

Restoring Justice, PBNI *Women Strategy* 2024–2029 in Action: Practitioner Reflections on the Impact of Trauma and Using Restorative Justice Practices

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Summary: Whilst there is an increasing body of academic research that focuses on women's involvement within the criminal justice system (O'Neill, 2015), research focusing on females who offend remains less prevalent than published research about males who offend. Statistics published in 2024/25 by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), show that the number of males (3,692) on Probation's caseload far outweighs the number of females (464). Whilst trends show that, over the past five years, the numbers of female service-users supervised by PBNI have remained relatively consistent, with a small increase, the number of women entering custody has increased significantly. Indeed, Northern Ireland's female prison population has increased over the course of the past four years. The most recent statistics are from 2023/24, where there were ninety female prisoners, compared to 2019/20 where there were only seventy-four female prisoners (Department of Justice, 2024). These statistics of increasing committals of women to custody and an identified gap in research support the need for evidence-based practice through adopting gender-responsive practice. Such practices have a foundation in trauma-informed practice that can support increasing use of restorative justice practices – specifically, 'healing circles'.

Keywords: Gender-responsive principles, trauma, trauma-informed approaches, restorative justice, justice-involved women, female offending, recidivism.

Introduction

Women are less likely to be the focus of research in respect of their journey through the criminal justice system, mainly because they are less likely to commit an offence than men (Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate, 2018). However, the number of women who offend in Northern Ireland is rising (CJINI, 2021).

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According to PBNI (2025a), the number of female service-users has increased from 399 in 2016/2017 to 464 in 2024/25. While women and girls account for less than one fifth of arrests and court convictions, proportionally they are more likely than males to be imprisoned for theft and more likely to receive short prison sentences (CJINI, 2021).

Thirty per cent of women in custody lose their homes whilst in prison (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2024) and many do not have any accommodation arranged prior to their release (Prison Reform Trust, 2011). They are also more likely to be single parents and the main carers for children (Prison Reform Trust, 2011). Many also face substance misuse difficulties as well as having experienced intimate partner violence (O'Neill, 2015).

Caudy *et al.* (2018) completed a study on the effect of custodial and non-custodial sanctions on men and women and found that those in prison were at higher risk of reoffending than those on probation. This effect was found in both men and women but tended to be stronger for the latter, indicating that prison likely has a more negative influence on women in terms of recidivism when compared to their male counterparts (de Castro Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022). This reiterates the importance of implementing gender-responsive and trauma-informed principles for practice to support reducing recidivism and potential negative impacts felt by women, families and society upon release from custody.

The Criminal Justice Inspection on how the justice system in Northern Ireland treats females in conflict with the law noted,

gender responsiveness is not about a different standard being applied to police actions, prosecution decisions or probation practice because the defendant is a woman or a girl, it is about how criminal justice organisations take account and deliver services specific to women and girls to provide equitable outcomes.

(CJINI, 2021, p. 4)

It thus highlights, at a local level, the need for gender-responsive strategies and a call for key stakeholders to consider how to develop their practice appropriately.

To support practitioners effectively working with female service-users, PBNI has created a five-year *Women Strategy (2024–2029)* to inform and develop its current model of working with women within the service. PBNI's focus is on developing a gender-responsive service that is trauma informed, including developing and supporting staff in their service delivery (PBNI,

2025b). The new strategy aligns well with the proposed way of working explored in this article and parallels thoughts on best practice with women within the criminal justice system. PBNI recognises the need to improve its gender-responsive practice, including the importance of improving probation interventions, which in turn will meet gender-specific needs and improve rehabilitation outcomes (PBNI, 2025b).

As a practising professional who has experience of working with females who offend, I welcome this strategy. It recognises the work of Probation Officers within PBNI and it has a forward-looking focus to ensure that all PBNI staff practise within the same gender-responsive principles. This is particularly important given the pivotal role the agency has in supporting work both in custody and in the community. The strategy has outlined six key guiding principles to be the focus of implementation: Acknowledgement of Gender Differences, Strengths-based and Empowerment Orientated, Holistic Case Management, Relationship-Based Supervision, Community and Family Integration, and Collaboration with Community Resources, with a trauma-informed approach embedded in each of the guiding principles.

