



University
of Glasgow

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**‘Prove Me the Bam!’ Victimisation and Agency
in the Lives of Young Women Who Commit Violent Offences**

Susan A. Batchelor

Abstract

This article reviews the evidence regarding young women’s involvement in violent crime and, drawing on recent research carried out in HMPYOI Cornton Vale in Scotland, provides an overview of the characteristics, needs and deeds of young women sentenced to imprisonment for violent offending. Through the use of direct quotations, the article suggests that young women’s anger and aggression is often related to their experiences of family violence and abuse, and the acquisition of a negative worldview in which other people are considered as being ‘out to get you’ or ‘put one over on you’. The young women survived in these circumstances, not by adopting discourses that cast them as exploited victims, but by drawing on (sub) cultural norms and values which promote pre-emptive violence and the defence of respect. The implications of these findings for those who work with such young women are also discussed.

Keywords

Young women, violent offending, imprisonment, victimisation, agency, responsabilisation, gender-specific services, worker-client relationship

Introduction

We are dealing with more and more drunken and violent young women in our town centres [...] it's a worrying problem that we need to look into. (John Vine, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers Scotland, quoted in MacAskill 2004)

In the absence of good public information, single incidents about women offenders can lead to misinformation about the nature of women's offending and the punishments they receive. This makes it hard for service providers to form a clear view about how well their services are targeted and how effective they may be. (Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorates for Scotland 1998, Recommendation 5)

Public and professional concern about young women's violence has continued apace since the mid 1990s. In May 2004, Scotland's most senior police officer, John Vine, was reported as having expressed disquiet about the rising number of crimes committed by drunken and violent young women (MacAskill 2004). Scottish Executive statistics

published in the same year showed that, in Scotland, women had increased their share of violent crime, from 7.5 percent in 2000 to 13 percent in 2002 (Scottish Executive 2001, 2004a). Alongside this apparent escalation was an increase in women's imprisonment, with the average daily population of female sentenced young offenders growing by 52 percent between 1994 and 2003 (Scottish Prison Service 2004). Looking at these percentage rises, Vine's call for new research into the growing 'problem' of female violence (MacAskill and Goodwin 2004) is understandable. Historically, women have formed only a small proportion of the offender population and the nature of the crimes they commit is comparatively minor (Burman 2004). The emergence of a new breed of 'post-feminist criminal' would therefore pose particular problems for a criminal justice system set up to deal predominantly with the offending behaviour of men. Relative low numbers and a perceived lack of threat have meant that, up until now, young women who commit violent offences have not been a key focus for service provision, nor indeed for criminological research, resulting in a general lack of information as to their background and characteristics and 'what works' in reducing their violent behaviour (Batchelor and Burman 2004). This article is an initial effort to address this gap, reporting on recent research into young women sentenced to imprisonment in Scotland.

Women who commit violent offences: the 'facts'

Male offenders dominate the official crime statistics. This may seem like an obvious point, but is worthy of mention because it has significant implications for the way in

which the data on women’s violent offending are interpreted. Table 1 presents the criminal proceedings data relating to female violence in Scotland for the period 1993-2002.

Table 1. Number of females with a charge proven for non-sexual crimes of violence, including handling an offensive weapon, Scotland, 1993-2002*

Age	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001**	2002**
Under 21 years	35	29	52	66	61	77	92	96	72	103
21-30 years	90	68	100	111	123	109	123	111	139	172
Over 30 years	84	84	89	107	106	116	133	108	117	138
Total	209	182	241	284	290	302	348	315	328	413

**Source: Criminal Proceedings in the Scottish Courts 1993-2002*

***The figures for 2001 and 2002 include data relating to ‘handling an offensive weapon’, which were moved from the ‘non-sexual crimes of violence’ group to ‘other crimes’ in 2001.*

These data show that between 1993 and 2002 the number of females with a charge proven for violence almost doubled (increasing by 98 percent, or 172 additional offenders). The biggest rise was amongst young women, who increased their number threefold (to 103, an increase of 194 percent, or 68 extra offenders). This general upward trend is replicated in England and Wales, where the number of women found guilty or cautioned for violence increased by 14 percent between 1994 and 2003 (Home Office 2004), and in the US, where the percentage of female juveniles arrested for violent crime increased by 101 percent during the period 1988 to 1997 (cited in Zager 2000: 90).

