



Report

For

**Alana House**

‘Enriching Lives’: Supporting women out  
of the Criminal Justice System

By

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## **Introduction**

Women sentenced to imprisonment for less than 12 months have a reconviction rate of 61% (Prison Reform Trust). According to the Government's Female Offender Strategy: 'female offenders cost the Government approximately £1.7 billion in 2015/16, including estimated police costs of around £1 billion. This excludes wider social costs, such as the cost of intergenerational offending' (2020:12<sup>1</sup>). Alongside the obvious costs to the taxpayer to keep a woman in prison (according to Baroness Healy currently approximately £56,415 per year), the ripple effect in terms of the impact on families and the rest of that woman's life is both profound and significant. Baroness Corston notes, "the effects on the 18,000 children every year whose mothers are sent to prison are, so often, nothing short of catastrophic<sup>2</sup>".

A key challenge, however, in tackling these staggering re-offending rates is that many of the issues that are arguably connected to a women's initial offending and then re-offending, are not adequately addressed before leaving prison. Things such as poor education, unemployment, poor mental health, and a lack of a support networks to rely on are often considered as causally connected to criminal offending, so it would make sense to try and address them.

Women make up just under 5% of the prison population in England and Wales. However, according to the Ministry of Justice, women are more likely than men to be sent to prison for a first offence and are more likely to reoffend (Advance, 2021<sup>3</sup>). Why does prison not work for women and what is being done to improve outcomes for them? Research on alternative approaches to supporting women at risk of re-offending has begun to highlight the value for money and success rates of Women's Centres who work specifically with women who are 'at risk' of reoffending.

*Alana House in Reading was opened in 2010 by the charity Parents And Children Together and is the charity's flagship community project that uses a holistic approach to support and empower women, providing support across the whole of Berkshire. The Alana House team provide a confidential, women-only, non-judgemental space and welcome all women who feel they need help and support. Alana House works in partnership with other organisations and provides a number of different specialist support programmes for women. The Enrich programme is part of this specialist offer.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-15-Womens-Centres-Report-v4.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/1610/full-report.html>

<sup>3</sup> [Community support for women, instead of Prison, breaks the cycle of re-offending - Advance Charity](#)

## **Executive Summary**

- Women who commit crime and enter the criminal justice system are usually already extremely vulnerable, prior to their first offence and then subsequently
- This research shows that the specific vulnerability these women experience can be understood as falling into '**four key domains of vulnerability** which are: '*Psychological*', '*Social*', '*Economic*' and '*Biological*'. They are all interconnected
- The Enrich programme works because it tackles these four domains of vulnerability systematically
- The Enrich programme clearly offers a person centred, holistic and trauma informed approach to their work. This is valued greatly by the women and professionals'
- Trust is key to the Enrich Programme success, which results from their humanising approach to the women that the programme works with
- The Enrich programme offers a distinctive understanding to ideas of 'restorative justice'. In this case, society is supporting to 'restore' the women let down by the 'system'
- The Enrich programme provides the practical and emotional support these vulnerable women need to 'restore' and empower them to make different life choices.
- The Enrich programme re-humanises the women, who often feel 'de-humanised' by the 'system'.
- Women only spaces are crucial

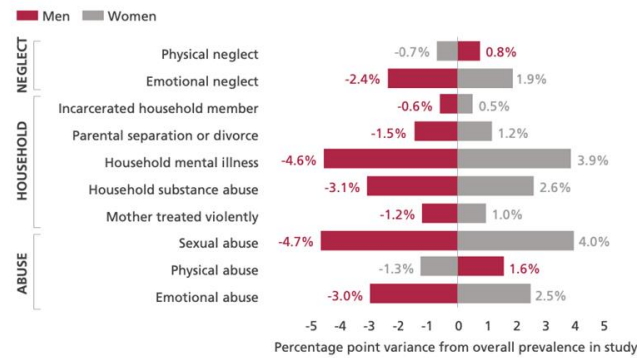
## **Background**

Government evidence has consistently shown that women do not respond well to prison and are '50% more likely than men to have five or more adverse childhood experiences which, in turn, contribute to increased risks of alcoholism, injecting drug use and suicide attempts' (Centre for Social Justice<sup>4</sup>, 2021:7) - see figure 1 below. It makes sense then, that if you want to break patterns of re-offending, you need to tackle factors that may be contributing to the underlying behaviours that lead to offending.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/A\\_Woman-Centred\\_Approach\\_CSJ\\_web.pdf](https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/A_Woman-Centred_Approach_CSJ_web.pdf)

