

## **Workplace climate and working conditions in a feminised public service**

### **after restructuring/outsourcing**

#### **Introduction**

The context of this article is the restructuring and partial outsourcing of a public service, namely the probation service of England and Wales. In contrast to most studies of outsourcing, which generally focus on lower skill jobs in peripheral activities (Rubery 2013), the article's focus is a professional occupation within a core activity. In addition, it considers how restructuring, and attendant fragmentation of an occupation, affects those remaining in the public sector, which has received little attention in extant literature. The article highlights the subjective employee dimension of working lives post-outsourcing/restructuring, which as others have commented, is relatively neglected in favour of examining management strategies and practices, or effects on service delivery and financial performance (Kessler et al. 1999; Smith 2012; Worts et al. 2007). Since the public sector is such a large employer of women, adverse changes affect women disproportionately (e.g. Rubery 2013; Rubery and Rafferty 2013). By exploring probation as an exemplar of the effects of public service restructuring/outsourcing on a female dominated professional occupation, the article responds to a concern to highlight the gender of subjects in industrial relations research (Danieli 2006; Wajcman 2000). The article begins by drawing on existing literature to sketch the wider gender and work context of public sector restructuring/outsourcing and then more specifically, the probation context. Following an outline of research methods, the research findings section first outlines the union response and then discusses two of the main effects identified in the study: demise of a positive workplace climate and deteriorating working conditions.

## **The gender and work context of public sector restructuring/outsourcing**

The UK public sector remains a large employer of women (about 66% female workforce), and the largest source of unionised employment for women (female union density 55%), where female pay and conditions benefit from collective bargaining (Moore and Tailby 2015). Even with the many managerialist policies now impinging on professional workers under the ‘modernisation’ agenda (Worrall et al. 2010), public services stand out for providing relatively high quality jobs for women in general and for *highly qualified* women in particular. Indeed, it is argued that over time the public sector has played a significant role in advancing gender equality in employment (Rubery 2013). Further, despite recent and continuing employment cuts and pay freezes associated with austerity measures (Bach 2016), progressive gender equality policies ensure that the public sector still provides a comparatively enabling context for women (Conley and Page 2010; Grimshaw et al. 2012).

Nevertheless, the significant trend of restructuring/outsourcing has undoubtedly destabilised the favourable public sector employment context (The Smith Institute 2014; TUC 2015). Outsourcing in particular is associated with erosion of the model employer tradition (Bach and Winchester, 2003), threatening as it does the homogeneity of public service working conditions with increased use of temporary/casual staff, and growth of wage differentials. Deterioration in working conditions is also common, including excessive hours, loss of job security, lower pay, increased performance pressure, loss of autonomy, increased monitoring, lower job satisfaction, work intensification, negative alteration of work/job tasks, (Cooke et al. 2004; Flecker and Hermann 2011; TUC 2015). In addition, job losses caused by redundancies and non-replacement of leavers/retirees often ensue in outsourced areas (Moore and Tailby 2015; Whitfield 2002). The evidence is compelling that outsourcing, compounded by the limited application of equality policies in the private companies contracted to deliver

services (EOC 1995; Whitfield 2002), has had disproportionate impact upon women's employment (Hebson and Grugulis, 2005; Moore and Tailby 2015; Rubery 2013; Worts et al. 2007).

While existing research understandably usually focuses on the dangers for outsourced workers, evidence within and beyond the UK shows that restructuring public services also negatively affects the quality of working life for staff remaining in the public sector. Such staff may also experience worsening working conditions and significant work intensification (e.g. Burgess and Macdonald 1999; Celikel-Esser et al. 2015). It is against this general background that we consider the specificities of the probation context and professional workers within it.

### **Setting the scene in probation**

This section briefly describes the structure and nature of probation work and moves on to outline salient aspects of the restructuring/outsourcing programme named *Transforming Rehabilitation* (TR). It is important to note that TR occurred in a highly unionised context (about 60% density) (the main union's response/strategy is outlined later).

#### *Structure and nature of probation work*

Thirty or so years ago, probation was a male dominated occupation, but through the 1980s, employment in the service expanded and gradually feminised. By the early 1990s, women comprised nearly half of probation practitioners, a decade later around 60% and today around 70%. Women also comprise around half of the senior management grades, and the gender pay gap is relatively small at 4% (mean hourly earnings) (Author A, XXXX). These promising signs of progress on gender equality place probation as an exemplar of a public sector professional occupation offering women good quality jobs with career prospects.

However, research indicates that gender can negatively affect many aspects of the subjective experience of work in probation. One salient issue is that offenders are predominantly male, particularly high-risk ones who have committed serious offences, and the complexities of supervising such offenders can have a negative impact on female probation officers' well-being (e.g. Annison 2007; Petrillo 2007).