Viewed in isolation, these figures paint a picture in which young women appear to be becoming more violent, more quickly. However, as with all official crime statistics, care must be taken to place these data in context. Excluding handling an offensive weapon, which the criminal proceedings data now categorises under the heading ‘Other crimes’, violent crime accounts for just over one-and-a-half percent of the total crimes and offences committed by women in Scotland (Scottish Executive 2004a). Put another way, the overwhelming majority of female offending is non-violent. This feature is even more striking if we consider the *actual* number of offences committed by women compared to men. In 2002, 289 women had a charge for a non-sexual crime of violence proven against them in Scotland, compared with 1,900 crimes of violence committed by men.¹ What this contextual data tells us, therefore, is that while the number of women convicted of a violent crime is increasing, violence (particularly serious violence) is still an overwhelmingly male activity.

Because the actual number of women involved in violent offending is low, very small numerical increases or decreases can make a great deal of difference in terms of reported percentage rises and falls (Batchelor 2001). Drawing on the figures presented in Table 1, for example, we can see that in Scotland in 2000, 96 women under the age of 21 had a charge for a non-sexual crime of violence proven against them, compared to 72 women in 2001 – a decrease of 25 percent, or 14 less offenders (Scottish Executive 2002, 2004a). This was followed by an increase of 43 percent in 2002, when the total number of

¹ These figures rise to 413 and 4,365 respectively if the data on handling an offensive weapon are included (ibid.).

young violent females rose to 103 – 31 more offenders than in 2001, but only seven more than in 2000.²

It is also important to acknowledge that official statistics say as much about sentencing patterns as they do offending (Acoca and Dedel 1998). It remains unclear whether the increases in female offending reported above can be attributed to *actual* rates of violent crime or changing *responses* to violence. Again their low numbers make young women who commit violent crime extremely susceptible to changes in criminal justice policy and practice. It could be possible, therefore, that what we are witnessing is not an increase in violent offending per se, but the increased reporting, policing and prosecuting of young women accused of violent offences. As we have already noted, in the 10-year period prior to 2003 the average daily population of female sentenced young offenders grew by 52 percent (an actual increase of 12 prisoners) (Scottish Prison Service 2004).³ Such trends have led commentators (e.g. Worrall 2001) to argue that responses to girls and young women who offend have undergone a fundamental shift, from a traditional welfare-oriented approach to one which seeks to criminalise and punish a supposed ‘new breed’ of ‘nasty little madams’.

Despite the growing number of young women convicted of violent offences, and the level of media interest that this has generated, there has been very little British research conducted in the area. This contrasts with the situation in North America, where the topic is now well established as a field of academic endeavour. Most of this US research has centred on girls’ gang involvement (Campbell 1984, 1990; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Miller 1998, 2001) and the experiences of Black and Hispanic women

² See Gelsthorpe and Morris (2002) for a discussion of the data in relation to England and Wales.

³ The number of male sentenced young offenders fell by four percent during the same period (a decrease of 23 offenders) (Scottish Prison Service 2004).

involved in the street-level drug economy (Baskin and Sommers 1998; Maher 1997). The remainder of this paper reports preliminary findings from one of the first UK studies to focus on young women convicted of a violent crime. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, it describes the backgrounds and characteristics of young women sentenced to imprisonment for violent offending, before discussing the sources of young women's anger and aggression according to young women themselves. In doing so, the paper points to a number of key considerations to be taken into account by those who work with such young women.

The research study

Funded by the ESRC, the 'Pathways through Violence' research focused on the feelings, beliefs, and experiences of young women convicted of a violent crime. One of the key aims was to bring the voices of young women to the centre of theoretical and methodological debates about 'youth violence' and, in doing so, to acknowledge the often inconsistent and even contradictory ways in which subordination and agency are simultaneously realised in young women's lives. Both traditional and feminist analyses of women's lawbreaking have tended to depict women who are violent as victims – of their biology (violent women as emotional, irrational and 'out of control') or of gender oppression (where the 'violent woman' is reconstructed as the 'abused woman' and women's violence is framed as a response to an abusive situation or past abusive experiences). The problem with this approach is that it contributes to the falsehood that

women who commit violent crimes are in some way abnormal or bizarre; it denies women any agency or choice in their lives; and it leaves us with little understanding of (or guidance as to how we should react to) violence perpetrated by female offenders.

