and villains. She had recently been successful in getting a job after twenty-two years of 'being a housewife' but was struggling to cope financially after experiencing difficulties with receiving Working Family Tax Credit. She had four children and was worried about being able to provide enough food for them. She was in rent arrears and in danger of having her telephone, gas and electricity cut off. She had also just had a visit from the bailiffs and talked frankly about how difficult it was to 'go straight' and not commit offences to get the money she needed. She was really enjoying the programme and particularly welcomed having the opportunity to meet other women with similar experiences to hers.

### *Sandra*

Sandra had been trying to set up a support group for women who were victims of domestic violence in conjunction with a local support and advocacy project when we met. She had also been attending the women's project for about six months after having been referred by her health visitor after attempting suicide. She was a lone parent of four children aged between twelve and nine-months old. She had been abused by her parents as a child and had lived in and out of care all her life where she also experienced abuse from foster carers and other children in care. She had also been involved in two relationships with men who were perpetrators of domestic violence, one of whom had attempted to murder her with a machete

although the police later reduced the charge to 'actual bodily harm'. She'd had to go into a refuge twice and was living in family support move-on accommodation when we met. Sandra's second husband was still stalking and threatening her at the time of our interview. She had one previous driving offence that she had committed three years earlier.

### *Katrina*

Katrina was attending the women's project programme for the first time after being referred there by her social worker. She was a lone parent with one son. Serious concerns had been expressed about his safety and his name was placed on the 'at risk register' during the time I got to know her. She had also been a victim of child abuse and domestic violence. She was suffering from depression and was very pre-occupied with trying to get re-housed because she was being intimidated and harassed by neighbours living on her estate. She had had contact with the police as a victim of domestic violence and also as a result of being cautioned for her own violent behaviour during incidents between her and her mother.

### *Barbara*

Barbara had attended two programmes at the women's project. She was separated from her husband after escalating domestic violence and he was looking after their two children. Her communication with them was via supervised contact visits with her social worker after she had physically abused one of them. She had a history of enduring mental health problems and was suffering from depression but had recently returned to work. She had also had problems with abusing alcohol and had been arrested for being drunk and disorderly on a number of occasions. Her aim was to work towards re-building her relationships with her children and being able to look after them again.



**Appendix 10**  
**Copies of correspondence and feedback sheets on transcripts**

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University of Gloucestershire

Ms.

Date:

Dear \*\*\*\*\*

Hi, how are you?

I hope you don't mind me contacting you again but as I said when we met up in the summer, I wanted to write to you once more.

I'm at the stage now where I have typed up our interview and wonder if you would like to meet to look at the transcript and either add to it, change bits or leave it as it is?

We could meet at \*\*\*\*\* like we did before at a time to suit you or I could send you a copy of the transcript and you could comment on it and post it back to me. Please don't feel that you have to do either. I already really appreciate your contribution to the study.

If you could let me know what you think by returning the attached slip in the enclosed sae, I would be really grateful.

I look forward to hearing from you.

With good wishes from,

Sarah Hill

\*\*\*\*, Please put a tick in one of the following boxes and post this back to me in the enclosed s.a.e:

1. I would like to meet to look at the transcript of my interview with you and discuss any issues that arise. Please contact me to arrange a suitable time

☐

2. I would like you to post a copy of the transcript to me so that I can look at it, make any comments and post it back to you

☐

3. I do not wish to meet and I would rather not make any further comment

☐

**Many thanks for completing this**



# Comments Sheet

---

Looking back – are there other comments that you would like to make about the issues that we discussed in the interview?

What sort of impact did the experience of taking part in the research have on you? (Positive and/or negative)

**Are there things that I could have done differently?**

**How do you feel about having the opportunity to look at and amend the transcript?**

**Thank you for completing this**



Appendix 11

Participant Evaluation Questionnaire (with participant observation)

Your Views

Please read each statement and put a tick in the box that best describes how you feel about taking part in the research.

	Yes, definitely	Yes	Maybe	Maybe not	No	No, definitely not
I was given enough information about the project to make a decision about whether I took part in the study or not						
It helped to get to know Sarah before taking part in the study						
I felt able to decide how I could give my views for example, in a group or being interviewed						
I would have preferred to talk in a group						
I preferred to talk on my own – not in a group						
I was able to give my views						
I was able to ask Sarah questions about the study						
My questions were answered fully						
I felt that my views were listened to by Sarah						
I believe that giving my views could make a difference to services						
I felt that I was given all the help I needed to take part in the study						

Please turn over the page

**What was the best thing about taking part in the research?**

**What was the worst thing about taking part in the research?**

**What would you change?**

**Thank you for completing this**



**Participant Evaluation Questionnaire for women in prison  
(without participant observation)**

**Your Views**

Please read each statement and put a tick in the box that best describes how you feel about taking part in the research.

	Yes, definitely	Yes	Maybe	Maybe not	No	No, definitely not
I was given enough information about the project to make a decision about whether I took part in the study or not						
It would have helped to get to know Sarah before taking part in the study						
I felt able to decide how I could give my views for example, in a group or being interviewed						
I would have preferred to talk in a group						
I preferred to talk on my own – not in a group						
I was able to give my views						
I was able to ask Sarah questions about the study						
My questions were answered fully						
I felt that my views were listened to by Sarah						
I believe that giving my views could make a difference to services						
I felt that I was given all the help I needed to take part in the study						

**Please turn over the page**

**What was the best thing about taking part in the research?**

**What was the worst thing about taking part in the research?**

**What would you change?**

**Thank you for completing this**



**Appendix 12**  
**Gatekeeper Evaluation Questionnaire**

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**Your Views**

- Did Sarah give you adequate information about the purpose of the research?    **Yes/No**

**Comment?**

- Did you have any reservations about the research project?    **Yes/No**

**Comment?**

- Did you experience any problems setting up the research in \*\*\*\*\*    **Yes/No**

**Comment?**

- Do you think that women fully understood that they could make a choice    **Yes/No**  
about their participation – that it was voluntary?

**Comment?**

- What are your views on the research methods that were used i.e. participant  
observation/individual interviews?

**Comment?**

- Do you feel that Sarah provided women participants with adequate support Yes/No during their involvement in the research?

**Comment?**

- Did the research have any impact on your delivery of the Yes/No programme/facilitation of the group/day to day work?

**Comment?**

- Did women express any apprehensions to you about their participation in the Yes/No study?

**If yes, please describe them?**

- Do you think that the research findings will be useful to you in relation to your Yes/No own work practices?

**Comments?**

- **General Comments?**

**Thank you for completing this**



# Appendix 13

## Findings from participant and gatekeeper evaluations

### Participant Evaluation Questionnaire (with participant observation)

Your Views

Please read each statement and put a tick in the box that best describes how you feel about taking part in the research.

