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Problematising 'Vulnerability' in Women's Prisons

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ABSTRACT

'Vulnerability' is a commonly used but little understood term in the field of social policy and beyond. The refocusing of our criminal justice system around notions of 'vulnerability' has had wide-reaching consequences which often escape both academic and political attention. Seeking to advance analysis of the concept of 'vulnerability', we explore its operationalisation in women's prisons and argue that this is often in direct opposition to the way that the women themselves understand and experience the label of 'vulnerable'. We draw upon notions of agency, risk, and resilience to re-examine how the 'vulnerability zeitgeist' may, in fact, be poorly serving those it aims to support and protect. Through utilising lived experience and empirical inquiry, this article problematises the term 'vulnerability', its operationalisation by prison staff, and suggests further work is needed in order to understand women's experiences of the term and its impact upon their time in prison.

1 | Introduction

Feminist work has long drawn attention to the need to account for women's experiences of punishment, and notions of gender-informed justice have emerged as a response to the distinctly gendered and oppressive realities criminalised women face (Carlen 1998; Covington and Bloom 2003; Howe 1994). Underpinned by feminist research, 'gendered-justice' focuses on trying to improve the experiences of criminalised women through criminal justice policy and practice frameworks (Baldwin 2023). This important body of work has exposed the myriad of complexities that can affect the lives of criminalised women, arguing that the Criminal Justice System should consider and respond to gendered issues including poverty, relationships, trauma, and abuse (Grace et al. 2022; Masson and Booth 2022). Responding to the dereliction of welfare safety-nets, gendered-justice strategies aim to improve some aspects of women's lives by placing emphasis on carceral institutions to provide appropriate support (Sufrin 2017). However, despite these good intentions, gendered prison reform has faced several critiques for reproducing Western neo-liberal responsibilisation strategies that govern women, weaponise therapeutic principles, undermine collectively, and legitimise state penality (Carlen 2004; Carlton and Russell 2023; Hannah-Moffat 2010; Moshan et al. 2024).

Academic research on women in prison has long grappled with assumptions and portrayals of women as passively vulnerable, which has led to problematic binaries of women as victims or agents, negating experiences of those who act under intersecting systems of oppression (Carlen 1983; Charles 2022; Morris and Wilkinson 1995). Additionally, within prison, women experience significant levels of infantilisation and are said to present images of independence and agency in limited and boundaried forms of carceral resistance (Bosworth 1996; Crewe et al. 2023; Rowe 2016). This can present over-simplified interpretations of women's power and agency alongside gender-informed responses that aim to support complex issues. Since Corston (2007), the concept of 'vulnerability' has been significantly mobilised, and its use is common within academic literature and policy frameworks that focus on criminal justice responding to the needs of women (Ministry of Justice 2018, 2021). Despite this, there exists little understanding of women's lived experiences of the concept of 'vulnerability' and whilst much literature implicates the importance of the term, few analyses centre women's realities. This

article begins to redress this gap and joins lived experience calls for research to consider the implications of labelling criminalised women 'vulnerable' (M. Booth and Harriott 2021).

Drawing on empirical research and lived experience reflections, this exploratory article begins to examine and problematise the operationalisation of notions of 'vulnerability' in women's prisons. Our combined reflections and analysis begin to unpack assumed understandings of 'vulnerability' in women's prisons, alongside their tensions, challenges, and pluralistic risk-based operationalisation. By centring the perspectives of lived knowledge, and challenging constructions of 'vulnerability' in prison, we problematise the term and argue for greater analysis of its use in gendered penology. We suggest the term is often steeped in responsibilising discourse, linked to shame and stigma, and limits opportunities for women.