Methods employed by the study included in-depth oral-history interviews with 21 young women detained in HMPYOI Cornton Vale in Scotland, interviews with adults that work with such young women, and documentary analysis (of social work reports, trial judge reports, prison narratives, programme records, etc.).⁴ All of the young women in the interview sample were single and all were white, and ages ranged from 16 to 24 years.⁵

The various violent offence types committed by the young women are presented in Table 2:

⁴ Cornton Vale is Scotland's only all-female establishment, and the majority of Scotland's female prison population is housed there, including young offenders. Fieldwork was completed in August 2001, when there were 38 young women serving a custodial sentence for violence. Each of these young women was sent a letter asking them if they would be interested in participating in the study and, of the 24 who agreed to be involved, 21 were eventually interviewed. These interviews ranged in length from one to two hours, all of which were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed by the author.

⁵ In February 2005, minority ethnic groups made up five percent of the female prison population in Scotland (SPS, personal correspondence, 24/02/05). In the general population of Scotland, 98% is white. The disproportionate number of ethnic minority women in prison in Scotland is therefore much lower than in England and Wales, where minority ethnic groups make up 26 percent of the female average population (compared to six percent of the population at large).

Table 2. Number of violent offence types

Violent offence classification as recorded in SPIN (Scottish Prison Service Information Network)	Number of young women (n=21)
Assault	6
Carrying a Knife	1
Assault and Attempted Robbery	1
Assault and Robbery	1
Assault to Severe Injury	1
Abduction, Assault to Severe Injury and Robbery	1
Assault to Severe Injury and Permanent Disfigurement	3
Assault to Severe Injury and Permanent Disfigurement and Attempted Robbery	2
Assault to Danger of Life	1
Abduction, Assault and Robbery, and Attempted Murder	1
Attempted Murder	2
Culpable Homicide	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>21</i>

Serious assault was the most common, closely followed by ‘petty’ assault.⁶ Length of sentence ranged from three months (assault) to 12 years (attempted murder) and mean length of sentence was three years and three months. Four-fifths of the young women had

⁶ According to the official classification of crimes and offences, an assault is recorded as serious if the victim sustains an injury resulting in detention in hospital as an in-patient, or any of the following injuries: fractures, concussion, internal injuries, crushing, severe cuts or lacerations or severe general shock (Scottish Executive 2004b).

previous convictions, not necessarily for violence, and just under half had served a previous custodial sentence.

According to narrative data from the interviews, serious assaults were generally alcohol-related, or drug-related and committed during the course of a robbery. Simple assaults were generally committed alongside acquisitive crimes such as shoplifting, for example when the offender was apprehended by security staff. These patterns are described in more detail in Table 3, which offers a crude typology of the violent offenders interviewed as part of the study.

Table 3. Female violent offender typology

	Number of young women (n = 21)
An ordinarily non-violent young woman, who attacks her abuser whilst under the influence of alcohol. (Rare in current sample due to age range, but more common in the wider prison population.)	1
Younger offender who drinks heavily and experiments with recreational drugs and/or abuses prescription medication (or who, occasionally, has a drug addiction). The violent offence typically relates to a fight that is initiated whilst the offender is under the influence and where things 'get out of hand' resulting in the victim receiving a severe injury, sometimes due to the use of a weapon. Victims are generally (but not solely) other young women.	12
Habitual drug user who assaults police/ security guards/ householder when she gets caught soliciting/ shoplifting/ burglary (to finance drug habit). Offender is generally intoxicated at the time of the offence and considers her actions to be in self-defence.	5
Drug-dependent offender who assaults and robs unknown victims, often threatening them with a weapon. This group of offenders represent perhaps the most 'damaged' young women: they have extensive histories in care, poor relationships with their parents (particularly their mothers) and experience of physical and sexual abuse within the family.	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>21</i>

As this table suggests, the overwhelming majority of offences were related to drugs or alcohol in some way. Four-fifths were committed while the offender was intoxicated (six

young women were under the influence of drugs, eight were under the influence of alcohol and three were under the influence of drugs and alcohol) and one third were committed alongside acquisitive crimes carried out to fund a drug addiction. Of the remaining two offences, one was related to a drug feud and the other to a family feud.

