# Family Justice Centres: A model for empowerment?

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## Abstract

The London borough of Croydon, in the south of England, established, in December 2005, a Family Justice Centre (FJC) to respond in a flexible way to meet the varied needs of those abused in intimate relationships. The FJC brings together some 33 agencies under one roof. This article draws on a small, grounded pilot study of the Croydon FJC – the first study of a FJC in the UK - to consider if the co-location and cooperation of services to victims of domestic abuse has the potential to empower victims to make informed choices about their futures.



**Keywords:** Domestic abuse; victims; empowerment; stages of change.


## I. Introduction

'I felt like I was on a conveyor belt and I wanted to get off.'[3] Deborah[4] is a forty-one year old mother of two and a client at the Family Justice Centre (FJC) in the London Borough of Croydon in the south of England. Like many other victims of domestic abuse, she suffered for years before seeking help and made various unsuccessful attempts to extricate herself from her abusive husband. Each time he was sorry, each time he promised to change, each time he reverted to controlling and violent behaviours. Cycles of abuse, as Deborah, and many of the other women we spoke to at the FJC found, are difficult to break. However, while some abuse victims may feel equivocal about ending their relationship in the relatively early stages, many are determined to escape some way down the line. It is at this stage that the various statutory, third sector and voluntary agencies can be most successful at helping women to recognise the toxicity of their relationships and to provide the practical and

[3] Interview with a Client of the Family Justice Centre (FJC), London Borough of Croydon (notes and recordings on file with the first author). All following quotations will state whether the interviewee is a client or a member of staff at the FJC and remove any identifying information, other than, when directly relevant, the particular role of a FJC staff interviewee. All interviews took place in the last three months of 2009.

[4] We have changed our interviewees' names to protect their anonymity.

emotional support to help them to negotiate their exit and establish a new life for themselves. But the academic literature, as well as numerous articles in the media, testifies to the difficulties faced by those who try to help women – and men[5] - to end abusive relationships.

Historically, the police in particular have been subject to often deserved criticisms about their failures to respond effectively to domestic abuse (Dobash and Dobash 1980; Hamner 1989). Despite improved working relationships between criminal justice and partner agencies, resource constraints and a continuing incident-focused approach to domestic abuse leave these professionals only partially effective. In short, the literature suggests that the police do not always gather sufficient probative evidence (Hester et al., 2003), and while domestic violence officers generally fare better than uniformed response teams, their roles and responsibilities are not always clearly defined (HMIC and HMCPSI 2004). Although victims of domestic abuse are more satisfied with the police and other criminal justice agencies than they were in the past, the police response is variable across areas and victims are not always kept informed about their cases (HMIC and HMCPSI 2004), or given the support they need (Hester et al., 2003).

Almost two decades ago, research by the first author showed that prosecution, in the absence of other support and assistance for victims, does not address the context of domestic abuse and is therefore of limited value to victims. She argued for multi-agency intervention services that are flexible, that offer civil and criminal remedies, and assess and respond to victims' particular needs and desires. In other words, for responses that did not assume that one size would fit all, but that recognised that victims of abuse were not an homogeneous population and might need different services at different stages of their relationship and their separation from abusive partners (Hoyle 1998). She further proposed a 'victim empowerment model' (Hoyle and Sanders, 2000) that allowed various agencies to work *with* victims to assess their needs and desires in relation to the violence, the relationship and ancillary matters and to try to meet their needs and to respond to changes in those needs when they arose. Under such an approach, victims would be empowered to make choices that are less coerced by their circumstances than is typical. Services would put in

[5] This article focuses on female victims of abuse. Although the FJC offers support services to both men and women, all of the clients who came to the centre and were interviewed during the research period were abused women.

place mechanisms that allow women to understand what is in their best interests and encourage them to act accordingly. Then, crucially, women should be supported in the choices they have made, even if these do not include invoking criminal justice intervention. As Stanko (1997) has argued, intervention services need to be flexible, give appropriate advice to women at various stages of exiting from violence and help them to make informed choices but then be supportive of the decisions they make (see also Brown 1997). Elements of this approach were found in the best examples of police domestic violence units (Hoyle and Sanders 2000) but there was a limit to what could be expected from just one agency, particularly one rooted firmly in the traditional criminal justice response - despite the not inconsiderable efforts of partner agencies.

Since then in the UK, as elsewhere, there have been various initiatives aimed at domestic abuse victims; including, the establishment of over 120 Specialist Domestic Violence Courts (SDVCs); the establishment of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs); the introduction of risk assessment and management tools; the rolling out of Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs) to provide targeted support to high risk victims; and Domestic Violence Protection Notices and Orders, recently evaluated for the Home Office of England and Wales. These changes have reaped some benefits in terms of criminal justice attrition rates. Domestic violence conviction rates are at an all time high, and more are pleading guilty according to a recent report by the Director of Public Prosecutions (Laville, 2012). Cases heard in SDVCs, especially those with strong multi-agency partnerships, show an even greater improvement in conviction rates than non-specialist courts (Justice with Safety: The Review of Specialist Domestic Violence Courts, 2008).