Women in the criminal justice system

Why women offend and the label attached

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) (2021) states that the types of offences women commit differ from those committed by men, but women are still less likely to offend. Women are less likely to commit violent, serious or organised crime; instead, they commit more acquisitive types of crime, such as thefts. The Inspectorate states that women are more likely to have mental health issues and to suffer from drug addictions, as well as being more likely to be victims of crime, with histories of violence and abuse. There is evidence that a number of women within the criminal justice system have committed offences because their partner had told them to, or coerced them to, often within the context of intimate partner abuse, and that the women have complied in an attempt to cease the abuse (Centre for Women's Justice, 2016). A study completed by Roberts (2019), further shows that some women engaged in offending behaviour in order to be committed to custody because of concerns regarding safety, financial pressures and to be at a distance from threats or abuse.

Delong and Reichart (2019) note that some women are involved in the criminal justice system due to their repeated victimisation in life and have

named this the 'victim-offender overlap'. Along with this overlap is the term double-deviancy, coined by Heidensohn in 1985. This refers to a woman being deviant in the sense that she is committing an offence, and also being deviant by breaking away from the social norms of the accepted 'stereotype' of females in the local community. Heidensohn considered how the role of a woman in society was changing with the increase in women committing crimes. She reports that the offending behaviour exhibited by women was affecting marriage and family life. Since this was not the norm for women previously, women were then labelled as deviant.

These negative feelings and views are echoed in the theorising of Becker's (1963) labelling theory. For example, if a woman feels that she is an 'embarrassment' to her family and society, or if she feels that she is already perceived a specific way, then she could be more likely to adopt this label and continue to commit offences in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ranaweera (2020) states that social labelling towards a woman can increase her offending behaviour as she is going against the gender norms imposed on her. This label is usually attached to 'female'-related offences, such as prostitution and/or abortion.

The stigma attached to a woman who has committed an offence adds to the shame she feels about being known to the justice system. A significant number of women state that they feel ashamed that they 'let themselves' end up at this point of their lives (Rutter and Barr, 2021). Women report concern that their families will 'turn their backs' on them when they find out about the offences, resulting in children needing social services interventions (Kincaid et al., 2019). O'Neill (2015) highlights the stigma that women experience because of having been in prison. All of the accounts from women in her research have a consistent theme in respect of feelings of shame and guilt, perceptions of being judged as a failure, which can serve to reinforce disadvantage, isolation and social exclusion (Corston, 2007).

Women supervised by Probation

PBNI (2025a) supervised 464 women in 2024, compared to 448 in 2020. PBNI notes that Probation Orders were the most likely form of sentencing in the year 2022/2023 (PBNI, 2023). However, PBNI's statistics do not specify between males and females. However, Shields and Cochran (2020) state that women were more likely to be sentenced to a Probation Order than their male counterparts.

Probation supervision is there primarily to address and manage risk in the community, but also fulfils the purpose of helping and supporting a woman by linking her with services and professionals who can provide further support, particularly upon her release from custody. In 2023, HMIP looked at the positive outcomes of women receiving community sentences, one of which is the importance of building a relationship with an identified professional. For example, if the Probation Officer both engaged the service-user and supported their desistance (through ensuring access to services such as training and employment, accommodation support and other relevant services) the sentence completion rate was 24 per cent higher and the reoffending rate was 14 per cent lower compared to those cases where the Inspectorate felt that the relationship was not as positive (HMIP, 2023).

Research by O'Neill (2011) also supports this finding, stating that 76 per cent of those women interviewed on probation supervision reported that their self-esteem and/or self-confidence had improved as a direct result of their engagement with PBNI. It also highlights the success of the Inspire Model within PBNI – which is gender informed and recognises and understands the role that gender plays in shaping a woman's experience and how this influences the pathway to offending, which differs from men. Started in Northern Ireland by PBNI in 2008, the Inspire Model was created to help manage women more effectively in the community. The purpose of having a women-only service was identified as an important element of the project in that women felt more comfortable, able to open up and discuss key elements of their offending behaviour and personal circumstances.

Despite any positives in respect of probation supervision of women in Northern Ireland, recent data show a higher rate of non-compliance with community orders by adult women compared to men, despite women being less likely to reoffend overall (CJINI, 2021).

The Prison Reform Trust (2022) notes that one of the reasons attributed to women not complying with community orders is that some women who are serving community-based sentences are also experiencing domestic violence, which can have an impact on their ability to comply with the order requirements. Principle four of the *Women Strategy* ensures focus by all staff on relationship-based supervision, ensuring recognition of the need to 'build trust-based, supportive relationships between Probation Officers and women ... the importance of relational support for women's rehabilitation' (PBNI, 2025b, p. 6).

