

# Hibiscus Initiatives' submission to Rehabilitation and Resettlement: ending the cycle of reoffending – call for evidence

January 2025

1. [Hibiscus Initiatives](#) ('Hibiscus') is a voluntary sector organisation with a track record of delivering high-impact support and advocacy services to Black and minoritised migrant women in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) and immigration system. We have been active in this field for over thirty years. In the past seven years alone, we have worked with over 12,000 migrant people from over 100 different countries. The information in this response is drawn from our own caseload and discussions with our frontline practitioners.
2. Hibiscus currently works with women in three prisons (HMP Bronzefield, HMP Downview and HMP Peterborough) and with women in the Greater London area in contact with the police, Courts and probation services. We partner with women through specialist casework support, advice and advocacy; group information and therapeutic workshops; and engaging them to transform the immigration system and CJS.

## Section 1: Reoffending – measuring the problem

### *1. What are the levels of reoffending in England and Wales, and how has this changed over time?*

3. The Ministry of Justice's statistics show that, while there is some fluctuation, the rate of proven reoffending has decreased significantly over the past fifteen years<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, there has also been a substantial increase in both the use and length of prison sentences. However, it would be incorrect to assume a causal link between these trends: research indicates that prison is not effective in preventing reoffending<sup>2</sup>. This is particularly true for those given shorter prison sentences, among whom the reoffending rate between October and December 2022 was approximately 60%<sup>3</sup>. In comparison, community sentences have been shown to be more effective at reducing reoffending<sup>4</sup>.
4. From our experience working with Black and minoritised migrant women we know that prison is inherently harmful. Furthermore, prison is not an environment conducive to rehabilitation and, by taking a person out of their community, can create the additional challenge of resettlement. It is not a reasonable solution to prevent reoffending.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Justice. (Last updated 2024). <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/proven-reoffending-statistics>

<sup>2</sup> College of Policing. (2023). <https://www.college.police.uk/research/crime-reduction-toolkit/imprisonment-and-other-custodial-sanctions#:~:text=The%20meta%2Danalysis%20found%20that,conditions%20where%20custody%20reduced%20reoffending>

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Justice. (2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/proven-reoffending-statistics-october-to-december-2022/proven-reoffending-statistics-october-to-december-2022#reoffending-by-disposal-type>

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Justice. (2019). [The impact of short custodial sentences, community orders and suspended sentence orders on reoffending](#)

## Section 2: Rehabilitation in prisons

### 2. What is the regime offer in different types of prisons?

5. In our experience, rehabilitation does not take place in prisons, and little is done to prepare women for their release. While our frontline staff have observed that the availability of rehabilitation schemes varies considerably between prisons, they are, in all cases, inadequate and unfit for purpose, particularly for the women we support who experience intersectional discrimination and multiple disadvantages. Rehabilitation services that aim to be effective need to be designed and implemented beyond generic programmes that often overlook the particular needs and circumstances of Black and minoritised migrant women. There is also a pressing need to ensure that post-release support is suitable and available to all women without discrimination.
6. **Rehabilitation must address factors in offending.** Criminal offending by women is strongly associated with financial hardship, substance abuse, mental health challenges, and their own experiences of VAWG. Many have '*multiple, acute and unmet needs*', which are further exacerbated by cuts to services resulting in a lack of crisis support<sup>5</sup>.
7. *"One of the most common offences we see with the women we support in prison is drug importation, usually of cannabis or cocaine... When recounting their stories the women usually tell us that someone in their community asked them to take this in exchange for payment. The women will tell us often that they were struggling financially and took the opportunity to try to alleviate this. For several women this is their first offence and first time in contact with the criminal justice system."* Hibiscus' project worker
8. Effective support and rehabilitation must address these needs; however, in practice, this does not happen. Women are frequently excluded from support and left with the same unmet needs that contributed to their offending, compounded by the additional disruption of prison and a conviction.
9. Over half the women in prison or under community supervision are victim/survivors of VAWG<sup>6</sup>. Our experience and research indicates that a significant number are also victim/survivors of human trafficking<sup>7</sup>. For many of the women we support, criminal convictions are directly linked to the abuse they experienced, either because they were coerced or forced into committing a crime, or because their actions were shaped by the trauma they endured.
10. Addressing the root causes, such as poverty, trauma, and mental health needs through an effective and robust rehabilitation regime, and providing interventions tailored to the specific needs of women can significantly reduce their involvement in crime.
11. **The vulnerability of those in the CJS and the support they require must be a primary consideration in their rehabilitation.** Many of our service users are victim/survivors of VAWG and human trafficking, with clear signs of abuse and trauma apparent from their first encounter with the police. However, they are often treated solely as offenders, without their own needs and vulnerabilities to be addressed.

---

<sup>5</sup> HM's Inspectorate of Probation. (2021). [Women and Probation](#).

<sup>6</sup> Prison Reform Trust. (2017). [Domestic abuse and criminal justice: Tackling the drivers of women's offending](#).

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Women's Justice. (Undated). [Stop criminalising survivors](#).

