

Where are the

WOMEN

who have been to prison, 

This is
our research.

This is
our story.

This is
our future.



Lived
experience
is expertise.

SUPPORT
WOMEN
NOT
PRISONS

The Three
Schools Project

WE ARE MORE THAN
WHAT THE SYSTEM SEES. 

We are
here

working
alongside
researchers 

Nothing
about us
without us. 

WE
KEEP
US
SAFE

THE SYSTEM WASN'T BUILT FOR US. ♡

WE SEE THE GAPS.

- ✗ Mental health support that's hard to access.
- ✗ Motherhood behind bars.
- ✗ Lack of trauma-informed care.
- ✗ No meaningful preparation for release.
- ✗ Revolving doors. Same systems. Same outcomes.

We lived it. We know it. ♡

OUR SOLUTIONS COME FROM REAL LIFE. ★

We don't just identify problems.
We co-create solutions.

- ✓ We design with lived experience.
- ✓ We test what actually works.
- ✓ We speak truth to power.
- ✓ We imagine and build better futures.

Nothing about us,
without us. ♡

We see what others
refuse to see. ★



“ You can't understand
the system from
the outside.
You have to live it
to challenge it. ” ♡

WHAT WE NEED FROM RESEARCHERS:



Listen to us – really listen.
Not just extract, but engage.



Work with us, not on or about us.
We are equal partners.



Value our knowledge
as much as academic knowledge.



Share power, credit
and decision-making.



Be accountable to us
and the communities we come from.



TOGETHER, WE RESEARCH. TOGETHER, WE CHANGE.

WHAT IS OUR PROJECT ABOUT?

Not research
on women -
research with women. 

Part of the
NIHR Three Schools
Mental Health
Programme

NIHR

Three Schools
Mental Health
Programme

We are
shaping every
stage of the
research.



Built with a
Lived Experience
Advisory Group
(LEAG)



FOCUS:

- ✓ Women in prison
- ✓ Severe mental illness
- ✓ Improving primary care

HMP & YOI
DRAKE HALL
WOMEN'S PRISON



Guiding.
Challenging.
Improving.
Together.

OUR WORK INCLUDES:

- * Shaping research questions that matter
- * Co-designing interviews and materials
- * Interpreting findings through our experiences
- * Making sure the research creates real change

We don't just
advise - we
lead, we decide,
we change
things. 

What matters to us:
- Respect
- Safety
- Mental health support.
- Dignity
- Choice
- Hope 

LIVED
EXPERIENCE
EXPERTISE

Better research. Better services. Better futures.

With women, not for women. 

WHY DOING RESEARCH TOGETHER MATTERS



WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM (CJS) ARE OFTEN DESCRIBED NOT HEARD.



RESEARCH DONE TO US:

- ✗ EXCLUDES OUR EXPERIENCES
From services, support, and decision-making.
- ✗ SILENCES & MISUNDERSTANDS
Shame, judgement and stereotypes keep women from speaking openly.
- ✗ GETS IT WRONG
The questions are wrong.
The methods don't fit.
The realities are ignored.
- ✗ DOESN'T CREATE CHANGE
Research happens about us, but without us—so nothing really shifts.

We have always had a voice but nobody was listening.



We are not hard to reach.
Systems are hard to access.



WHY TOGETHER?



- ♥ We bring lived experience and insight.
- 👥 We set the agenda and the questions.
- 📢 We challenge assumptions and bias.
- 🤝 We build trust and stronger relationships.
- ★ We create research that leads to real change.

THE IMPACT OF DOING IT TOGETHER:

- ✓ Better questions.
- ✓ Deeper understanding.
- ✓ Solutions that work.
- ✓ Policies and services that reflect our lives.
- ✓ Change that lasts.



When women are left out, everyone loses.

Better research.
Better services.
Better outcomes.

It starts with including us.



REMEMBER:

Nothing about us without us.
Always with us.



WHAT MAKES OUR RESEARCH TEAM STRONG

We are
mothers.
daughters.
advocates.
researchers.



Experts by experience.



We bring knowledge
that can't be found
in textbooks.

Our lived experience
is real, valid and
essential.

