

Prison Reform Trust – Transforming Lives programme

Report on qualitative research by Llamau with women in Wales, 2017-2018

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Introduction

Purpose of this report

This document provides a thematic report on qualitative research conducted by Llamau for the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) between July 2017 and May 2018 with 28 women from Wales, all with recent experience of the criminal justice system. The research took place in community settings in Caerphilly, Newport and Cardiff and in HMP Eastwood Park in Bristol. See the appendix for further details of how the research was conducted.

About PRT and the Transforming Lives programme

PRT is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective prison system. We have a longstanding interest in improving criminal justice outcomes for women and our Transforming Lives programme to reduce the unnecessary imprisonment of women in the UK is supported by the Big Lottery Fund.

About 13,000 women are sent to prison in the UK every year, twice as many as 20 years ago, many on remand or to serve short sentences for non-violent offences, often for a first offence. Thousands of children are separated from their mothers by imprisonment every year. Yet most of the solutions to women's offending lie in the community. PRT works with national and local organisations to promote more effective responses to women in contact with the criminal justice system. For further information and a range of publications see: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/women

About Llamau

Llamau is the leading homelessness charity in Wales, supporting the most vulnerable young people and women. It is particularly well known for working with those most at risk - care leavers, people who have been involved with the criminal justice system, people who have experienced domestic abuse and people who have had chaotic and disadvantaged

lifestyles. Llamau's previous experience of conducting qualitative research with service users includes, for example, the 2014 Llwybrau project aimed at assessing the feasibility of using existing Welsh domestic abuse one-stop shops to support Welsh women offenders. For further information go to: <https://www.llamau.org.uk/> and <http://www.llwybrau.cymru/>

1. Overview - experiences of the criminal justice system

1.1 Offending behaviour

A number of women spoke about their offences – mainly lower level crime including theft, handling stolen goods and fraud. One woman had a conviction with possession with intent to supply. Another had been convicted with a threat of harm with weapons on her partner.

"I've been done for shoplifting, too many times to count really. I'm always back and forth in the courts"

"I've been offending since I was 14 – shoplifting, fraud, theft."

"Mine was threatening my husband. They got it on tape and said it was threatening with a weapon."

"I got done for handling stolen goods, and I've been done for being in possession of drugs."

"One time I got done for holding the security guard in the shop hostage – I was off my face at the time, I didn't know what I was doing but just trying not to get caught. I did time for that."

One woman spoke in detail about her experiences of shoplifting:

"I'd been doing it for years. I started when I was a teenager just to get things we couldn't afford. I wanted the same as my mates. Then it just got out of control, and with the drugs it became something I had to do. I'd get dressed up for it – I'd have certain outfits I'd wear - I'd dress smart, do my make-up. It was like a career for a while. When I stopped the drugs the shoplifting was almost like an addiction itself. I'd get a real high, a buzz from doing it."

1.2 Background to offending

The women were asked if they could talk about background experiences which they felt had contributed to their offending behaviours. Many talked about past traumatic events and links between their offending and problematic substance use, domestic abuse and other traumatic experiences.

"My ex was really nasty, he used to hit me and stuff. When the relationship ended and I ended up in a woman's refuge I didn't know what to do. I met a bloke and left there because I thought he'd look after me – he was doing drugs and I joined in. I got done for handling stolen goods, and now I've ended up back in refuge again."

"I was with my husband for over 20 years. He wasn't a nice husband – he used to batter me all the time. The police were called to our house loads and told me I needed to get away but I never did until now. I didn't know what to do without him, we'd been together since we were kids. It was only after my conviction I knew I had to get out but because it was threats with a weapon - no Women's Aid would let me in until I rung Llamau."

One woman shared her experiences of having her children removed, and how this led to her using substances and shoplifting:

"I had my kids removed, and I just wanted to block everything out. I didn't know what I was meant to do every day without them. I know why they were taken but nobody helped me – they just told me I was putting them at risk because of my ex. He was really abusive. They

didn't tell me how to get help they just took them. Then I started on the drugs just to cope and ended up addicted. I couldn't afford the drugs so ended up shoplifting just to afford them. I ended up getting caught and now have a record. I won't get my kids back; they've been adopted out because I messed it all up."

Another woman talked about her experiences as a child, and how her substance use led to her offending to provide for her children:

"I moved 15 times when I was a kid. I watched my dad beat my mum up all the time. I blamed my mum for not leaving – we had to cope with everything. My mum was a prostitute and my father was an animal. I ended up trying drugs out of curiosity just to see what it was like to forget about everything for a bit. I ended up addicted but it was me running away. When I was pregnant I went on the meth script and stuck to it – I was clean in my pregnancies but I didn't know how to be a mum – I mean I knew how to feed them and everything but I didn't know how to be there emotionally for them. I used to shoplift to overcompensate for not being available to them emotionally and to justify the drugs. They had everything – it was ridiculous what they had but it was all materialistic, they didn't have me emotionally."

1.3 Police response

Some women felt that that they were targeted by the police because they were recognisable in their local communities. They felt likely to be judged by the police who would recognise their previous behaviours and offences rather than deal with each incident.

"If you're known to the police then you're targeted by the police. That's just the way it is."

"One copper knew my past with drugs. Even though I'm clean now he called me a dirty smackhead."

They felt they were treated negatively by the police, both when they called on them for help and upon arrest. Several women agreed that they felt judged by the police forces based on their experiences as teenagers / young adults. They all had multiple experiences of being stopped and searched by the police.