	Yes, definitely	Yes	Maybe	Maybe not	No	No, definitely not
I was given enough information about the project to make a decision about whether I took part in the study or not	7	3	0	0	0	0
It helped to get to know Sarah before taking part in the study	10	0	0	0	0	0
I felt able to decide how I could give my views for example, in a group or being interviewed	8	2	0	0	0	0
I would have preferred to talk in a group	0	0	2	0	5	3
I preferred to talk on my own– not in a group	6	2	2	0	0	0
I was able to give my views	8	2	0	0	0	0
I was able to ask Sarah questions about the study	3	7	0	0	0	0
My questions were answered fully	4	6	0	0	0	0
I felt that my views were listened to by Sarah	9	1	0	0	0	0
I believe that giving my views could make a difference to services	6	1	2	0	0	1
I felt that I was given all the help I needed to take part in the study	7	3	0	0	0	0

Please turn over the page

## **What was the best thing about taking part in the research?**

Being able to give as much information as possible to help Sarah with future improvement in services. (Barbara)

Helping Sarah and others in the near future. (Katrina)

**The best thing was that for years I have felt that my views were very insignificant and the fact that Sarah actually listened to me. A lot of services that I have come into contact with didn't actually listen properly to what I had to say and almost blamed me for the situation I found myself in. (Sandra)**

I hope that my views about the police, social services and DSS will make a difference in the future. It was so important that you were in the group before you asked me to take part in the research. It was much better than if I'd met you cold. (Ellen)

Feeling that my experiences haven't been wasted and that at least one person is keen to make improvements in the services offered (or not) to us. (Katie)

Being able to talk about my experiences with services. (Rebecca)

To be totally honest about my experience with social services and the police. (Rita)

That I got to voice my opinion and that I got to know Sarah first. (Rosie)

Talking about your experiences with different services. (Lesley)

**Giving my views. It made it much easier to talk to you having got to know each other a bit in the group beforehand. It would have been difficult to get rid of the 'front' otherwise. I was able to be more honest. (Angie)**

## **What was the worst thing about taking part in the research?**

Opening up. (Barbara)

I was worried that I wouldn't be able to answer any questions and that you would fire questions at me. I was worried about coping with my nerves. (Katrina)

**The fact that because I have been so dissatisfied in the past with services, this was the first time that I had spoken about what had happened to me in eight years and I found that I was overwhelmed with how I was feeling. (Sandra)**

Talking about my past with my violent drug addict partner. (Ellen)

Being worried that what I had to say wouldn't be relevant and that I would be wasting Sarah's time. (Katie)

Talking whilst being recorded on tape. (Lesley)



## **What would you change?**

I would have liked more time. (Barbara)

I wouldn't have changed anything. It's been so important to get to know you beforehand.  
(Katrina)

I would change the initial explanation by (project worker) when asking if we objected to Sarah joining the group with regard to not appreciating how wide-ranging Sarah's interests were. I think if Sarah had suggested we all wrote our names down and she would approach us for a one-to-one from the start rather than later on, I, for one, would have realised just how approachable she was though, I realise she had to gain our confidence first! I kept my distance to begin with, feeling I was irrelevant! (Katie)

**Participant Evaluation Questionnaire for women in prison (without participant observation)**

**Your Views**

Please read each statement and put a tick in the box that best describes how you feel about taking part in the research.

	Yes, definitely	Yes	Maybe	Maybe not	No	No, definitely not
I was given enough information about the project to make a decision about whether I took part in the study or not	3	1	1	0	1	0
It would have helped to get to know Sarah before taking part in the study	2	1	0	0	3	0
I felt able to decide how I could give my views for example, in a group or being interviewed	2	3	0	0	1	0
I would have preferred to talk in a group	0	0	1	0	3	2
I preferred to talk on my own – not in a group	2	3	1	0	0	0
I was able to give my views	4	2	0	0	0	0
I was able to ask Sarah questions about the study	2	4	0	0	0	0
My questions were answered fully	3	3	0	0	0	0
I felt that my views were listened to by Sarah	6	0	0	0	0	0
I believe that giving my views could make a difference to services	2	2	1	1	0	0
I felt that I was given all the help I needed to take part in the study	1	3	1	1	0	0

**Please turn over the page**



### **What was the best thing about taking part in the research?**

To put my feelings and views across. (Leanne)

Telling somebody who is interested about my experiences. (Rachel)

It was informative. (Nicky)

### **Voicing my opinion. (Carol)**

I like to think that my views on matters would help to make a change. (Kath)

To help others. (Stacey)

### **What was the worst thing about taking part in the research?**

The environment, i.e. the room and lack of comfortable surroundings. (Rachel)

Not enough time. (Nicky)

I don't think that there was a worst part in this research. (Kath)

Not being told about the visit. (Stacey)

### **What would you change?**

The surroundings and I would have liked more time to talk. (Rachel)

To have more informal time (Leanne)

Nothing. I think Sarah did an excellent job and made me feel at ease. (Kath)

More preparation in terms of the what the interview was about and which day you would come. (Stacey)

**Thank you for completing this**

## Gatekeeper Evaluation Questionnaire

### Your Views

- **Did Sarah give you adequate information about the purpose of the research?** Yes: 4  
No: 0

#### *Comment?*

Preliminary meeting enabled group leaders to clarify aims and objectives. (Hannah)

Sarah was very clear about her intentions. (Linda)

Yes, lots of opportunity to discuss any concerns, implications for involvement etc. (Susan)

- **Did you have any reservations about the research project?** Yes: 3  
No: 1

#### *Comment?*

Certainly not the research itself, reservations initially about an extra person in the group who was there in a more official capacity say. To be honest I was worried about my skills being evaluated also. (Gail)

Concern centred around Sarah's previous involvement with the project if some group members were the same and how they would perceive her role. (Susan)

- **Did you experience any problems setting up the research in \*\*\*\*\*** Yes: 1  
No: 3

#### *Comment?*

Sarah explained the purpose of the research well to the group and her policy on confidentiality. (Gail)

The women were given the opportunity to decide whether or not the 'group' as a whole took part. Had they decided against it, Sarah would not have been present. (Hannah)

With the operational pressure at times it was slightly problematic, but this could be overcome. (Linda)

- **Do you think that women fully understood that they could make a choice about their participation – that it was voluntary?** Yes: 4  
No: 0

#### *Comment?*

No pressure was put on the women to take part. Sarah built up a relationship of trust with the women. (Gail)

It was explained to them very clearly by Sarah and probation staff. Some welcomed the opportunity to have a say for a change. (Hannah)



Process explained well by Sarah and supported by the women's project staff team.  
(Susan)