Diverse backgrounds.
Diverse experiences.
One shared purpose.

We come from different
communities, with
different stories and
strengths. What connects
us is our commitment to
creating change for women
in prison and in the
community.



9 women
forming
a collective.

We work together
as a team.

We share ideas,
challenge ideas,
and build better
ideas together.



In the room:

- ☒ Women with lived experience
of prison and the CJS
- ☒ Women with lived experience
of severe mental illness
- ☒ Women with experience
of caring, supporting
and advocating
- ☒ Women with experience
in research, services
and systems change



"We bring
our whole
selves."



Our voices matter.
Our knowledge matters.
Our leadership matters.



Nothing
about us,
without us.



"We are more
than what the
system says
we are."



WHAT MAKES THIS TYPE OF RESEARCH DIFFERENT



"If there is power, it is shared power."



This project is built on principles of Generative Justice. These aren't just words - they shape how we work together, every day.

EQUITY



We start from the understanding that not everyone begins in the same place.

- * We recognise the impact of prison, racism, trauma, poverty, mental illness and stigma.
- * We remove barriers where we can and work to change the ones we can't.
- * We value different forms of knowledge and lived experience as expertise.

shared identity

CARE



We care for each other and the work.

- * We build relationships, not just projects.
- * We create emotional safety and space for honesty.
- * We check in, we listen, we respect boundaries.
- * We understand that looking after ourselves helps us show up for each other.

emotional safety

RECIPROCITY



We give, we receive, we grow together.

- * We share power and decision-making.
- * We value everyone's time, insight and contribution.
- * We make space for mutual learning.
- * We ensure there is something in it for us too - not just the research.

all knowledge valued

This means our work is:



non-hierarchical

No one is above or below. We learn from each other.



flexibility

We adapt to real lives, not rigid systems.



support beyond research

We support each other beyond meetings and deliverables.



skills, opportunities, growth

We build each other up, share skills and open doors where we can.



long-term commitment

We're in this for the long haul, not just for the project.

These principles keep us grounded.

They guide how we relate, decide and create change.



THIS ISN'T JUST RESEARCH ABOUT US.
IT'S RESEARCH WITH US, BY US, FOR US.



WHEN LIVED EXPERIENCE IS TAKEN SERIOUSLY



WE SHAPE THE WORK



We help shape:

- * The research questions
- * The language used
- * The methods
- * The way findings are understood
- * The direction of the work

Research Questions

- What really matters to women?
 - What gets in the way of support?
 - How can services be better?
- 

“We are not participants.
We are experts.”



Lived experience is knowledge. It's not just “insight” – it's expertise built from living it.

“Our lives are not data points – they are knowledge.”



WE CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

We bring up what others might miss.

- * The realities behind the numbers
 - * The impact of stigma and racism
 - * The gaps in services
 - * What actually helps (and what harms)
- 

We know what needs to change, because we live it.



WE CAN CHANGE DIRECTION

When something isn't working, we say so.

- * We challenge
 - * We suggest alternatives
 - * We help find better ways
 - * We keep the work grounded in reality
- 

IT LEADS TO BETTER RESEARCH

When lived experience leads, research becomes more relevant, more ethical, and more likely to create real change.

It's not just better for us.
It's better for everyone.



THIS IS WHAT RESPECT LOOKS LIKE



Trust us.



Value our expertise.



Listen to us.



Work with us,
not on us.

When lived experience is taken seriously,
research changes. Futures change. Lives change.



WHAT GOOD CO-PRODUCTION LOOKS LIKE — AVOIDING TOKENISM

NOTHING
ABOUT US
WITHOUT US
IS NOT A
SLOGAN.
IT'S A
COMMITMENT.



GOOD CO-PRODUCTION

★ SHARED POWER, ALWAYS

People with lived experience are involved in every stage — from planning to delivery to evaluation.

★ PAID, RESPECTED, VALUED

Involvement is paid fairly. Time, expertise and emotional labour are recognised.

★ BUILT ON RELATIONSHIPS

We take time to build trust, listen, and support each other. No extractive relationships.