Improvements notwithstanding, in the UK one in four women will experience one or more acts of domestic aggression in their lifetime (although fewer will be exposed to escalating violence and intimidation) and, on average, two women a week are killed by a current or former partner (Smith et al., 2011). The most recent report from the Crime Survey for England and Wales found that there were 2 million incidents of domestic abuse in the year 2011/12, although the majority did not include acts of physical violence (the rates of which have declined significantly since the 1990s), and 7.3% of women reported experiences of domestic abuse (equivalent to an estimated 1.2 million females). The survey suggests that 31% of women had

experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16, equivalent to an estimated 5 million women. While these rates are lower than the 2004/5 baseline rates, domestic abuse still affects a considerable proportion of the female population in the UK, as it does in most countries around the world (National Statistics 2013: 18). Furthermore, the changes to the English system do not seem fundamentally to reduce the fears of women when asked to testify against their abusive partners: half of the victims whose cases are dealt with by one of the SDVCs choose to retract their statements and withdraw their support for prosecution, despite the courts' strong and supportive multi-agency partnerships ethos (Robinson and Cook 2006). Domestic abuse is still an underreported crime: in 2011/12 police recorded only 800,000 of the at least 2 million incidents uncovered by the national survey (National Statistics 2013: 68). Clearly, despite considerable changes to the criminal justice landscape, domestic abuse can still confound the best efforts of all agencies to reduce violence in the home and provide effective services to victims.

While criminal justice has changed considerably in the past decade or so, it is still largely about providing services in the *interests* of victims, rather than communicating with those victims about what might be the best route in that particular situation. Furthermore, there remains too little meaningful communication and cooperation between the various services to victims. Now these services have been brought together under one roof in South London to provide a viable alternative to traditional service provision. This article will consider if the co-location and cooperation of services to victims has the potential to empower victims of domestic abuse make informed choices about their futures.

## II. The Croydon Family Justice Centre

The London borough of Croydon established, in December 2005, a Family Justice Centre (FJC) to respond in a flexible way to meet the varied needs of those abused in intimate relationships. The first of its kind in Europe, the Croydon FJC is based on the same model as the original FJC established in San Diego in 2002, and has a close working relationship with those more recently developed in New York City since July

2005, and more latterly across the US.[6] Croydon FJC brings together some 33 agencies – which would be dispersed in other cities - under one roof (although not all have personnel within the FJC every day). It draws on services from over 110 staff, and aims to provide assistance, support and a range of services to approximately 7,000 adults and 14,000 children each year; victims who contact the agencies directly, those who are referred from agencies both within and outside of the Centre, and those who walk into the centre without an appointment at a time of crisis. The agencies represented include police, solicitors, housing, counsellors, crisis helpline workers, probation, social work, and IDVAs, among others (only the Crown Prosecution Service – the body set up in 1986 to prosecute criminal cases investigated by the police in England and Wales - has chosen not to be co-located with the other agencies). Croydon council, Croydon Police and all the agencies represented within the Centre fund their own salary costs through the use of their existing staff from Local Authority and Partner agencies, and Croydon Council provides further financial resources.

The FJC is committed to total information sharing across the supporting agencies - agencies which have historically struggled to work together for the benefit of clients - to improve risk assessment and management processes as well as services to victims. It aims to provide broad social and legal support to victims of domestic abuse, offering immediate help-line crisis counselling alongside housing assistance, legal advice, court accompaniment, access to benefits advice, language interpretation, safety planning, support groups, and extended adult counselling and child therapy. Its aims are to reduce the number of domestic abuse incidents against adults and children, particularly murders and serious assaults; to end homelessness caused by domestic abuse; to increase the options available to victims; to provide culturally sensitive services; and to hold offenders to account by co-ordinating monitoring and risk assessment and management. It operates in conjunction with the Community Safety Unit (CSU), a specialized unit of the Metropolitan Police Service dedicated to the investigation of domestic, homophobic and race-related violence, and housed in the same building. While the establishment of the FJC does not aim to change the

[6] According to the US-based, Family Justice Center Alliance, there are currently over 70 operational centers in the US with ten international Centers (Canada, Mexico, England, Jordan and Sweden). In addition, there are over 100 Centers currently developing in the US, Europe, Middle East, Africa, and Central America. See www.familyjusticecenter.org.

services offered to victims by statutory, third sector or voluntary agencies, it does change the *ways* in which these services are offered and provided.

Interviews with those who operate from the FJC suggest that the guiding philosophy of the Centre is to allow victims' individual and specific interests to guide their response. Staff were adamant not to treat victims as an homogeneous group; their goal was to offer a more flexible 'consumer-led' service, which responded to individualised needs (MacCormick and Garland, 1998). In this, as with other consumer-based approaches, the language of choice and empowerment was clear: victims should be encouraged to decide which services to take up and when. Victim empowerment puts people back in control of their own lives. It enables victims 'to master their environments and achieve self-determination' (Peled et al. 2000: 10). In one of the first studies to consider victim empowerment, Newmark, Harrell and Salem (1995) defined empowerment as the ability to be assertive and to make and act on informed choices. Of course, this does not mean that staff do not want offenders to be prosecuted, but most do not see their services as a means to that end; rather, they see the ability and confidence of victims to make informed choices and to be supported in those choices as the primary goal of the Centre.