The three main grades of probation practitioner (and focus of this article) are Senior Probation Officers (SPOs - 64% women) (essentially middle managers), Probation Officers (POs – 70% women) (fully qualified practitioners), and Probation Service Officers (PSOs – 67% women) (less qualified practitioner grade) (Author A XXXX). Since 2002, PSOs have outnumbered POs (Robinson et al. 2015), similar to the trend elsewhere in public services, for example teaching and nursing, for changing ratios of qualified to un- or less-qualified 'assistants' (e.g. Adams et al. 2000). Prior to TR, POs/SPOs undertook supervision of both high and medium risk offenders and a range of tasks involving interactions with courts, prisons, police, victims of crime, employers, offenders' families and friends, social workers and other professionals. In addition, SPOs management tasks consisted mainly of overseeing professional practice. Meanwhile, PSOs, overseen by SPOs/POs, undertook supervision of medium risk offenders and a range of allied tasks. There were/are also specialist roles involving both SPOs/POs and PSOs, such as delivering rehabilitative programmes and working in approved premises<sup>1</sup>.

### *Transforming Rehabilitation*

TR is the latest in a series of structural reforms that probation had undergone since the early 1990s. These earlier reforms are discussed elsewhere and are not rehearsed in detail here (see Gale 2012; Mawby and Worrall 2013). Suffice it to say, that bearing the hallmark of Taylorism, they had a cumulatively negative impact on work and working conditions (Gale

2012; Author A XXXX). Work design became based on standards and objectives implemented through managerial performance controls, in particular the national risk assessment tool introduced in 2003, known as OASys (Offender Assessment System). Many practitioners complained that this reduced probation work to a 'tick box' exercise, and they commonly experienced work as intensified and increasingly pressured (Gale 2012). Thus, job quality in probation had suffered incremental degradation in the two decades leading up to TR. Immediately prior to TR, the probation service of England and Wales comprised 35 regional Trusts operating semi-autonomously within the National Offender Management System (NOMS). The Trusts had somewhat variable working conditions and employment relations practices, albeit within a national framework agreed with three recognised unions (Napo, Unison and GMB<sup>2</sup>).

The Offender Management Act 2007 provided the statutory framework for competition in the probation service, giving power to the Secretary of State to contract with providers outside the public sector (Dominey 2012). In May 2013, the Justice Secretary announced TR and little more than a year later in June 2014, TR saw probation services split between two separate structures. A public sector National Probation Service (NPS) was created to supervise high-risk offenders (people who have committed serious offences), and 21 regionally based Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) for low to medium risk offenders (people who have committed minor offences). In February 2015, the government sold the 21 CRCs on 7-year contracts to eight organisations, meaning that multiple employers are now delivering probation services.

Many commentators have remarked on the swift execution of TR, which created considerable turbulence in service delivery, and deep uncertainty for employees (Deering and Feilzer 2015; Robinson et al. 2015). Even the HM Inspectorate of Probation acknowledged that the

implementation did not go smoothly (Justice Inspectorate 2014). About 54% of the probation workforce of around 16,000 (full-time equivalent) was transferred to the CRCs, with the remaining 46% transferred to the NPS (NOMS 2015). Thus, all probation staff had a new employer: those remaining in the public sector went from being employees of a semi-autonomous organisation to civil servants. Those outsourced became employees of organisations sold on medium-term contracts mainly to private companies. Multi-nationals Sodexo and Interserve run more than half of the outsourced provision.

Senior Trust managers made staff transfer decisions based on a standard evaluation of tasks/work performed on a single day in November 2013 – another tick-box exercise according to our informants. The perceived injustice of this led to a number of appeals, especially from women working part-time and absent on that day, and those on maternity leave. Of the two largest practitioner grades, the majority of Probation Officers (POs) went to the NPS and the majority of Probation Support Officers (PSOs) to the CRCs (reflecting the new high-risk and low/medium risk division of offender supervision responsibilities).

Employees transferred to CRCs under the Cabinet Office Statement of Practice on Staff Transfers in the Public Sector (COSOP), which guaranteed employment on existing terms and conditions for a short period (until October 2015). There was also a National Agreement negotiated with the three recognised unions, which included an enhanced voluntary redundancy scheme to apply after October 2015; pay protection for three years; continuation of union recognition and national collective bargaining.