1.1 | Assessing 'Vulnerability'

The definition of 'vulnerability' is widely contested. It is a term that is often underpinned by assumptions of fragility or weakness and constructed as a concept that infers deficits, negates associations of strength, and prompts ideas around protection (Gilson 2011; Thorneycroft 2017). Although there may be consensus on what people think 'vulnerability' means, if we start to unpack this further, we see that the meaning that is adopted by individuals, policy makers, academics, and practitioners is defined by a wide range of contributing factors (Fawcett 2009). Mythen and Weston (2023) argue that a lack of consensus about the definitions of terms such as 'vulnerability' contributes to its conflation with risk and consequently this means that 'vulnerability' can be used in ways that contribute to our misunderstandings of risk. What is clear, however, is that the concept of 'vulnerability' has come to play a major role in policy, research, and practice and as such, policy makers and others often place an evaluation of an individual's 'vulnerabilities' at the forefront of their decision-making (K. Brown et al. 2017). This salient shift means that questioning 'vulnerability' is of vital importance.

Though conceptually 'vulnerability' did not emerge through criminological thought, its development within the Criminal Justice System has seen a shift towards agencies 'addressing "vulnerability"', particularly within policing domains as a result of legislative frameworks and safeguarding (see, e.g., Engelmann et al.'s (2024) strategic review of service provision for vulnerable people in contact with the police in Bradford). Scholars have consistently shown that the underlying concepts informing this rhetoric are often contested, frequently normative and axiomatic, and rarely operationally defined (Asquith and Théron 2021; Virokannas et al. 2020; Walklate 2011). Within criminological spheres, operational labels of 'vulnerability' have often focused on the ontological and individual, resulting in the problematic undermining of agency and hierarchies of suffering (Asquith and Théron 2021; Mason-Bish 2013). However, some interpretations have recognised the role of state systems and processes in generating 'vulnerability', problematising societies that vulnerabilise and the labelling of individualised notions of 'vulnerability' (Bartkowiak-Théron et al. 2017).

Although the focus of this article is to explore the operationalisation of 'vulnerability' within women's prisons, it is pertinent to trace the origins of this development to the increasing use of the term 'vulnerability' within social work and youth justice practice and literature (see Bui and Deakin 2021; Virokannas et al. 2020). As Beck (2009, 178) argues, '"vulnerability" and risk are two sides of the same coin'. Within both the statutory and voluntary sectors, a blurring of notions of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' is often apparent in the way that practitioners display their understandings of young people's behaviour which could be considered to be dangerous. Work by Mythen and Weston (2023) highlights this obvious tension through interviews carried out with practitioners involved in delivering early intervention services for those deemed to be 'at risk' of child sexual exploitation (CSE). Apparent in the interviews is confusion over definitions of the universal understanding of the term 'vulnerable' alongside a specific duty to identify the risks that young people may be at due to their perceived 'vulnerability'. The research also found that for many practitioners working with young people, the concepts of 'vulnerability' and risk are often used interchangeably. K. Brown (2011) argues that for young people in conflict with the law, the term 'vulnerability' and its conflation with the concept of risk are extended to include actions and behaviours that a young person may be involved in that professionals and others view as risky. Bui and Deakin (2021) argue that the use of 'vulnerability' as a tool for children in conflict with the law has grown year on year, up 84.2% since 2010. As Parton (2010) suggests, this has had a dramatic impact on the way that practitioners in the sector work and, consequently, on the young people they support. However, it becomes problematic when we start to use 'vulnerability' as an assessment tool, and this can have real-world consequences for the people we claim to support. For many young people, the different and occasionally opposing definitions of 'vulnerability' often challenge how their lives are governed. Despite no agreed upon consensus on the understanding of 'vulnerability', it is a standard procedure for practitioners to use what they consider makes someone vulnerable as a tool to measure, classify, and develop intervention plans (B. Brown 2012). One example of the dichotomous views held around 'vulnerability' is the way that B. Brown (2012) explains her understanding of the term. She describes 'vulnerability' as 'uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure' (34), going on to argue that we feel 'vulnerable' when we as individuals step out of our comfort zone, take risks, and open ourselves up to the development and the possibility of change. In doing so, she challenges the assumption that 'vulnerability' is a sign of weakness.