While FJCs are spreading across the US and are emerging in Europe, at present Croydon has the only *established* FJC in the UK (although a similar Centre was opened in Derby in 2009 and in August 2012 a second FJC was launched in Staffordshire). Other cities, including Birmingham, Liverpool, and Londonderry, have expressed an interest in establishing FJCs, and it has attracted support from government ministers (Rose, 2007), but to date, there have been no academic studies of women's experience of their services or of their efficacy more generally, at least that we know of. Furthermore, we have come across no academic peer reviewed studies of American FJCs,[7] although some articles make mention of FJCs as examples of collaborative efforts or available resources for victims (Garner and Maxwell, 2008:

[7] There is an informative book an article by Casey Gwinn, Gael Strack and their colleagues. Gwinn was the inspiration and driving force for the first FJC in San Diego and, having worked with him there, Strack is now the CEO of the US National Family Justice Center Alliance (Gwinn et al. 2007; Gwinn and Strack 2006). Both describe in rich detail the origins and the work of the FJCs, but, as practitioners, they cannot subject it to independent academic scrutiny. Similarly, Townsend et al (2005) provide helpful information on the location of FJCs, grants, and plans for development, but their focus was on the viability of evaluation research and the means of measuring program integrity, not on the extent to which the Centres help victims.

529).[8] This article is based on a grounded pilot study of the Croydon FJC. This small study does not attempt to provide an evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the FJC, nor of any efficiencies that result from co-located service provision. This is not because we do not feel these are interesting issues to study, but because a pilot study does not provide sufficiently rigorous data for this purpose. Instead, it considers if the FJC has the *potential* to empower victims of domestic abuse and their families, by meeting their legal, health and social service needs, and, in particular by service-providers helping clients to understand and recognise the choices that are available to them.

## III. An Empirical Study of the Family Justice Centre

We sought to understand what triggered help seeking in victims of abuse, how and why they sought help and what service providers within the FJC saw as their remit in providing support and advice. We draw on ethnography, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 22 service providers and eleven clients and a self-administered tool to measure clients' experiences of and responses to violence.[9] The ethnography comprised spending two days a week at the Centre over a two month period during which we observed: staff meetings, discussions about specific cases, interactions between clients and staff in person and on the telephone, and between staff from various agencies. We kept fieldwork diaries of our formal observations and informal chats with staff.

We interviewed all the members of staff that were free and willing to be interviewed during the time we spent at the FJC. While some staff were not available for formal interviews, they did chat to us once they got used to our presence and while we do not quote them here, their opinions informed our analysis of the recorded data. We gathered a convenience sample of clients with appointments during those weeks who had been approached by staff and agreed to be interviewed. All interviews took more than an hour and were held in private in small interview rooms. We discussed

[8] Academics from Boise State University in Idaho did a small study in 2008 but their findings of high satisfaction rates among clients were based on a brief 'tick box' client 'exit survey', rather than indepth interviews and therefore is unable to tell us what it was about the services that produced client satisfaction (Giacomazzi et al. 2008).

[9] All interviews were digitally recorded, and information about the research and consent forms approved by the Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

clients' experiences of domestic abuse, and their attempts to cope with or manage the abuse. Further, we asked them about when and how they had sought help or advice, and the responses by the FCJ on this and previous visits. While our primary interest was the extent to which the FJC could empower victims, we avoided using this expression, asking instead about whether contact with the FJC had made them feel differently about the abuse or their ability to cope with or respond to it, and about what options they felt they had and what choices they had made and why. We were interested in their own stated aims for seeking help and comparing these to those of the service providers they were in contact with.

In recent years, the academic literature has established that the *type* of violent relationship determines both help seeking among victims and the ability of service providers to intervene effectively and in a timely fashion (Johnson 2008; see also Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1999). In other words, those who experience extreme episodes of violence, accompanied by enduring controlling behaviours, feel differently about their abuse and about how to respond to it than those who are in relationships where conflict occasionally spills over into bi-lateral aggression. Hence, our interviews with clients sought to explore not only the dynamics of, and barriers to, help seeking, but, in particular, how the types of abuse impacted on clients' and agencies' responses. We designed three detailed self-completion tools – administered during interviews - to measure frequency and types of abuse; frequency and types of symptoms of abuse suffered; and frequency and types of responses to abuse. These were not just focused the most recent experience of abuse, but encouraged women to think back over time, with the tick boxes recording experiences from 'never', through 'once', 'occasionally', 'frequently' to 'almost every day' for each measure.[10] Both the interviews and the self-completion tools explored multiple control tactics over time (Johnson, 2008: 8) and coping strategies employed by the victims.

Of course, our small interview samples are not random, comprising only those clients who staff remembered to ask and who were then willing to talk to us and only those staff with free time on the days we were in the Centre. Such a study cannot demonstrate efficacy of any kind, and indeed the impact of the FJC on reoffending or further experiences of violence was beyond the remit of this study. Instead, we aim to

[10] There were over 120 measures across the three tools. Interview schedules for clients and staff and the three self-completion tools are available from the first author.

describe what the FJC does, consider its potential to empower clients to bring about changes in their lives that may leave them less vulnerable to abuse, and to pave the way for further more detailed empirical study to build on our pilot work. In making a claim for the types of issues and themes that research on FJCs could explore, we remind ourselves that 'effectiveness' should not be measured solely in terms of crime rates or the proportion of crimes resulting in a criminal conviction.

