COMPASSIONATE JUSTICE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FROM A PARTICIPATORY ARTS TRAINING PROJECT WITH STAFF WORKING WITH WOMEN ACROSS THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

Developed and delivered by
CLEAN BREAK & WOMEN/THEATRE/JUSTICE



un:mute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Clean Break is a women-only theatre company founded in 1979, which grew out of a prisoner-led drama workshop at HMP Askham Grange. It is now a renowned theatre, education and advocacy organisation. *Criminalised Women: Changing the Story* is a collaboration between Clean Break and an interdisciplinary research team of academics, Women/Theatre/Justice, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Warwick Business School.

In 2025 Clean Break delivered nine participatory arts workshops to 101 people working with criminalised women in England. Participants came from prisons, probation, policing, voluntary sector services, the magistracy and the judiciary. Each workshop was facilitated by a Clean Break staff member and a Clean Break Member artist with lived experience of the criminal justice system. The workshops centred on consideration of original artworks and a Clean Break film, engaging staff in reflective dialogue and applied theatre exercises, prompting open questions about the lives of criminalised women, the systems that process them, and the daily work of the people employed within those systems.

In 2026, the Women's Justice Board and the Prison Reform Trust produced reports with recommendations for reducing women's imprisonment and outlining reasons why, despite government commitment, progress has been limited. The reports call for a whole system approach which is responsive to the needs of women. Training is one of the key elements of this. The Clean Break workshop programme, *Criminalised Women: Changing the Story*, speaks to the ambition and pragmatic recommendations both reports outline: it is gender-specific, trauma-informed, co-delivered by women with lived experience and engages staff working across the criminal justice system.

The academic team observed the workshops, analysed pre- and post-session questionnaires, and carried out interviews with participants one-two months after the workshops. The result is a report that gives a reader access to the workshop and participants' reflections of their learning through it. It lets us hear the voices of those who make the criminal justice system work on a daily basis, providing evidence that Clean Break's unique approach of participatory arts training can contribute to policy aims through:

1. improved outcomes for individual women.
2. supporting workers and working practices across the criminal justice system.
3. contributing to strategic aims of reducing imprisonment for women and, in turn, the ripple effects on families and society.

FINDINGS

- **The criminal justice system is highly fragmented, with many staff unaware of what happens to women before and after their time with them**. Only women themselves experience the system as a whole. This training revealed and addressed gaps in staff knowledge that the structures and processes of the criminal justice system produce. What the workshop and artistic resources supplied was not only information but frames through which one person in one part of the system could better understand the processes in another. And, in turn, better understand the experiences of women who are being processed within it and how each person she is in contact with shapes these experiences.

- **Much of the work of justice happens in the informal spaces between formal structures.** The training brought to light different areas within the system where it has been possible to create environments and practices that respond to criminalised women's needs, fulfilling the ambition of government strategy and report recommendations. Participants described a system of formal roles, statutory duties, risk tools and workload allocations, and then described doing their jobs in the gaps 'between' them; **compassionate justice in action**.

- **Modes of training matter**. Participants recalled the workshop in specific detail weeks and months afterwards, describing it in terms distinguishing it from the majority of training provision they have experienced; often online, PowerPoint-driven and content-heavy. This training offered a different way of learning. Participants made the distinction between being told what to think and being invited to think. The form of this training is directly related to its effect. Key characteristics include: mixed practitioner cohorts, expert facilitation, a facilitator with lived experience, artistic material that invites multiple interpretations, face-to-face delivery, and the deliberate absence of prescribed conclusions.

- **Participatory arts practice facilitates peer learning and collaboration.** Sessions were hosted by regional partners in prison, probation, policing or sentencing, but each group varied across each session with a mix of occupational roles, levels and experience. In each training, post-session questionnaires and interviews, participants acknowledged and appreciated the opportunity to spend time with colleagues they wouldn't ordinarily work with and to learn from them. There was a shift in perspective about how the different elements of the system could work collaboratively.

- **Policy exists to design systems and processes. People have agency to make changes in practice.** In follow up interviews, participants spoke about shifts in their practice they attributed to or were informed by the workshop training. The report details these changes in practice, that facilitate policy and produce better outcomes for staff and criminalised women.

- **Cultural change in the criminal justice system is possible.** In addition to changes in practice, the training prompted shifts in people's attitudes towards their role and potential to 'do the right thing' in a system that often leaves workers feeling overworked and powerless to support women in the ways that they need. The training was a prompt to take what we have called, **a compassionate breath**, that improves outcomes for women and working life for criminal justice system practitioners.

In sum:

- The criminal justice system is highly fragmented, with only women themselves going through the system as a whole. This is a barrier to staff understanding of women's experiences.
- Much of the work of justice happens in the informal spaces between formal structures.
- Modes of training matter.
- Participatory arts practice facilitates peer learning and collaboration.
- Staff have agency to make changes in practice that facilitate policy.
- Despite challenging working conditions, cultural change through participatory arts practice is possible, enabling better outcomes for women and staff alike.

Centrally, the report evidences the impact of Clean Break's training on practitioners' understanding, attitudes and behaviour. In a system with many chronic problems, the training has revealed, enabled and enhanced the ability of staff to make a difference to the lives of women in the system.

Coda: perhaps the most persuasive point is that, subsequent to the 2025 workshops, Clean Break has been asked by participants and colleagues of participants to deliver further training in other parts of the criminal justice system.

RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

1. The training is complementary to core training and will encourage better practice and improved retention. **Invest in this training, and its variants developed subsequent to this project, for delivery across the criminal justice system. Incorporate it at the earliest stages of training for police, prison and probation staff and the judiciary.**

2. This report captures informal or unseen work by criminal justice system staff that improves the experiences of criminalised women. **Invest in further research to identify the work done in the spaces between formal activity. Ask staff what they do and what could be done in the system as it exists now.**

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