Figure 1: Variance in prevalence of adverse childhood experiences by gender vs overall prevalence in general population



Source: CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study<sup>2</sup>

Women’s centres are a valuable alternative to imprisonment for women involved in the criminal justice system; even for those simply at risk of offending. They can offer support and help for the issues and challenges that underpin women’s offending – such as poverty, mental health issues, substance abuse and provide a range of services for women. According to the Prison Reform Trust <sup>5</sup>(2021), a friendly and welcoming environment allows women to take responsibility for their own lives and helps support women maintain and/or re-establish their family ties. An important and distinguishing feature is that women’s centres offer a friendly, non-judgmental approach that emphasises the importance of trauma-related and informed programmes.

Various studies have shown that non-custodial programmes are significantly more cost-effective than imprisoning women who offend. Aside from supporting families, it makes sense that tackling the reasons for women offending will have a significant impact on offending rates. Clare Jones<sup>6</sup>, the National lead for Women Centred Working states that *‘there is compelling evidence that women centred ways of doing things can benefit statutory agencies and voluntary bodies – and ultimately save the public purse millions.’* The desire to see a new approach to tackle female offending is long-standing. Jones, (2021) states, ‘countless reports, taskforces, strategies, and plans have been published or created in the last two decades’ (2021). Working with women through women’s centres makes sense. According to the Women’s Budget Group (2020<sup>7</sup>), a place at a woman’s centre ranges from £1223 to £4125 depending on the needs of the woman. It also found that the women’s centre model shows one centre making a saving of £18M over 5 years. It makes sense then, to consider the

<sup>5</sup> <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/invisible-women-understanding-womens-experiences-of-long-term-imprisonment/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Women-and-Girls-Briefing-Report-Final-web.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/the-case-for-sustainable-funding-for-womens-centres/>

ways that women's centres could do more to support this important, cost effective, and preventative work.

## **The project**

The Enrich programme supports a maximum of 20 women per year, in group sizes of no more than 10 women. Women are supported for between six and 12 months and are referred to the programme by police, other community-based services, and general referrals. The programme offers individual support based on the needs of the individual, which can be via 1:1 meeting, group sessions or out-sourcing support for specific needs. On average the programme costs £2000 per woman, with the income from the 20 places supporting the appointment of a 0.5 of a key-worker post. Key to the Enrich programme is that it is trauma informed: an approach that acknowledges that a person is very likely to have experienced trauma and recognizes the consequences of that trauma in their current life. As such, the Enrich programme is individually tailored to the needs of the person.

## **Methods**

Several interviews were carried out with a range of interested people. The interviews were designed to evaluate the Enrich programme from multiple perspectives and placed a specific emphasis on the views of the specific needs of women, and why the Enrich programme was perceived to work. Interviews took place on-line or face to face and were carried out in tandem with an Alana House volunteer who has lived experience of some of the issues facing the Enrich cohort of women. In total, 15 interviews were carried out with the following: four service users, one focus group with three service users, three staff from Alana House, one staff from Probation services, Thames Valley police, Elizabeth Fry House, Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit as well as Brighter Future for Children.

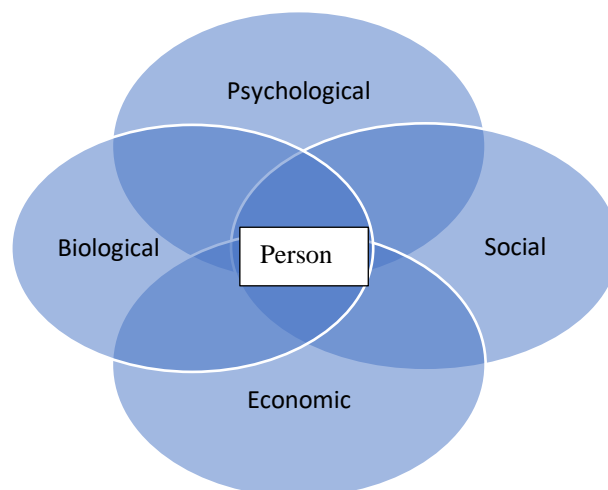
Transcripts from interviews were analysed to identify key themes of interest, acquired through a process of iteration. Colour coding was used initially. This inductive and systematic approach allowed for an exploration of the data which permitted the themes that appeared relevant and significant to the Enrich programme to emerge. A thematic analysis, in relation to the topics and themes that arose in the interviews, was carried out in relation to the discourse evident in the content and meaning as well as the specific areas of interest. It is worth noting however, that frequency of 'content' was not a specific aspect of this research. All University ethical guidelines were complied with in carrying out this research. All those taking part gave informed consent and were assured of anonymity. Quotes in