For many practitioners and researchers that work with and support young people, it is clear that the narratives that young people offer them about their own lives firmly challenge what many imagine it is to be 'vulnerable' (K. Brown 2011, 2014, 2015; Ellis 2018). Many young people reject notions of themselves as 'vulnerable' as they feel this paints them as obedient and weak (K. Brown 2014). In a study carried out in a secure care home for girls, Ellis (2018) interrogates the residents views on vulnerability. She concluded that most often the narratives of the young people indicated that they felt there were negative connotations to the term 'vulnerable' and rejected the term as being relevant to them. The residents chose to adopt the term

'child in need of protection' to describe themselves, and they argued that professionals had unnecessarily detained them. For the residents being told that they were 'vulnerable' sat in direct opposition to the ways they felt that they had had to be strong to navigate the experiences they had faced to that point in their lives. There was also a stark and obvious disconnect between the analysis of the case files that Ellis (2018) undertook and the views of the girls themselves. The term 'vulnerable' was frequently used in the resident's case files demonstrating that not only staff felt the girls were 'vulnerable' but also the ubiquity of the term as a means to classify, short cut and justify interventions that the girls were subject to. Within this context the work of Fraser (2007) and McNeill (2019) on misrecognition is pertinent within the operationalisation of 'vulnerability'. They suggest that

> 'people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case, they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition' (Fraser 2007, 20). Therefore highlighting the discrepancy between the misrepresentation of individuals labelled as 'vulnerable' experience and the way that it is understood and experienced within our institutions of care and control.

Similarly, within penological literature, notions of 'vulnerability' are strongly associated with gender and gendered performance. Research on men's experiences in prison has highlighted the intersectional nature and role of hyper-masculinity, prisoner hierarchies, class and culture in perceptions, and assessments of 'vulnerability' (Cornish 2022; Ievins 2023; Maguire 2021; Sloan 2016). This work reveals the subordinate qualities associated with gendered performances of vulnerability in prison and carceral masculinities. Moreover, Cornish (2022) identified the relationship between moral subjectivities of prison staff and their management of fluid and imposed notions of 'vulnerability'. Notably, he found 'vulnerability' to be both socially and institutionally constructed, shaped further by penal time and space. So, transformative is the operationalisation of 'vulnerability' within the criminal justice space, and Schutlz (2023) suggests prison officers use the perceived vulnerabilities of incarcerated people to inform how they work with them on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, assessments of 'vulnerability' colour everything from building positive relationships to use of force within our prison system. In contrast to the few studies exploring men's experiences, a considerable amount of literature on women's imprisonment uses the term 'vulnerability', and it regularly occurs as a key theme when describing the context of women's lives (Liebling 2009; Moore and Scranton, 2014; Masson and Booth 2022). Within the literature, the term vulnerability is used to characterise the women themselves, and notions 'vulnerability' and trauma regularly shape gendered analysis (Crewe et al. 2023; Leese 2018; Kelman et al. 2022). Interestingly, rather than a notion to be explored, the term appears as a given status which is readily attached to the features and characteristics of marginalisation criminalised women face.

It was not until the formative work of Corston (2007) that we began to see the most significant awakening of a slow operational impetus for gendered-justice and 'addressing "vulnerability"' in England and Wales. The Corston Report was pivotal in cementing the concept of 'vulnerability' as an infrastructure for policy and practice responses towards criminalised women, though a significant portion of this evidence gathered was from people with expertise and experience of working with women rather than the women themselves. Acknowledging the potential harms caused by labelling, Corston (2007) explicitly rejected the label of 'vulnerable' instead defining women by their 'particular vulnerabilities' using a tripartite framework to categorise issues in domestic, personal, and socio-economic groups. Notably though, the report used terms such as 'brash', 'pathetic', and 'damaged' when referring to women who fall within its classifications and inferred a position of 'non-"vulnerability"' for others. Crucially, these notions of 'vulnerability' were interlaced with neo-liberal associations of risk and risk reduction, arguing that vulnerabilities should be addressed 'by helping women develop resilience, life skills and emotional literacy' (Corston 2007, 2).