- **What are your views on the research methods that were used i.e. participant observation/individual interviews?**

*Comment?*

This gave Sarah first hand experience and knowledge of the women in the group. She took part in the same exercises and went through with the women the emotions that they expressed. (Gail)

It is a good way of engaging people who may not always find 'interview only' research comfortable. It gives people the opportunity to see the researcher on a different level. (Hannah)

The women felt safe with the research methods. (Linda)

Women have found the individual interviews very productive and feel a sense of pride in contributing towards the research undertaken by Sarah. (Susan)

- **Do you feel that Sarah provided women participants with adequate support during their involvement in the research?** Yes: 4  
No: 0

*Comment?*

Sarah was supportive to both the group members and the group leaders. Thank you Sarah. (Gail)

Yes, adequate support was provided and information on additional community resources was given also. (Hannah)

Sarah provided the women with prompt additional information. All the women reported having a good experience with her. (Linda)

Definitely. (Susan)

- **Did the research have any impact on your delivery of the programme/facilitation of the group/day to day work?** Yes: 1  
No: 3

*Comment?*

The impact for me personally after my initial nervousness of having Sarah there was her support at the end of sessions. I valued Sarah's comments on the content of the programme and her assistance to de-brief particularly after difficult sessions. (Gail)

Sarah was very much part of the 'team'. Probation staff and women felt very comfortable working with her. A good experience all round really. (Hannah)

- **Did women express any apprehensions to you about their participation in the study?** Yes: 0  
No: 4

*If yes, please describe them?*

None whatsoever. (Linda)

- **Do you think that the research findings will be useful to you in relation to your own work practices?** Yes: 4  
No: 0

*Comments?*

It may change some of my approaches towards women to motivate them to attend programmes or other agencies. (Gail)

It will help us when providing through-care services for the women. (Linda)

- **General Comments?**

Can I have a copy when it is finished please Sarah. Thank you so much for all your help over the weeks. (Gail)

Sarah's style and approach suited this kind of research method. Very supportive of probation staff and women offenders. I would welcome the opportunity to work with her again. (Hannah)

**Thank you for completing this**



## Appendix 14

### Example of interview transcript

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**Interview (5) WP/MM/21.6      Rachel**

Some discussion and introductions before the tape was switched on and Rachel asked me to explain the research in more detail

S: The research is about women who have experience of the CJS, it's about women's experiences of contact with services and that could be any service, it could be education, health, social services, police, whatever, prison I suppose? But community services I'm thinking of more than prison services. Um and um, the research is part of my PhD, I'm doing a PhD at Cheltenham at the moment but there are lots of reasons why I'm doing the research, including personal reasons having left school with no GCSE's ---

R: Oh I'm glad I'm not the only one (laughing)

S: Oh I tell a lie I have got an 'O' level in Food and Nutrition! (laughing)

R: Oh, OK (laughing)

S: Anyway – there's all of that

R: Its never too late though is it?

S: No – it's never too late and I did my undergraduate degree as a mature student. But also before I started my PhD I was working as Co-ordinator of a women's project in Gloucester which is a project which was set up for women offenders to help offer support to help women get back into education and training and employment. And find their way around different services like housing and all that stuff. Time and time again women were coming in talking about often very difficult experiences of contact with services and then every now and then there'd be a really positive story of contact with services. And I was just really keen to say well, "What is it about women's contact with services? What could services do to be more effective in offering a better service to women offenders particularly and that's what the research is about. It's to find out from women what they would like to see done differently, what's good, what's not so good and then find a way of impacting on the policy makers. So that's it in a kind of 'nut shell'.

R: Hmm, mm

S: I don't have anything to do with the prison here, or probation or police or what-have-you and the other thing I should say is that anything that you tell me today will only be used for the research, it won't be used for anything else.

R: Right

S: I'll also change your name so that you can't be identified and I'll take great care (emphasised) to make sure that you can't be identified. So the prison won't be identified and so on but at the same time anything that you do say, I'll use your words rather than mine.

R: Yes, OK.

S: The other thing to say is that the tape and the transcript will be destroyed after the project.

R: No problem – That's fine,

S: If at any point you think, "Hmmm, don't want to do this", then say, "Stop" and we'll stop – yeah – is that all right?

R: Yeah, no problem

S: It's a lot to go through but it's really important that you feel happy to carry on.

R: Yep.

S: So, um, before we start talking about services, do you feel OK about telling me a bit about you, your story and (pause)

R: Ok – I'm doing 15 years for being knowingly concerned with importations – I've been in prison for 3 ½ years. In that time I've gone through a series of emotions, I think a lot of people do that. When they come to prison, it's like stages (emphasised) that you go through and um I've decided that the best way that I can deal with my prison sentence is by doing education and giving myself the opportunity to obtain the GCSEs that I failed to do at school. So that's basically how I manage my time in prison, I'm absolutely addicted to the studying to be quite honest (laughing) –

S: (Laughing) – Right

R: I can't go a day without looking in my books, it kind of like takes you out of the prison.

S: Hmm – yeah, yeah, that's really important – to have those strategies isn't it?

R: It is yeah. It's like planning your time yourself because no one's going to plan it for you. They say that there's sentence planning and everything but it's better to do your own. Because then there's targets to reach along the way – it helps a lot.

S: Hmmm – so have you got a long term plan then in terms of GCSE's and so on?

R: Yeah – I'm hoping to do a couple of A levels and then maybe 2 years before I'm due for release, because I've got 4 years left now, that's if I get first parole, August 2004 – that's my release date. Um, I'm hoping to start an OU course, maybe I'll get to level 2 before I get released and then I can continue it at university. I desperately want a degree. Desperately (emphasised)

S: So you could actually top up or do that top up year, final year actually at university, full time?

R: Yeah definitely. I'd like to continue it outside.

S: Do you know what you want to do?

R: I'd like to go into Psychology in depth – I'd like to cover one area of Psychology rather than a general area. I've just taken a GCSE in Psychology.

S: Oh right? So are you waiting for the results?

R: Yeah

S: Are they the first GCSE's you've done?

R: Yeah (laughing)

S: Oh? When do you get your results?

R: August.

S: Oh right, it's horrible waiting isn't it?



R: I know.

S: Did it feel like it went OK?

R: Yeah, I couldn't believe actually how easy it was

S: Really?

R: Yeah I was thinking, surely this is not the higher paper? I quite enjoyed doing the exam.

S: So you are a woman with a mission then?

R: Oh yeah – I've done 2 years studying it though and I knew my stuff so it was quite easy.

S: Yeah – so are you going to go on and do 'A' level Psychology then?

R: Yeah I'd like to do an A level first and then perhaps do the social sciences as a first level of the OU and then maybe 'Discovering Psychology' – D202 I think it is?

