

# scottish justice matters

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## POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE





# WOMEN TALKING ABOUT INJUSTICE AND POVERTY

**CC, Karen, Heather, Colette** talked to **Lesley McAra** and **Maggie Mellon** at Serenity Café, Edinburgh. The Café is run by and for people in recovery from substance abuse and from associated problems. Thanks to them and particularly to **Cat Grant** for introducing us.

We asked “what does justice mean to you?” and “does poverty affect justice”? Justice was not an experience they had had. They did understand and wanted to talk about injustice to them and to their children.

“Injustice is having things done to you that you have no control over.”

“That’s what I thought I deserved.”

**Does poverty affect justice?**

“Class is a big issue.”

“You’re from a scheme. As if you don’t speak the same language. You do speak the same language of course but it’s like you don’t.”

**Prejudice.**

Colette got a bursary to go on a course to learn therapeutic skills in trauma recovery:

“It was like I had a free school meals ticket. What’s someone like you doing on a course? How did you get paid for?”

**Financial justice is harder and harder to get.**

“When you are in poverty you can’t get help.”

“Your benefits are stopped, your gas is capped.”

“It’s become normal for people.”

“I spent the whole winter freezing because of the bedroom tax. I did not want to live.”

**DWP finds people fit for work without giving them a chance to review the case or the evidence.**

“You keep needing to hand in the same evidence over and over again, even though they have it in the file. But they don’t tell you that you need to keep giving them the same evidence. Then they just stop your benefits.”

**Health: failures of diagnosis, over prescription of drugs to mask problems, not being accountable to patients.**

“Don’t be so stupid there’s nothing really wrong with you.”

“The NHS is the biggest drug dealer, then they accuse you of wanting drugs.”

“They just tranquilise you, not deal with the underlying problem.”

“I was prescribed valium when my father was killed. I was a teenager. Given drugs for years and then they misdiagnosed me as borderline personality disorder because the drugs were affecting my behaviour.”

“I asked why no-one would help me and the doctor said “What do you want? Tea biscuits and a hug?” I was trying to say “I just want you to understand that I want to feel normal. I don’t want to be using street drugs. I’ve been self medicating since I was a girl.”

**Education: if you are labelled as a problem, your children can be too.**

"I loved school but nobody ever praised me for it. Now I sabotage success. What's the point?"

"My daughter was denied the test for dyslexia. I was seen as a madwoman for asking. I had just been diagnosed twenty years too late for me. I did an FOI and found emails from teachers saying that I had issues about self worth and was just pushing these on my daughter. I found my daughter was being called a lesbian, and one teacher said she was a bad person. I fought for a year and half and eventually the council apologised. Now she is at university."

**Social work focus on child protection can leave parents without support. Parents' problems and their need for support become the reason that they do not deserve support.**

"My son said all I want is for my mum to get better, but that was not listened to.

I was just left. I was the problem. But he's just been left, thinking I don't care about him. I saw the pain in his eyes.

He did not get listened to."

"The social workers say we are the children's social worker. Where is my help? I asked for help and they ripped my family apart."

"No one said here is a mother who is in dire straits. How is that good for children?"

"Ripping families apart, spending money on foster carers instead of spending money to keep families together, where is the justice in that? That is punishing me and my kids. I felt they used everything against me, my mental health and addiction."

"I have lost everything that is important to me. Nobody has been on my side."

**Legal Aid**

"By the time I got legal aid it was too late. Nothing I could do. I had lost my son. I just got denied, denied, denied."

**The criminal justice system 'catches' women who have been failed by other services, but it does not help them.**

"They don't give a shit about why you are there."

"I left home at 15, nobody said I could go to school. I was in a bedsit, doing three jobs, got into crime. I got exploited by older men, that's how I ended up in prison. I was in prison on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. I have been on my own since then. The only normality I had was when I had kids. But they have ripped them off me. I was not cruel to them. I was cruel to me."

**Police and courts having no discretion or are not exercising discretion on domestic violence.**

"I got charged but he was the abuser. Police charged him with assault when he busted my mouth open, but I told the sheriff I could not give evidence against him so the charges got dropped. Two weeks later he got me done with a domestic, he told police he was terrified of me."

"He used to get me to come round, then he would call the police and get them to arrest me for breach of bail not to harass him. I would be in the bath and the police came."

**Humiliation in the criminal justice system was an experience of more than one woman.**

"Police turned up at my house to arrest me because of a complaint by (a former partner who was persecuting me). I had just woken, so I needed the toilet. They would not let me go to the toilet. Said there needed to be a woman PC to go with me but they had sent two men."

"My mother's house got raided for drugs because of my brother and his pal. I was 8 months pregnant and they would not let me go to the toilet. I wet myself and they made me sit in the room for four hours and not allowed to clean myself." "I spent my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in prison, and my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. Then I was 21 years out of trouble.

Back in the cells for the first time recently. Turnkey let me go to the toilet - got my trousers and pants down, but then she pulled me out so hard my head hit the wall opposite and burst it open. Six male policemen charged in, I don't know where they came from. I was just exposed."

**Administrative injustice was the most strongly felt by the group. Assessments, targets and labels that the bureaucratic services seem to work to lead to lack of empathy, failure to look for solutions or to do the quite simple things that could solve the problem.**

"They've got their set criteria, so its like 'if they are like this then they must be this or that.'" "Whether it be homeless or addiction or whatever its just 'in that box'."