Victim characteristics varied according to violent offender typology: alcohol-related offences, which tended to be the result of interpersonal conflict, were committed against young women who were not known to the offender or older male victims known to the offender. Drug-related offences, on the other hand, tended to be perpetrated against shop assistants, security guards, police officers and members of the general public who were not known to the offender. These findings run contrary to the view that women are more likely to commit offences of violence against persons they know, but may be explained by the age-range and offending profile of the sample. Whereas studies of violence by adult females suggest sexual partners (Rasche 1990) and infants (Morris and Wilcznski 1993) are the most likely victims, and research into girls' violence identifies siblings (Batchelor *et al.* 2001) and peers (Campbell 1986) as common targets, recent research into criminally violent young women acknowledges their role in assault and robbery offences, typically committed against persons unknown to the offender. This latter research, which identifies drugs and a prior history of prostitution as important factors in robberies committed by women (in the US), suggests attacks on strangers are most commonly related to predominantly poor areas in which young women are exposed to crime and violence on a daily basis (Baskin and Sommers 1998) and where they learn to use violence as a means of survival (Maher and Curtis 1995). This highlights the importance of understanding the *context* within which female offending takes place.

The context of offending

In line with research into the backgrounds and characteristics of young women convicted of violent offences in North America (e.g. Baskin and Sommers 1998; Miller 2001; Ryder 2003), the current study suggests a pattern of violent female offending that begins with family problems and experiences of abuse. More than half of the young women did not grow up in an intact two-parent family and they experienced significant family disruption in terms of changes to their main caregiver. Almost three-quarters of the young women reported previous social work involvement and involvement in the children's hearing system (CHS) and more than half had been looked after by the local authority. The average age of first referral to the CHS was 11, most commonly for school non-attendance, followed by lack of parental care, being considered outwith parental control and offending behaviour. Whilst these findings support analysis of Scottish Children's Reporters' Administration data showing that many offending girls originally come to the attention of the Reporter on non-offence grounds (Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate for Scotland 1998: 12), two-fifths of the young women were referred to the Panel on grounds relating to their own challenging or difficult behaviour (i.e. offending, truancy, or being considered outwith parental control).

Two-fifths of the young women said they had been sexually abused, usually by a member of their family. A significant amount of violence within the home was also reported, with two-fifths of the young women describing witnessing regular incidents of 'serious' physical violence between their parents, most of which were attributed to their father's (and sometimes their mother's) alcohol abuse. The young women also witnessed

physical violence between and against their siblings ('beatings' sometimes involving the use of weapons, such as majorette batons, bricks, or belts), and two-fifths had been victimised themselves, usually by their parents, sometimes seriously.

Whilst these figures highlight the prevalence of past abuse in the lives of young women who commit violent offences, they are perhaps lower than might be expected when compared with research into the backgrounds and characteristics of female prisoners. Loucks's (1998) research, for example, revealed that the vast majority of women in Cornton Vale had been victims of physical (60 percent), sexual (47 percent) or emotional (71 percent) abuse. There are a number of reasons why the young women in my sample may have exhibited lower reported rates of abuse. Firstly, the data reported in Loucks's research relates to adult rather than young offenders and the emotional and physical abuses reported were usually experienced during adulthood and from a partner. Because the age-range of my sample is lower (16-24 years), the abuses recounted were generally experienced during childhood. Another possible explanation is that the young women had not yet come to terms with their experiences, or perhaps did not recognize their experiences as abuse (see Batchelor *et al.* 2001). The difficulties associated with disclosing and/or discussing experiences of abuse also mean that the numbers reported are likely to be underestimates.⁷

As a result of these experiences, many of the young women expressed feelings of unresolved grief and rage, and said that these emotions contributed indirectly to their offending. Clear correlations exist between the victimisation of young women and high-risk behaviours such as substance misuse, suicide and self-harm (Acoca and Dedel 1998;

⁷ Interviewees were not asked directly about experiences of abuse, but they were asked whether they had ever been the victim of violence and whether they would describe their family backgrounds as violent.

Howard League 1997). Four-fifths of the young women in the study said that they had experienced problems in relation to their alcohol consumption; one third of the sample was drinking daily and just under a half described a pattern of regular binge drinking involving 'taking mair and mair, just tae black oot'. Four-fifths of the young women reported some experience of illicit drug use and three-fifths said that they were addicted to heroin at the time of their last offence. Only one of the young women in the interview sample had had no problems related to substance abuse, while almost half had experienced difficulties in relation to drugs and alcohol (although not necessarily at the same time). These figures are higher than those reported in previous studies of women prisoners. While 88 percent of the women in Loucks' (1998) study reported having used illicit drugs at some point in their lives, only a third had ever injected drugs and just over a half said they were addicted to drugs. Less than one-fifth reported daily alcohol use. Research carried out in women's prisons in England and Wales showed drug addiction rates of about a quarter (Gunn *et al.* 1991; Maden *et al.* 1991), while research in North America suggested women in prison use more drugs more frequently than their male counterparts (Snell and Morton 1994). These comparisons suggest that substance misuse may be a particular problem for young women sentenced for crimes of violence, both in comparison with the wider female prison population and the male prison population.