S: Hmm – I don't know the OU very well

R: Yeah – that's for the second year and then I'll probably go into depth when I get to level 3 or something.

S: And they're supportive here are they of that?

R: I've not really experienced (pause) – the education staff – they're very good, they're much nicer than at (prison)

S: Right – you were in (prison) before here? (pause)

R: I was in (prison). I've only been in this prison now for 2 months.

S: That's right, because yeah, (worker) said that they'd had to work quite hard at getting you transferred here.

R: Yeah, (prison) were very reluctant to let me go because of my association with (another inmate). Because she's my relative, she's my co-accused and um, they seem to believe that she's had an influence on me committing a crime, but at the end of the day we're family and we'll never break that bond. No point in trying to keep us apart because it just won't happen.

S: Has it made a difference being here?

R: Definitely – it's been, I've had much more support, especially with being with (relative)

S: So it's support at different levels?

R: Oh yeah (said with emphasis)

S: From her and from staff?

R: From the staff as well. The staff are excellent here compared to (place). (Prison) is absolutely horrendous (emphasised).

S: Were you at (prison) for all of the rest of your sentence?

R: 2 ½ years (emphasised) I was at (place). Prior to that I was on remand at different prisons, (prison), (prison) and (prison). None were as bad as (prison). (Prison) is very (with emphasis) oppressive. I would die if I was to go back there!

S: Hmm

R: I would put up a fight – I'm not going back there. (Laughing but serious)

S: So it was a long time to be there?

R: Hmmm it was yeah.

S: So were you doing any education there?

R: I was yeah. I started the GCSE. Um, (prison) wouldn't pay for the courses that I wanted to do, because I wanted to also do a Business Studies course and a Maths course, well a GCSE with the NEC College and as you can imagine those are pretty expensive. I think about £200 per course. They were reluctant to pay for that for me because they'd already enrolled me on the Psychology course but I knew I had the ability to take on more than one course because I find it the best way to be. Um, so in the end I got so impatient with the rubbish and the crap (emphasised) they were talking that I just said, "Fair enough I'll ask a member of the family or someone to pay for it". And luckily I managed to get funding via relatives, family as it were. So I bought the two courses myself.

S: So there wasn't a problem with you actually doing them it was the funding? They didn't try to stop you from doing them?

R: Well they didn't like (emphasised) it, they didn't like it at all (emphasised) you know they think that you should just do one course and that's it. It's not very good at all at (prison) One of the teachers there, she did like me and I think she saw that I had the ability to do this so I think she pushed it for me a little bit.

S: And (worker) was saying that you're hoping to go to open prison later in the year?

R: Well – I'll have done a ¼ of my sentence on the 1st November so I should be eligible for open prison then but considering the length of sentence I've got they might not think I'm suitable? I'm not really sure how that works. That's quite frightening for me to look at after I've been in for such a long time. It's frightening for me. Thinking about housing and things when I get out is really frightening for me as well. It almost makes me want to retreat into myself.

S: It needs to be really carefully staged so that you feel comfortable about it and actually you've only been here for 2 months haven't you?

R: That's right and I mean (prison), being a 'Cat. A' – a top security prison um where you're within – it's a female prison within a male (emphasised) prison so it's not just one set of fencing. There's so much more – there's dogs on the wing and officers - everywhere you go you're escorted by an officer. It's quite disturbing really.

S: Hmmm

R: You know and since I've been here I've been much better. I've put weight back on and I feel great in myself. (Laughing)

S: It must take some adjustment though even coming here then from (prison)

R: It did

S: It must have felt really scary actually?

R: It was – (emphasised) it was terrifying (laughing) but I knew (relative) was here so that made me feel a bit easier but I suppose that if I'd been coming to a place that I knew nothing about - oh I'd have been a totally emotional wreck (laughing).



S: Hmm – yeah (pause). So before you were sentenced what were you doing before that if you go back to – (pause) how old are you now? Do you mind me asking?

R: 27

S: Do you mind if I ask you what you were doing before that?

R: Ohhhhhhhh (laughing) I don't know if it's relevant?

S: It's really to get a picture of you and your journey but you don't have to say -

R: Well I wasn't working in any legal profession for a couple of years prior to coming into prison.

S: Right

R: But before that I was actually in a firm of solicitors doing debt recovery litigation and things like that. Just um, a junior secretary position I had.

S: Was that your first job after leaving school?

R: No, I went into hair dressing after leaving school; I didn't like it because it was only £40 a week (laughing)

S: Hmm, yes it's still as badly paid now as well isn't it?

R: Hmm, so I left there and I went to work in a firm of solicitors and then when I moved up north I went for a job in another firm of solicitors and then I kept getting fired because of my lifestyle (very quiet)

S: Hmm, right.

R: I used drugs for about a year and a half to two years prior to coming into prison, but before that I never used drugs. I was actually involved in a violent relationship from the age of 15 right through 'til 23, something like that. Just before I was 23 I actually broke away from the relationship so it's a good 7 years, um. I had a child in that time so obviously my jobs – well - I couldn't hold a job down really. I mean I'd go into work with a black eye one day and I'd be feeling really embarrassed, so in the end my confidence just dwindled away.

S: So, in terms of your contact with services, what contact have you had?

R: I went into a refuge in (place). A mother and baby refuge um, I couldn't stand it – I couldn't stand it at all. It was – I don't know, it just felt – I didn't feel right. I didn't feel like I belonged there. Some of the women there were really quite rough and the language that they used um I just didn't feel comfortable at all. I think after that – I think my father came to collect me from there and he took me home to his house.

S: Hmm, so was it more about the women than about the refuge itself, the refuge staff?

R: It was both.

S: It was both?

R: Hmm, it was both. I felt that there were too many restrictions around and I felt like I was too limited. I was (pause) I don't know how to describe it. It was a horrible feeling when I think back to it. I didn't – no it wasn't good.

S: So, rather than being a place of safety, a kind of haven, which would welcome you in and offer you a safe space (pause)

R: It didn't cocoon me as such – it didn't make me feel safe at all.

S: So it was more restrictive than safe?

R: Hmm

S: And was just the one time that you were - ?

R: Just the one time Yeah.

S: And when you left there - was there any follow up or support for you at all?

R: No, nothing at all. My dad just came and collected me.

S: Right. (pause) – During that time would you have liked to have had some support from somebody, from a service, from an agency, from anyone? During the time that you were experiencing the violence as you were trying to leave the relationship?

R: I definitely would have done.

S: And what sort of thing would you have liked?

R: I would have liked to have been moved out of the area and housed.

S: Did you try and do that at any stage?