Notions of 'vulnerability' have gained some policy traction since Corston and often underpin rationale within gendered-justice work (N. Booth et al. 2018). The Female Offender Strategy (Ministry of Justice 2018) and the Women's Policy Framework (Ministry of Justice 2021) make several firm commitments to 'address "vulnerability"', whilst reaffirming its conflation with risk and responsibilisation in the lives of women (Hine 2019) and, arguably, extending its scope as a lens of surveillance through which to view women's behaviour and compliance (Elfleet 2021). Consequently, there are large demands placed on 'vulnerability' as a concept, yet considering its operational weight and potential impact on the lives of criminalised women, its emergence in gendered-justice remains critically unscathed. Given the lived experience critique that research does not always consider "the impact of labelling us as disadvantaged and vulnerable… and how that might also act to retraumatise us" (M. Booth and Harriott 2021, 204), assessing the experience and impact of being labelled or assumed vulnerable should be a key concern. It is in this vein that our article advances understanding and analysis of the term vulnerability as it is 'attached' uncritically to the lives of women in prison. By exploring the impact of the often perfunctory use of the term vulnerability, we attempt to make sense of its assumed understandings and the implications of its operationalisation.

1.2 | Drawing Together and Driving Forward: Towards a Lived Understanding

The constructivist analysis and discussion presented in this article derive from the integration of lived experience and empirical research. Bringing together these bodies of knowledge, we argue, deepens our analytical perspective and widens our understanding of social realities. It has long been acknowledged that women's experiences of imprisonment are subsumed by those of men (Howe 1994). Whilst our understanding of some of the gendered aspects of imprisonment is developing, recent work has called for the incorporation of feminist epistemology into lived experience criminology in order to enrich scholarship that focuses on the lived realities of women in prison (Cox and Malkin 2023; Darley et al. 2023). Recognising this issue, the methodological approach taken in this article aims to begin to redress this paradigm by focusing on how notions 'feel' to those they are imprinted upon.

The empirical data enmeshed within this analysis are drawn from a study exploring staff–prisoner relationships in a women's open prison (Waite 2023). Using grounded theory, the research focused on constructions of meaning and trust within the institutional setting. The study received relevant ethical and HMPPS National Research Committee approval, and all participants gave voluntary and informed consent. Consent was viewed as an ongoing process, and safeguards were employed to ensure participants felt able to withdraw consent at any stage. Consent was explained and discussed in both initial conversations and before interviews were conducted. The researcher was mindful withdrawal of consent during interviews could be displayed through body language, as well as verbally, and so was attentive to a range of cues. An open sample was used to recruit to the research in order to facilitate flexibility, openness, and opportunity during the stages of data collection (Charmaz 2005). Twenty qualitative interviews were conducted with staff and women held at the prison, producing roughly 30 h of rich narrative data. The sample included 10 women incarcerated at the prison, eight prison officers, and two education staff members. In this article, women are referred to using a pseudonym which they chose themselves. Staff are referred to by their general role. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher with hand-written notes taken throughout the process. Whilst participants were not explicitly asked questions on vulnerability, the focus emerged through a later revisiting and reanalysis of the data.

Key to the methodological aims of this article are the pursuit of epistemic justice (Bellingham et al. 2021) and knowledge equity (Arrondelle et al. Forthcoming). Collectively, we reject that there is one form of 'knowing' and instead argue for wide and varied ecologies of knowledge (Lăzăroiu, 2012). This does not mean that our work is not rigorous or credible; rather, we contend that the inclusion of the voices of those who have firsthand experience of prison makes our work more credible and transferable. The enmeshment and analysis of empirical data in this article come from two studies carried out separately by the authors. The article combines the commonalities across experiences of women serving time in an open prison with autoethnographic reflections on the operationalisation of 'vulnerability' in a prison by one of the authors who has served time in a women's prison in Scotland. These reflections were written post-grounded data collection and not considered at the time of the original study. The combination of these two rich sources of data acknowledges the benefits and growing recognition of the importance of lived experience research in criminology and amongst criminal justice system practitioners (see Antojado and McPhee 2024; Earle et al. 2024: Ortiz 2024; Ross and Vianello 2021). This approach can generate valuable insights into the ways in which the criminal justice system affects individuals' lives, and it can inform more effective and equitable policy and practice. Lived experience research not only gives a platform to criminalised people across the justice system but allows us, through our direct experiences of institutions of control, to use our stories to support not only our own desistance but hopefully help others along the way. The importance of the application of a lived experience lens to the existing body of knowledge about women in prison as well as to the analysis of empirical work is not to be understated. In doing so, we practise what we preach, centring our work within the wider ecologies of knowledge, equally appreciating all forms of knowledge production, thus illuminating a better route to effective change.