Experiences of self-harm were another common feature of the interview sample. Eight young women had attempted suicide and 12 had deliberately injured themselves, for example by cutting, on at least one occasion. Six reported taking their anger out on themselves in this way on a regular basis. Whilst the figures for attempted suicide are comparable with those reported in the wider literature (38 percent of Loucks' respondents

had attempted suicide at some time in their life), the proportion admitting to self-harm was higher. Only 16 per cent of the women in Loucks' study had a history of self-harm, compared to one in three women in Rickford's (2003) more recent research. Based on these figures, it would appear that the young women in my sample were around twice as likely to engage in self-harming behaviour than the wider female prison population.

In relation to education, truancy and absconding were common, with four-fifths of the young women reporting that they had regularly truanted from school. Half of the young women had been subject to a special educational provision and all but one left school at age 16 or earlier, one third without any formal educational qualifications. This latter figure is lower than the findings reported in the wider literature on women in prison (e.g. Henderson 2001), which report lack of formal qualifications at the level of approximately 60 percent.⁸ That said, only one young woman in the sample was employed prior to custody, one was still at school and therefore financially supported by her mother, while the remaining 19 were reliant on benefits. One quarter of the young women were homeless and/or living in a drug project/homeless accommodation prior to custody.

In summary, then, and as the literature on female violent offending and women in prison predicted, disruptive family backgrounds, histories of physical and sexual abuse, childhood experiences of institutional care, substance abuse, self-harm and socio-economic disadvantage were common among these young women. However, there did appear to be some important differences in terms of the relative degree to which the *young* women imprisoned for *violent* offences described here experienced these

⁸ One reason for this could be the high number of young women in the sample who received special educational provision.

difficulties when compared to the female prison population more widely. In particular, they appeared to have more pronounced, poly-substance misuse problems and higher levels of self-injury, were more likely to be initially referred to the CHS on grounds relating to their own problem behaviour, and had higher levels of educational attainment. The following section provides an account of the meaning of these circumstances according to young women themselves.

Young women's accounts

Despite their conviction for violent offending, and perhaps as a result of societal disapproval, the young women rarely described themselves as violent. Rather, they made a distinction between *being* a violent person and having the *potential* for violence, and spoke more easily about feeling annoyed than being or acting aggressively or violently. The main things that the young women said made them feel annoyed were: being mistreated or let down by their families, friends, and the other people around them; and being denied agency and respect. The following section explores these two themes further, drawing on the accounts provided by young women.

'You can't rely on people'

Like the 'violent girls' described by Batchelor *et al.* (2001), most of the young women in the current study attached great importance to their family relationships and were very

loyal towards family members. Similar to the informants in Artz's (1998) research, the young women regarded 'good' families as those where family members were 'close'. Closeness was demonstrated by unconditional love and unquestioning loyalty:

Ma family's stood by me through everythin'. They have. Every single thing, ma family's stood by me. I couldnae ask for a better family [...] They've never wance asked me what happened, they've never expected nothing fae me. [Cathy]

While the young women often romanticised their relationship with their families, they were also an important source of anger. Many of the young women said that they did not feel wanted at home or that their parents were emotionally distant or didn't pay them enough attention. Sometimes this lack of attention was attributed to parents working long, unsociable hours, but more often the young women blamed drug and/or alcohol abuse, or the impact of domestic violence. Karen, for example, described her parent's relationship as characterised by her father's authoritarian and controlling behaviour and her mother's detachment:

I never got on with my dad. He is quite violent, so I ended up getting put into care [...] I used to get beaten up with the baton a lot, or the belt [...] It was if he was in a bad mood, like if you put too much sugar in his coffee or some'ing, or you made a noise when he was trying to watch the racing. Ken, *something stupid*. [...] I resented my mum for standing and watching it all happen and not doing anything. I still to this day don't understand why she done that [...] She doesn't

show any emotions of any kind. Even anger, she can't really be angry. When she is angry, she just goes quiet. Never ever in my whole life had she told me that she loves me. Never. Not once. [Karen]

Many of the young women were also angry about the abuse they had witnessed and/or experienced within their families and struggled to reconcile strong attachments to family members with incidences of abuse and neglect:

When I stayed wi ma wee gran my papa wis abusing me. He abused me fae when I wis three 'til I wis 11. And ma ma knew all about it and didnae tell anyb'dy, cause it had happened tae her as well and she jist let it happen. [...] I hate whit she done tae me, but I love her. [Debbie]

Partly as a result of these experiences, the young women were very protective of vulnerable family members, especially mothers and younger sisters or female cousins, and were determined to prevent further abuse. They often saw it as their *personal* responsibility to stop other people from being hurt and expressed overwhelming feelings of guilt and rage when they were unable to protect others from the same fate:

I used to see ma dad battering ma mum and I didnae like it. Ma mum used tae sit and take it from him. Then one day I've sat and went like that, "How is she letting a man hit her? How does she take that?" That's when I started fleeing aboot him, scratching his face an' hitting him an' that. [Stephanie]

As a whole, the young women expressed vengeful thoughts towards individuals deemed to have offended against vulnerable victims and again many felt that they had a *responsibility* to act against the perpetrators of such abuse. Violence against the perpetrators of ‘sick’ crimes (e.g. rape, torture, and offences against children or the elderly) was thought to be entirely justified and, within the prison, fostered a sense of solidarity between ‘cons’ (versus ‘beasts’). Such acts also established social and self-respect, enabling some young women to feel morally superior and in (rather than out of) control. As Zoe explained: ‘I like to see the fear in their eyes. You’re in control’.

Grief was another source of anger. Nine of the young women had suffered significant bereavements, including the death of a main caregiver or current partner. Judy, for example, lost her father and her only sibling in a car accident when she was 15. She began drinking heavily after the accident, in her words ‘to block things out’. During one of her weekend drinking binges she became involved in a fight with another girl, who she attacked with a broken bottle:

Ma da and ma big sister got killed when I was only 15, so I was kinda fucked up aifter all that [...] I never gret or nothin and I wouldn’t go down tae the graveyard. I just kept bottling it up and then I just flipped [...] I’d been standing drinkin a bottle of Bud and I just pure lost the plot [...] I ran up tae her and I skelped her wi the bottle [...] Ma faither and sister’s anniversary had just been and see when it comes tae the anniversary ma heid starts daein’ overtime and I

end up blankin it oot and I just blanked it oot for so long that I just lost it that night. [Judy]

Three of the young women also expressed grief over the loss of their children, all of whom had been adopted due to lack of parental care. There were six young mothers in the study in total and all but one expressed anger at their families, as well as the social work department, for not being more supportive of them in their care of their children or their choice of partner:

I started going oot wi' this guy that was always in and oot the jail a' the time [...] and ma mum and dad didnae approve. Naebody would gie him a chance or anything and then I fell pregnant at 17 [...] Ma wee lassie's dad, he got about two year when she was five months old [...] He got oot in the January and he died in August. I still loved him and everything. I couldnae go with him because ma mum and dad just wouldnae have it [...] Once he died I just hit rock bottom. [...] I really couldnae cope by myself and I didnae want to tell ma mum and dad that I couldnae. [Lesley]

Disloyalty from friends was another common theme in young women's accounts of what made them angry. Because their experience of relationships had often been exploitative or abusive, many of the young women said that they didn't trust other people easily and therefore felt particularly upset if someone that they let into their lives subsequently let them down. They often described a pattern of unstable and intense

relationships, characterised by an initial period of intimacy (or ‘closeness’) followed by rejection and devaluation (when the other person transgressed the rules of friendship in some way). Angela, for example, recounted a story about a young homeless woman she befriended. Shortly after meeting the young woman, Angela let her stay in her flat until she could find somewhere else to live. However, shortly after moving in, the other young woman went round to a local dealer’s house and, using Angela’s address, bought drugs ‘on tic’. She failed to pay the money back. The sense of betrayal Angela felt, she said, was even more upsetting than the threat of violence:

When she done it, it hurt. You are trying to help somebody oot who’s in need and basically she threw it back in ma face [...] I had gave her the trust to come in and oot whenever she pleased [...] She just threw all that back in ma face. [Angela]

In an attempt to shield themselves from further disappointment, some of the young women deliberately isolated themselves, emphasizing their self-reliance and self-determination: ‘I’m a loner [...] very independent’. Or they took protective action, deliberately hurting others before they could hurt them:

I always ‘hink the worst of everybody and I don’t like letting people near me because I get hurt. So I’d rather hurt them before they hurt me. [Cathy]