★ TRANSPARENT & ACCOUNTABLE

Clear about how decisions are made, how money is used, and how findings will be shared.

★ SUPPORTS WELLBEING

Co-production should not cause harm. We check in, offer support, and respect boundaries.

★ LEADS TO CHANGE

The work creates real impact for our communities — not just reports that sit on shelves.

TOKENISM

✗ JUST FOR SHOW

People with lived experience are only brought in at the end, or to 'tick a box'.

✗ UNPAID & EXPLOITED

Expecting free labour, or offering 'exposure' instead of fair pay.

✗ NO REAL RELATIONSHIPS

Dropping in, asking questions, then disappearing. No trust, no follow-through.

✗ NO TRANSPARENCY

Decisions made behind closed doors. No clarity on purpose, process or outcomes.

✗ HARM & BURNOUT

No support offered. Re-trauma, overwhelm and emotional labour are ignored.

✗ NO IMPACT

The research benefits others, not our communities. Nothing changes.

DON'T ASK
US TO
SHARE OUR
STORIES
THEN LOCK
US OUT OF
THE ACTION.



WE'RE NOT
YOUR DATA.
WE'RE YOUR
COLLEAGUES. ♥

★ CO-PRODUCTION ISN'T EASY.
IT TAKES TIME. IT TAKES
COURAGE. IT TAKES A WILLINGNESS
TO SHARE POWER AND LISTEN
IN NEW WAYS. BUT IT'S THE ONLY
WAY TO DO RESEARCH THAT
MATTERS.

REMEMBER:

SOLIDARITY ISN'T
A BUZZWORD.
IT'S A PRACTICE. ♥

★ POWER WITH, NOT POWER OVER. ★

WHY CREATING SAFE SPACES IN RESEARCH IS VITAL



“

When we feel safe, we can be ourselves, speak up, and do our best work together.



Safety in research isn't just about physical safety.

It's about emotional safety.
Relational trust.
Being heard. Being believed.

It's about showing up as your whole self - not a 'case', not a 'problem', not a statistic.



I don't have to
be on my guard
here.



THIS LOOKS LIKE:

- * Respect and no judgement.
- * People who listen.
- * Time that isn't rushed.
- * Confidentiality.
- * Honesty.
- * The freedom to disagree.
- * Support when things are hard.
- * Laughter. Tears.
- * Real conversations.



Safety is
not silence.
It's being
able to
speak.



IT MEANS:

-  We can talk about the hard stuff without fear.
-  We can challenge ideas without worrying about the consequences.
-  We can be honest about our needs and struggles.
-  We support each other, not just the research.
-  We see each other as whole human beings.



It's not always
easy. But we
keep coming back
to each other.
That's the work.



SAFE SPACES AREN'T OPTIONAL.
THEY ARE ESSENTIAL.
BETTER RESEARCH STARTS WITH CARE.



OUR VOICES. OUR KNOWLEDGE. OUR POWER.



WHAT WE KNOW:

- * Prison is experienced differently by women.
- * Women are more than their offences.
- * We are mothers, daughters, partners, friends, thinkers, leaders.
- * We have strengths, resilience and solutions.
- * When we are supported, we thrive.



RESEARCH WITH US, NOT ON US

Involve us at every stage.

Compensate us fairly for our time and expertise.

Share findings with us in ways we can use.

Make change together.



"The most important thing we can do is listen to women with lived experience and believe them."



WHAT CHANGE LOOKS LIKE:



Support to stay connected to family and community.



Trauma-informed mental health care and healing.



Education that opens doors, not just fills time.



Respect, dignity and freedom from violence.



Opportunities to lead and shape decisions.



WHEN WE ARE HEARD, WE CAN:



Improve services and support.



Reduce harm and reoffending.



Create safer, healthier prisons.



Build fairer communities for everyone.

Change is possible when we lead it.

TOGETHER, WE CAN:

- * Challenge stigma and stereotypes.
- * Close gaps in support and opportunity.
- * Hold the system to account.
- * Imagine and build a better future.



WAYS TO TAKE ACTION



START CONVERSATIONS

Ask questions.
Listen deeply.
Challenge gently.
Open doors.