"In Newport they all know me from running away from care. I started to go out clubbing at 14 and ended up being trafficked. Because of all this and them constantly picking me up and taking me back to care they think they can just stop and search me anytime. It's humiliating."

Many women felt the police had been overly aggressive upon arrest.

"I feel the police over react if you have a history of kicking off. They send too many out, it's intimidating. I had two vans come to arrest me!"

A number of women described feeling degraded while in police detention and felt they were never listened to, and that the offence was all officers could see.

"They took all my clothes and gave me a paper suit and prison daps. I was made to walk home through Newport like that the next day at 11am. Everyone was looking at me, it was humiliating."

"It can take 10 minutes for someone to talk to you, see what you've been through and think... you're still fighting, still here, let's give you a bit of leeway."

"If you're arrested on a weekend you're locked up for the 2 days until court. They don't let you out of your cell. You're not even allowed to go in the yard."

Several women reported that they were not offered any mental health support.

“They have never offered mental health help in the police station. Even when I was screaming for help they didn’t.”

Some women talked positively about their interaction with police officers.

“The police have always been really good with me. They treated me with respect. I used to go to school with the desk sergeant so it was alright – he’d treat me good.”

“I had one custody sergeant who treated me with respect. He was alright – he spoke to me like a person. That’s the only one ever – he was safe as hell like!”

1.4 Court process

Throughout the research, women consistently raised concerns about a lack of understanding and empathy on the part of the judiciary, especially in the magistrate’s courts, of the life experiences and trauma experienced by the women. A number of women felt that they were treated as repeat nuisance offenders and that the judges had no understanding of their lives.

“The magistrates don’t understand because they don’t live our lives. They don’t care about us and what we’ve been through.”

“The only credit you get is for pleading guilty at the earliest opportunity, not for trying.”

“The judge just looks at you like you’re worthless, like you’re wasting their time being back there. They don’t want to help, just look at the right sentence.”

“One judge said to me I could run the world one day I was so manipulative. I was only 17 – he didn’t want to know what was going on and how I was like that.”

These women agreed that the court process allowed no opportunity for the judge to gain any understanding of the trauma they women had experienced, their support needs and how this might be affecting their lives. Women who had been involved in both magistrate and crown courts felt they had had a more positive experience when in crown court.

“In the magistrates they see you and the offence. They don’t take anything else in to account – never look at your experiences.”

“I found the judges not to be sensitive. They just think we’re thick, we’re idiots and we’re all tarred with the same brush.”

“On my last incident at magistrates I asked them for help. Nothing was taken into account – I think they need more training about what some women go through, then they’d have a better idea. I know I did wrong but if I’m standing there asking for help you’d think they’d at least listen.”

“I felt I was just a number. Nothing about my background. It was my first offence and they just gave me community service. They didn’t help me at all.”

“At crown they actually see the person behind the crime. You get more time to explain what’s happened to you.”

“At crown it feels like it’s a better system. They will listen to you and you can give your appeal letters over so they know a bit about you not just the crime in front of them. I don’t know why they don’t do it in magistrates, why do you only get a chance if you go to crown?”

“You don’t even get the chance to even give a paragraph about our lives [in the magistrates court] – how we live, why we do things and what we’ve been through. It’s all just guilty or not guilty. They don’t look at us.”

The women felt there was a lack of awareness about domestic abuse and how it might be linked to offending.

"I got done for threatening my husband. He'd rung the police and they heard me in the background saying I'd kill him – I had my butter knife. I ended up with probation for a year but didn't go to prison. He beat me all the time for years and the police knew it. They'd been out loads; it was in my records. The judge didn't care because it was on record I'd said it. He didn't care about all the beatings I'd had."

"I don't think the judges know about domestic abuse. They don't know about control and I don't think they can be bothered to learn. If they did they'd have a bit more sympathy for how some of us have got here."

1.5 Prison

Asked about how effective their custodial sentences had been, and whether they had had a positive impact on their lives, the women tended to feel they had a negative impact, and that more could be offered to women in prison to help them following release.

"There should be more things in prison to help you when you get out – sometimes it's easier there, you don't have to think about where you're going to sleep, eat and all that. Being out is hard. I left prison with £46 and nowhere to live. The first thing you want to do is shoplift just to get off the streets for the night."

"I don't think just handing out prison sentences is the way to do it. Unless you know what the person has been through, what's led them to be here in the court than how can just giving prison be a help... Most of us just need help. I know some people need locking up because of what they've done, but some of us wouldn't be in the courts if we had help to deal with our issues."

1.6 Community sentencing

In general women did not feel their community sentences had been effective.

"I did a carpentry course on community service and made a wishing well. The community service bloke filled in all the paperwork for me so I'd pass but it's a bit pointless. I've got this certificate now but how's it meant to help my problems?"

"I didn't have a good experience on my community order. They just mix you with people with loads more issues with you and the guards there just let you get on with it – they don't help, like you're just taking up their time."

"They don't get mental health. Sending me out to do some work or building things isn't going to sort my mental health. I needed counselling or something."

Some women found it intimidating having to do community service with men.

"I was heavily pregnant and was given manual work with a load of men on community service. I went on the bus but refused to do it. Instead of looking for an alternative I was taken back to court and put on a tag."

"For community service they just pick you up, take you miles out. I don't know where I am and am the only girl in the group. It's really intimidating."

Women commented that the court relies heavily on fines without any consideration of their lifestyle and financial circumstances. They agreed the courts should be looking at alternatives to stop the cycle of fining women which doesn't address their support needs.

“My pre-sentence report recommended I get help for my problems with an alcohol programme and to make me do hours with that. The court just ignored it and gave me another fine.”