You can’t rely on other people. You’ve only got yersel’. When you think about it, it’s just you. [...] The folk I’ll sit doon and take drugs wi’ are not really pals,

they're acquaintances that I know. I don't really like them. You're just that wasted that you just don't care who you're sittin' wi'. You talk to them anyway, you're not bothered what they've done tae you or what they're thinking about doing tae you. You're just not bothered. [Carol]

This sense of being unable to rely on anyone, is again reminiscent of the sentiments expressed by the 'violent girls' interviewed by Batchelor *et al.* (2001) and the violent female offenders interviewed by Baskin and Sommers (1998) and Ryder (2003). Many of the interviewees said that that they didn't feel like they had many 'real' friends because 'they're just too quick to stab you in the back.' As Fiona explained, 'They're nice to you one minute and then talking about you behind your back the next, so I mostly keep myself to myself.'

'It is better a sair face than a red face'

Like male street youth (Bourgois 2002), the young women in the current study placed a high premium on being treated with 'respect', believing that if you allowed other people to disrespect you, you would be left with nothing. According to Baskin and Sommers (1998) this attitude, or code, that places 'respect' above all else springs primarily from economic and social marginalisation:

In severely distressed communities, particularly among young males and increasingly among young females, it is sensed that something essential is at stake

in every interaction. People are encouraged to rise to every occasion, particularly with strangers. To run away from such disputes would leave one's self-esteem in tatters. (Baskin and Sommers 1998: 35)

In the words of one of the respondents:

If you let people walk all over you, people will and people do [...] See if you stand back and let them hit you, they will keep hitting you. If you hit them back, then they usually stop. You have to be violent in here because I would say 70 percent of the lassies *are* violent, so if you're not then you won't get nowhere. You get bullied and you don't get any respect. It's simple. [Karen]

Much of the young women's violence, then, was motivated by a desire to gain respect, but this search for respect was in itself a form of self-protection, an attempt to pre-empt bullying or victimisation through the display of an aggressive or violent disposition. Almost without exception, the young women expressed the importance of being *seen* to 'stand up for yourself', repeating the mantra: 'it is better a sair face than a red face'.⁹ As Lesley explained, 'If everybody sees that you're just gonna take it, then everybody's gonna try and have a shot'. Adopting a tough, aggressive approach was therefore regarded as an *unavoidable* aspect of life growing up in a 'rough' area and was something that many of the young women said that they were explicitly taught from an early age.

⁹ In other words, it is better to fight and lose (i.e. get a sore face) than have the embarrassment (i.e. red face) of backing down.

Against this backdrop, some of the seemingly trivial sources of young women's anger and annoyance are rendered intelligible. Within the prison setting, for example, Zoe attacked a fellow inmate for lifting a slice of bread that she put in the toaster: 'I'd toasted it and she's just buttered it and taken it away. That's treating ye like a daftie', while Stephanie got involved in a fight over a cigarette:

I got put in with this girl and her fag went out and I says, "Cool doon! You'll get a light. We've only got 10 minutes to go!" and she went, "You shut up!" I went, "Who are you telling to shut up, you bam?!" She went, "You're the bam!" I says, "Prove me the bam!" and she went, "Naw, *you* prove me the bam!" I says, "Naw, *you* prove *me* the bam!" [...] and she jumped up and grabbed us. I was like that, "I'll have tae fight fer maself here" and I just started punching fuck out 'er.
[Stephanie]

Both women felt that they *had* to react in such circumstances or they would be seen as 'a daftie' or 'a bam' (i.e. easy prey). Far from being irrational, then, viewed within the hostile world of the prison setting their behaviour could be regarded as a 'necessary survival strategy' (Maher 1997). The young women confronted real danger on a daily basis. At any given moment, their victim, their offending peers, or various agents of the state, could attempt to take advantage or 'put one over' on them (Katz 1988). By communicating that they were prepared to stand up for themselves, physically if necessary, the young women maintained a level self respect and status, and in doing so protected their emotional and physical selves.

Discussion and conclusions

From the outset this paper has argued that, in order to understand young women's use of violence, we need to understand the social, material and gendered contexts of their lives. As the findings above have made clear, these contexts are characterised by multiple and serious disadvantage, psychological distress and exposure to routine violence. For most of the young women, families were an important source of anger and frustration, often because they were the perpetrators of abuse or because they failed to protect young women from abuse. Families were also the site where young women developed an understanding of the world as a dangerous and hostile place. Young women were taught explicitly and by example that violence is poised to erupt at any moment and that physical force is an acceptable and necessary means to establish respect and reputation (and thereby ensure self-preservation). Viewed within this context, their violence is neither hysterical nor irrational, but rather a *reasoned* response to intimidated or actual harms.