SHARE KNOWLEDGE

Read. Learn.
Share what you know.
Teach others.



SPEAK UP

Use your voice for what's right.
Support others when they speak theirs.



SUPPORT PRACTICALLY

Believe survivors.
Offer support.
Respect choices.
Stand beside people.



BUILD BETTER TOGETHER

Get involved.
Join in.
Make spaces safer for everyone.

OUR COMMITMENT

We commit to each other.
We commit to truth.
We commit to change.
For us.
For the next woman.
For the generations after.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN REAL LIFE:

- * A cellmate who checks in.
- * A listener who doesn't rush.
- * A worker who believes.
- * A system that protects.
- * A community that shows up.
- * A future that includes us all.

That's the future we are building.



REMEMBER:



You are not alone.
You are not a problem.
You are not invisible.



You are worthy.
You are powerful.
You are the change.



Your experience matters.
Your voice matters.
Your future matters.



OUR EXPERIENCES ARE NOT THE END OF OUR STORIES.
THEY ARE THE START OF **CHANGE**.

STRONGER TOGETHER.

Better research. Real impact.



This project is powered by a team with both lived and professional experience. Together, we bring different perspectives, challenge assumptions, and create research that truly matters.



MIXED EXPERIENCES. STRONGER INSIGHTS.



We combine lived experience with research knowledge.



We listen to each other and learn from different viewpoints.



We ask better questions.



We dig deeper and find out what's really important.



OUR WORK TOGETHER HAS BEEN...



JOYFUL

We enjoy working together.
We celebrate wins - big and small.



EXCITING

Every stage brings new ideas, energy and motivation.



MEANINGFUL

We're proud of the difference our research can make.



“When we work together, we don't just do research. We build trust, skills, confidence and change.”



WE'VE BUILT SKILLS THROUGH TRAINING

We have had training in:

- ✓ PRILL participatory methods
- ✓ What it means to be in a Lived Experience Advisory Group
- ✓ Research processes
- ✓ Planning for progression
- ✓ CV building and preparing for future opportunities



“Different stories.
Different strengths.
One team. One mission.”



WHAT WE'VE GAINED TOGETHER

- + Confidence to speak up and be heard
- + Knowledge of research and how it creates change
- + New skills we can use in many areas of life and work
- + Stronger connections and lasting friendships
- + A shared purpose and shared power



Working together isn't just how we do research.
It's how we build a better future.



WE ARE MORE THAN WHAT THE SYSTEM SEES.

We are trying to change systems, improve research and make things better for women in prison; but we all change as part of the process. Together we created a collective poem that expresses our feelings about co-producing research as women with lived experience of the Criminal Justice System:

We are a team of strong compassionate women.

We have formed a sisterhood, championing each other, supporting each other.

We all have space to bring something to the table, and we all bring our superpowers.

We inspire each other, getting each other through the darkness and building unity and family as a team together.

Being part of this group has made me feel seen, valued and appreciated, despite what I've done or what I've been through.

It's being part of a family that understand you. A family that does not judge you and will fight for you.

To share our lived experience on a platform that doesn't judge or condemn is invaluable.

We are helping women navigate managing thoughts and emotions inside of those prison walls. The bonus is having a space where we connect with each other in a place where we can safely be vulnerable.

Never have I been part of something so genuine and beneficial to not just the group, but to progression and change for women within a system not built for us.

I am proud to be more than just a voice, changing lives for the better for the future. We hoped we could create something that holds a little magic for the reader in their darker times and I think we really formed a big hug from us to them. And that feels amazing.

We keep us
safe.



WOMEN
CHANGE
SYSTEMS.

THANKS TO



- PROFESSOR TAMMI WALKER
- PROFESSOR CAROLYN CHEW-GRAHAM
- ASST PROF HANNAH KING
- GLORIA RODEN LUI
- KATE COWEN
- FLEUR RILEY
- PAULA HARRIOTT
- SARAH A
- SARAH M
- KELLY G
- FAYE D
- NADIA B
- ZOE D
- AMY B
- LUCY

Lived
experience
leads
change.



Stronger
together.



HJFRLab@durham.ac.uk