“Why do they continuously give you fines when they know you’ll struggle. They’ve taken so many fines from my benefits now the benefits said they can’t put any more on there because they’re not allowed. What did the courts do? Tell me I’ll just have to make sure I pay it myself not deducted from my benefits. So government says I can’t live on any less and the court just goes around the system. It’ll take me years to pay them off. It makes no sense to just keep throwing fines at you. Why don’t they make you do something that will help to turn yourself around and give a chance? Something like go on courses to get help?”

“It’s a catch 22. If you can’t pay the fines a warrant goes out. If the fine’s over £500 you go to prison. When you’re released the fine is still there. You’ve got 14 days to pay again and end up just going around in circles.”

However one woman had only praise for the support she received from her probation officer

“It was her that helped me get the help I needed. She met with me every week because I had to go on my order. She told me about the help I could get and said it was domestic abuse I was in. She said I should get out of there and leave my husband to be safe. She helped me get in to the refuge – I didn’t know it was even there. I don’t know what would have happened if I didn’t have my probation worker.”

1.7 Women’s Pathfinder Diversion Scheme¹

The Women’s Pathfinder Diversion Scheme aims to provide a multi-agency response to divert women away from the criminal justice system where appropriate and into community support at the earliest opportunity. The first Women’s Pathfinder pilot site was launched in Cardiff in July 2014, followed by the a further four sites from October 2015 to February 2016 in Newport (Gwent), Conwy/ Denbighshire (North Wales), Cwm Taf covering Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf (South Wales) and Pembrokeshire (Dyfed-Powys).

To be referred and accepted onto this scheme, women need to meet eligibility criteria. The current criteria are for women to reside in one of the pilot areas, be aged 18 and above, admit guilt and have committed an offence within the gravity factor matrix 1-3. Women who have received previous convictions or cautions can be referred to the scheme if diversion is likely to benefit the woman and contribute towards reduced reoffending.

Most of the women who took part in this qualitative research (across South Wales and Gwent) would not have been eligible for the scheme, which would explain why most of them had not heard of or been offered the programme. When they were told about the scheme, the women commented that if they had been eligible they felt it would have benefitted them, highlighting the need to ensure support is offered to all women as part of a wider whole system approach to supporting women across the criminal justice system.

One woman who had been offered access to the programme by the police when in custody stated she didn’t take the opportunity as her focus was to get out of the cells and it would have meant spending longer in custody:

“At that time, I had quite a bad alcohol problem and was using drugs. I’d been in the police station ages. They did offer me the scheme and said it meant I’d have to work with someone instead of going to court. I just wanted to get out of the cells. They said I’d have to wait for someone to come and do an assessment with me and they might not get there for a couple

¹ Contextual information provided by Jade Theaker, Women’s Pathfinder Diversion Scheme

of hours. I just wanted to go so I said no. I regret it now as I have a record, but why isn't someone based there who can do it with you straight away? I wasn't in a good place and my head was gone. I couldn't wait around for hours and if I was bailed I'd be out straight away so I did that."

A number of women agreed that in order for the pathfinder to work they should have a staff member based at the police station, as they felt most women would take the fastest option out of custody. The women suggested as an alternative they could be bailed with a condition to have an appointment with the pathfinder worker in the next 24 or 48 hours. They agreed this would have assisted them as they would have been released, but given an opportunity to access support. They suggested that provision could be made for them to be re-arrested if they did not attend.

Whilst the Women's Pathfinder Diversion Scheme Support Workers are based within the custody suite, they are not always available to take immediate appointments due to attending one to one support sessions in the community and women being brought in out of hours. When staff are not available, the standard procedure is for the police to make an appointment for them to return for an assessment. If they do not attend their assessment the offer of diversion will be withdrawn and they will be processed through the usual criminal justice route.

Since receiving the above feedback, Gwent Police have reminded all the officers of the process to ensure no further women miss the opportunity for support through this scheme.

Going forward the Women's Pathfinder is working with South Wales PCC, Gwent PCC, HMPPS and Welsh Government to roll out a Whole System Approach Service Delivery Model across South Wales and Gwent.

1.8 Women only services

Many women discussed being in abusive relationships in the past. For some this was an ongoing issue as they were currently in refuge fleeing abusive partners, others had past experiences of abuse. All women discussed traumatic experiences from their childhoods and adult lives, which had affected their emotional wellbeing and made them feel vulnerable to further trauma and abuse. They all felt that women-only services were important, and praised the women-only support provided to them by Llamau.

"Why shouldn't there be gendered services? We have different needs. Men get loads more options than women."

"We've all had bad experiences, often violent relationships, bad childhoods and that. I wouldn't want to speak to a man. Having support from women makes me feel safer..."

One woman talked about her positive experiences accessing a woman only centre in Cardiff and the impact it had on her:

"It was really good. I felt comfortable there, there were no men around and the workers were good and they were there to help me with my problems. They helped me contact my GP about my mental health. I was offered a female probation officer and it really helped me."

Women felt that professionals working in the criminal justice system needed to be more aware of women's needs, and support them to access specialist services.

"I asked for help with my domestic abuse but they didn't listen. They just wanted to sort out my offence."

"It takes a lot to finally tell someone what's going on. I told my probation worker and they just gave me train fare to get to refuge. I had no idea where I was going."

"The police took me to a refuge once. When I was in the car I started telling them about what had been happening to me. The woman officer just said "sshh" like she didn't want to know. I only lasted a day in the refuge. I had one set of clothes and felt lost. I just cried the whole time. It's not like that in my refuge now, I feel like I'm getting the help I need, and there's 24hr staff support if I need it."