Quarterly workforce statistics for probation published by NOMS reveal incremental decreases in the CRC workforce since the split in June 2014. Owners Sodexo made 436 redundancies in October 2015; in December 2015, Working Links announced it would make over 500 redundancies; in February 2016 Purple Futures announced forthcoming

redundancies. Sodexo did not honour the enhanced voluntary redundancy scheme agreed prior to the share sale, choosing to implement instead what it called a ‘severance package’ with lower benefits. In contrast, there have been staff increases in the NPS with the union Napo claiming that there are large numbers of vacancies and severe difficulties in filling them due to older practitioners retiring and an insufficient supply of new trainees. This has all occurred in the context of no reduction in the number of offenders requiring supervision.

With regard to work design post-outsourcing, the private companies/consortia began introducing and/or piloting processes such as biometric/electronic reporting/monitoring and telephone/tablet offender supervision to replace face-to-face meetings. Such initiatives, obviously intended to help the private companies achieve savings in this labour intensive service, became a source of great concern for practitioners, especially longer-serving ones who entered probation via the social work route. Such practitioners strongly value an ethic of care, and they see face-to-face interactions with offenders as an essential ingredient for rehabilitation (Mawby and Worrall 2013). Thus, similar to the experiences in other types of welfare service work (Henriksson et al. 2006), restructuring/outsourcing posed challenges to the structure, professionalism, workplace climate, and working conditions of the probation occupation (Deering and Feilizer 2015).

## **Research methods**

The research in the single setting of probation allows us to foreground the experiences of (largely female) union officers and members/practitioners during the early period (February to July 2015) in which the post-restructuring/outsourcing changes were occurring. The access route was via the main probation union, Napo, whose approximately 7,500 membership consisted mostly of main grade probation practitioners (SPOs, POs and PSOs). We also conducted interviews with the Unison and GMB national officials responsible for probation.

National Napo officers (including the General Secretary) were involved in the research design and later in discussing preliminary findings at a Napo official/officer event in February 2016. We remain in regular contact with senior Napo officials receiving updates on the unfolding effects of TR. The union was therefore a co-producer of knowledge gained from this research.

Reflecting the common and accepted approach to case study research (Yin 2003), we utilised multiple methods including a Napo membership survey, qualitative interviews, focus groups, observation of and participation in union events, examination of union documents/communications. The online survey attracted 992 responses, representing a 17.5% response rate. Respondent characteristics included: *gender*, 68% female, 32% male; *race*, 88% white, 12% black and minority ethnic; *grade*, 14% SPO, 50% PO, 28% PSO, 5% Admin; *employer*, 57% NPS, 43% CRC. These proportions are broadly representative of Napo membership overall. Most substantive questions required respondents to select as many or as few options as they wished from a range of positive and negative statements; no questions were compulsory. About a third of respondents gave a testimonial at the end of the survey. Many used this opportunity to tell more about workplace climate and working conditions. The survey findings were analysed using frequencies and cross-tabulations; it allowed us to include the experiences and views of a larger population of probation practitioners/union members beyond those active in the union, and to give a stronger sense of the magnitude of particular problems and challenges across the dimensions of gender, grade and employer (NPS/CRC).

In the course of the qualitative fieldwork, we visited many probation workplaces across England and Wales observing the conditions union members worked in and having informal conversations. We conducted 30 interviews with Napo branch officers, across 17 of 21



regions. These were all serving probation practitioners with some paid work hours allocated for union work: they talked about their own experiences as well as those their members reported to them. This sample yielded a cross-section, including female (19) and male (11), CRC (15) and NPS (15) employees, and different grades (2 SPO; 20 PO; 7 PSO; 1 case administrator). The interview sample disproportionately comprises POs because most branch officers were POs. We conducted interviews with Napo national lay officers (4) and paid officials (4) – who had responsibility for specific regions/CRC owners where they supported branch officers. In order to hear directly from non-office-holding Napo members, we held focus group and/or multiple interviews with branch activists and attended union meetings in four branches each with a different CRC owner (combined around 100 probation members). We attended the Napo women’s conference in June 2015 (approximately 80 participants; mostly ordinary Napo members), where we facilitated two workshops (attracting approximately 20 women each) on the effects of restructuring on work and working conditions.

All interviews, focus groups, union meetings/events were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data was stored, organised, and thematically coded using research software NVivo. For the purposes of providing texture, we show gender, grade, employer and union position when quoting individuals. The article now briefly outlines Napo’s response to TR and this is followed by the main findings section offering union officer and member perspectives on TR.