this report refer to 'Professional' (P), 'Service User' (SU); 'Staff' (SF) or 'Focus Group' (FG) and no identifying features are given.

## **Findings**

From interviews with professionals and service users, it was clear that women who have been in the criminal justice system face very specific challenges; challenges that made them vulnerable to offending in the first place, as well as being at risk of re-offending. The reason that the Enrich programme is seen to work – from the perspective of those interviewed – is that it tackles those challenges on a very practical level, as well as more holistically.

From the interviews 'vulnerability' as a significant domain was clearly identified as the key underpinning theme associated with women and crime. Regardless of what crime women commit – and however bad – '*vulnerability*' was a key feature. In this research, '*vulnerability*' can be understood to mean being or feeling exposed to the possibility of being hurt, either physically or emotionally. The data analysis in this research saw vulnerability evident within four key domains: '*Psychological*', '*Social*', '*Economic*' and '*Biological*' and with the person centred at the heart of these domains. Each of these domains are causally connected, in that they each influence and reinforce each other, making a woman susceptible to crime and to re-offending. Figure 2 below illustrates the interconnectedness of these areas. In the following sections, these will each be explored in more depth alongside the ways that the Enrich programme works to address them.



*Figure 2: Four key domains of vulnerabilities*

### **The four domains of vulnerability**

1. '*Psychological vulnerability*': All professionals and service users referred to prior experiences of trauma and abuse as well as other adverse childhood experiences in earlier life. Challenging childhoods are viewed as significantly impacting formal education in a negative way and, as adults, results in women vulnerable to poor mental health, substance misuse and abusive relationships. In consequence, adult women in the criminal justice system very often experience psychological vulnerability in terms of low levels of personal resilience, feelings of powerlessness, low self-esteem, and low self-worth.
2. '*Social vulnerability*': For women coming out of prison, the impact of social vulnerability is very important but, sometimes overlooked by professional services. Whether removed to a new area when leaving jail or mixing in social groups and networks that contribute to psychological vulnerability, social isolation and loneliness is very often a pre-requisite or an outcome of offending. Feeling alone and without a sense of belonging to any mainstream community does have a practical impact, as well as a psychological one too. Practically, women are cut off from important sources of advice, support, and protection. Their social vulnerability therefore emphasises their psychological vulnerability, as it reinforces feelings of low self-esteem and self-worth.
3. '*Economic vulnerability*': Women who have gone through the criminal justice system are most often from the more social deprived area and struggle to find work; because of their often-poor educational attainment as well as criminal records and poor mental health. A steady income is key to secure housing and basic standards of living, as well as structure to the week. A lack of access to an income creates an economic vulnerability that can make a woman susceptible to re-offending. It also leaves women - who are already psychologically and socially vulnerable – at risk of being exploited and abused by others.
4. '*Biological vulnerability*': All interviewed agreed that women are particularly vulnerable by default of being women. Their biological sex makes them vulnerable as adults – most typically to abuse at the hands of men. Professionals suggested that the women they dealt with in the criminal justice system were there either because of the impact that men had had on their lives previously or as consequences of the manipulation and abuse at the hands of the men in their current lives. Bearing children also mattered and created an additional biological vulnerability – with care giving responsibilities creating pressures and vulnerabilities in the other three domains.