1.3 | Operationalising 'Vulnerability'

The key tenets of our argument begin with the analysis of prison staff perspectives and notions of 'vulnerability'. Here, we draw attention to its nature and characteristics, alongside the ways in which it is operationalised. The subsequent section extends our understanding of 'vulnerability' in women's prisons by drawing together analysis of women's lived experiences and perceptions. The final section seeks to advance our critical understanding of the term in women's prisons and calls for a reframing of the term in the hope of opening up alternative understandings. The concept of 'vulnerability' was used regularly within prison officer descriptions of their work and their relationships with women. Whilst it is common within the study of men's imprisonment for these descriptions to be associated with sexual offences and victimisation on prison wings, these narratives did not feature within HMP Open.[1] Instead, 'vulnerability' was a normative framework, associated with perceptions about women's susceptibility to harm and risk. As a group, there seemed little doubt when attaching notions of 'vulnerability' to women, and this was often underpinned by deeply gendered ideals:

> Generally, women don't tend to be criminally minded from the outset. Erm, it's usually circumstances, often personal tragedies or getting with the wrong people, being easily led, being manipulated, or pressured that's led them to committing the offence. (Education Staff, HMP Open)

Women in prison are often characterised as vulnerable, and this can lead to false dichotomies of women as victims or agents (Carlen 1983; Morris and Wilkinson 1995; Pollack 2000). These binaries fail to recognise the multiplicity of women's experiences and the complexities associated with this framing. Within prison, concepts are regularly conflated with, and shaped and subsumed by, notions of risk (Hannah-Moffatt, 2010; Hine 2019; Waite, 2022). This can compound gendered associations of 'vulnerability' with dominant concepts of risk and can shape how staff navigate these powerful prison assumptions. At this prison, staff perceptions of 'vulnerability' were often shaped by perceptions of women's susceptibility to being behaviourally influenced in a negative way. For example, when describing women's transfer to the open prison, an officer explained:

> You'll have a group of them come together and sort of stick together and if you've got two bad ones in there and the rest are feeling a bit vulnerable, or a bit like, oh I'm not ready for this, or this is such a change, then they can get lead by other people. (Prison Officer, HMP Open)

Whilst this narrative did recognise prison transition as a challenging process, the framing of 'vulnerability' as a factor for risk or non-compliance was central, rather than a condition generated by the carceral process. In this example, the prison itself became a generator for both exposing and disclosing these notions of 'vulnerability'. In these circumstances, and given the challenges associated with prison transition (Waite 2023), the prison and its processes constructed 'vulnerability' and laid it bare, leaving

women with little agency. Moreover, the framing of either 'bad' or 'vulnerable' reveals the binary nature and contraposition of these subjective assessments, negating complexity. Mental health was a particular feature in notions of 'vulnerability' and women's place at the open prison because of its lack of mental health support. As one prison officer explained:

> She has got a lot of things wrong with her and you do need a little bit of understanding, sometimes, rather than being where … you can get an officer that might not be quite as understanding and say, you know, if you're gonna self-harm you're back to HMP Closed, that type of thing … which doesn't do any good for her. (Prison Officer, HMP Open)

This complicated notions of vulnerability further, whilst some staff believed HMP Open was not resourced and equipped to support self-harm, others recognised the associations with punishment this regressive move held. Again, the common theme here is the positioning of women's 'vulnerability' as the central concern, rather than the processes and state intervention of incarceration. The impact of labelling a person as vulnerable, rather than addressing systemic issues, can legitimise the positioning of women in prison as passive individuals to correct, or be ready for correction, whilst the wider issues associated with incarceration remain unresolved (Hannah-Moffat 2000; Pollack 2000). Additionally, displays of emotions exposed the ways in which individualistic perceptions of risk generated binary assessments that were weighted towards carceral compliance:

> She started saying you don't know what I've been through, you don't know my history, I'm on an ACCT,[2] I've got mental health issues. I said I appreciate that, but you know, that doesn't give you an excuse or open ticket to be rude to somebody and obviously if you can't control those feelings of anger and aggression then should you be here really accessing ROTL.[3] (Prison Officer, HMP Open)

Responding to 'vulnerability', then, was regularly underpinned, shaped, and weighted towards individualistic notions of risk (Pollack 2007; Hannah-Moffat 2010). However, staff responses to 'vulnerability' were also shaped by moral frameworks and how staff viewed and navigated their role within the carceral system. Driven by relational work, one member of staff described the difficulties they felt when sharing information about 'vulnerability' that had been disclosed within the context of a trusting staff-prisoner relationship, acknowledging its impact:

> It's like punishing her for being honest … you've got to let them down because they've come and told you the truth about something, but the risk assessment is that it wouldn't be suitable for her to go somewhere and she's just told me that, you know. Be nice and then punishment for it, it's so hard. (Prison Officer, HMP Open)

Another reflected upon a culmination of frustrations that stemmed from the carceral system being unable to respond to perceptions of 'vulnerability' and mental health care:

> … mental health here … we have got 3 girls here now that I would say shouldn't be here through mental health. We don't have any mental health cover, we might have the nurse in once a week, the psychiatrist cancelled the last two appointments to speak to them. (Prison Officer, HMP Open)

These displays demonstrate the recognition of the difficulties created by carceral systems that officers have relatively little power to change. Recognising this, and driven by a moral emphasis on the importance of building relationships with women, some staff spoke of the difficulties in maintaining boundaries when they perceived 'vulnerability':

> Sometimes relationships, those boundaries are crossed. It happens in all walks life, so I'm not saying it doesn't happen here sometimes, but it's dealt with appropriately if it does happen and I think, if you've got somebody who's very, very vulnerable, your instinct is to help them in any way possible and it's just making sure that you don't do that sort of thing. (Education Staff, HMP Open)

In these reflections, staff were acutely aware of how their morally subjective responses conflicted with their roles as prison officers working with women and relational work was often underpinned by distrust: For example:

> You've got to have some start point for prison staff coming into the female estate. How do you deal with a crying female prisoner? People … oh I'd give them a cuddle … would you? Would you cuddle a prisoner? Well no, because I cuddle you because you're crying, I walk out thinking I've done a brilliant job there, next thing I get a knock on the door from the security PO, and your keys in mister you've been accused of sexually assaulting a prisoner … and they're the things that people never consider … and you've got to consider. (Prison Officer, HMP Open)

The key issue was how staff managed and navigated their relational responses to the women they perceived as vulnerable. Blurred boundaries and infantilisation feature significantly within women's experiences of staff–prisoner relationships (Carlen 1998; Crewe et al. 2023; Waite, 2023). Through the operational lens of 'vulnerability', these notions shaped relational work: paternalism and staff perceptions of need intersected with hierarchies of 'vulnerability'. Crucially, this vacillating between 'vulnerability' as worthy of protection and 'vulnerability' as risk brought to light these gendered interpretations of 'vulnerability' and the ways in which they were both created and moulded by the institution.

1.4 | Women's Experiences

Whilst notions of 'vulnerability' are often embedded within women's policy and practice frameworks and normative assumptions of the label 'vulnerable', calls to consider what it feels like to be labelled vulnerable have received little attention (M. Booth and Harriott 2021). Operationally, assessments of the 'vulnerability' of women are weighted towards the intrinsic, with negative associations, and arguably define women by their trauma. Notably, within the prison context, these assessments define and shape prison officer responses and discretion. The centring of these notions of 'vulnerability' on women themselves leaves the systems and structures that generate 'vulnerability' unchecked and unresolved.