"I told my probation worker I was being hit. She sent me to a worker who just told me about the bond board (support to access rent in advance and bond for private rental tenancies). No one told me domestic abuse services were there."

"Some services... it's like they've finally realised we have other needs not just our offence. The diversion scheme sounds good and they're finally doing something, then they might pull the funding –why? We're starting to get the support we need then it's gone."

1.9 Recommendations for reform

We asked women what would they say to people working in the criminal justice system about what needs to change, and what they felt would be of benefit to women. Their responses included:

"Don't just pad someone up if they've got mental health problems. If I'm suicidal why not sit and talk to me to help me through it rather than just sit me in a cell where it's worse."

"It can take just 10 minutes to sit and get to know someone, not just the crime you see. There's a reason we're in trouble."

"Put yourselves in my shoes. You haven't lived the life I have, seen the things I have so how can you understand why I act the way I do?"

"They should make it your sentence that you do some courses. At least that way you have the opportunity to do something to help you get out of the system. Something like NVQs."

"Give women opportunities. If someone said to me 'you have to go on this hair and beauty course and if you don't we will have to bring you back to court' then I might see it through. I'd get something to focus on and a skill for life to help me move forward – better than another fine which just gets me more and more in debt. It doesn't help me change anything."

"Give women guidance on to programmes. We've all experienced abuse. Why don't they make it compulsory we attend a programme for that to help us get out of the abuse and build a future."

"There should be community service just for women. We're different to men and shouldn't have to feel intimidated when doing it. We should have separate groups."

"Give us the thinking skills courses to make better decisions."

"Training for magistrates – definitely."

"Training for judges. They need to understand people and what their lives are like not just sit on their chairs giving out sentences to make them feel better."

"They should look at alternative interventions other than prison. Maybe look at programmes you have to attend more, but programmes that will help."

“Women’s programmes, and women’s support. They need to stop making women go out with male offenders – especially women who have been abused as it’s really scary.”

“Link workers pre-release to help sort you out.”

“I was referred to IRIS as a jail leaver as part of my licence conditions. Maybe they should think about programmes instead of prison.”

2. Domestic abuse and women’s offending

2.1 Experiences of abuse

A number of women described their repeated experiences of violence and abuse at the hands of one or more intimate partners over a long period of time. Two of the women had experienced multiple abusive relationships.

“My first husband was schizophrenic. He’d batter me then apologise because he was ill. I was all confused. I didn’t know it was abuse because he had mental health problems, but he didn’t have to hit me. I was with him over twenty years before I escaped.”

“I became gradually isolated from everyone. It was all about the drugs – the next hit. The violence didn’t start until after two years but he controlled everything. I’d be asleep for days sometimes. He took control of the habit, me and the money. I had nothing.”

“My ex was drugging me. I was on methadone and thought I’d taken too much, but he was putting stuff in my food to keep me there and out of it.”

“My partner used to hit me all the time. Even after there was a restraining order. He doesn’t care, he still comes round my flat banging on the windows, shouting up to be let in. Sometimes it’s easier to just let him in than deal with it all – it’s done with then.”

2.2 Domestic abuse as a driver to women’s offending

Women spoke about the damaging experience of emotional abuse, financial abuse and coercive control. Some discussed how their experience of domestic abuse was linked to their offending.

“We had separate benefit claims but he’d come to the bank with me on my pay day and take the money. If I wanted anything I had to ask then prove what I’d spent it on. I couldn’t have anything.”

“He wouldn’t let me cook – now I know why because he was putting stuff in my food. He wouldn’t let me go anywhere or see anyone. I was always with him.”

“He took control of the habit and the money. It was all about keeping the habit going for him. I was just someone for him to get more money off, take drugs and batter.”

“I had been smoking heroin before I met him. He injected me for the first time as he said he wanted me to be safe. From then I’d just be out of it – he’d go out and steal and then come back and inject me and I’d just be lying there. I was only 18 myself and was with him for seven or eight years. I was completely reliant on him, completely emotionally dependant. He wanted me to watch over and sell the stolen goods. It was the only way to get the money for the heroin. I ended up going to prison for him for theft.”

“I called the police as my ex was threatening me. He was standing opposite my home. The police said he was ‘outside’ the area of the restraining order so they couldn’t arrest him even though he was screaming abuse. I got angry and kicked off so they arrested me. Of course I’m going to be angry. He’s abused me, broken in to my house then stands opposite my

house, just down the road enough so they can't get to him and I'm the one lifted. They had no idea what he'd put me through, just saw me as the one kicking off. It's a joke."

In general the women felt that the police were rarely sympathetic or helpful to them as victims of domestic violence, that they did not demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse, and that they did not have confidence in the police to identify the primary aggressor and protect them as victims. This was especially felt where substances were involved.

2.3 Prosecution of women who use violence in retaliation or self defence

Women felt that in general the police were not effective in identifying the primary aggressor and protecting them as a victim. As a result, they did not have confidence in the police to help them.

"We went to Cardiff because he wanted to go drinking there. I didn't want to go but I went because it was easier. He started and was pushing me about in the town. I pushed him back and when the police came they took us both for drunk and disorderly. They didn't ask me any questions just put me in a cell."

"One copper said because of your mental health it'll escalate so we'll remove you too."

One woman explained how having a police officer talk to her about abuse had made an positive impact on her. She felt listened to and taken seriously

"Gwent Police was really good. They looked after me. They said it wasn't right what he was doing to me and that made a difference."

