



More Than Safety: The Role of Women's Centres in Ongoing Support and Empowerment Handout

ADVANCETALK

Unpacking the
Intersection of
Domestic Abuse and
the Criminal System

Introduction

Women and girls face unique challenges based on their gender, compounded by other intersecting identities such as race, sexuality or disability, as well as trauma, poverty, homelessness and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Women's Centres can be a place of solace and safety for many, offering support for survivors of domestic abuse, and other forms of exploitation and violence.

What is a Women's Centre?

Women's Centres are safe spaces where women are able to participate in wellbeing activities, including awareness raising and self-confidence building, to take part in training and education, and to meet with other women.

For women in contact with the criminal justice system, Women's Centres can be a life-line, and are an invaluable alternative to imprisonment. The tangible impact of these centres is vast, from improvements in mental health and relationships, to areas such as work, education, housing and finances.

Women's Centres are also cost-effective. Women represent a small percentage of the prison population, and yet they impose a disproportionately high cost on public. The annual average cost of a woman's prison place in 2022-23 was almost £80,000, and yet the Women's Budget Group estimated a place at a Woman's centre to £1,486.91 to £5,015 in 2023. (1)



Advance Women's Centres

Advance's Women's Centres are safe spaces where women can go for help, support, advice, or just a cup of tea and a chat. They're there for women dealing with all kinds of challenges, such as domestic abuse, coping with mental health struggles, or trying to get back on their feet after losing a job or a home. A woman might access the centre for many reasons: to see a keyworker, an external professional appointment like counselling, or to attend a probation meeting in a more comfortable and environment.

Women can access practical support at a Women's Centre. They can for example attend financial support sessions with a dedicated professional, speak with a housing specialist, or attend a sexual health session with an external health service provider. They can also join in on regular group sessions which include coffee mornings, creative workshops, singing and poetry, hair and makeup masterclasses, pamper sessions and wellbeing workshops.

Women's Centres are especially important because they focus on the unique problems women face, like balancing caregiving with work, dealing with trauma, or overcoming discrimination. They're not just about solving immediate problems; they're about giving women a place to feel safe, connect with others, and rebuild their lives in a way that works for them.

Groups aimed at women supported by our Domestic Abuse services are also run from the centres, for example, Woman's Trust, a mental health charity for victims/survivors of domestic abuse run regular sessions.

In London, the Women's Centres can be used by our Young Women and Girls services, hosting groups for those supported by our services. A lot of engagement happens externally, including sessions in schools on topics like healthy relationships and recognising signs of domestic abuse, as well as trips out, such as to makeup masterclasses at a MAC store.

Peer Mentors

Women supported through Advance's Criminal Justice services also have the opportunity to become Peer Mentors after completing support. This means that they can volunteer and support with one-to-one and group activities at the Women's Centres, for example one Peer Mentor is running a Reiki (wellness) class and another is running weekly art groups.

Outcomes

We spoke with women who attended group sessions run by Advance, across our Women's Centres and in locations held by partners:

- ➡ **85% of women rated the sessions 5/5.**
- ➡ **84% agreed the sessions were useful**
- ➡ **98% said they were likely to recommend the sessions to someone else**
- ➡ **98% saying they would return to the groups**

Mental health and wellbeing

Experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of gendered violence can have a huge impact on women's mental health, often leading to anxiety, depression, or PTSD. That's why having safe spaces like women's centres is so important. These spaces offer support that's trauma-informed and understands the specific challenges women face. Organisations like Women's Trust provide a lifeline, giving women the chance to heal, rebuild their confidence, and move forward in a safe, supportive environment.

Lived Experience

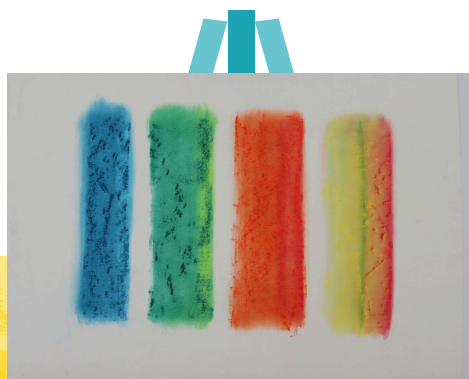
Women's Centres are not just places of support, they're also spaces where women can use their own experiences to drive real change. Many women who come through our doors go on to become Lived Experience Ambassadors or Peer Mentors, using what they've been through to help others and shape how services are delivered.

We regularly welcome politicians, local authorities, police, and the press to our centres to learn more about the issues women face. Our Ambassadors and Peer Mentors often meet with them, sharing their personal stories and insights to influence best practices and improve policies. These women are supported every step of the way by our dedicated Centre Coordinators and keyworkers, ensuring their voices are heard and respected.

Artwork and creativity workshops.

Art and creativity workshops are a big part of what makes Women's Centres special. These workshops, often run by Peer Mentors who understand what it's like to face challenges, give women a chance to express themselves in new ways. Through painting, drawing, writing, or other creative activities, women can build confidence, discover new skills, and connect with others.

For many women, these workshops are also a safe and gentle way to work through trauma. Sometimes it's easier to express feelings through art than to talk about them.



Poem by Women at Advance East London Centre

I was Maria, once full of hope
Before the laws wait, I learned to cope
A call for help, a need for aid, but trust in power slowly frayed

With eight men on a busy road
Pressed against concrete no words flowed
Arrested for crimes I didn't commit
Now mark my name in their cold script

Strip searched I stared at the floor
Wishing to vanish to be no more
Deprived of freedom
Stripped of pride
The truth they bent
The truth they hide

For many Marias, this tale's the same
False charges, lies, a cruel game
We came for safety, found despair
In a system that should be fair

But at Minerva hands reached out
In her darkest moments
They stood with us, in this fight
Reminding us of our basic right

Not all are lost
Not all corrupt
But too many wear the badge unjust
So we ask for change
For truth to reign
So no more Marias feel this pain

For justice is more than just control
We ask the powerful to hear our plea
Bring back the love that set us free



Recommendations

- Ensure funding for Women's Centres is long-term and sustainable.
- Create a central investment pot of £89.1 million for women's centre support in England and Wales to ensure that women have access to safe women's spaces, wherever they are in the country.
- Promote Women's Centres as accessible, community spaces where women can access appointments, meetings and drop-in sessions with professionals a
- Ensure that funding for Women's Centres is unrestricted so they can be utilised for all women, for whatever their needs are.
- Increase grant and flexible funding for practical needs such as travel.

About Advance

- We help women and girls who have experienced trauma through domestic abuse, exploitation and the criminal justice system to rebuild their lives. We do this by providing practical and emotional support, wherever and whenever a woman or girl wants it.
- Through our network of Women's Centres across London and the Southeast, women can access one-to-one, group, and peer support, as well as practical help and essentials.
- We work alongside criminal justice agencies like Probation teams to support women in contact with the criminal justice system. Read more>> <https://www.advancecharity.org.uk/what-we-do/criminal-justice-services/>
- We support women and girls affected by domestic abuse in a range of statutory and criminal justice settings, including social care offices, Local authority Housing offices, Police stations and hospitals.
- We support young women and girls, from the age of 13 who are experiencing domestic abuse and exploitation throughout domestic abuse services.
- We support young women and girls who are in contact, or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system through are specialist young persons Minerva keyworker. Read more >> <https://www.advancecharity.org.uk/what-we-do/young-women-girls-services/>

Notes

(1) **The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women's Centres, Women's Budget Group**

Adjusted in accordance to inflation from m £1,223 to £4,125 per woman to £1,486.91 to £5,015 in 2023.