### **Napo response to TR**

In this article, space constraints do not allow us to examine the union response to restructuring/outsourcing in detail; rather the principal focus is on how as professional workers, union officers and members experienced TR. However, a brief account of Napo’s

position on TR and the challenges it bequeaths the union is necessary. As stated earlier, the recognised probation unions all opposed TR, and Napo has since said, “*Transforming Rehabilitation was an earthquake that has shaken probation to its foundations*” (Napo 2016). Napo implemented a campaign of opposition centred on the risks it claimed TR posed to the public and to workers’ physical and psychological safety. The campaign involved lobbying government ministers and members of the shadow cabinet, two days of national strike action, issuing a claim for judicial review. At branch level, there was much activity to generate awareness about Napo predictions of the harmful effects of TR, gain member support for strike action, recruit new members from among non-union staff. Although it is recognised that in the case of professional workers, attending to the needs of their client group to which they are highly committed, might sometimes collide with their own self-interest with regard to defending working conditions (Author A XXXX), TR promised to be equally harmful for clients and practitioners alike. Therefore, this potential tension was mitigated as evidenced by strong union member support for the first national strike day in over 100 years of the probation service in March 2014.

After TR was implemented and as a small union, Napo faced multiple challenges including: (i) sustaining the network of branch officers to carry out the work of the union at workplace level; (ii) dealing with multiple new employers; (iii) maintaining the national negotiating and consultative structures. On the ground, Napo officers turned their attention to gathering members’ experiences of fault lines in the split service and gaining media attention of these; seeking to develop working relationships with the new CRC owners with a view to defending members’ terms and conditions and avoiding redundancies. Damage to the workplace climate and deteriorating working conditions were two main themes emerging from our research.

### **Union officer and member perspectives on workplace climate and working conditions<sup>3</sup> post restructuring/outsourcing**

The following account of union officer and member experiences needs to be read in the knowledge that the overwhelming majority of survey respondents, interviewees and others we engaged with in the course of the research expressed outright, in principle opposition to the split of probation services and especially to outsourcing. They therefore supported Napo's official position. Napo officers and members strongly objected to the introduction of the profit motive into a core public service where both offenders' wellbeing and public safety are at stake.

#### *Demise of a positive workplace climate*

At the time of the fieldwork, probation offices<sup>4</sup> were located in and around city/town centres, sometimes in modern buildings and sometimes in older ones looking in need of refurbishment. They usually consisted of a secure reception/waiting area partitioned by glass screens for workers' protection; practitioners typically worked in open plan spaces of varying sizes. The workplaces could be quite noisy with a lack of privacy – telephone calls with offenders occurred in the open plan space, although there were small rooms for face-to-face supervision. There was usually a staff kitchen, which was an important space where practitioners could interact informally, talk about professional problems, etc. thus relieving some of the stress inherent to the job. Although, probation work can be deeply satisfying, it can be equally frustrating and stressful partly because of high rates of recidivism, the disturbing nature of some offences and aggressive behaviour of some offenders (Mawby and Worrall 2013). Therefore, a positive and supportive workplace climate is crucial to the well-being of practitioners and ultimately to effective functioning of the service:

I can't tell you how difficult it is doing some of the things we have to do in our job. Being able to get support from your colleagues ... and even just the feeling of they know what I'm going through because they have to do it too, that helps. We work in an open plan office ... and you form close bonds with people that you sit close to because they're the ones that overhear you when you have difficult phone conversations ... you put the phone down and they'll be the ones putting the kettle on and saying, "do you need to talk about it?" (Female PO, NPS, Napo national lay officer)

These 'kitchen conversations' were not only an important component of workplace collegiality, but they also facilitated practitioners to reclaim control over the work, occurring as they did outside of the formal standardised processes dominating their daily work.

NPS and CRCs were still sharing most probation workplaces, but to mark the split they had moved their employees onto different floors or into different sections of floors. NPS/CRC practitioners were no longer allowed to linger around each other's computers/desks because of confidentiality rules across the two new structures. There were also separate stationery cupboards, separate fridges, and even separate tea bags for NPS/CRC employees. While research participants frequently laughed about these trivial signs of TR, similar to restructuring programmes in other services (e.g. Kessler et al. 1999), many saw them as epitomising a division that was highly consequential:

.... you had this office where people worked with clients<sup>5</sup>, I mean, it wasn't perfect, but then when the split came, it was literally like someone took an axe to the office and smashed it in half and I don't think it's got better since then. (Male PO, NPS, Napo branch officer)

The ‘taking of the axe’ metaphor symbolises the speed with which the split was executed, and the havoc staff felt it wreaked, changing the workplace climate from one typically described as supportive and collegial, if imperfect and stressful at times, to one experienced as thoroughly demoralising and constantly highly stressful. Table 1 reveals overwhelmingly negative perceptions of workplace climate among Napo members. For example, only 20% described the workplace as inclusive, only 3% described it as high trust; only 10% felt managers valued employee opinions, and 63% reported low morale. The strong degree of homogeneity in responses across grade and gender is noteworthy, albeit SPOs inclined to more positive views across most items in Table 1, which is hardly surprising given their incorporation in the management layers. However, there is little indication that PSOs found the post-TR climate empowering in the way that some seemingly experienced earlier reforms (Gale 2012). In fact, these lower grade practitioners were more likely to perceive a culture of fear and low trust.