One woman described her recent experience in HMP Eastwood park, and how meeting someone there had made her think about her own life and abuse, with thoughts on retaliation.

"There was a lady there who stabbed her partner and she's going to be there for years. I wish I was her. I like it there because I'm safe and can go to the Bluebell club, join in with things and make friends. Sometimes I think I'd like to stab my ex to get back in because when I'm in my flat he's always there. At least I could have a life in Eastwood."

2.4 The extent to which the impact of domestic violence and abuse on women offenders is taken into account by the criminal courts

Women generally agreed that their experiences of domestic abuse had not been considered by the court. They felt the judges couldn't see what crime was part of the abusive relationship and how they're doing it because they have to, not through choice.

"I got a conditional discharge for theft. They didn't care why I had done it, they just see the charge."

"I had public order. That's when he started in town but the court doesn't care about the details or what really happened. They just see you're in trouble again."

One woman described how her experience of abuse had led to her failing to attend court and consequently to her imprisonment.

"I've been to Eastwood Park three times, all for not attending court. I didn't want to go in case he was there. I got ten days, two weeks and ten weeks but served five."

2.5 Services and interventions that have or could have helped women to escape abuse and/or to stop offending

All women agreed they only got specialist support once they were sentenced or if their offending was escalating. They felt there should be a focus on identifying abuse earlier and offering support. One woman described how she is receiving support now after leaving prison, but did not get any whilst inside or previously.

"All of my sentences have been really short so you can't go to any of the groups like Freedom programme, Counselling or Stepping Stones. I'd be gone as soon as they start so I couldn't go on them."

"The courts never asked why I was doing it. I needed help not convictions. I wish I'd gone to Llamau sooner. I didn't know they'd help me with everything."

"I did it myself (got off drugs). When I left him for refuge it was really hard but I'm glad I did it. It would have been nice for someone to have just come up to me and say "here's a number, they can help you". I didn't know where to go."

"My probation worker has been brilliant. I don't know where I'd be without her. She's sorted my benefits, got me help and sent me here. She's great."

"Everyone should do group work or training to learn about abuse, especially emotional, even the judges so at least when they see someone they can understand where they're coming from."

3. Problematic substance use and women's offending

3.1 Links between problematic substance use and women's offending

Some women spoke about how their use of drugs and alcohol was linked to their offending.

"I used to be really violent when I've drunk and ended up with a marker on my name. I got into loads of trouble but am trying to sort it out now. I've not done anything for two years until a couple of weeks ago. I was drunk and kicked off so probably looking at a sentence."

"To be honest all I cared about was the drugs. Thieving was just something I had to do to get money. I don't think I ever stopped to think about my family."

"I started using about 15/16 so my siblings grew up around the chaos. My mum kicked me out in the end because she didn't want me and drugs around the little ones so I ended up dossing in squats and with mates. The drugs got really bad then and I started getting into more trouble. I think my mum just gave up."

Women who were service users at Gwent Drug and Alcohol Service (GDAS) had histories of offences ranged from theft, burglary, fraud, handling stolen goods and being in possession of drugs, as well as some violent offences.

"I started because my mum, my sister and her best friends all done drugs. I started at 17 – my mum gave me my first drugs and I've been on them ever since. I've been to jail several times. I've used heroin, crack, spice, base and pills – 6 times I've nearly died through the drugs. Now if I was to shoplift I get 12 months for each offence as I'm classed as high risk prolific offender."

"I grew up in care homes, and I was abused by my foster carers. I had depression by 14 and ... I started experimenting to try to escape from it all."

"I was involved with Met Police for years. I was groomed by a huge paedophile gang when I was a kid in London. I've been done for shipping drugs and phones in to the prison, drug dealing and stolen goods."

"I've been to prison once for a year for violence. Most of my offences are shoplifting though."

"Handling stolen goods and being caught with drugs. I'd do anything to feed the habit – I'd shoplift then sell to feed my drug addiction."

3.2 Background to problematic substance use

All women interviewed at GDAS had experienced both childhood and adult trauma in their lives, and talked about substance misuse being used initially as a coping mechanism which then became an addiction. In addition, some women had been brought up around drug and alcohol use and it was perceived as normal use in their social and family networks.

One woman shared her story about growing up in London and being groomed by a paedophile ring, and how this led to her substance abuse.

"I was caught in a paedophile ring between the ages of 6 and 16. They'd be at the school waiting for me, they'd threaten me – if I didn't go around they'd hurt my mum and I believed them. I couldn't tell my parents. When I was about 11 they started injecting us with heroin to keep us groggy and go along with the stuff they did to us. When we got older and maturer they wanted us to go out and recruit other girls. I became a child groomer – getting other girls to come along. I've been raped, and then they started on my sister. I watched my sister get murdered, they shot her. I've seen a man die – he threw petrol on himself and set himself on fire. It's all so hazy because of how out of it I was and I think I've blocked some of it out. A few of them are in prison now but I can't forget seeing my sister murdered."

Another woman talked about her trauma which led to using heroin.

"My mum was a heroin addict all through my childhood. I don't remember her being straight. When I was 15, my sister (age 13) was kidnapped, injected with shit and sold. I was running around trying to find her – she was missing for three days. She'd been raped and the police found 8 men's DNA on her. One man got two life sentences for it. My sister thought she'd moved on and was trying to cope. She had three kids and was trying to get on with things. Four years ago she got £127,000 compensation for it but it destroyed her. It was dirty money. She couldn't cope and killed herself. One day I asked my boyfriend to inject me and he gave me heroin and that was it – within a week I was addicted. I wanted to punish my mum but it's ruined my life too. I've had my kids removed and my life has been a wreck. I'm trying to get it back on track now. My mum is straight and so am I from the heroin."