The notion that women's violence is a rational response to past and potential victimizations runs contrary to official policy responses to women who offend (Hannah-Moffat 2004). As in England and Wales (Carlen and Worrall 2004), offending behaviour programmes have come to form a central plank of rehabilitative work within prisons in Scotland. These programmes link offending behaviour with interpersonal and cognitive deficits, and focus on 'correcting' faulty thinking to reduce reoffending. According to a cognitive behavioural approach, young women's violence is the result of *distorted* thought processes; in short, the 'problem is in their heads, not their social circumstances'

(Carlen 2002).¹⁰ By indicating that young women imprisoned for violent offences can be *both* victims of crime *and* agents who resist victim status, the current findings point to the need to address not only the narrative self-stories of individual women, but also the contexts within which they offend. As Farrall and Bowling (1999) have noted, ‘the process of desistance [from offending] is one that is produced through an *interplay* between individual choices, and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual’ (Farrall and Bowling 1999: 261, original emphasis). Interventions that hold individual women responsible for their own health, well-being and rehabilitation without offering them any real power to make the necessary choices are therefore not only inadequate, they are unjust (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw 2000).

Any work targeting young women who have committed violent offences needs to take account of their gendered experiences of substance misuse, abuse, suicide and self-harm, family relationships and responsibilities, housing, education, employment, offending, and punishment. In addition to offering help with practical problems, workers must assist young women to develop an understanding of their victimisation and should encourage them to address the strong feelings of anger and frustration that contribute to offending behaviour. This requires an understanding of the importance of relational issues, which are both part of the problem and – potentially – part of the solution (Batchelor and McNeill 2005; McNeill *et al.* 2005). Many of the young women in the current study grew up in households characterised by disconnection and violation. These relationships were then re-enacted on a systemic level by a criminal justice system based

¹⁰ This emphasis is reiterated in recent policy documents including, in England and Wales, *The Government’s Strategy for Female Offenders* (Home Office 2000, see Carlen 2002 for further discussion) and, in Scotland, the Inter Agency Forum *First Year Report* (IAF 2000, discussed in Tombs 2004).

on power and control (Covington 1999). If they are to undo any of the damage done, workers must provide a context for young women to participate in *positive* relationships, characterised by consistency, continuity, respect and warmth.

Previous research suggests that, whereas work with young men tends to be more successful where it takes place in a structured, rule-bound environment, programmes for young women are successful where they ‘focus on relationships with other people and offer ways to master their lives while keeping these relationships intact’ (Belknap *et al.* 1997: 23). Whereas young men are more likely to adhere to rules because they respect rules or want to avoid consequences, young women are more likely to co-operate where they have established a relationship with workers and feel that they respect them and have their best interests in mind (Ryan and Lindgren 1999). Young women in the current study said that they respected workers who treated them fairly, showed real interest in them as people (for example, phoning up to see how they were doing in hospital), and listened to what they had to say. Conversely, they were more likely to ‘kick off’ when staff treated them unfairly, refused to listen to them, or spoke down to them because they were prisoners:

In here they treat you like dirt and that annoys me. Like for instance there’s always certain members of staff won’t say, “Will you do it?” They say, “Go and do it” [...] They see it as we’re prisoners so we need tae do it. They don’t treat us wi’ respect. Like if they are busy in the office it’s like, “*Go away!*” [...] That just causes you to say, “Well, fuck off!” It just starts a big battle. [Annie]

Young women who commit violent offences have multiple needs that include substance misuse and addiction, homelessness, bereavement, sexual and physical abuse, offending and self-harm. As a result, they need services that adopt a comprehensive and holistic strategy aimed at addressing these practical and personal issues in a continuum of care. Young women are unlikely to engage with services that focus solely on their offending behaviour, or with workers who treat them as instances of some 'problem' or 'disorder'. Despite (and sometimes in spite of) their difficult family circumstances, young women who offend tend to reject the label of 'victim', preferring to focus instead on their ability to make active decisions about their everyday lives. If we are to achieve positive change in the lives of young women who commit violent offences, we need to respect this agency by maximising involvement and participation, and making sure that young women are made to feel like valued partners with genuine potential and worth.

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