This is partly explainable by the disproportionate outsourcing of PSOs. In terms of differences between public and private, Table 1 reveals the rather more negative perceptions of CRC employees across many items, in particular culture of fear and uncertainty. The early Sodexo redundancy announcement was partly responsible for this with fear reverberating across CRCs with different owners. Strangely perhaps, with a couple of exceptions, the new CRC owners had been conspicuously absent from workplaces which was amplifying anxiety about the future, job security and pay, but also workplace climate issues. One of the new owners had organised an early all-staff meeting, but according to interviewees, it had done little to allay concerns. Napo branch officers described it as a ‘tell and sell’ of the company’s mission which they found deeply patronising in both delivery and substance. Practitioners were asked to wear a badge displaying the acronym BIONIC – standing for ‘believe it or not, I care’ – which was seen as offensive to their professionalism (i.e. of course they care!).

The perception that the workplace climate had degenerated was by no means confined to CRC employees though (as we see in Table 1), with the majority of NPS employees also revealing negative perceptions even though there was no threat to their job security. In the case of the NPS, practitioners were struggling to adapt to their new and more bureaucratic Civil Service environment, and more importantly, to the split from former close colleagues now in the CRCs. They described the split as a personal loss, (a messy divorce was a common phrase) but also a professional one, which they felt damaged the service and the occupation. The survey also asked about future work intentions: more than 40% of CRC workers and 24% of NPS workers now wanted voluntary redundancy, and nearly 30% of CRC workers and 24% of NPS were actively looking for a job outside of probation. These are substantial proportions of staff and reflect severely weakened morale.

#### *Deteriorating working conditions*

Prior to TR, despite a national framework for basic terms and conditions the semi-autonomous structure of probation meant that there was some local variation and managerial discretion applied. This evolved into local custom and practice, which in the main Napo members valued, especially women. For example, local ways of handling sickness absence, performance/capability issues, flexible working, etc., existed. These arrangements were often informal, flexible and generally seen as accommodating of people's individual needs, but their future was now uncertain. People in the NPS found that Civil Service policies were more strictly adhered to than they had been used to in the former Trusts. This had implications for such things as time-off-in-lieu of extra hours worked (TOIL), use of union facility time, management of sickness absence, as well as flexible working. In the CRCs, the picture was uneven with some honouring individual/local agreements for the time being at

least, and others withdrawing them immediately, causing much disruption to individuals, especially to those with caring responsibilities:

You have flexible time. So maybe you work earlier in the day rather than later and you move your hours around to accommodate ... or you take unpaid leave. If you've got young children you say, half term, I can't find cover, I want unpaid leave.... All of this is now being refused (Female PO, CRC, Branch officer).

As the CRCs began to reorganise probation offices, the prospect of having to move to a workplace in a different location further from home, exacerbated concerns about flexible work arrangements and caring responsibilities:

It's people with caring responsibilities who are uncertain about where they're going to be working and often it's the women that end up having to drop the kids off at school, pick them up and have caring responsibilities, older relatives ... they find uncertainty very difficult to deal with ... (Female PO, NPS, branch officer)

From Table 2, we see work-life balance had deteriorated for a large minority (31%), as well as widespread experiences of worsened working conditions as measured by multiple items. Again, the relative homogeneity of responses across gender is noteworthy, but there was more unevenness across grade. In particular, greater numbers of POs were experiencing bigger caseloads, unrealistic targets, and staffing shortages than other practitioner grades. The differences across NPS/CRCs were often small: the majority of practitioners in both parts of probation were experiencing staff shortages; lack of cover for staff absences was a critical issue in both; around two-fifths in NPS/CRCs regularly felt unable to cope with the workload and suffered work-related stress. In the CRCs, the majority was also experiencing unrealistic targets, and in the NPS long working hours. An additional critical working conditions issue

emerging from interviews and discussions with Napo members in CRCs was the lack of a sufficient number of POs to oversee PSOs' work. This was a cause of stress both for POs who felt the pressure of work intensification and for PSOs who felt they lacked vital support, especially for offenders at the top of the medium risk category (e.g. domestic violence cases).