R: I contacted the council. I used to go down to the council and I actually got a copy of an injunction that I had from my firm of solicitors and took it to the council and said, "Look I need to be moved out of the area, I'm suffering domestic violence." And their response would be, "Well, there's such a huge waiting list and blah, blah, blah." So in the end I'd always end up going back and just putting up with the situation. It was difficult, it's difficult setting out on your own, being on your own and not having any support from anybody.

S: And when the relationship is very oppressive and controlling it's very difficult isn't it to –

R: It's difficult to make that first step. And obviously if there's someone there to help you with the follow-up, to help re-house you or something, to get you totally out of the area. But it was like, "No we don't want you to move from that area." Or, "There's too many people on a waiting list." Or, "You have to go through this procedure and that procedure and that procedure." And how can you do that when you've got to do it behind this person's back because it's all got to be kept secret and you've got to keep it low key and (pause)

S: Hmm, do you think that services don't take enough account of that?

R: Hmm

S: Take account of the position of women who are in violent relationships?

R: No they don't. They don't take that into consideration but there again I can see it from their point of view because there are women who go to drastic extremes and move out the area and take the kids with them and set up a new home. And then two weeks later the guy's coming in and living with them. You know there are situations where that happens but they have to be able to see who are the genuine people. And maybe if they did give a woman that chance to get away and make a life she might just say, "Well I can do without that, I don't want anything to do with that." And she might feel stronger in her decision to get away. Can you follow what I'm saying?

S: Hmm, yeah – but it's that thing about (pause) giving people a chance isn't it really I suppose?



R: Yeah – you've got to give people a chance – you have.

S: Rather than saying (pause) sometimes it feels like um, people are treated in kind of groups, so there's this view like, "Oh well, women in violent relationships, they're not going to leave anyway so what's the point?"

R: That's right! That's exactly right!

S: But what about all those women who do leave? And it's not easy and it's a journey and it's not as simple as that –

R: And also there are stages of emotion that you go through where you need somebody there. You don't need to be put into a refuge where there are all these women that are taking drugs or shouting and swearing and 'f'ing and blinding and their kids are running round with runny noses and dirty faces. And – oh (said with real feeling) honestly it's – that's not what you need. You need someone there to talk to, to make you feel stronger - to make you know that the decision that you're making is right and it will get better. Not someone that, I mean can you imagine, you are just taken out of this relationship? OK, you're relieved that you don't have to answer to anybody and you're not sat there shaking because you think you know - "Any minute now I'm going to get a punch in the face or a black eye." But then you're thrown into a situation where you're sat there in a room with minimal furniture, minimal accessories for you to do your cooking and you've got this little kid running round or whatever. You feel quite desperate – you know – you're on your own, there's nothing to do. And then outside of the room it's just like mayhem – you know?

S: Hmm – who would you want that person to be do you think? Who do you think that person could be, should be, that person to talk to you and to offer you support?

R: Not (emphasised) another person who's suffered domestic violence.

S: Not?

R: Not! No!

S: I'm interested that you say that – what –

R: I don't think so, no, because you need to see it from somebody else's perspective. You need to get strength. You need to be able to draw that strength from somebody else who can see it from outside the situation rather than one that's been in the situation.

S: Is that because there's a danger that if the person has been in the situation –

R: It's a weakness

S: So they perhaps start taking from you instead of – ?

R: That's a possibility yeah. I mean personally I would rather sit down with someone who hasn't suffered domestic violence or anything but who has a good understanding of it. They've got (emphasised) to have a good understanding but not someone who's experienced it. I would prefer that.

S: Because that could get in the way? Do you think that translates to other situations as well? Like what about in terms of your position as someone who has been labelled 'an offender'. Do you think that's important as well in terms of future support that it doesn't come from people who also have that experience as well?

R: How do you mean?

S: Well some of the um –

R: The way that they view us as ex-offenders or inmates?

S: Yeah – I mean whether when you're trying to um think about education, employment or what have you. I mean a lot of women's groups have been set up and are run by women who have experienced prison or have experienced probation or what have you. And a lot of the literature talks about how important that is, to have contact when you come out of prison for example, with other women who know what it is to be in prison. I just wonder whether you then would see that as important or not actually?

R: No, no I really wouldn't – I really want to put that behind me. I don't want to be persistently reminded of prison life. And socialising with somebody who is also an ex-prisoner, no thank you. You know they're undesirable characters as it is in here anyway. I don't choose to socialise with these people. I've been put into this situation beyond my control and I'm now forced to live amongst this. I mean I know I've done my crime myself but I feel I'm different and I just – I do.

S: Hmm, yes. But again whoever that person or those people are who give you support, do you feel that they have got to have a good understanding?

R: They've got to have a good understanding but I wouldn't want someone who's been in the situation really.

S: Hmm, yeah I guess it can potentially get in the way, I suppose?

R: Hmm.

S: So again – in terms of support at that time, would you have welcomed someone coming to you to offer support.

R: Definitely!

S: Because it can be quite difficult can't it – actually getting out?

R: Definitely, definitely, if I'd just had somebody there that would have helped me along (pause) to give me something positive and something to look forward to and some help.

S: What about people's attitudes towards you? Is that important in terms of people not being judgmental?

R: It's important to me, I do like to have positive regard from others but I know that people don't, they don't think like that. They tend to stereotype don't they? That's human nature people just do that automatically. You know, some people haven't got the educational background to sit down and see that there's a drastic difference between one person and the other even though they're now in the same situation.

S: Does that worry you – ?

R: Yeah it does – I experience that every single day in here. We are all tarred with the same brush.

S: By the staff?

R: By staff

S: So everyone gets treated the same?

R: With a slight variation – it depends what regime you're on.

S: And do you think then that that, do you have concerns about that being repeated outside?



R: Yes, very much so. I do not want anybody outside to know that I've been in prison. I'll not work for anybody outside. I'll work for myself.

S: Set up your own business?

R: Yes I'd like to do that yeah, where I don't really have to – I mean that's one my concerns about going into the psychology because it's very – it's a touchy area isn't it? I might have to reveal too much about myself?

S: Hmm – I mean there are - um you know, there are, um, there is support for people in working around that disclosure. Exploring how you feel about that disclosure, about your conviction and so on and people do come out the other side and are able to disclose their offences, and do get good jobs. I mean it does happen. It's not necessarily always easy but it does happen but I guess you're a bit of a way away from that yet aren't you in terms of how much of your sentence you've got left and so on?

R: Hmm

S: I've got an advisory group that is working with me on the research. They are all women who've been offenders. And they're like a steering group and we've been working together on the research since September and there are four women and we meet every 6 weeks or so. And they're very much advising me on what and how and where and who and all the rest of it and um, all of them are in various different stages of kind of pursuing their careers and so on. And I was telling someone the other day that one of the women has just heard that she's got an interview to become a probation officer to do probation training.