## IV. Clients' experiences of abuse

All of the women in our small sample of clients described themselves as British, three as of African descent and one as mixed race. The youngest was 24, while the oldest was 61, with most in their 30s or 40s. Half were employed, and all but one had children living with them. Most had been to the FJC a few times before, in one case 'more than 10 times', with just two on their first visit. Three were still living with their abusive partners; the rest had separated, most fairly recently. Their relationships had lasted from 2 to 25 years, with most having been with their abusive partners for between 5 and 9 years.[11]

Our self-completion tools showed that almost all of these women had experienced minor physical assaults, with a quarter experiencing them 'frequently' or 'almost every day'. More than half had experienced assaults causing 'serious' or 'life threatening' injuries at least once, most 'occasionally' and a few 'frequently', and in most cases the abuse was escalating in severity and frequency. Half had been attacked with a weapon, three had experienced sexual assault and/or rape - two 'almost every day' - and two had been forced to undergo a termination. While there were variations in exposure to physical abuse, all had experienced emotional abuse. Our data show, in line with previous research (Hoyle 1998), that central to all experiences of domestic abuse was attempts to exert control over the victim. Indeed, all but one of our interviewees seemed to be subject to what Johnson (2000) has labelled 'intimate terrorism'. By this he means abuse that is more likely to be serious and to escalate over time and much less likely to be mutual. It is motivated by the desire to control a

[11] While we collected this information, our sample is too small to make anything of it. Further research should consider the particular needs of ethnic minority women, as well as older women and women with insecure immigration status, particularly in multicultural communities such as Croydon.

partner. It is, furthermore, almost entirely a male pattern of violence (see also Dobash and Dobash 2004: 324; Hamberger and Guse 2002).

Certain behaviours, such as 'lying', 'persistently putting the woman down in front of other people', 'never listening or responding to her when she spoke', were experienced by most clients 'frequently', some 'almost every day'. Other behaviours, such as 'isolating' the woman from friends and family; 'monitoring her phone calls, emails, texts, etc'; 'checking up' on her; 'following her and not allowing her out alone'; or 'not allowing her to have a job', were experienced by most women at least occasionally - for a few these were 'almost everyday' behaviours. Similarly, over half of the women were controlled much of the time in other ways; being told what clothes they could wear, what they were allowed to do with their time, who they could or could not spent time with, etc. 'Destructive criticisms and name calling' were experienced by almost all on a frequent basis and most were regularly told that they were 'mad', with their friends and family also being told they were suffering from mental health problems – probably a ploy to shift the blame from abuser to victim and to alienate the victim from obvious sources of support.

Most had their finances controlled by the partners; a couple were 'stalked' by email, phone or text or were watched and followed when they left their homes. Two recorded 'occasional' abuse of their children, although the injuries were said to be minor. However, two had received threats of violence against their children, and two had been told that their abuser would take away their children. Furthermore, more than half of the women recorded that their children had witnessed and heard violence against them and seen injuries caused by that violence. The exercise of control, whether through threats of violence, financial dependency, or emotional abuse destroyed the confidence of our interviewees, leaving them isolated and believing they had few choices. As one woman described, 'I feel trapped… he watches every single aspect of my life. (client)' Just under half of our interviewees experienced the following symptoms 'frequently' or 'almost every day': crying, fear, anxiety, anger, depression, loss of confidence, loss of self-esteem, fears that they were 'going mad', and suicidal thoughts. Three had attempted suicide and self-harmed as a result of abuse, two had developed an eating disorder, two misused alcohol, more than half had trouble sleeping, and all but one had feelings of self-blame. Two recorded symptoms of abuse experienced by their children, including self-blame, sleep disturbance, anxiety, anger, and fear. The impact of controlling behaviours was clear: an

increasing sense of isolation and impotence over time and, particularly, as the abuse escalated.

When controlling behaviours leave women feeling isolated, believing that they 'have to cope' on their own, a frequent response, articulated by six of our interviewees, is to try to avoid confrontation or to placate the abuser. All our interviewees had moderated their own behaviours so as to avoid aggravating their partners; changing the way they dressed or being careful about what they said. As Natalie put it, '[The worst part is] the constant worrying, …feeling like you're walking on eggshells all time to try and keep the peace.' (client) Controlling partners frequently deny women access to social support networks, thus 'disabling their efforts to extricate themselves from the abuse' (Bliss et al 2008: 162). Almost all of the women we interviewed had stopped socialising and avoided family and friends. In other words, to reduce the risk of abuse, they had taken measures that left them further isolated from the obvious support networks, and in a few cases had effectively become prisoners in their own homes, further diminishing their self-esteem. Given that low self-esteem is negatively correlated with help seeking (Bliss et al, 2008), such clients provide a significant challenge for service providers.