12. Our experience indicates that rehabilitation requires an appropriate response to the needs of those who have offended, in order to address the root causes of their behaviour (including the impact of victimisation as a driving factor). For Black and minoritised women, this becomes even more critical, as a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective. A trauma-informed, holistic, and wraparound support system provided by specialist organisations (where women are supported in navigating the various stages of the CJS) would ensure effective and inclusive rehabilitation. This is of the utmost importance as without care and consideration of circumstance, the cycle of offending and sentencing is likely to continue.
13. Specialist organisations play a critical role in bridging the gaps left by the system, offering holistic support to help women navigate their rehabilitation, recover, and rebuild their lives. However, systemic reforms are essential to ensure that these women are treated with dignity and fairness, their vulnerabilities are acknowledged, and their rights are protected at every stage of the process. Without such reforms, the CJS will continue to perpetuate harm rather than deliver justice.

### *3. What impact does custody have on prisoner health and wellbeing, and how effective is provision for this in prison in promoting rehabilitation?*

14. The impact of imprisonment on women's health cannot be understated. As explained above, those entering the criminal justice system are likely to already be vulnerable on account of their experiences. This is then compounded when they are imprisoned, uprooting their lives and moving them into an environment likely to have a deleterious effect on their physical and mental health<sup>8</sup>. Finally, the prison regime is unable to address the physical and mental health needs that women have, whilst itself exacerbating them<sup>9</sup>.
15. **Mental health needs are a significant issue relevant to effective rehabilitation; yet there is very little support available.** It is not reasonable to expect anyone to engage with meaningfully with rehabilitation whilst they are experiencing severe mental health problems or trauma. Evidence shows that over 80% of women in prison report having mental health problems.<sup>10</sup> Of particular concern are women experiencing trauma and in need of urgent, specialist treatment and support, such as victim/survivors of human trafficking and VAWG.
16. Our frontline staff report that in practice there is no specialised support available for victim/survivors of VAWG or human trafficking. Even when a woman receives a positive decision in their trafficking claim, no additional support is available to them in prison. In addition to this, waiting times for mental health services in prisons of over two months, with no exceptions made for those experiencing acute trauma. The same issue is apparent for those in the process of making trafficking or asylum claims. Medical racism presents a significant additional barrier to many accessing healthcare in prison. Black and minoritised women are less likely to seek help for their mental health and more likely to experience a lower quality of healthcare in general compared to white women<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> The Corston Report. (2007).

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20130128112038/http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System Inquiry into Women's Health in Prisons Briefing 1. (2022). <https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/APPG-womens-health-and-well-being-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Women in Prison. (2024). [\*Women in Prison respond to overcrowding crisis and impact on women's prisons.\*](#)

<sup>11</sup> Women in Prison. (2018). [\*Double disadvantage: The experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women in the criminal justice system.\*](#)

17. Access to mental health care and support in prisons must be improved significantly to enable those affected to engage with rehabilitation.

## Section 3 – resettlement services and alternatives to custody

### *10. How does joint working between services happen so that ex-offenders receive the support they need post-release?*

18. **The roles of specialist services in community sentences.** Our service users often describe feeling ‘stuck in a cycle’, where the factors that led to their offending remain unresolved. These factors can include issues such as homelessness, lack of income, racism, discrimination, and exclusion from means of support. Specialist services help women address these issues by advocating for their rights and ensuring their entitlements are guaranteed. Through the provision of trauma-informed, holistic, and wraparound support, organisations such as Hibiscus help women recover from the abuse and trauma they have experienced, equipping them to rebuild their lives. Women receive services free of judgement and harm, leading to better outcomes. This includes preventing repeat and secondary victimisation and re-traumatisation. The value of Women’s Support Services, particularly through the existence of Women’s Centres, has demonstrated a clear cost-benefit worth investing in<sup>12</sup>. Sustainable and long-term funding for these services is essential to ensure the effectiveness of community sentences.

19. Access to specialist support is more relevant for migrant women with no recourse to public funds, as often they are barred from accessing suitable housing or financial support, leaving them in a position where their basic needs cannot be met. This lack of support prevents them from building a stable foundation for rehabilitation, leaving the factors that contributed to their offending unchanged. As a result, breaking free from the cycle of offending becomes much more difficult.

### *11. How effective is support provided to ex-offenders on release such as homelessness prevention, employment opportunities and health and wellbeing services?*

20. **Not enough is done to prepare women for their release from prison or to support them after they have been released.** In addition to the lack of rehabilitation, there is a failure to address the underlying needs of Black and minoritised migrant women preparing to leave prison, including those needs that may have contributed to their offending, such as homelessness, substance abuse, and exploitation. Our frontline staff work with service users to ensure that support is in place for their release, as there is minimal assistance provided by prisons or the probation service. This often involves trying to secure accommodation, a particularly challenging task for those with no recourse to public funds. Without such support, women are released into highly vulnerable situations, often with significant safeguarding concerns.