R: Wow

S: She never, ever, ever thought that she would ever, ever end up in a position where she would do that and she has and she is.

R: Is she an ex offender?

S: Yes

R: Oh wow (emphasised) so there is hope?

S: Yes. So you can make it. Obviously it's going to depend on your personal direction and decisions you make about future career and so on but she against all the odds in many respects is there and has a right to be there. She's worked her way to that point. So everything's crossed now.

R: Yeah that's true isn't it? Has she told about her offences?

S: Oh yes, she's disclosed her convictions.

R: What really?

S: Oh yeah, yeah. (pause) Sorry – going back to services –. So you didn't really have that much contact with services? There was the refuge, there was trying to get re-housed unsuccessfully?

R: Yeah

S: But not really any others?

R: No not really. There was the police –

S: The police, yes –

R: There was the hospital, the doctors, so maybe there were a few.

S: Yeah, so if you think about some of those, I mean what was your contact like with them? Were you hospitalised because of the violence?

R: Yeah

S: Did anyone ever ask you the question about how you'd come about your injuries?

R: Yes

S: And did you feel able to tell them?

R: No, no.

S: And was your partner normally there with you at the time?

R: Yes

S: So you can't really talk then.

R: No.

S: So at that stage, would that have been an opportunity for someone to have –

R: I would like someone to have come and got me (laughing) definitely.

S: Hmm, yes

R: To say, "we know what's happened, come on, out the back door, where he doesn't know."

S: Yeah, yeah. It's very hard isn't it because all the emphasis is on you isn't it, on you saying, "I need some help here," but it can be really hard to do that?

R: Yeah – too scary

S: What was their treatment of you like at that time?

R: It was Ok (questioningly)

S: Do you think they knew how you'd come about your injuries?

R: Yeah

S: But it was unspoken?

R: Yeah and it shouldn't have been unspoken really but in saying that his presence obviously made them feel stand offish or maybe disgusted because maybe they thought I'd brought him with me because I wanted him with me. Not the fact that I was being brought there by him and um.

S: Is there something there about professional's knowledge and how much they know as well as – you talked about understanding. Do you think they should perhaps have more knowledge about domestic violence?

R: Yes definitely, definitely. How to deal with the situation with the most discretion, definitely. If there'd been somebody there in that hospital that could have known, that could have seen the picture. I mean surely they could tell by body language or, you know. I mean there must be



something they could pick up on. Whether they just don't care or whether they really genuinely don't know?

S: Do you think they might be frightened?

R: Possibly, possibly?

S: Hmmm – yes because in a way hospitals are quite um, I mean they're places where you do what you're told aren't they to some extent –

R: Hmm

S: And um, I know that another woman told me that she'd been asked the question about her injuries, but with her partner sat there –

R: And that's the wrong thing to do! You just think, "Just, just, just, I'll take you somewhere else," (in a whisper). And you're sat there and you're thinking "Just take me somewhere else and I'll tell you all about it," (laughing) But they don't – they just stand there and the guy is sat right next to you and oh! It's so frustrating (with emphasis).

S: What she said was that one day one of the male nurses actually told him to leave the room.

R: Now you see – in that situation, if I was sat there and I had a serious stab wound and a male nurse asked my partner to leave the room he probably would have left the room. But there's no way I'd have been able to tell a male person what's happened because if they didn't act upon on it or they didn't do anything and I had to walk out of that cubicle with him – go back to him. (pause) I would have got an absolute smashing around the face because of the male (pause). He would have accused me of giving the male nurse you know, signals to you know send him out of the room so he could get up to some sexual – you know – that's how his mind would work!

S: So the gender of the worker is important?

R: Definitely important! It needs to be a woman.

S: And is that true if it's a domestic violence officer as well?

R: Oh yes! Yes. Definitely!

S: Right. So if you replace that male nurse with a female nurse she could perhaps ask your partner to leave whilst she treats you in private – if she then said something like, "Tell me what happened" – would you have welcomed someone asking you that question in that way?

R: Definitely.

S: Do you think that the gender of the worker is important in other situations as well – do you think it needs to be a woman as well or (pause)? Would you prefer to have a woman dealing with you or not always?

R: Yeah (sounds uncertain) I think I (emphasised) would. But that could be because of my own interpretations of men in my past and my experience of being physically, sexually, emotionally abused by this relationship, that could be just my view. You know – it's not really safe to (pause)

S: Although - your view is important and is valid and should be valued. And there are other women who have had similar experiences to you. And so one of the things that I think is (emphasised) really important is that services offer something that will work for you (emphasised) as an individual as much as for anyone else. And so perhaps the gender of the worker is important for women that have had experiences like the ones that you have had.

R: Yes.

S: What would you say was your most negative contact with services out of that lot? Not necessarily identifying which service but what was it about the contact that was most negative?

R: I think the council.

S: And why would that have been?

R: I think the council because they make it so difficult for you. There's no support there. There's just nothing there at all. (Whole section said with emphasis)

S: And how do they make it difficult?

R: Well, the amount of, oh and the social security as well. The amount of time you have to wait around and the process of filling in forms and you know, waiting for housing, to be housed. You know the fact that you can't up and change area as and when you feel like it - that's terrible. It's really terrible especially for somebody who is trying to escape domestic violence. I think the council are horrendous. And trying to get on private housing association lists. Sometimes they don't prioritise - you know - I mean look how many women are in prison because of domestic violence situations. I mean in (prison) it was absolutely full of them. The majority of women in there are murderers.

S: Every woman I have spoken to so far for my research has experienced (pause)

R: Domestic Violence! It is a huge, huge (emphasised) area that needs to be covered and it's just not - it's totally neglected. It's not seen for what it really is and the effect it has on you.

S: And the women who have committed murder -

R: One of my friends from (prison) well, a girl I used to talk to quite a lot, she was a very nice person but because of the domestic violence she was suffering she had a drink problem and she abused drugs. And one day the guy was beating her really badly and she just totally snapped! And she stabbed him and she didn't mean to do what she had done. It was the impact of the moment and the fact that he was abusing her and she just retaliated and went too far and now she's doing a 15year tariff for murder! (emphasised). I mean, you know, that could have been prevented (emphasised) if there was help there and if the police were more willing to come and get you out of the situation.

S: You didn't feel supported by the police?

R: Not at all! No I didn't feel supported at all by the police because they would belittle you - you know - they make you feel worthless and (pause)

S: And that's regardless of who it was? If it was a domestic violence officer did it make a difference?

R: I never saw a domestic violence officer. I was never offered a domestic violence officer - it was just a general officer and you'd get, "Oh well you'll have to make a statement about him love. He's abused you, he's battered you again, ----". But they didn't understand that when I leave this police station - where am I going to go? What am I going back to? And if he gets charged with this I'm going to be really -. I'm going to get it worse! (emphasised).