It is important for organisations like PBNI to ensure that all their practitioners focus on fully understanding the reasons why women may not be able to

comply with community sentences and look at the individual's needs in a holistic way. For example, as mentioned above, women in the criminal justice system are more likely to be single parents, and women are more likely to experience domestic violence and are more likely to have negative outcomes from the likes of a custodial sentence. In this respect, it is important that practitioners not only take account of gender-responsive practice but also consider the impact of trauma and adversity experienced by women who have contact with criminal justice. Trauma-informed approaches are key to supporting women and an integral part of the *Women Strategy* (PBNI, 2025b) and the future focus of PBNI as it becomes a trauma-informed agency.

Adversity in childhood and offending

Most people who encounter the justice system have experienced a variety of traumas, commonly adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Scottish Government, 2018). Boullier and Blair (2018) describe adversity in childhood as 'potentially traumatic events, with lasting effects on health and well-being'. More specifically, Felitti *et al.* (1998) describe these trauma-inducing experiences as exposure to adverse events in the household, including substance abuse, mental illness, intimate partner violence and criminal behaviour, as well as verbal, physical and sexual abuse. It is known that adversity in childhood can often lead to offending amongst women (Lawrence, 2022). A study by Levenson *et al.* (2015) found higher rates of adversity exposure in a sample of justice-involved women (41 per cent) in comparison to women not involved in the justice system (15 per cent). The increased number of childhood adversities in women involved with the justice system then pose an increased risk to their physical and mental health (Turner *et al.*, 2021).

Rhoades *et al.* completed a study in 2016 which shows how adversity in childhood can impact upon young people and how this links with offending behaviour in their later years. Sixty-one male and eighty-one female participants were recruited into randomised controlled trials. The results showed that, for females, family violence, parental divorce and cumulative childhood risk factors were significant predictors of adult arrest, rather than juvenile justice referrals. Each additional childhood risk factor increased the risk of adult arrest by 21 per cent. Women who experienced parental divorce were nearly three times more likely to be arrested as an adult and those who experienced family violence were two-and-a-half times more so than those without such experiences.

Rhoades *et al.*'s study notes the impact that emotionally traumatic events may have on women and their risk of offending in later life. It is important that practitioners working with women understand the impact of adversity in childhood and how they might present. Evans-Chase (2014) provides knowledge around this by stating that adversity in childhood may impact on self-regulatory behavioural and emotional responses, leading to delinquency, interpersonal violence, drug and alcohol use, and suicidal or self-mutilating behaviours.

Adult trauma and offending

Traumatic events that happen in adulthood can be as devastating as trauma experienced in childhood and have a significant impact on a person's life. Karatzias *et al.* (2017) suggest that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5* (DSM-5), are common among women in prison, with 58 per cent meeting the criteria for PTSD.

After experiencing a traumatic event, it is reported that women are more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies to manage stress and trauma-related symptoms (Kelly *et al.* 2015). Baranyi *et al.* (2018) define some of these maladaptive coping strategies by saying that women are more likely to turn to frequent and heavier use of substances and display passive and avoidance-focused coping styles, compared to men. Levenson *et al.* (2015) support this view, identifying that due to trauma, individuals adopt high-risk behaviours as part of forming abnormal coping strategies. So, not only are women employing substance misuse and passive/avoidance-focused coping mechanisms, but they are also using the offending itself as a coping mechanism for their trauma.

For some women, the trauma they experience can be linked to their offence, or the act of the offence itself can be the trauma that they need support with (Pink and Gray, 2022). Kubiak (2004) concurs, stating that a diagnosis of PTSD may interfere with the ability to benefit from rehabilitative programmes, can have an impact on impulse control and may be associated with higher reoffending rates. In these circumstances, using offence-focused work and programmes may be beneficial as it can help reduce two issues at once: the trauma and the offence. However, this is something that would need to be carefully managed to reduce potential of retraumatising the person.

The prevalence of trauma and adversity amongst women in contact with the justice system substantiates the need for evidence-based practice in contemporary probation practice, which is encapsulated within both PBNi's *Women Strategy* and strategically within the *Corporate Plan 2023–2026*. The *Corporate Plan* ensures focus on empowering service-users and staff, whilst also recognising the cultural, historical and gender issues that impact on service-users.