## Why the Enrich programme works

**Psychological vulnerability:** Service users discussed how they felt often powerless, excluded, and lacked confidence. A lack of voice created feelings of frustration and anger. This impacted directly on mental health, relationships, and responses to others:

*...well, I did more than stand my ground, I shouted, and I screamed, but it made me feel bad because I had to shout and scream to get my point across...with my partner, me straightaway, I'd be an angry person. Straight in, at him. But now I've learnt he winds me up and winds me up and I'll take it and I'll take it and I'll take it and then I'll go. SU1*

*...very few female people, we call them offenders...very few female clients offend freely, like no, very limited influence, there's often a man around. You get violence where woman have been violent to partners, [but] it's often, and not always, but often, more often than not as a result of them taking abuse over a long period of time [P1]*

Feelings of invisibility begin in childhood:

*I've been depressed probably since I was a real child, I lost my mum and all that, so, yeah, and even at school, I rebelled, but I think it was, I'd go home and get battered. SU1*

SU1 discussed how she was rude in school, skipped out of lessons but nobody stopped her – she was problematic as a student, her home life was traumatic, but no one seemed interested in checking in on her. As an adult she felt isolated and alone: “*there was nobody, I never had nobody*”. The effects of adverse childhood experiences and trauma are still felt in adulthood as ST1 illustrates:

*Anything that can be an adverse experience for anybody and I think, those can go back to childhood and upbringing. That can be any involvement in using drugs or alcohol to cope, those sorts of situations. If you've grown up in an area or grown up in a family or had a family where there was not a lot of money, not a lot of access to resources, to food, to education. Basic things, shelter... I think all of those can interact in a way that can create, that remove privileges and create barriers.*



P3 illustrates that this same idea is evident, through her work with female offenders:

*Well, time after time, in this post and in all the previous situations that I've been dealing with individuals with or without mental health problems, there has always been gaps and sad stories about them as children. Their experiences of neglect then become, then becoming subsequently involved in unhelpful relationships, with either men or women or peers. And due to their vulnerabilities, that behaviour sometimes becomes entrenched, sometimes it just might be like a one off, awful situation that occurs that then puts them in contact with the criminal justice system. I think that is a very persistent theme that I've been mindful of (P3)*

SU1 goes on to discuss how counselling through Enrich has enabled her to understand the anger she feels and has been taught strategies for managing it. Support for poor mental health is offered but the simple power of knowing there is someone there to share concerns with is profound. Having an advocate in the key worker role, can often be the first time that women have had support to attend meetings and help with situations, such as doctors' visits. Service users can feel a great deal of mistrust of the criminal justice system and so professional meetings are often a source of a great deal of stress. This is largely because of a fear of judgement and anxiety about not being heard. Intuitively, a lack of trust and anxiety are important factors in psychological vulnerability

In terms of supporting psychological vulnerability, building trust is the single most important aspect of the Enrich experiences. Trust allows women to be truthful, in ways they do not feel able to with other services – such as probation. These services are perceived as lacking interest or care, and rather than help, they are there to catch the Service User out. This leads to a lack of honesty and sharing because women fear the consequences of doing so – for example, having licences revoked and being returned to jail. Probation is seen as punitive and Alana House as nurturing. One SU recounted how she was told by a very young probationer “*we are not your friends*”. The relatively young age of probationers was also seen to result in a lack of understanding and a patronising approach to Service Users which further alienated them. This view was somewhat reinforced by P2:

*Where we can get agencies, counselling, mental health, health, and health go in there, where people feel safe but don't feel judged...because, to be honest with you, the probation service years ago used to be very much on the side of the offender and we've moved, quite a long time ago, into more of an enforcement agency (P2)*

The Enrich programme in contrast, was seen to offer the option of new directions, partly because of the efforts to understand the women and not apply any judgements. This leads to strong feelings of trust and humanisation. Many women suffer with anxiety and depression, so this is important. The Enrich programme is not just an intervention at Alana House; it is a place where some women feel 'loved' – some for the first time in their lives.

As the Enrich programme is trauma informed and non-statutory, developing greater self-confidence and resilience is possible:

*...it builds your confidence, your understanding and at least you're there. (SU2)*

*Well straightaway it's a safe place to come. It's for women that have had a crap life, drugs and abuse and everything like that. They can come here and just relax and forget about what stress they've got, actually, going on, on the outside but they can come here, relax and just speak to a member of staff or somebody to say, well look, this is what's happening, I'm struggling here a bit, how can you help me? Could you give me any advice? (SU3)*

Activities, both individual and group, are designed to explore feelings and recognise the ways those feelings manifest in everyday life. The role of the key worker is also profoundly important – with individuals mentioned a lot. The power of a named person to go to means that, for some women, there is someone to turn to when help, advice or a moan is needed.

