

WOMEN'S CENTRES

The case for the increased use of alternatives to custody for women

In 2007, Baroness Jean Corston, the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Women in the Penal System, published her review of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system. This report called for a 'distinct, radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach' for women involved in the justice system, and determined that imprisonment was inappropriate for the vast majority of women in prison. One of Baroness Corston's main conclusions, which informed Government policy two years later, was that women's centres and other community services were far more suitable options for women in the criminal justice system.

More than four years ago, that same APPG conducted a no-stone-unturned inquiry into the treatment of women in the criminal justice system. Within the scope of this inquiry was women's centres, described as 'one-stop shops' for women in the community. In their present form, women's centres exist for women with a history of criminal behaviour or those at risk of offending. Referrals for their range of services and opportunities will often come from probation services and social services. The centres, which have been partly funded by the Government since 2009, are at risk of closure, with a £10 million funding gap identified by a 2020 report by the Women's Budget Group. There are calls for their funding to be put on a statutory footing.

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The aim of the centres is to provide safe, women-only spaces where women from all backgrounds can access specialist support, advice, information, and education to help them achieve their full potential. Women-only spaces also serve to build service users' confidence in challenging discrimination and misogyny. While some centres are managed differently from others, they do share the common aim of helping to support, encourage and enable women to improve their quality of life and well-being. Individuals seeking support from women's centres will often have a range of multiple, complex, and gendered needs, and will sit across a spectrum of risk, both of re-offending and of harm, requiring different responses in every case.

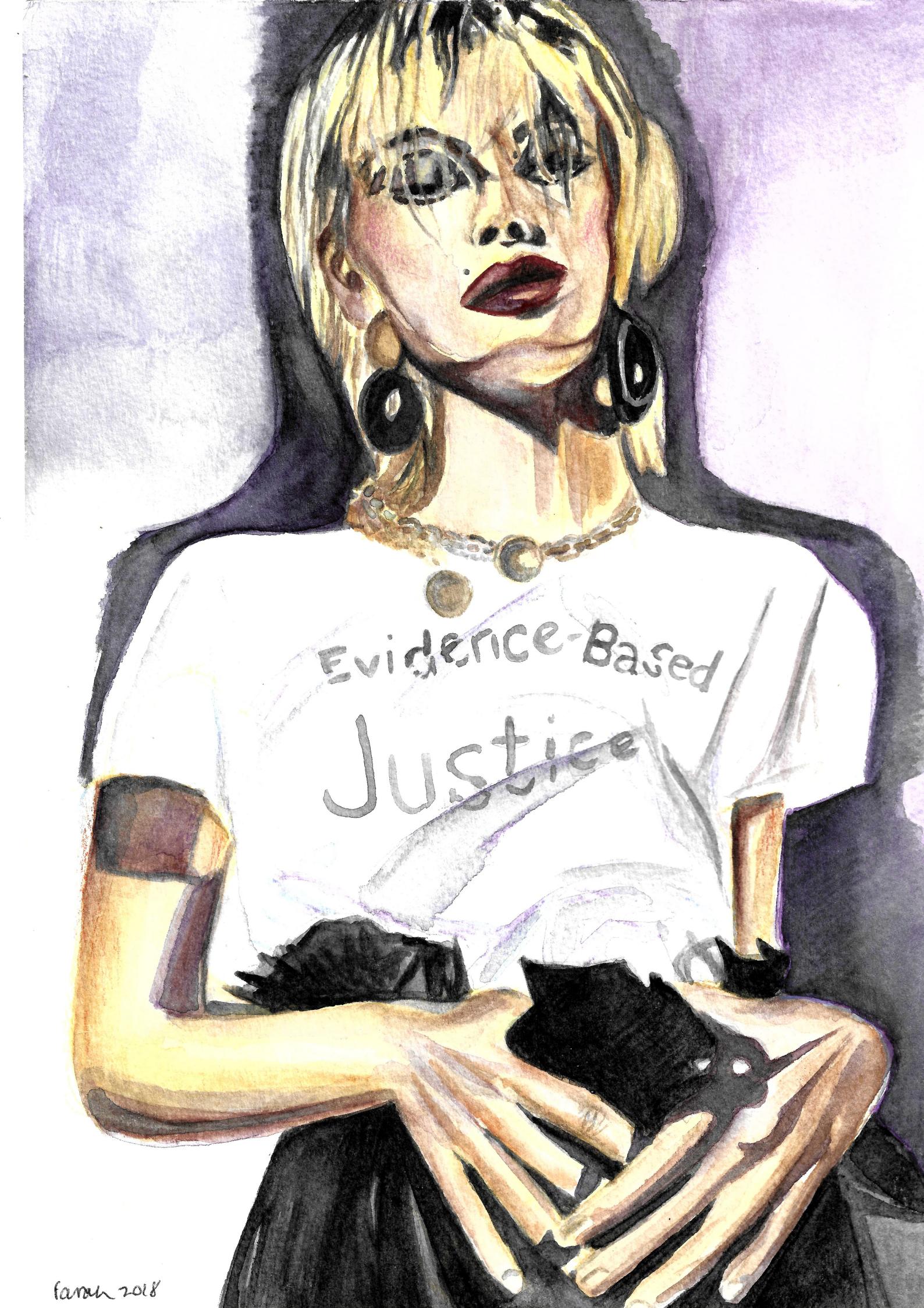
The Ministry of Justice has concluded that women's centres have a significant statistical impact, with the difference estimated to be as high as 9 percent, on the reduction of reoffending. Peer support networks in women's centres give women a voice and provide an environment that promotes empowerment through discussion. Women develop 'both greater independence and a sense of solidarity', say the Women's Resource Centre, an umbrella organisation within the women's sector. In a properly functioning women's centre, women will support each other as peers, volunteers, and workers, and as a result they will develop the confidence to speak out and share their experiences and views.