Trauma-informed practice is an evolving form of professional practice that is relevant to all justice-involved women. McAnallen and McGinnis explain this as a 'person-centred and whole-system approach, which differs from trauma-focused interventions that target underlying trauma' (2021, p. 110). Sweeney et al. (2018) suggest that services which fail to recognise trauma can negatively affect outcomes for women who can be retraumatised. Professionals need to be aware that offence-focused work cannot take place if the woman is not mentally or emotionally able to understand her actions and take responsibility. This evidence-based theory is encapsulated within principle three of the *Women Strategy* to ensure that holistic case management is adopted by all staff who should 'use gender-responsive risk and needs assessment and case-planning' (2025, p. 6). This emphasises focusing on the need to understand women's offending background, the trauma they have experienced and how the adoption of a trauma-informed approach can assist, before attempting to reduce recidivism through the use of restorative justice – hence why a trauma-informed approach is so important.

Restorative justice

So where does restorative justice fit and why is it important with women who have offended?

Restorative justice is a process that was introduced in the late 1970s in response to the neglect of the needs and rights of victims within the criminal justice system (Choi et al., 2012). The Crown Prosecution Service in England (2023) states that the three main aims are victim satisfaction, engagement with the perpetrator and creation of community capital. While such programming can take many forms, in justice settings it usually involves direct conferencing between the person responsible for the offence and the person who has been harmed. Any form of restorative justice requires the consent of both parties and some recognition of the impacts of the offending behaviour

on the person harmed. Restorative justice can offer a trauma-informed, relationship approach that acknowledges the experiences and focuses on healing rather than punishment, understanding the harm caused in context whilst fully accepting the impact of the offence on the victim.

Dandurand and Griffiths (2006) state that there are five main categories of restorative justice: (1) victim–offender mediation; (2) community and family group conferencing; (3) circle sentencing; (4) peace-making circles; and (5) reparative probation and community boards and panels. Paul (2016) adds to this by saying that letters to the victim from the perpetrator are also commonplace.

As PBNI is a key organisation in the supervision of those within the justice system, it is important to reflect that the benefits of restorative justice have been acknowledged and adopted into practice with the implementation of the *Restorative Justice Strategy 2024–27*. This strategy highlights the benefits of using restorative justice in practice and the different ways that restorative justice can be used within the organisation.

Changing the use of restorative circles

The Restorative Justice Council (2023) suggests that there are indications that restorative justice may be even more effective for women. Restorative justice has been identified to be a particularly useful intervention for improving a person's sense of self-worth (Marder, 2013), and participation may also have positive effects on the mental health of the women who are involved.

Elis (2005) also proposes that restorative justice may be more beneficial for women, as the process focuses on strengthening informal relationships. Research completed by Osterman and Masson (2016) shows that women are keen to emphasise how the context of their offending was not an excuse for their offending behaviour. This willingness to be transparent about their offending adds to their suitability for the restorative justice processes, as in many cases they are already aware of the harm they have caused during their offending.

The difficulty, however, can be in getting women to embrace the restorative justice process and take part, especially if the aim is to engage a woman in group work. Osterman and Masson (2016) highlight that it may be more challenging to get a female case to a restorative justice conference because of possible past traumas that may need more attention before the case reaches the point of readiness. This reinforces that women need to be in

a relatively stable frame of mind before entering into a restorative justice scenario and reiterates the importance of addressing traumas before or during offence-focused work. There was also a suggestion by practitioners that prior relationships between perpetrator and victim were more common in female cases, thus making these cases more complicated (Miles, 2013). This is a barrier to be aware of when trying to use restorative justice with women in the justice system.

Restorative justice circles were first used in the late 1970s in the United States, with young people who were deemed as ‘troublesome’ (Wachtel, 2016). As the years progressed, the use of restorative circles remained mostly the same. The aim of the circle was to bring together a group of people, discuss ideas, take responsibility, empower and encourage each other and hold each other accountable. The use of the restorative circle is a more adaptive form of restorative justice (Wachtel, 2016).

Literature from Hayes and Daly (2003) explores cases involving young girls who offend and their victims, who are known to them. They found that in these situations, where a restorative justice circle was used, there can be an increase in contested facts and less apologetic behaviour. Therefore, lower levels of positive outcomes, including minimal change to reoffending rates, were found.

Despite the work from Hayes and Daly (2003), it is exactly this form of restorative justice that this article proposes could be used best with adult female service-users, the suggestion being that it is going to be used differently from the traditional form of restorative circles and may not include the victim of someone’s offence, but instead a victim representative. This allows for the victim’s voice to be heard throughout the restorative justice experience.

Bazemore and Umbreit (2001) state that restorative justice circles demand a lot of time and therefore are not used on more minor offences. Moreover, they also state that circles require a significant time commitment, prompting some to suggest that they should be used where deep, long-term intervention is needed. The use of circles for a more long-term intervention is what could be best used with female service-users.