Importantly, the women interviewed for this study often rejected the narratives of 'vulnerability' and trauma bestowed on them by the carceral system. Whilst this absolutely did not negate their experiences of trauma or marginalisation, it did suggest that the operationalisation of 'vulnerability' did not align with women's perceptions and experiences. Women consistently recounted the complex circumstances of their lives before prison, but rather than associating this with risk or being in need of correction, women recounted the ways in which they had navigated their lives with notions of strength and independence in a form of narrative resilience (Richards-Karamarkovich and Umamaheswar 2023). These descriptions rejected infantilising narratives that either undermined agency or autonomy, or underpinned these concepts with responsibilisation. Crucially, women described the ways in which they had endured the difficult aspects of their lives. As Annie explained:

> I hid my mental health for 20 odd years … and even when I was on my knees, my house was still clean, I still went out to work, my kids were still … but inside I'd be dying but as the children have got older I've found it harder to hide because you're wishing their lives away and then I don't know what I expected. When I did have this time to myself, I didn't know what to do with it because it had always been about them, taking them to ballet, football, martial arts, parties, doing this, doing that, and there wasn't really time for Annie the person.

Here, Annie describes already having the 'resilience', life skills and emotional literacy that policy and practice initiatives aim to teach (Corston, 2007). Notably though, Annie's shielding and resistance to 'vulnerability' enabled a protective response that allowed her to maintain gendered performances of what it is to be a 'good woman' (Rutter and Barr 2021). Rooted in neoliberal and patriarchal discourse, performances of 'good woman' ideals shape identity and feelings of failure generate shame and stigma, negating fundamental structural barriers. Within the boundaries of the prison, women's 'vulnerability' was also system-generated and shielded. Women felt vulnerable by their incarcerated position and having to rely on staff to complete instrumental goals. When women were able to 'get things done' within the relative freedoms and processes that the open prison provided, they preferred distant relationships with staff, explaining that time should be given to women who were 'more vulnerable and more needy'. This suggested some overlap with staff perceptions of 'vulnerability', demonstrating its links to the levels of institutional support a person needed. Significantly, though, the shielding and resistance to perceptions of 'vulnerability' were again evident in women's experiences:

> I find it really difficult to ask for help and when I have asked for help in … I've got, I've got rejected. So, that makes you think well, you know just get on with it… (Sobia)

In addition, when women did expose emotional 'vulnerability', it was often when they felt they had little choice:

> I'm not the type of person to go to someone and say 'can I talk to you?' To me it gets to a point where I'm at breaking point, I'm crying, I can't take no more … (Vicky)

Some of what has been learned from this research with women in an open prison, the second author has also experienced first hand. Reflecting on the findings of this work through a lived experience lens allows me to consider my own experience of help-seeking prior to my experiences of being arrested, but also through my entire journey with the criminal justice system. However, it hits hardest when I recollect the ways that I was labelled as vulnerable whilst in prison. Despite the context being different, the similarities in parts of our stories are important. Recognition of this creates a moment to pause, an opportunity to consider how and why women who find themselves in prison are viewed; how they view themselves; and how the systems designed to control and support women in prison are built on this very shaky, contested, dichotomous ground.

Similarly to Annie, I had never thought of myself as being vulnerable, I worked with young people who we called 'vulnerable' all the time. I thought I knew what it meant to be 'vulnerable': back then, for me, it meant that there are lots of things in your life that you needed support with—and I would have never admitted this. What Vicky recollects about seeking help is entirely how I saw myself. I also was not the type of person who ever asked for help, I was capable, I could achieve everything I needed and wanted to on my own. I was strong and independent, until I wasn't.

From my first interactions with the Police, I felt helpless, but still not vulnerable. One of my skills had always been being able to make the best out of a bad situation and here I was in the worst situation I could imagine and I had no idea how to make it better. No one gives you information; the systems and laws seem bewildering, and despite trying to use all of the skills and knowledge you have collected over the years, I felt unable to make headway, to make this better for myself and my family.