### **Social vulnerability:**

The Enrich programme, run through Alana House, offers a sense of camaraderie, community, and friendship. This is key to tackling the social isolation and vulnerability that women leaving jail can feel:

*...it wasn't for Alana House I'd be, well I don't even know if I'd still be alive because I live on my own. I would be basically just isolated completely if I didn't have Alana House. (SU3)*

*I keep myself to myself but it's nice just to come and have the chat with people and, when you've, you're not feeling in the right place, and come and have the chat and that. (SU2)*

Service users describe how being part of Alana House feels like being part of a family because it is warm and has a welcoming atmosphere. Many women have had bad childhood experiences, and this is their first sense of having a place to go, where people really care. Friendships are made and trusting relationships with staff develop, whilst structure to the week provides stability and something to look forward. As one Service user said: *"it's like having two big arms wrapped around you"* (FG).

The Enrich programme also supports women by engaging help that connects to all aspects of a woman's life, including family:

*...Sometimes people haven't got the confidence to come and speak, [but here] they build the relationship with the support worker, [before] they don't realise that you can get the right help and the right support. Some people are on drugs and alcohol. They don't know what kind of support there is, social worker support, things like that. So at least then the families, they can [help] put the families together and you can get that support (SU2)*

*...when women come out of prison, they're exposed to so many different professionals time after time, and [are] expected to build up relationships and tell their story over and over and over again, so the earlier that we can forge that link and foster good working relationships is better (P3)*

Again, the role of the key worker is clearly important. The key worker is a social bridge and a necessary and useful conduit between Service Users and others. This is key to higher levels of engagement with Professionals as well as having any chance to build the levels of trust that are required, to begin to tackle the issues that women face.

### ***Economic vulnerability:***

Professionals discussed the challenges for women of finding work and accommodation when leaving prison:

*We've got issues of foreign...offenders, foreign nationals. And it's a hostile environment where they're not, there's no agreement to send people back, there's no deportation so they're stuck in Britain, they're not allowed to claim benefits, they're not allowed to work, they have no money, no nothing. And when you've got someone offering you to do some drug dealing... These people have got nothing (P2)*

For professionals it is very evident that for some working women, life can seem very hard, with little money to spend or, prospects for an alternative life:

*...no one wants to raise their children like this, no one wants to be poor, no one wants to live in rubbish housing. But the, not the alternative, but what that means can be, is massive, isn't it? If you've never had to get up at 7 o'clock, get to work for 8.00 and do a full day, when it's hardly going to give you any money, and there's no one to look after the kids, and da de da, you haven't got that like wider support, that family network... I've heard women say, "I don't want to live like this, but it's really scary, can I get out"? (P1)*

Professionals are enthusiastic and supportive of the ways that the Enrich programme supports women with practical yet important tasks: such as applications to Universal Credit and housing, job applications and creating curriculum vitae, preparing for an interview, as well as what to wear - to name a few. Bureaucratic systems can be confusing and challenging for women with no access to the internet or limited literacy skills, which may in turn, lead to anger and frustration. Support from the Enrich programme empowers these economically vulnerable women, whilst arguably also boosting self-esteem through the care and support shown.

### ***Biological vulnerability:***

Having spaces for 'women only' was of paramount importance to both the Service Users interviewed. Many women do not trust men and would not attend or engage if men were included. Women felt their lives had been harder because they were women, either because of abuse or a lack of access to money, care, and support. As one Service User said, "*it is a man's world – they have all the power*" (FG). Feeling safe is key to being able to relax, trust and therefore engage:

*I get to speak to a lot of people, other women as well, that have gone through similar situations. I feel safe here, I feel comfortable...If men was [sic] here, I wouldn't bother (SU3)*

*Well straightaway it's a safe place to come. It's for women that have had a crap life, drugs and abuse and everything like that. They can come here and just relax and forget about what stress they've got, actually going on, on the outside but they can come here, relax and just speak to a member of staff or somebody to say, well look, this is what's happening, I'm struggling here a bit, how can you help me? Could you give me any advice? (SU2)*

Enrich supports women with parenting classes, well-being classes and support for physical and mental health. This is important as it feeds into a women's skill set as a parent – both in raising children but also understanding about what she does as a parent and why.