## **Table 2**

Napo members also expressed a range of new workplace health and safety concerns. With regard to the physical work environment, plans to remove screens and to install hot drinks machines in reception areas (supposedly to make probation offices more client friendly) in CRC offices left workers, particularly female, feeling vulnerable to assault. Members identified other specific risks for women from what many saw as new money-saving policies: meeting (largely male) offenders outside of the workplace (saving on office space); PSOs supervising domestic violence cases with only the most basic training (saving on training costs and/or PO grade input); offender programmes with larger numbers of male participants (reducing number of programmes). The following female Napo officer's experience illustrates the perceived risks. The background to the quotation is the ban on sharing client information across the NPS/CRC divide on grounds of commercial sensitivity:

I ran a [domestic violence] group on one occasion where the men were disclosing some of their offences and I was aware being a tutor in that room that I did not know the background of all these men .... I didn't know their risk because I didn't have access to their information. There was one guy, and he turned round and he said, "I was in prison ... I was done for stabbing my partner". You just sit there as a tutor and you think this ... should be information that I should have access to because potentially there is a risk to me. (Female PSO, CRC, Branch Officer)



Classic signs of work intensification, targets and deadlines had become a highly contentious issue across the NPS/CRC divide (see Table 2). Napo blamed severe understaffing in both parts of probation. In an unprecedented move, at least one CRC was reportedly considering the bullying tactic of weekly ‘naming and shaming’ of individuals failing to meet targets. More generally, senior managers in the CRCs had become less tolerant of complaints about work-overload:

.... the entire CRC offender management staff were basically told, “if you don’t get your reviews up-to-date by this date you will go on action plan” [first stage of disciplinary process], blanket across the board .... they used it as a threat .... and that’s what they did. They probably won’t meet the action plan requirements because .... they’re still getting two new cases a week. (Male PO, NPS, Branch officer)

An adversarial management style contrasted with the more relaxed approach to which most practitioners were accustomed in the former Trusts. One branch officer explained that in his office (which contained both CRC and NPS staff) every practitioner supervising offenders was on the first stage of the disciplinary process. One adjacent issue was that targets were unadjusted for part-timers. While admittedly this pre-dated restructuring, part-timers (mostly women) were now apparently feeling the pressure even more keenly. For many full-timers, especially in NPS, the unrealistic deadlines resulted in long hours working – and attendant accumulation of TOIL, which many were unable to take because of staff shortages (see Table 2).

Another aspect of work intensification for some was the blurring of the boundaries between PO and PSO roles, which had started prior to TR (see Gale 2012), escalating since to become a major concern (especially for POs) and source of stress especially in the CRCs (see Table 2):

Up to now, there have been quite clear divisions, that certain parts of the work were done by POs and for that, they got paid a PO grade. Certain other tasks were done by PSOs who hadn't been through the training and weren't paid as much .... At the briefing they [CRC owners] said, "We're going to remove these boundaries". So the concern is if you are going to get a PSO to do that work, are they going to be paid the same? (Male PO, CRC, branch officer)

Previously, practitioners accepted some informal blurring of role boundaries as part of professional group dynamics, allowing flexibility within teams, learning and development processes. However, as reflected in the quote above, many now feared that the CRC owners would remove boundaries, re-banding pay and redesigning the PSO role such that they could get more for less. The fact that around 20% of SPOs and POs in the survey were regularly being required to carry out tasks below their grade also heralds a changing job profile for higher grade practitioners. Napo was concerned that these were all signs of gradual downgrading of probation work with no winners, and possible future erosion of pay and status.

Work intensification was taking different forms in the two different parts of probation. The extensive stress and heavy workloads in the CRCs were due in large part to the increase in *volume* of (low-medium risk) cases and required speed of workflow. CRC practitioners talked about the factory-like conditions in which they were now 'processing' low-medium risk offenders. In the NPS, the *intensity* of POs' (high-risk) cases was the main issue (Phillips et al. 2016). Formerly, POs typically had a mix of high and medium risk clients providing some balance to their work. They were now dealing with *only* extremely complex high-risk cases often involving some harrowing offences. Further, these clients often have health, social and

behavioural problems; they require a lot of individual attention and different interventions, which often prove physically and emotionally exhausting for practitioners:

Everybody is under an enormous amount of stress. Every single case you've got is high risk. You've got something happening and it's just like "oh my God, this is taking off", your caseload is what, 40, 45. Something happens, you end up spending at least half a day, more commonly a day, couple of days, trying to sort one person out and ... all that anybody seems to be concerned about is whether you've got your OASys done on time. (Female PO, NPS, Branch officer)

## **Conclusion**

Many factors are involved in the changes in work and working conditions that have occurred in public services over the last decades (Burgess and MacDonald 1999), and probation is no exception. Probation had been sliding downwards in terms of quality of work and working conditions for many years, but *Transforming Rehabilitation* ushered in a new and, from the perspective of Napo officers and members, wholly negative era perceived by many as the final blow both to the service and occupation (see also: Deering and Feilzer 2015). TR – as indicated by its title – was a *transformation* of probation, not simply another in a series of reforms, which disrupted a public service that offered highly qualified workers (predominantly women) good quality jobs.