S: It's that vicious cycle isn't it?

R: Hmm, it is (emphasised) that's right!

S: So the worst thing was around making it so (emphasised) hard to kind of find any way through.



R: There was no opening for me, there wasn't an opening. What we could do with is an independent organisation that deals specifically with domestic violence. That is a needy area.

S: One that deals with everything to do with domestic violence?

R: Everything, housing, benefits, everything, everything, counselling, the works, everything.

S: Have you come across the Duluth program in your studies yet? It's the Duluth domestic violence intervention program and it's a program that has been developed in America. And in fact they've just got funding in (place) to set up one of the first pilots in this country to set a similar project up. It's about adopting a multi-agency approach to domestic violence. So it's about making sure that, for example, the police, probation service, social services, housing, health everything, you name it, every agency is involved with supporting women who are involved in violent relationships. It is about offering a co-ordinated response to domestic violence. There are also support programmes for men as well.

R: That sounds fantastic

S: I could see if I could find anything about it because it might be useful for your psychology studies, an article or something?

R: That would be excellent – yes. Because you know one thing I found with the domestic violence was that he had to hit me – I had to have bruising or damage on my face or in a visible area for me to be able to firstly obtain the injunction. Secondly, he'd have to abuse me again (emphasised) and then I could go back and get an injunction or power of arrest. Then thirdly, he'd have to breach that again for him to be arrested (emphasised). So that's three batterings for him to be locked up!

S: Hmm, and -

R: It's like, "Come back when you've got another black eye and we'll raise it one step higher."

S: Hmm. (pause). I'll send you some stuff about the project if you'd like?

R: Yes I'd love that

S: Can you get hold of books and things in here? Will they do that for you in the education department?

R: Yes

S: Because I could send you in some references

R: If you can give me some recommendations for some books yeah. And if they don't want to get them here I can always get my family to get them for me. I am definitely interested.

S: Yep, OK I'll do that (pause). We've talked about the worst experience – what about the best? Is there a best experience of contact with any service?

R: Oh (long pause) no.

S: Nothing positive?

R: No, not really. I suppose I haven't really had enough involvement with them to actually get something positive (pause). I think the best experience I've had so far of any service is actually here (emphasised) in (prison) (laughing) which is the education department so far. They are pretty good. The health care is terrible, absolutely horrendous! (pause) I think one of the good services was Family Planning outside. It was the Family Planning Clinic – now they were good.

S: Right – and what was it about them that was good?

R: The confidentiality –

S: And you trusted that?

R: Yes – and the fact that they didn't just talk about family planning, they wanted to know about other (emphasised) aspects of your life which was really nice because it makes you feel more relaxed. And if they saw that there was a – if you were talking and they think, "Hey up – there's some kind of problem there", you know they would advise you without coming straight out and saying, "Hold on mate I think you've got a problem."

S: Hmm (tape runs out and is turned over) Thank you for this – gosh the time has flown by – it really does feel like we've only just got started. Would you be interested in meeting again to talk some more?

R: Definitely, now I know what kind of information you're looking for I'll think about it. It's quite a lot of years that I've been in prison – 3 ½ years so trying to recall any particular good experience or bad experience is quite distant for me now.

S: If (worker) can organise it then it would be good to come into the wing. If that is a possibility – whether they'll allow me to do that is another matter but we could try for that. The other possibility if that's not possible would be for you to write something and send it to me via (worker)

R: Yes that would be alright.

S: But hopefully we'll be able to meet again and I'll definitely send you in that information. The other thing would be that if you're interested in seeing a copy of the transcript and that might make you think, "Well no I didn't mean that or I want to change that or what-have-you." Would that be something you might be interested in doing, so giving me some feedback on what I write basically?

R: Ok yes – if that will help you?

S: Yes it would – because my worry is that otherwise I might take something out of context or –

R: Yes – no problem.

S: That would be really good. But one of the concerns I have about doing that is that I wouldn't want to post it in because then it gets opened and it might be read and I wouldn't want to do that. (worker) did say that I could send it in via her but that still worries me a bit about it coming via someone else. But if we are able to organise another visit then I could actually bring it with me and you could read it here because I really don't think it should go through another person.

R: I can understand that and considering some of things that we've discussed – I mean there's quite a lot of it that the prison staff don't know about me.

S: Hmm and that's really important so I'm not going to do that. So, if we can do it in a way that I can give it to you, you can look at it and give it back to me then we'll do it but if not then I think I'd rather not do it.

R: Hmmm – yes. I mean it depends on you though in that I'm here (emphasised) it's you that's got the busy lifestyle at the moment (laughing).

S: Hmm – but I'd really appreciate that and would welcome it. And if you do feel that there are other things that you'd like to talk through then I'd welcome the opportunity to come back. I don't know how many times they'll let me come back but I'm sure they'll let me come back one more time.



R: Ok.

S: Finally, do you mind filling this in for me? It's a questionnaire about how you feel about having taken part in this part of the research? Is there anything else you want to say before we finish – before we do that?

R: No – not really just that I've quite enjoyed this. It's been good to talk (laughing) it has!

S: Yeah

A knock on the door – “Can you finish up now?”

Both of us – Yes

R: (Referring to the questionnaire) Yes, I think this would have been good (would it have been helpful to have got to know Sarah before taking part in the research?) because I feel more confident with you now – I feel more relaxed, so yes definitely. So yes I think it would have been better to have known you before or to have met you before.

S: I had hoped that I'd be able to do that. We thought that we'd managed to work it so that I'd be able to come into the prison and spend some time just meeting people

R: You know what would be good? It would be good if you could come onto our wing. That would be excellent. You know we've got offices all over the wing that we can use and that would be really good.

(Pause – whilst completing the form)

R: The best thing about taking part in the research? Telling someone who is interested (emphasised) about my experiences.

S: Hmmm

R: The worst thing about taking part in the research? It was the environment, the room. Lack of comfort around us.

(Pause)

R: What would you change? - obviously the surroundings. More time. (pause) That's it.

S: That's brilliant – thank you so much. (pause) Sorry, you can hear them getting fidgety out there.

R: Yeah – already!