The other women talked about their experiences of drug and alcohol abuse

"I had low self-esteem. My mum had tried to kill herself and my boyfriend was a cocaine user. It was curiosity to try and then that was me done – addicted."

"I was 15 and had my first daughter. I was beaten by my ex-partner. Social services said they had a protection order and signed her over to care. I got pregnant again – both kids went in to care and got adopted. My ex told me to do some drugs to block it all out and I did – I felt I had nothing left in my life."

"My marriage broke down and I went into a women's refuge because of how he used to beat me. The drinking got out of control – I was so lonely and I'd been with him all my life. I ended up getting done for drink driving."

3.3 Police response

The women seen at GDAS had extensive experience with the police in Gwent, South Wales and locations in England. Interaction with police ranged from stop and searches to arrest and custody. The women reported mixed views on their interaction with the police. Some said that knowing the officers made a positive difference, while others said they were treated negatively for the same reasons.

“It all depends on the officer – I would treat them with respect – they’re only doing their job and I knew I’d get an easier outcome.”

“I’ve never had a good experience. They’d rag my hands behind my back when I was handcuffed. They’d constantly stop and search me even if I was walking down the street to see if they could catch me with anything. One copper used to drive erratically so I’d bounce around in the van.”

“Some officers knew about my past and treated me differently. They were good with me, it makes a difference.”

In general the women felt that there had been a positive change in the way the police responded to their problematic substance use. They had all received support in custody.

“The Police will tell you to go and get your methadone or they’ll have it brought in which is good. They didn’t used to – you’d have to ask for help but now they ask you when you come in and actually do something.”

“The nurse in the cells – every six hours gives you what you need.”

“I found them helpful. One copper pointed me in the right direction, told me where I could get help and I finally stopped.”

“They always made sure I had what I needed when I was arrested and told me where there was help.”

“The Police put a referral in for me to Kaleidoscope [problematic substance use service Gwent].”

One woman reported problems with the level of prescription given, but others had not had this experience – this was an area based response.

“If you go to prison or Saturday courts they have to wait it through until Monday and only give you 10mls. You have to survive until your script comes in. It’s right though as you could be lying but it kills going through it.”

One woman reported that she had had mental health support.

“I had mental health support in custody. Sometimes the Police don’t realise mental health usually comes before drugs. I felt the help was good when I was in the cells.”

3.4 Prison and community sentences

Most of the women attending had experience of the prison system. One woman had experience only of community service due to being a first time offence. However her experience of community service was extremely negative. The woman was an alcohol user who found herself sleeping on the streets after an abusive relationship broke down. Her offence was drink driving and she notes she was offered no support with the alcohol but just given service and sent away.

“At the time I was given community service I was still drinking. My mental health was really bad and I think I was naïve to all the drugs. Community service was really scary – there were loads of blokes there and we’d be picked up and sent to do some pointless work. I learnt more about crime and drugs there than anywhere else. They’d be bragging and giving each other tips. Drugs were everywhere. I was almost tempted to try some of the drugs when I was there, and that scared me. I’ve never touched drugs but it could have been so easy.”

A number of women spoke about their view of prison as ineffective in helping them tackle addiction and reduce offending.

“In Eastwood the Twelve Steps programme is where all the sex offenders are based. Most of us won’t go on there with all the paedos so we can’t go to the group.”

“I think prison should be a place you never want to go back to. Back in the day it was old school rules and hard – nowadays prison is easy for people. I know people who want to go back – they’ve got it all wrong.”

“In Eastwood they’ve had so many cuts – the staff are so badly paid they’re on less than I was when I was in British Gas. It’s ridiculous – no wonder they all leave.”

“There’s not much help with drugs in prison now. Why don’t they make you do programmes when you’re there – they should be part of the conditions. You have to attend drug groups or mental health, whatever it is.”

“I’ve not had any community orders since 2010 because of my offences. I go straight to jail, surrounded by drugs. What chance have you got then if you’re trying to stay clean.”

“I was given community, it didn’t work, prison, didn’t work. What can they do? Once you’ve been to prison once you know what’s coming. The first time I was really scared but now it’s easier to go back. You just get so tired of it all it’s easy to go back to prison.”

3.5 Experiences of support

All women talked positively about problematic substance use services in Gwent. However they expressed concern that most of the support was either offered by police or by finding out for themselves. There did not seem to be a clear wraparound support mechanism from custody to community. Although a few women had referrals made there were clear feelings there should be a smooth transition between custody based services and community services, especially since most of the women’s offences were related to problematic substance use.

The women praised the support provided in prison by PACT and concerns were raised about threats to PACT’s funding. All women agreed there would be a significant negative impact on their lives if PACT was not available in the prison.

“PACT worked really well, if it wasn’t for them I don’t know what I would have done.”

“PACT need more support. When I was there it was only two women running everything – they need more to help more people.”

Other women explained that little or no support had been offered to them in prison and on release.

“I had no support from the prison. When I came out I had to go to the local authority for accommodation. I went back on the drugs for a few weeks. I was sleeping in a tent and it was the only way to cope.”

"I have never been offered any support, I've just been put in prison with other users – how's that going to help anyone?"

"I came out a year ago after doing 1 and a half year. I got no support and came out homeless."

"I was referred to IRIS which has been the best thing for me. I'm part of the women's group here and met loads of people who understand me."