## V. Help-seeking

There is a theoretical (e.g. Liang et al 2005) and empirical (e.g. Bliss et al 2008) literature on the stages of relationships at which victims of domestic abuse seek assistance. Liang et al (2005) suggest that there are three stages to help-seeking that can be understood alongside 'stages of change' theory (Prochaska and DiClemente 1982): defining the problem; deciding to seek help; and selecting a source of support. It can take a long time and sometimes a good deal of excuses and denials (from victims and their abusers) before many are able to define their experiences as abuse, and, for that matter, abuse sufficiently serious to warrant intervention. As one woman, who had remained in an abusive relationship for seven years, reflected:

> When you're living in it … it becomes normality, until someone points it out to you and says, 'You know, it is abuse. … they shouldn't be … treating you like this.' (client)

As our interviewees described, in many cases the first experiences of abuse are relatively mild, escalating in severity and/or frequency slowly over time, so that the

victim gets used to being in an abusive relationship and cannot see clearly how the dynamics of the relationship are changing. At first, controlling behaviours might seem comforting, interpreted as signs of jealousy and devotion, or fear and vulnerability on the part of the abuser. Like lobsters in the pot, the gradual warming of the water does not always send out the right danger signals, but in most cases, over time the evidence becomes harder to ignore:

> It started very gently, it was nothing to scream about, but … It got more aggressive, frequent, and obviously more severe. I got a slap or something like that; then it changed to punches … When he got really bad, I'd call the police and he would just leave…. I'd feel sorry for him because he'd come back home crying and sorry and, I don't know what's wrong with me, I just felt sorry for him … It would die down for a bit and then gradually just gets up to that point again. (client)

The clients we interviewed identified two primary catalysts for active help seeking. First and foremost was the realisation that the abuse had started to have an adverse effect on their children (the presence of children in the home is often a trigger for help-seeking; Bliss et al. 2007); the second was the experience of a *particularly* abusive incident that suggested that the dynamics of the relationship were changing.[12] Almost two per cent of children in England live in homes where there is a known high risk of domestic abuse (Laming, 2009) and in somewhere between a third and two thirds of cases where a woman is being abused in the home, her children are too (Humphreys and Thiara, 2002). The majority of our interviewees articulated concerns about the impact of abuse on their children: 'Enough was enough and it started to affect my son…. I just knew that I needed to change me and my son's life, I needed him out of my life.' (client) Sophie, who had been subject to severe physical and sexual assault, provided a similar explanation for her eventual decision to seek help: '[The] main factor was my daughter… she would witness it, which I wasn't happy with.' (client)

[12] Research has shown that women's own predictions of whether their violent partner will re-offend against them are the best single predictor of subsequent violence (Weisz et al., 2000).

Just under half of our interviewees explained that a significant shift in the level of threat to them was key to choosing to make changes to their lives. As Chloe described:

> One evening when he got really violent … He … took my phone. There was someone's name in my phone, he was like "Who is that?", … threw the phone across the room and just went berserk. …pulled the telephone wire out because I was going to call the police, … put it around my neck… and then when he let go I just ran out with my daughter. (client)

Rachel described a similarly violent attack that prompted her to seek help:

> When it got to the stage when he felt that he had to take my life, nobody warrants that, …in my eyes it was just pure evilness …. He stabbed me five times and bludgeoned me over the head and tried to strangle me. (client)

Controlling behaviours, alongside physical and sexual abuse, isolated clients from their support networks, leaving them without the confidence and self-esteem to imagine a world beyond the abusive relationship. Acknowledging abuse is difficult for women who lack confidence or whose feelings and concerns have been dismissed or neglected for years, and although some find the courage to leave their abusive partners, many repeatedly return over the years. Research has demonstrated the critical role of formal and informal support in improving the ability to cope with, and leave abusive relationships, as well as the safety of victims. Indeed, the presence of informal support increases women's likelihood of acting to end the violence by seeking formal sources of help (Liang et al., 2005). Friends and relatives can provide women with crucial support (Horton and Johnson 1993). However, research shows that women suffering from intimate terrorism – as all but one of our interviewees seemed to be - tend to be more likely to seek help from formal institutions, rather than relying on friends and neighbours (Leone et al., 2007). In our sample, almost all of the women were – to a greater or lesser extent - isolated from friends and other informal support networks by their partners' controlling behaviours, making the FJC potentially particularly well suited to them. How the FJC makes and maintains contact with such vulnerable women is therefore key to an effective response. We asked FJC staff about their efforts to bring victims into the Centre.

## VI. Contact with the Family Justice Centre

Given that most of the clients we interviewed explained that a particularly brutal attack had been the catalyst for help-seeking, it is not surprising that the majority of our clients were referred to the FJC through their contact with the police (with most of the others referred by the housing service). Every morning reported cases of domestic abuse are referred by the Community Safety Unit (CSU) to the FJC, where helpline workers try to make contact with victims by telephone to tell them about the services offered within the FJC and, when appropriate, make an appointment with the relevant agency. We asked staff what their aims were in making initial contact. Almost all referred to the aim of establishing what that particular client's needs were and then offering tailored support and referrals, although some expressed concern that by responding only to what was being told to them on first contact might preclude effective responses to a range of other, as yet, undefined needs. This was particularly so for helpline workers who were often the first point of contact. One such member of staff referred to the fine line between responding to a victim's articulated needs and actively encouraging them to seek help from all potentially relevant services:

> I can't do any more than [offer advice about talking to various different support workers] because if the woman chooses to leave or put the phone down and say, 'I'm not doing that', that's their choice. You can't make anybody do anything unless they're ready and they really want to, but I'm trying to encourage and just to make them see that actually, 'This is what I do need to look at, especially for my kids.' (staff)

In addition to proactive contact with clients, the helpline responds to enquiries and self-referrals and the FJC is open to clients without an appointment, or indeed any prior contact with the Centre. Further, CSU officers not only refer victims via the helpline, but in some cases physically take them across the corridor to the FJC:

> We have the luxury of the family justice centre, … we've dealt with all the criminal side and then we've taken them over, and by another hour or two … she's housed in a refuge, and away from the situation…. it's all dealt with in one day pretty much. Even the injunctions … and from there on in there's a big sigh of relief for them. So it's very impactive to, not just the criminal side but to deal with the whole issue of, … domestic crime, … that affords them a little bit of protection. (CSU police officer)

While the majority of clients find out about the FJC from the police or housing officers, most articulate their needs as extending beyond advice on civil and criminal action. Therefore, the Centre needs to offer a tailored approach that takes seriously the diversity of experiences and does not only support those who are heading for the courts. In addition to providing practical information and advice, the staff we interviewed described a crucially important service they felt they offered that could be described as 'a route to empowerment', with many providing stories of women who had, under their care and guidance, gone on a significant journey.

## VII. A Journey towards Empowerment

One member of staff we interviewed told us the following story. We reproduce it not because it stood out, but because variations on this theme – the journey towards empowerment - were articulated by almost all agency representatives in formal interviews and in the stories they told us during informal chats:

> I remember one lady, when she came in she was just so emotionally, physically drained. On the edge …of a nervous breakdown, just so destroyed, … just about standing. …She never thought that she was ever going to get out of it. And slowly, but surely, when she started to take control through the advice, through the support, and empowering her… Six months later, to look at her, how she changed in her appearance, how she'd taken control of her life. Her whole demeanour, all of her had become much more positive. She started a college course, got the little ones into preschool. It was just like she'd got control of her life. She was still having a few problems with him but she was going through the solicitors, going through the police. And it was like wow, you know. We were like, you look fantastic, you look amazing, look at you, where did you come from? And it was good for us - it was good for her as well - to be able to see that. (staff)

Our interviews with the various service providers at the FJC showed that they explicitly saw their role as helping their clients on the journey towards empowerment:

> We have to empower them … we see the changes in the women, they become more … happy. The woman is over there and she's achieved her destination

> where she's travelling to. That's our aim, to help her reach that place that she wants to go…. That's what we're here for. (staff)

Others adopted the language of healing:

> [We help victims] to feel like fully functioning individuals once again. So the healing … takes place and they are able to change their lives depending on what their priority needs are, why they've come to see us. (staff)

The question remains, *how* do they try to empower their clients? While Liang et al (2005) are surely right to identify the three main stages of change for victims of domestic abuse; these are not, as they imply, discrete stages. In particular, victims do not typically fully define the problem in isolation from support. Indeed, some are faced with support services before they have even acknowledged there is a problem, if a neighbour or friend contacts the police, for example. Our interviews with staff and clients suggest that even when a victim has made contact with support services and decided that they may need help, often they have not fully 'defined the problem' or recognised the extent of the trauma caused by their experiences of abuse. Our data suggest there are four stages on the journey to empowerment: first, for those who have not fully accepted that they are being abused, staff help clients to recognise the abuse (define the problem); then they help them to build the confidence, self-esteem and other inner resources to address the abuse. Following that, they provide clients with the relevant information to make the right decisions; and, finally, they give them the space and encouragement to make those (informed) decisions and choices.

*Defining the problem*

One of the key messages that came out of our interviews with staff was that they tried 'to help women to find a voice, to describe their violence, to acknowledge it.' (staff) One interviewee described the process of encouraging women to acknowledge verbally the abuse, then to allow her to write it down, even if the victim wished to tear up the informal statement immediately after, with the ultimate aim of encouraging her to make a formal statement for the police, in due course '… because sometimes when it's in black and white and, you know, even if I let her have it at the end, you can say well look, you maybe need to look at that and think.' (staff) Most staff spoke about the need to be patient and understand that it takes time for women to make significant changes to their lives and recognise abuse:

> I think it's difficult; it's not easy to contain the shock. I try and be quite honest and I even just say 'just run by me again, you said for twenty two years every few months you'd be beaten, bitten, punched and kicked, but that was normal?' …[referring to a specific case] I've only seen her a couple of times and it's certainly not my job to right now push this upon her, … it's got to be done gradually and gently. (staff)

*Building self confidence*

Part of that gradual process is to try to raise the low self-esteem of those who have been abused and controlled for sometimes many years; those who have been told that they are stupid, ugly, worthless and have been persuaded that they could not cope on their own:

> A lot of women don't have the courage to leave. They lose all their self-esteem and they also think that nobody will believe them and they're the only ones in that situation. So talking to them and helping to build up their self esteem, it's not going to happen overnight but at least if you start on it. (staff)

Other service providers referred explicitly to the goal of empowerment:

> Some of them blame themselves, some of them say they can't do this, can't do that, and we empower them, we give them the right advice, we lead them to the right people and … they become stronger, they can stand up to them. (staff)

Raising self-esteem is also a goal of the child counsellors:

> Your job sometimes is to aid [the children] to repair themselves, to develop some inner resources to deal with the situation…. You have to work with the child, support, enough resources they feel stronger in themselves to manage it or to cope with it… You can't put a sticking plaster on it; it takes time. (staff)