"Big organisations that are making decisions, they don't want to use their resources to find the cause of a problem or to solve a problem. They just want to meet their targets."

"If you live in a council house, the council will come to service the meter. If they find there's no gas in the meter they can't service it. So instead of having a card to charge the meter, they just cap the gas supply leaving you cut off and so you can't charge it up again. It only would cost them £5 to charge the meter and then they could test it and leave you with gas. But they cut it off and then they are leaving people freezing and it costs them a lot more to come out again to uncap it."

**Not being listened to was an experience common to all the women ascribed mainly to being labelled, stigmatised as the problem, rather than having a problem.**

"If I spoke the same language as them I would have been listened to."

"I was suicidal. Nobody asked me why. They took me in patched me up, more vullies, they seen me as an addict, a junkie. Then they let me out the door. I was back in a week."

**There is often not a need for a massive costly intervention. What the women described as helpful was being listened to, empathy, support, not being judged: just the experience they had when coming to Serenity.**

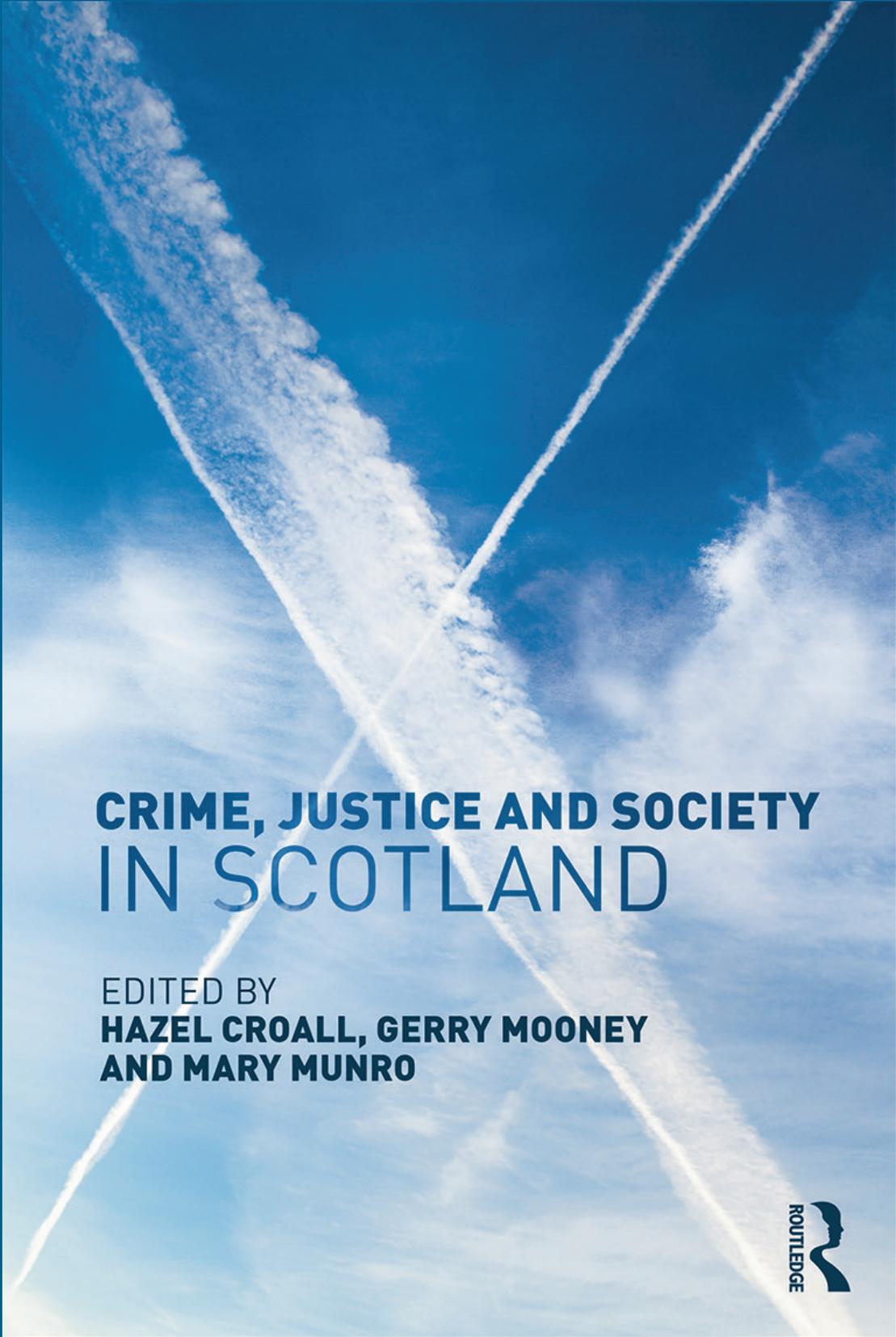
"I crawled through this door. By the grace of god Cat was put in my path. She held my hand and has never let go."

"This is the first help I have had."

"Walking across the door of the café was the biggest step."

"No 'you are this, and that': just listening, and support."

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# **CRIME, JUSTICE AND SOCIETY IN SCOTLAND**

EDITED BY  
**HAZEL CROALL, GERRY MOONEY  
AND MARY MUNRO**



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