S: So, I'll be in touch

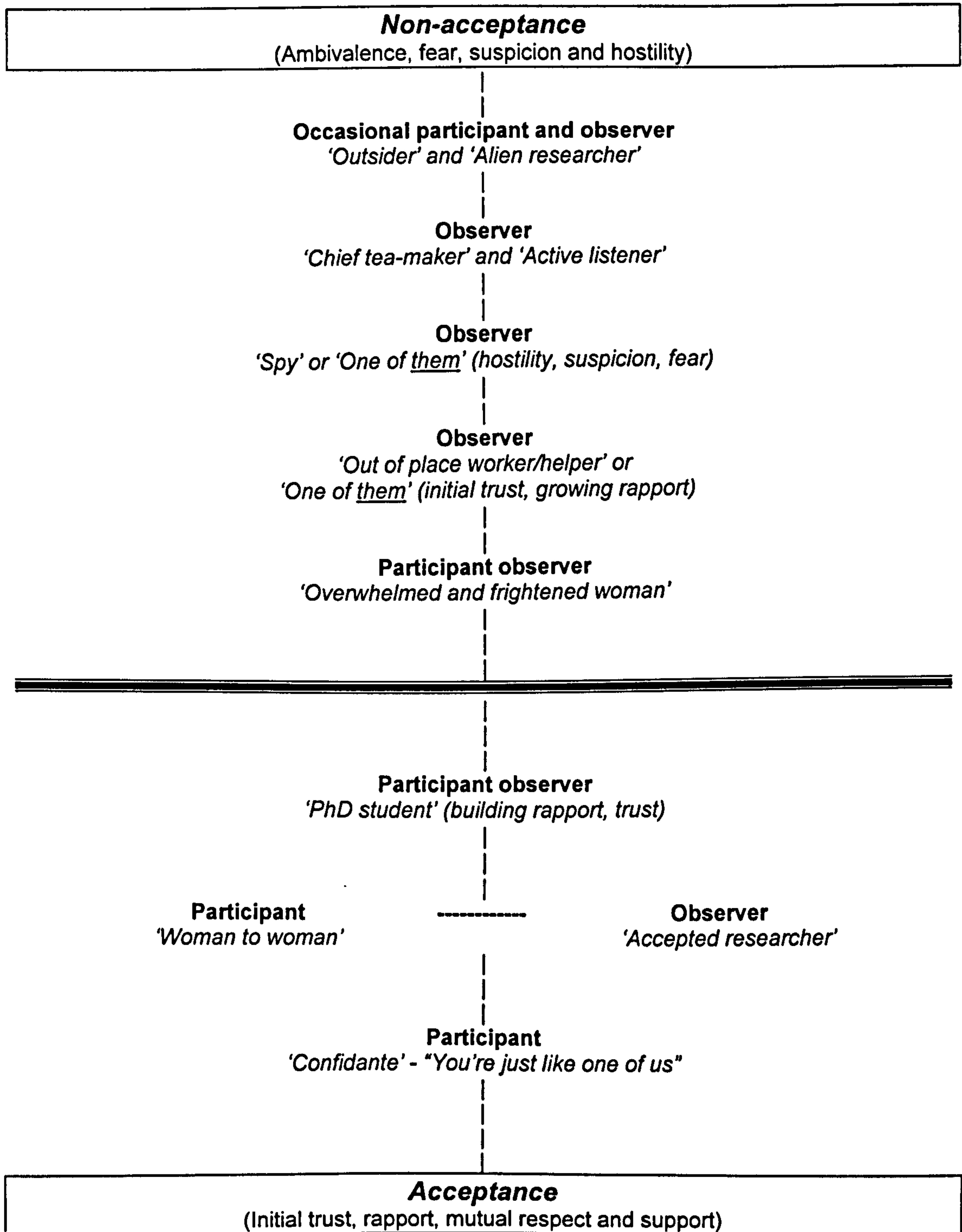
R: Ok - thank you very much

S: Thank you ever so much

R: You're welcome.

Appendix 15  
Participant observation: role analysis

Evolving role





## Role descriptors

**‘Outsider’:** An ‘occasional participant’ role during early stages of meeting women attending the programme which involved taking part in all group activities except those that were entirely focused on offending behaviour for which I had no direct experience to share. This role was characterised by suspicion on the part of the group facilitators and several women and largely seemed to be because of their uncertainty about my purpose in the group.

**‘Alien researcher’:** An ‘observer’ role which was symbolised by ambivalence, hostility and a deal of suspicion because the majority of women had not had any previous contact with researchers.

**‘Chief tea-maker’:** A support role that I fulfilled for both staff and women attending the programme. The role involved hearing many intimate disclosures by *some* women, particularly out of group time.

**‘Active listener’:** Another support role which I performed for staff *and* programme participants and which involved a degree of reciprocity and mutual disclosure and resulted in acceptance by all staff and *some* women.

**‘Spy’:** Some participants and group facilitators ascribed me this ‘observer’ role which invoked suspicion, hostility and fear and was characterised by staff *and* participants’ uncertainty about how I would use the information I was gathering as a result of my participation in the programme.

**‘One of them’:** Similar to the ‘spy’ role in relation to being an ‘observer’ but confined to participants who, at times, seemed to perceive me as ‘one of them’, in other words, a probation officer or social worker, with essentially negative connotations, therefore I was perceived by them as not to be trusted.

**‘Out of place worker/helper’ or ‘one of them’:** A support role in which some participants sought help with problem solving about particular issues. This was characterised by a degree of acceptance and a willingness to engage with me as ‘one of them’. The difference here is that my worker/helper status was essentially viewed in positive ways.

**‘Overwhelmed and frightened woman’:** A ‘full participant’ role which was intensely emotional and involved identification with women’s experiences of being abused and therefore deep empathy, tears and feelings of hurt and upset for all participants in this particular session, *including* the two facilitators.

**‘PhD student’:** A ‘participant’ role which was personified by initial trust from most participants who teased me about what use a ‘PhD student’ was in helping them problem-solve. This was after genuinely not being able to help them in a series of activities in which my poor lateral thinking skills came to the fore. There was some duality in this role because, as indicated in Chapter 5, Rita also called me a ‘fucking useless PhD student’ which was intended as an insult rather than a joke. However, in this instance, there was evidence of growing rapport and trust between us.

**‘Woman to woman’:** A ‘full participant’ role in which I shared personal experiences about my childhood and the difficulties I had encountered and which provided the basis for one of the feedback sessions that was facilitated by one of the probation officers. This was especially symbolic because of how *all* participants demonstrated their acceptance of me as a ‘woman’ and how they communicated this in their evaluation of the session.

**‘Accepted researcher’:** This was an ‘observer’ role in which *some* women approached me to ask questions about the research and asked me what difference I felt their views would make. As a consequence, four out of ten women agreed to participate in interviews with me.



**'Confidante':** A 'participant' role that demonstrated *some* individuals' full acceptance of me in the group. This was characterised, for example, by disclosures about incidences of domestic violence and drug and alcohol relapses.

**'One of us':** A group member role in which I was accepted for being more like 'one of us' than not. This embodied initial trust, rapport, mutual respect and support and, as a result, *some* women's acceptance of me in the group.