Unlike Sobia, I still couldn't ask for help, so I buried my head in the sand. I had neither the internal courage or the language to be vulnerable about the situation I was facing. I told no one other than my sister and mum, and even then only the smallest details that I could get away with. I went to solicitors appointments on my own, and I went to court hearings on my own. Now, when I needed it most, I felt unworthy of being supported.

When I was eventually sentenced to prison, the lack of control I had felt from the beginning was only antagonised by being badged as 'vulnerable'. I went from being able to control every aspect of my life to not even being able to control when lights went on and off. This everyday infanitilsation was wrapped up in the discourse of 'vulnerability' we heard on a daily basis, and it was reinforced not only by the relationships women had with each other in the prison, but more importantly by the staff. The lens of 'vulnerability' that tainted the establishment was clear for everyone who took a moment to step back and reflect to see. 'Vulnerability' was used to justify our lack of choice, our lack of control, and the dehumanising removal of our agency where we frequently could not control when we went to the toilet, had showers, or interacted with other people. It was conflated time and time again with risk, being 'vulnerable' was used as a defence to stop us accessing work, education, healthcare, friendships, and our families.

To be clear, this was a 'vulnerability' created by the prison and its systems, one that actively discouraged more positive notions of being vulnerable as advocated by B. Brown (2010) who argues that vulnerability has the potential to help us grow, to identify and work on our imperfections. The label of 'vulnerability' I experienced only succeeded in closing me down, making me feel more shameful about what I had done as I understood that my confessions and cries for help would only be met with judgement and not empathy. Frequently, I found myself ignored and rejected by staff when I tried to seek the support and comfort I had long needed but had been too afraid to ask for. As discussed above, prison staff often found it difficult to respond to us on a human level offering the empathy and compassion that we all craved. This was either for fear of repercussions or the burn-out that so many of them obviously experience. Instead, we relied on each other for this support and consequently, I came to hate and reject everything associated with the word and the label I had been given as it became synonymous with everything bad in my life. However, 10 years later, I find myself wondering what would have been different about my life if I had understood that in fact being vulnerable was a good thing, that I could have reclaimed that word as being something good and valuable. If I had grown up and lived in an environment that encouraged me to be vulnerable, to open up about problems, to share the burden and ask for help, what would my life look like now?

2 | Conclusion

In this article, we have highlighted some of the problems surrounding the operationalisation of the concept of 'vulnerability' within women's prisons. We have problematised the issues around how we understand 'vulnerability', how it is often conflated with risk and used as a way to control and manage criminalised women. We have also posed some questions around whose knowledge counts when we determine what 'vulnerability' is, and offered some challenges to our institutions of social control about how we could reframe 'vulnerability' to provide greater and more positive opportunities for both our prisons and criminalised women alike.

Our hope in the short term is that we inspire careful consideration about the language that we use. We need to account for the effect that words such as 'vulnerable' have on the individuals that we label as such, and consider how that may contradict the view they hold of themselves. Importantly, we ask that the conflation of risk and 'vulnerability' be challenged. Being labelled as 'vulnerable' should not be a form of punishment in and of itself, and it should not be an excuse for withholding services or conversely for providing over-bearing levels of 'support'. These binaries are not helpful and don't appreciate the multi-faceted dimensions of anyone's lives. In fact, we believe that it is dangerous to build systems and practices on this shaky ground. More broadly, we hope that this article sparks a conversation about how we make change within our criminal justice system, and whose knowledge we build that change upon. Problematising 'vulnerability' in our prisons gives us the opportunity to critically reflect on the terms we employ and attach to people and the impact that it has in gendered institutional environments. We also hope that problematising 'vulnerability' paves the way for further research in this area, in order to understand women's experiences more broadly.

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Endnotes

[1] HMP Open is a pseudonym.

[2] ACCT stands for Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork and is a tool used by prison staff to plan care processes for prisoners identified as being at risk of self-harm or suicide.

[3] ROTL stands for Release on Temporary Licence. It is a licence that allows prisoners to leave prison for a short time to participate in activities such as work, education, and family visits.

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