*Providing tailored services and information*

While different service providers talked about the journey towards empowerment, they were sensitive to their different roles. Solicitors were much less holistic, tending to restrict their advice and information to legal matters that they were qualified to advise on. Similarly, housing officers tended to focus on practical matters and not

discuss in such depth the emotional fallout from violence or controlling behaviours. The counsellors, on the other hand, saw themselves as qualified only to listen and give information about and referral to other more proactive services. As such, they provided much needed support in building up the confidence and self esteem of victims, but sometimes felt frustrated by their remit:

> You realize you've got this small window… and it's difficult because you cross boundaries and you're not really counselling then … you can't help but become just a human being who's thinking, 'oh my god, this is just wrong' and you know 'quick get a solicitor and get this done now' … Often as a counsellor you can feel quite, it's quite pathetic at times how nervous I've been and somebody comes in with something really extreme and you can almost hear yourself in your head thinking you know all I can do is listen to you talk. You think, my God you need more than just talking to me, we really need to get you somewhere safe. (staff)

Based in the FJC, however, counsellors acknowledged that they could at least inform the MARAC and considered that their prospects of successfully referring clients for civil or criminal interventions were higher than when they were working in isolation of other services. Furthermore, even when their clients were not ready for referral to other services, they could seek advice on their behalf and pass on relevant information during consultations. We saw some staff doing just this – popping out of a meeting with their client to consult with another agency in the building and then feeding back back to those who were too anxious or upset to talk with someone else; a form of shuttle mediation that seems particularly promising with new clients.

A significant part of a tailored, individualised approach is recognising when clients are ready for change; when they have sufficient confidence to make difficult choices, and not presuming that once they have 'defined the abuse' and acknowledged the further risks to themselves and their children they will be ready to embrace change. Reflecting an understanding of 'stages of change' theory, the staff we interviewed recognised that not all victims followed the same trajectory; some were ready to move on at an earlier stage and some needed considerable support to make even small changes to their lives:

> Really it depends on the individual. There are some women that are stronger than others. They've come to a stage where they know it can't continue, they have had enough, they want the help… Others may need a lot more

> encouragement and it may take time. It may be a matter of start off with the counselling before they're ready to take legal advice, or they're ready to get an injunction, or they're ready for a refuge. So again everybody's case is different, some I could spend ten minutes on the phone, get them in, get them appointments, they're at the place where they're ready; others I could be forty-five minutes, trying to encourage them to make a decision, to do something even if it's a matter of come in, speak to somebody, get the advice. (staff)

Similarly, another FJC worker explained:

> I'm able to tell them about the services that are available but you can't force them to change, … everything is time and that person will have to, you know, be in a better place where they feel that I can change. … You have to wait just like any cycle of addiction; you have to wait until that person comes to the contemplating stage. (staff)

*Making informed choices*

For victims of abuse to make informed choices about their current situation and future prospects, FJC staff have to provide clients with information tailored to their needs, sometimes with various options for change. Of course, the most important but difficult change can be leaving an abusive partner. Those we interviewed made clear that this was often one of their primary goals but they resisted being dogmatic and most tried not to persuade victims to leave abusive relationships, but to help them recognise that was a feasible choice:

> I won't persuade them but I will just tell them the options that they have, give them to the counsellors, give them to the right people and they will advise them what they can do. 'Cause I'm not supposed to tell them what to do, like to leave. I wouldn't say you must leave, I would say, you need to be safe. Do you know you have choices? (staff)

While staff are reluctant to *tell* women what to do – not least as they recognise that victims have been controlled for too long – they aim to provide the relevant information for effective decision making. Although waiting for victims to be ready for change can be frustrating, staff seemed committed to long-term support:

> It's frustrating sometimes because we want to help them and they're not ready to leave. We can't force them to take action. They have to be ready

> themselves. …It's their life, they have to decide when they're ready, if ever. So initially we'll just listen and we'll point out factors and how things may possibly progress. We give them information, we give them the tools as well, let them know where they can get help if they're worried about any particular aspect. If they've got that they can then decide for themselves. (staff)

Furthermore, they frequently remind their clients that they will continue to support them even if they choose not to leave or take legal action, although this approach is typically balanced with risk management procedures. The MARAC, which meets weekly at the FJC, but can meet more often if necessary, is used to share risk assessment information and to alert other service providers to an escalating situation if the victim is reluctant to leave the relationship:

> We start the ball rolling, we are able to enlighten them as to what has been happening, what is happening, and what will possibly happen for the future … [if] she doesn't want her relationship to break down, …we will support that as much as we can, but we need to make sure that she stays safe, that the children stay safe, that the abuse stops so we will [refer to the MARAC] if we need to. We are here to support whatever need it is that the victim wants. (staff)

## VIII. Victims' experiences of empowerment

Criminal justice and the other interventions offered by the FJC are aimed both at improving victims' safety and ensuring offenders' accountability. Victim empowerment *can* come from both attempts to hold offenders to account and services to make victims safer but it many cases arrest and prosecution can leave victims disempowered (Hoyle and Sanders, 2000) and a blanket provision of services to all victims is less likely to empower victims than a tailored approach to individual victims that seeks to understand the particular experiences and context and needs of each victim. Bearing in mind the limitations of our modest client-based data, this final section provides some preliminary evidence that some of the victims at the FJC felt empowered, but it also voices some caution about the quest for empowerment that further research might want to consider.