Stuart and Pranis (2006) outline certain unique qualities of the circle process, which include: a formal opening and closing of the circle, use of a talking piece to create safety and regulate discussion, building the relationship between the women before engaging in meaningful conversations surrounding traumas and victims, and addressing underlying causes of problem behaviour rather than focusing on a single incident. The last of these processes is what is most intriguing and would be the most

important aspect of the restorative justice circles. The main aim of the circles would be that the women could explore their traumas together, in a safe space, to gain understanding of what led them to this point in life.

As a result of the prevalence of shame and guilt experienced by women, the use of restorative justice may be of benefit in terms of enhancing female sense of worth. A study completed in 2012 by Gaarder and Hesselton looked at how restorative justice circles helped with shame and the feelings experienced by girls who had offended. The study found that such shaming was a necessary part of the restorative process for the residential group. The girls felt ashamed when speaking about their offence. However, in the circles, the constructive use of shame enabled the girls to accept responsibility for their harmful action and move on. From this point on, this article will refer to the use of circle intervention as 'healing circles', as it is felt that this is a more apt name than restorative justice circles.

Many of the women using the healing circles will have been victims themselves and could possibly empathise with the victim of their crime because of their own experiences (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). This new use of healing circles can focus on two things – offending and trauma – as it aims to deal with both at the same time.

The idea of using a healing circle as group therapy for those who have offended may not be a main focus point of restorative justice, but it is important to note that there is research to show that talking in a group setting can be beneficial for women in the justice system. The Probation Service (2021) states that 'talking therapy' is most effective in helping women to identify and change negative and self-destructive patterns of behaviour. The use of the group setting can lead to a sense of peer mentoring and healing amongst the group members, as the women, with similar experiences, can help lead each other and work on staying away from a life of offending. NHS England (2023) also highlights that peer support does not replace the need for effective professional advice, support and information. However, it does provide people with a supportive community that enables them to play a more active role in the ongoing management of their health and wellbeing.

Difficulties in using healing circles

Risk

It is important to remember that the women who will be together in these healing circles have committed criminal offences and, depending on the

offences, could be assessed as presenting a high risk to others. An example would be women who have been violent, who are not taking responsibility for their offences or who are victim-blaming (Osterman and Masson, 2016). Being aware of the offences and the people who would be brought together is something a facilitator would need to consider before starting the healing-circle intervention. As some women are also victims of their offence, they can take exception to the fact that they have to acknowledge their wrongdoings as well (Larsson et al., 2018).

Mental health

A main concern with healing circles is that, if they are not delivered appropriately, they could exacerbate a woman's existing mental health problems (Miles, 2013). There must be safeguarding measures in place to protect the women involved in the healing circles as it is not appropriate to have them involved if they are too unwell to begin with. Women who want to be involved in the healing circle would need to be ready to engage in such work, as it can have negative as well as positive outcomes. This is another use for the facilitator, to determine the readiness of the participants.

Victims

By using the healing circles in the way that this article proposes, there is a chance that some victims will not have their harm restored. This article does not seek to use healing circles as an only form of sentencing, but as something that goes hand-in-hand with another sentence, such as a community order or custodial sentence. If used appropriately, it would be the hope that these healing circles could show a new way of managing female service-users, both in the community and in the custodial setting.

Conclusion and way forward

The healing circles that have been proposed will potentially take some time to become adopted within the criminal justice system. It is important to understand that these circles look at the healing of the woman's trauma, and the aim is to reduce reoffending through empathy and understanding. If these healing circles were considered, they could replace or run parallel to current victim interventions/programmes that are used within the community and prison settings.

Healing circles could be used as a programme that lasts for a defined period of time, giving the woman a chance to explore herself and what led to the offending behaviour. The use of healing circles in this context could be similar to the use of problem-solving courts/justice. In these cases, once a woman has gone through this specialised approach, a judge assesses what is a suitable sentence after the identified criminogenic needs have begun to be addressed (Problem Solving Justice NI, 2018). This could be a way to use healing circles as it would give a woman the chance to explore her trauma before being sentenced, which could enable her to complete her sentencing in its entirety.

The use of healing circles aligns with PBNI's *Women Strategy* and *Restorative Justice Strategy* and therefore will be proposed for consideration as the *Women Strategy* is progressed in the coming year. The healing circles would provide a strengths-based relationship approach, not only with female service-users and professionals but in a peer-support capacity. It would also support the links between the women and their community, collaborating with family and society once again. The use of healing circles is adapting a trauma-informed approach in a unique way, exploring a new way of working in a gender-specific approach and giving women the chance to step away from the criminal justice system.

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