In women's community projects

48% are suffering with substance abuse

40% have experienced domestic violence, sexual abuse or rape

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON WOMEN IN THE PENAL SYSTEM (2011)



Evidence-Based
Justice

'...the government's vision will ultimately result in growing numbers of people competing to participate in the punishment and control of women (&men) in prison and the community—in essence, to be their sisters' keepers'

KENDAL, CITED IN CARLTON AND SEGRAVE, 2013, P43

The national charity Women in Prison is currently campaigning for the government to stop the building of new prisons, taking the view that there should be more investment in women's centres to tackle the root causes of women's offending behaviour. The charity points out that the government's own evidence proves there is another way that works, keeping families together and strengthening communities.

'When support exists in the community through local services like Women's Centres, women are able to tackle the issues that swept them up into crime in the first place, like poverty, domestic abuse and mental ill-health,' says Dr Kate Paradine, CEO of Women in Prison. Despite new challenges caused by the Coronavirus, including loss of income and increased workload, women being in the presence of controlling partners and being unable to connect online, women's centres have been able to adapt. As part of this adaptation, the women's centres have created helplines to support service users through the pandemic.

Support for women's centres can be found across the criminal justice system, with advocates insisting that the centres represent the most effective source of support as part of alternatives to custody. More than half of the women service users surveyed by Women's Resource Centre and its members, have reported a significant improvement in their life as a whole, with demonstrable improvements in relationships, work, housing, neighbourhood, money, and physical health, as well as substantial improvements in the ever-growing issue of mental health.

Historically, outcomes for women sentenced to imprisonment have been poor, according to the Prison Reform Trust, with 48% of women reconvicted within one year of leaving prison. women's centres have been proven to reduce reoffending, and cost far less too, with a place at a women's centre ranging from £1,223 to £4,125 per woman, compared to the cost of prison which has an average annual cost of £42,765.

'Short prison sentences make no sense,' say the Prison Reform Trust, while women's centres can provide a 'centre of excellence for helping women with multiple and complex needs.'

Critics say that women's centres should not be involved in the punishment of women because they create 'compliant women' rather than equipping them with critical thinking skills and believe the centres are 'contributing to the expansion of penal policies and infrastructure'. Additionally, engagement with women's centres is often voluntary, but in some areas is now enforced via 'specified activity requirements' within the community, suspended sentence orders, and conditional cautions.

These schemes can be perceived as having an element of coercion, taking the ability to choose away from the service user. To build up confidence and resilience in their female clients and form strong attachment relationships to caseworkers, voluntary attendance is considered, by some, to be essential.

Furthermore, children are not allowed in women's centres, so for women unable to make childcare arrangements, the centres may be unsuitable. This inability to secure alternative childcare has the knock-on effect of missed community punishment hours or probation supervision appointments, in turn increasing the perceived risk of the woman to the community and the likelihood of added punishment.

While there is still plenty of debate on whether women's centres are an appropriate way to offer women support, the existing services are currently heavily underfunded.

An initial review of 15 women's services specialist providers, conducted by the Women's Budget Group, has revealed a £10m gap in core funding for women's centres for the year 2021. For many of these women's centres, the uncertainty of receiving adequate funding and the inability to plan beyond the short-term, risks the closure of vital support services for women who might otherwise end up in custody.

'The very nature of the centre's funding relies on footfall...[it] relies upon women being and remaining dependant on their services

PINK PUNISHMENT BLOG

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