21. Over recent years, austerity measures introducing significant cuts to welfare and support services have increased inequalities, fostered economic hardship and dismantled initiatives focused on prevention, whilst leaving the basic needs of communities, particularly those subjected to intersectional disadvantage, unmet. Our frontline experience shows that these inequalities can be significant factors in women’s reoffending as they are left without viable alternative ways to meet their needs. These inequalities are then magnified by the impact of imprisonment, which removes support available to women and their families and impedes

---

<sup>12</sup> Women in Prison. (2022). [The value of Women’s Centres: Supporting women to rebuild their lives.](#)

rehabilitation. Comprehensive and adequately funded through-the-gate and wraparound support should be made available to all women.

### 13. *What role should non-custodial sentences have in promoting rehabilitation?*

22. Community sentences enable individuals in contact with the CJS to engage more effectively in rehabilitation without enduring the severe detriments associated with imprisonment. This distinction is particularly significant for women. Our experience of supporting Black and minoritised migrant women, who are disproportionately affected by custodial sentences, demonstrates that community sentences address the root causes of offending behaviour while minimising the social, emotional, and economic costs of imprisonment on women.
23. **Community sentences offer significant benefits compared to custodial sentences, especially for Black and minoritised migrant women.** They allow families to remain intact, reducing the risk of family and relationship breakdowns, and enable women to maintain employment or education, thereby decreasing the likelihood of losing their homes. Our frontline staff report that working with women in the community allows for a women-centred approach, as there are fewer restrictions limiting their engagement.
24. This is especially true for Black and minoritised migrant women, for whom imprisonment causes substantial additional harm and broader negative impacts. Tailored, women-centred approaches and trauma-informed support are essential to maximise their impact, ensuring conditions promote rather than hinder rehabilitation. While in the community, women can access emotional and practical support from specialist services, as well as from support networks. This support can be engaged with in an environment that fosters recovery and rehabilitation, without causing additional harm.
25. *“[...] remaining in the community allows women to accelerate rehabilitation and prepare themselves for future endeavours, be that going back to school or getting work, and just being more prepared. When you're doing that in a community-based setting it allows women to progress a bit more throughout their sentence and then be fully prepared to take on whatever they want to.”* Hibiscus’ project worker
26. **Diversion schemes have been shown to be effective in preventing reoffending and rehabilitating offenders.** These allow individuals with criminal convictions to remain in the community under the supervision of probation, with the additional condition that they engage with support from third-sector organisations. This helps them address the root causes of their offending, such as substance misuse or homelessness, removing the need to offend and improving their lives. Hibiscus was previously contracted to provide this support. The recidivism rate among our service users was extremely low, demonstrating how effective the scheme could be. With long-term sustainable funding for third sector organisations, this would be an excellent alternative to custodial sentences for many women.
27. **Short sentences are not conducive to rehabilitation.** Our frontline staff have observed that there is insufficient time for women serving short sentences to engage with available programs. In addition, they are often excluded from participating in certain courses or programs, as well as from working or holding certain prison jobs, due to their imminent release dates.
28. There is also minimal opportunity for women to prepare for their release, such as arranging housing. Engaging effectively with third-sector organisations is also challenging due to the short timescale and the slow administrative processes within prisons. For example, it may take

two weeks for our staff to be notified about a prisoner, an additional week to arrange and hold an appointment, after which the individual may be released the following week.

29. As a result, the impact of imprisonment and having a criminal conviction can be as significant as it would be with a longer sentence, yet the potentially beneficial elements, such as meaningful rehabilitation and establishing stability, are absent. Another project worker supporting women in the CJS notes that from her experience:
30. *“It is really unclear what the plan is in terms of rehabilitation. When we see women who are going in and out of prison constantly and who don't really get much support.[...] I don't think we see any rehabilitation happening, whether regarding housing, emotional support, physical or medical care, or legal support. It's not fair and I don't think that rehabilitation is really on the table for most of the women that we see.”* Hibiscus' project worker

## Key recommendations

31. Develop and implement gender and intersectional sentencing guidelines that are tailored to the experiences of Black and minoritised migrant women. This must include a move away from custodial sentences for women, particularly those who are additionally vulnerable and subjected to marginalisation such as victim/survivors of VAWG and human trafficking, and Black and minoritised migrant women.
32. Rehabilitation must address factors in offending, including financial hardship, substance abuse, mental health challenges, and their own experiences of VAWG.
33. Suitable healthcare provision must be made available and accessible within a reasonable timeframe, to all in prison. This must include specialist mental health services and support for those who have experienced trauma.
34. Provide long-term sustainable funding to specialist organisations (including Women Centres) that provide wrap-around, trauma-informed, women-centred and rights-based support to women in contact with the CJS.

## Conclusion

35. We are calling for a radical reform to the current rehabilitation and resettlement regimes. Effective rehabilitation can only take place in an environment in which participants feel safe and supported. Their needs must be met and, in partnership with third sector organisations, the root causes of their offending addressed.
36. We believe this must include shift away from custodial sentences towards community-based alternatives. Only through this can effective rehabilitation and resettlement be achieved, enabling the statutory purposes of sentencing to be fulfilled without causing unjustifiable harm.
37. For further information contact Elizabeth Jiménez-Yáñez, Head of Policy and Public Affairs. [elizabeth@hibiscus.org.uk](mailto:elizabeth@hibiscus.org.uk)