*I think, well it's like really difficult, it's not like no men experience these challenges but I think it is very, it is very gendered. I think women do experience more from, again like the domestic abuse side of things, trauma. There're also the added complications of if they have children, obviously the children, usually it's the responsibility of the mother whereas men don't, can just leave. Not that women can't, but that is usually what we see. Yeah, I think it is, yeah, very much, there are challenges that women have that men don't (ST2).*

Professional staff also agreed that women's only spaces were not only important, but were imperative:

*...there's always something that happens, there's always trauma, particularly women...[our] evidence has shown [women] are different and their needs are different, and they've got, some women, sometimes...they've lost everything. Some women commit serious offences, they lose everything, they lose access to their children, they have to go back to their home... they're more vulnerable (P2)*

For Professionals, a single sex space is considered as being safer for vulnerable women:

*...it's a very safe space. It's a very, very positive environment where they feel valued, they don't feel judged, and they feel very safe. And apart from the odd occasional Friday when a couple of the guys would come down to the community café, it was very female orientated, so that was very important for a lot of women... I think [women only spaces are] imperative and I think women have a right to them as well (P3)*

*I think we also always have to have services that are tailored for particular communities...I think what's really important, though, is kind of bringing that together, so that there's some learning from those kind of areas that work with particular communities, or people with particular needs, as well as those more kind of generic services. Because I think the danger would be that the focus would be lost, and we will be harder to get to, as services. But we'll tell ourselves they're harder to reach, but actually it will be harder to make your way to a service. And it isn't one size fits all... So yeah, I think there is a place, particularly for women with particular needs. And I think that can get tougher, as well, I think it can get tougher for those women to navigate, I think navigate themselves through, as services and the economy and everything else. (P1)*

It is clear – from all interviewed - that gender plays a big part in the reasons for coming under the auspices of the criminal justice system as well being a clear factor in addressing the reasons that lead women back into it. The Enrich programme supports women by “*joining up all of the dots*” (ST1), in ways that other services simply cannot. It is why it is seen as so valuable, not just by Professional services, but also by the Service Users themselves.

## **Education**

A key aspect of the Enrich programme is education, education about self, about adulthood and about future possibilities:

*I guess that's what I feel very passionate about is promoting that, because once they are at Alana House, they can learn the new skillsets that they need and increase their education and just feel better about themselves in general (P3)*

Whilst not explored explicitly, education has a clear role to play in earlier prevention of criminal activity by working with children who are 'at risk' via adverse childhood experience

*Well, I think prevention is the biggest thing, so I think there should be more done in schools and in education, on teaching kids about the importance of relationships and boundaries and who to turn to if these things are happening (ST2)*

Education clearly matters as it is through education that women are being empowered to take charge of their own lives – and for some, for the first time.

## **Conclusion**

The Enrich programme clearly offers a person centred, holistic and trauma informed approach to the work it does, that is appreciated and considered valuable by professionals and service users alike. As well as supporting the triggers to criminality, the Enrich programme offers social connections and promotes feelings of social belonging. Feeling you belong and have networks of support are key to feelings of self-esteem, confidence and choosing a different path. This is why the Enrich programme works.

Statistics can illustrate with numbers, the impact of an intervention on a person's life and allow us to speculate as to the broader social benefits of that impact. Statistics cannot tell you why something works however: or allow the experiences of those behind the numbers to tell their tale. In this small research study individual stories and perspectives show powerfully, the real and lived experiences of the Enrich programme; how it works and why. Through this research, powerful accounts clearly show the role that 'vulnerability' plays in the lives of women who enter the criminal justice system as well as why the Enrich programme, with its focus on the 'four domains of vulnerability; works. In highlighting these four key areas of vulnerability: 'psychological, social, economic and biological' this research offers a distinctive understanding to ideas of 'restorative justice'. In this case, society is supporting the women let down by the 'system', by providing financial support so that the Enrich programme can provide the support so very needed to 'restore' and empower these women to make different choices. In this way, this research has made a very valuable contribution; first by identifying the four domains of vulnerability and secondly, by highlighting how an approach to criminal justice that re-humanises, it is clearly the only way forward.

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