"I went to groups on my own back. I had a bad experience with a man in the 12 steps though. He kept telling me to skip the 12 steps and go to the 13th. Apparently it's renowned but I didn't know. He wanted me to have sex with him. I was so low. I left the group and then found Recovery Cymru which have really helped me."

"I was forced on to drug counselling but it didn't work. I don't think you can force that – no matter what you're offered it won't work until you're ready. Forcing somebody to go just isn't going to help."

3.6 Recommendations for reform

The women were asked what they would suggest to make positive changes to the criminal justice system for women offenders. Their responses included:

"DTTOs should be available to people not just through the court. I was in blackwood once and a copper told me if I shoplifted I'd get one. We (me and partner) did it to get the help we needed. I've got a record now but did it to get help and it was the copper who told me about it."

"They should look at alternative programmes not just prison. If it's linked to drug abuse then prison isn't going to solve the problem is it?"

"They should make sure men and women do community service separately. It's so intimidating doing it with the men."

"They should have info in the courts, the cells – not just 'do you need to see a substance misuse worker' on the ceiling in the cells". Make people more aware about what's out there."

"The link workers should be there pre-release to help sort you out so you're not on your own and tempted straight back."

"IRIS – this place, it's saved my life. It's given me structure and somewhere safe to go."

"I feel I would have benefitted by being referred to GDAS for support. I had to find them."

"There needs to be awareness to young people about the impact of drugs and alcohol. They see it as cool but look at our lives. They need to understand addiction."

"People like us – people who have gone through things and have life experiences who can go and talk to others and tell them what addiction is really like."

"People who have been offenders, we've all had addictions and are working hard to stay straight. We should go in and speak to the magistrates, give advice and mentoring to them because they don't understand what it's like to be addicted, or what might have made us turn to drugs in the first place. They need to learn."

4. Family relationships and maternal imprisonment

4.1 Impact of offending on family relationships

A number of women explained how their offending negatively affected their family relationships.

“When I was a teenager I used to ring my dad to pick me up – it was always stupid things like theft. He’d get to the police station and say ‘I can’t believe I’m picking you up from here again’. It was embarrassing. He’d lecture me the whole way home, then my mum would scream and cry. I felt bad but I didn’t stop. I was using by then and needed money.”

“I never told anyone about going to court until I came out again – I didn’t want them to know.”

“My parents used to say ‘I don’t know what we’ve done to deserve a daughter like you. It caused my mum’s mental health problems. My dad used to hit me, and he hit my mum and it was all my fault for the trouble I kept causing. He kept saying I’d driven him to it.”

One woman described how her offending was linked to her family background.

“My mum and dad were heroin addicts, and I became one too eventually. Both my parents got sent down for dealing drugs. My dad has turned his life around now and works for a drug support service. My mum is still inside though, she’s in and out. I ended up sharing a cell with her once which was nice. It was good to go through prison with her so I wasn’t alone. She rings me every day now to see how I’m getting on.”

4.2 Relationships with children

Women in custody felt they struggled to maintain a good relationship with their children, especially as they were held so far away from their home so that visits were hard.

“I didn’t want my son to come and see me in prison, who wants their kids here? But if I didn’t see him it could make things worse. I didn’t know what to do for the best.”

One woman had her children removed as a result of her substance misuse and offending.

“My kids got taken away, I’ve got two children. I was doing really well, off the drugs and seeing them every day when they lived with my aunt. Social Services were working for me to get them back then I just went on a binge and wrecked it all. I ended up going to prison after a fight when I was out of it, and the kids are being adopted now, I lost my chance. I can never change that and they’ll grow up and think I chose the drugs over them.”

4.3 Pregnancy and birth in custody

One woman gave birth while in prison, and another was due to give birth in three weeks. They shared their experiences of childbirth and pregnancy in custody and whether they felt supported.

“I gave birth in my cell on my own, it was awful. I kept telling the staff I was in labour and they didn’t believe me. In the end I just gave birth on my bed on my own. They came in and were like ‘oh she was in labour’. I had my child in a stinking cell in a prison.”

“The mother and baby unit here is closed until July. There was a flood and loads of water damage and they haven’t got the funding to fix it. You can’t keep babies here.”

“After your baby is born you could get six hours or six days bonding. I’ll get six hours then my baby will be taken off me. The system’s messed up. If you’ve got drug problems or something, or if your unwell they have to keep the baby in so you can get six days. Just

because I don't have any issues my baby will taken away after six hours. I feel like I should make up I'm sick just to spend more time with him."

"I have to do a parenting assessment, they're doing it now and I'm going through it to see if I'm a risk. Then they'll monitor when I'm released but the baby will be with me and his dad."

4.4 Impact on children of maternal imprisonment

Women with experience of custody agreed that their imprisonment had been difficult for their children to cope with and had put pressure on the whole family.

"My daughter is 15 now. When I came inside she went to live with my grandparents. They were older and found it really hard to have a teenager in the house. Nan died and my granddad couldn't cope as he's 80. She started misbehaving and staying out. They asked for help but because they were her great grandparents nobody would help them. In the end she went into a care home. She kept running away and has been in three already... She hates it there and can't wait for me to get out so she can come and stay. It's hard knowing I can't do anything to help her."

"My children are 17,15,10 and 3. They're with my mum and everyone refused to help her because she's their Nan. She suddenly had to bring up 4 kids with no help... It's been hard."

"My son was taken from me at six hours old and is with his dad until I get out. We knew it was going to happen and planned. He's a great dad but it's not the same. I'm missing out on everything and the bonding."