While erosion of professional autonomy and shift towards managerial control were the major concerns arising from earlier reforms of probation from the 1990s onwards (Gale 2012; Author A XXXX), for union officers and members in our study TR was more about adverse impacts on working conditions and quality of work. Adverse impacts ensued despite the collective agreement and transfer regulations. While these can in theory protect against

erosion of employment conditions, and hence reduce conflict and allay employee concerns (Grimshaw et al. 2015), such benign outcomes did not transpire in the probation case. The unions' worst fears about worsening working conditions were borne out early on with redundancies in the CRCs (some without the agreed enhanced payments) occurring very quickly. Further, although COSOP preserved basic terms and conditions (pay, hours of work, etc.) for a limited period, it could not cover the wage-effort bargain (Rubery et al. 2002), a fault line reflected in the work intensification experienced across the public/private divide in probation. Mounting an effective defence of its members' working conditions, especially work design elements, will be a huge challenge for Napo. The union will need to adjust quickly to the multi-employer, dual sector environment and the fragmentation of staff; otherwise, it will risk membership attrition that it can ill afford.

Another important point is that workplace climate is dynamic, relational and responsive to the collective mood, and as the case demonstrates a union agreement/transfer regulations cannot protect or specify this aspect of the employment experience (Cooke et al. 2004). The relational facet of work is very important in probation because of the specific nature of the service and client group (supervision of predominantly male offenders), which poses inherent challenges to the wellbeing of the predominantly female practitioner group. In addition, while probation is a niche occupation, cumulatively the degradation of such professional spaces is a threat to gender equality in employment overall. The main consequence of the restructuring of probation is the impoverishment of a feminised professional space that provided women with relatively good working conditions, enhanced job quality and security, flexibility, learning and development, and career progression. All of these positive aspects of work in probation were possible because of the climate of collegiality that existed across practitioner grades. This is now jeopardised by occupational fragmentation, which has given rise not only to physical and spatial divisions, but also to professional and psychosocial ones.

From a quality of work perspective, the former semi-autonomous Trusts had, in the main, worked well for women, particularly with regard to equality initiatives such as flexible work arrangements, and also for related issues which are not the specific focus of this article, such as women's capacity to participate in the union (see Author A XXXX). The combined processes of recentralisation (to NPS) and decentralisation to the private sector threatened this enabling environment. The restructuring of the probation service thus exemplifies the negative employee outcomes identified in previous research (Flecker and Hermann 2011; Marchington et al., 2005), and highlights the vulnerability of feminised professional occupations to them (Worrall et al. 2010).

Future research in this and other feminised contexts would aid understanding of longer terms impacts for feminised professional occupations. So far, the evidence indicates that working conditions and workplace climate are unlikely to improve over time; more likely, they will worsen. The so-called E3 programme<sup>6</sup> announced for the NPS in late 2015 promised to address inconsistencies in grades and pay bands, and to preserve learning and development opportunities. However, Napo's perspective on this was that E3 posed a threat to mobility arrangements, pay protection, job evaluation outcomes, role boundaries, learning and development. For the CRCs, previous outsourcing cases herald fragmentation of working conditions and reduced pay transparency with implications for gender equality (e.g. Smith Institute 2014). Redundancies in some CRCs might presage the emergence of a multitier workforce once the protected three-year period has expired, as has occurred in other outsourced public services (Smith 2012). Traditionally probation has made only limited use of agency workers, but it may now witness a drift towards casualisation similar to other feminised professions such as nursing and social work (de Ruyter et al. 2008), and this would only add to the view that female dominated work is undervalued and especially vulnerable to

degradation processes (Rubery 2013). It appears that public services can no longer be relied upon to advance gender equality in employment for highly qualified women.

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**Table 1: Perceptions of workplace climate**

<b>Item: (N/%)</b>	<b>NPS</b>	<b>CRC</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>PO</b>	<b>PSO</b>	<b>SPO</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1. My workplace feels inclusive</b>	86	47	133	93	39	35	167	113	54	167
	21	16	19	20	16	27	20	20	19	20
<b>2. There is a culture of fear at my workplace</b>	120	110	230	144	98	19	261	175	84	259
	29	<b>37</b>	32	<b>31</b>	<b>39</b>	15	31	30	31	31
<b>3. There is a culture of uncertainty at my workplace</b>	296	247	543	346	191	92	629	429	201	630
	71	<b>83</b>	76	75	76	70	75	75	73	74
<b>4. My workplace is consultative and management values staff opinions</b>	39	27	66	34	18	31	83	54	29	83
	9	9	9	7	7	24	10	9	11	10
<b>5. My workplace feels divisive</b>	131	100	231	169	70	21	260	175	87	262
	31	34	32	<b>37</b>	<b>28</b>	16	31	30	32	31
<b>6. There is a bullying culture at my workplace</b>	47	38	85	59	25	7	91	57	36	93
	11	13	12	13	10	5	11	10	13	11
<b>7. There is low morale at my workplace</b>	273	194	467	311	160	59	530	362	170	532
	66	65	65	<b>68</b>	<b>63</b>	45	63	63	63	63
<b>8. There is high morale at my workplace</b>	6	10	16	12	3	9	24	16	8	24
	1	3	2	3	1	7	3	3	3	3
<b>9. There is a culture of low trust at my workplace</b>	103	93	196	131	69	24	224	154	70	224
	25	31	27	<b>29</b>	<b>27</b>	18	27	27	26	26
<b>10. There is a culture of high trust at my workplace</b>	12	9	21	16	3	7	26	18	8	26
	3	3	3	3	1	5	3	3	3	3
<b>Total</b>	416	297	713	459	251	131	841	575	272	847
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

**Table 2: Perceptions of working conditions**

Item (N/%)	NPS	CRC	Total	PO	PSO	SPO	Total	Female	Male	Total
<b>1. I have a bigger caseload</b>	140	108	248	195	68	26	289	192	96	288
	33	36	35	<b>42</b>	27	20	34	33	35	33
<b>2. Targets are unrealistic</b>	204	181	385	281	121	47	449	311	143	454
	49	<b>61</b>	54	<b>60</b>	48	36	53	53	52	53
<b>3. I regularly work hours over and above my contract</b>	218	128	346	240	95	61	396	282	120	402
	<b>52</b>	43	48	51	38	47	47	48	43	47
<b>4. I regularly feel unable to cope with my workload</b>	173	113	286	221	80	36	337	241	98	339
	41	38	40	<b>47</b>	32	28	40	41	36	39
<b>5. There is not enough staff at my workplace</b>	241	163	404	285	120	70	475	331	148	479
	58	55	56	<b>61</b>	47	53	56	56	54	56
<b>6. There is often no cover for annual leave/training/sickness absence</b>	211	144	355	237	115	60	412	290	125	415
	50	48	50	51	45	46	48	49	45	48
<b>6. I am unable to take TOIL</b>	98	53	151	110	37	31	178	122	55	177
	23	18	21	24	15	24	21	21	20	21
<b>7. I am regularly required to carry out tasks/duties above my grade</b>	66	37	103	41	55	21	117	76	43	119
	16	12	14	9	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>	14	13	16	14
<b>8. I am regularly required to carry out tasks/duties below my grade</b>	72	54	126	102	19	28	149	90	60	150
	17	18	18	<b>22</b>	8	<b>21</b>	17	15	22	17
<b>9. I am worried about the increasing blurring of the boundary between PSO and PO work</b>	179	166	345	223	118	50	391	264	127	391
	43	<b>56</b>	48	<b>48</b>	<b>47</b>	38	46	45	46	45
<b>11. My work-life balance has deteriorated</b>	138	82	220	158	59	35	252	175	76	251
	33	28	31	34	23	27	30	30	28	29
<b>12. I regularly suffer from work-related</b>	171	110	281	203	98	33	334	234	98	332

**stress**

	41	37	39	<b>43</b>	<b>39</b>	25	39	40	36	38
<b>Total</b>	<i>419</i>	<i>298</i>	<i>717</i>	<i>468</i>	<i>253</i>	<i>131</i>	<i>852</i>	<i>587</i>	<i>276</i>	<i>863</i>
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Approved premises house some high-risk offenders, usually lifers, released from prison on licence. They are closely monitored and returned to prison if deemed necessary.

<sup>2</sup> Napo represents mainly main grade practitioners and some administrative workers; Unison represents mainly administrative workers and some main grade practitioners; GMB represents senior managers.

<sup>3</sup> We are using a broad definition of working conditions offered by ILO to cover a range of topics and issues, from working time (e.g. hours of work, work schedules) to remuneration, as well as the physical conditions and mental demands that exist in the workplace (<http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/working-conditions/lang--en/index.htm>).

<sup>4</sup> We include here a brief description of probation workplaces since unlike other public services (e.g. healthcare, education) most people do not have dealings with probation.

<sup>5</sup> 'Client' is practitioners' and the unions' preferred term; the management term is 'offender'.

<sup>6</sup> The E3 programme (Effective, Efficient, Excellent) was created to define and implement the changes deemed necessary to achieve a consistent way of working across NPS.