4.5 Interaction with children while in custody

We asked the women with custodial experience how they felt the prison service and agencies supported them to have contact with their children whilst in prison. They talked positively about the PACT team, and how they make sure the children are welcomed. They discussed the monthly family day where they can all play with the children, do art and crafts, picnics and activities. They felt this was vital to their relationship with their children.

"There should be more children's visits with officers who don't walk around with keys and that, it can be scary for children to see that."

"The family days are great. If the kids had to come and see me, and just sit opposite me without touching and having to sit on their hands it'd be awful. Kids don't understand they can't hug their mum so having the family days means we get to spend time with them properly."

"I didn't want my children to come and see me in prison. I didn't want them to see me there so we just said I was on holiday."

"It was hard at first. Social services bring my daughter up and they would cancel the visits. I'd get a call saying they were short staffed or had too much on. I know it's a trek but it's the only thing I look forward to, and she wanted to see me then we'd be let down. They seem to be better now though."

"The PACT team are really supportive. They make calls for you and help organise seeing your kids. They see you when you first arrive and if you have kids they'll sort you making a call to let them know you're ok then help sort everything out. I have monthly visits with my family."

The women all raised concerns about funding being cut for the PACT team and the provision of transport from Wales for children visiting the prison.

4.6 Re-establishing relationships with children after release

We asked the women how they had found rebuilding their relationships with their children and wider family which had been disrupted by their imprisonment or offending behaviours. They all said they were worried about how their children would relate to them returning in a parental role, especially after someone else had been bringing them up. Some talked about how they had found rebuilding relationships with family members difficult.

"How do I walk into my kids' lives after four years and start being their mum again? I'm worried they'll hate me, or won't listen, like 'who does she think she is coming in here telling us what to do now?'. I know it's going to be really hard."

"I miss my kids every day and wish I wasn't here. I just want to be home with them. I know my mum is doing a good job but they're my kids. I just want to be there to see them grow and help them."

"I've never had any social services involvement but my kids have now been put on the child protection register because I'll be out in 4 months. I've got to prove myself to my kids and the social now. I don't know what they think I'll do to my kids or what risk I am but I have to get on with it."

"I found it really hard. We didn't tell my kids I had gone to prison because I didn't want them to know. When I got out they thought I'd just left them to go off somewhere. I don't think they trusted me to stick around, and I proved them right."

4.7 Recommendations to support family relationships

We asked the women if there was anything they felt would benefit their relationships with their families, or any recommendations we should put down to support them.

"They need to fix the mother and baby unit [in HMP Eastwood Park]. You can't have a baby here and keep it which is wrong. They need to sort their funding out."

"I think childcare resettlement roles are so important. They can help you go out with your kids. Everything in prison is false, and when you get out it's like you're scrambling around trying to remember what to do."

"There should be more family days to help us keep in touch with our kids and play with them."

"My daughter has really struggled with me being inside, and I didn't know what to tell her for the best. It would be good to have more support on how to discuss with your kids. What do you tell them? What can you say? I know it's different for everyone but more help would be good."

"I agree help when you're out would be good. My kids rebelled against me when I got out and I didn't know how to cope. It was like they hated me. I know they were just angry and upset but it would have been nice to have support through that time."

"I think there should be more children's units with officers without keys, bright spaces and that so it doesn't scare the kids."

"Social services, police and probation should look at the offending and try to understand why we did some of it. Mine was fraud. I know I did wrong but what does locking me up and tearing me from my kids achieve? They could look at giving mothers different sentences in the community for crimes like that so it doesn't mean your kids have to live with someone else."

Appendix: Transforming Lives programme – Overview of service user engagement in Wales, 2017-2018

PRT commissioned Llamau in 2017 to gather qualitative evidence from women in Wales with recent experience of the criminal justice system, in order to strengthen and inform PRT's advocacy in seeking to reduce the unnecessary imprisonment of women from Wales. This formed part of a wider programme of service user engagement by PRT, working in partnership with User Voice in England and with support from Hibiscus Initiatives in London and the 218 Service in Glasgow. Questions for discussion with women from Wales were developed by PRT in consultation with Llamau and scope was allowed within discussion for the women to raise and expand upon themes that mattered to them.

The following five focus group meetings and six one-to-one interviews held between July 2017 and May 2018 were conducted and written up by Llamau, with PRT also represented at most meetings. Two women attended both the first and second focus group meetings, and one woman attended the first three meetings. A total of 28 women from Wales were involved overall, as well as one English woman in HMP Eastwood Park.

- **Caerphilly Multi-Agency Drug Centre, 25 July 2017: Domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending** - Three women attended this focus group, two of whom were service users of Llamau, and one referred by probation.
- **Newport Stow Hill Offices, 27 July 2017: Experiences of the criminal justice system** - Five women attended, all of whom were Llamau service users, either accessing domestic abuse refuge provision or supported accommodation for women with multiple support needs.
- **BAWSO Cardiff offices, 20 September 2017: Family relationships** - Five women attended and discussed their experiences of offending and the impact it had on their family relationships and their children.
- **HMP Eastwood Park, Bristol, 12 December 2017: Family relationships** - Eight women attended (seven of whom were Welsh and one English) and discussed their experiences of their offending and the impact it had on their family relationships and their children. An interview on the same topic was held with a ninth woman.
- **GDAS, Newport, March 2018: Problematic substance use and offending** - Eight women attended this focus group, all of whom were service users with Gwent Drug and Alcohol Service (GDAS).
- **Caerphilly Multi-Agency Centre and refuges, 11-15 May 2018: Experiences of the criminal justice system** – Owing to difficulties in bringing women together to hold a focus group meeting, five one-to-one interviews were conducted with women with experience of the criminal justice system.