Some clients come to the FJC for basic legal information: 'Just where I stand, whether I could get him out, … what options I had. And they told me I can do this and that, and it helped a lot. (client)' Some were less sure what they needed, beyond

someone pointing them in the right direction: ‘at that time I didn’t know what was going on. I was just hoping for suggestions.’ (client) Others emphasised the value of advocacy:

> They really did help me. Got a solicitor for me, and went with me [to meet with] the solicitor. … I never [before] had anyone to help me, and she really came through with me, … she pointed me in the right directions. (client)

Much of what the FJC offers victims can be termed ‘advocacy’. Advocates ‘direct, guide, and support battered women while confronting and challenging obstacles to their safety’ (Shepard 1999: 115). They counsel, provide access to resources, represent victims in other institutional settings, such as the court, but more importantly they help women to better understand their options and how to make choices.

According to the victims we interviewed, the FJC met short and longer-term practical, legal and emotional needs. It provided information and guidance on the choices available to clients, particularly in relation to immediate short-term housing needs, immigration and personal security issues; and provided longer-term on-going support through counselling and legal action. But much more than this, the victims felt that the Centre provided a route towards empowerment. Clients described encouragement for them to think for themselves, to take the information given and make informed choices, to imagine a different life: ‘He asked me what *I* want to do, so it’s up to *me* to tell him what I wanted to do, so I think for myself.’ (client) Another woman remarked

> … They talk to you, they listen to you and what you want out of life and they don’t pressure you into anything, they just advise you what *you can do* … [if] you know that they’re there for you. (client)

The confidence to recognise options, to realise that they do not have to remain in abusive relationships and that there are people who will help them to negotiate the changes needed to reclaim their lives and live free from fear is crucially important for most domestic abuse victims. As Alice put it: ‘I think the difficulty for me was that I’d never felt as if I can trust anybody.’ (client) She felt different after her first visit to the FJC. She explained to us that she had started to learn to let others help her:

> I mean I’ve never really discussed [the abuse] with anyone else, and I spoke to [FJC worker] and …she actually made me think, ‘Yeah, I can actually go do this right and not just stay home and feel sorry for myself. (client)

It is clear that at least some victims experience the services offered by the FJC as empowering, which was of course the main goal of the staff we spoke to. However, giving victims agency that has for too long been denied them may pose certain risks. If a woman is empowered and able to reassert her agency, she then might be expected to be responsible for what happens to her in the future, and especially to her dependents (Hoyle 2008). This could result in agencies feeling less sympathetic if she chooses to return to a violent relationship and then experiences further abuse. The victim might, in such circumstances, be thought to be accountable for her own victimisation (McDermott and Garolfalo 2004: 1263). There are risks that victims who are in genuine danger but do not yet feel ready for change may be left vulnerable to further, and perhaps fatal, violence if they are left to choose how the system should respond to their victimisation. It is also possible that by putting the responsibility firmly on the shoulders of the victims, staff are leaving them more vulnerable to further retaliatory abuse. Attempts to empower a victim could prove iatrogenic in less obvious ways. McDermott and Garofalo (2004: 1252) alert us to the risk of disempowerment from victims' advocates. For example, if advocates guide victims in shaping their stories to construct better cases for the prosecution service; or counsel or advise in a manner that suggests the professional knows best what is in the victim's interests. We saw no evidence of this but further research must be alive to such risks.

There may be dangers that one form of control (by a partner) is replaced by another (by a member of agency staff). While the women we spoke to did not express concern that staff were 'controlling', the use of children to persuade women to recognise the seriousness of their situation, while perhaps understandable, is rather manipulative and caused us some concern. As discussed above, clients described to us their children's experiences of abuse as a primary catalyst for change and a number of our interviewees made clear that they tried to persuade their clients to make choices to change their lives by referring to the likely damage to their children:

> I will tend to use the children sometimes, I will say to a mum 'you choose to stay in this relationship, in ten or fifteen years time if your daughter comes home to you with a black eye or a broken nose and their partner has done it to them, if you tell her to leave her response will be, well you know, how is that going to make you feel? Do you want history to repeat itself?' [Or] 'how would you feel if your son was to abuse their partner or their wife?' So I will

turn it around for them to hopefully see it for the future for their children. (staff)

There are also dangers in the social sciences of taking our interviewees at face value, of accepting their explanations for their actions. It might be that putting the ball firmly in the victim's court is a strategy for self-protection, rather than client protection. Recent research in the US suggests that domestic violence victim advocates, who suffer intense emotional strain from their work, redefine their advocacy role from 'saviour' to 'options giver' in order to better cope with their work-related stress (Powell-Williams et al., 2013). We found no evidence of this but further research might probe deeper than we were able into staff rationales for empowerment of clients.

Family Justice Centres in the US are not without their critics. Some contend that a multi-agency approach that includes agents of the state cannot be victim-centred; others fear that children of abused women may be more likely to be taken into care when child-workers are part of the systemic approach; with others worrying that the inclusion of law enforcement might increase the likelihood of victims being arrested, particularly those with insecure immigration status; and there is the inevitable unease about the costs of co-located services (Gwinn et al., 2007). These are all valid concerns and our research was not set up to dismiss them. While it is true that our police interviewees based in the CSU seemed to be culturally distinct from the other agencies based in the main FJC, with the inevitably greater focus on prosecution and risk assessment, they were certainly not unaware of the need for various other sources of support, and could not be described as unsympathetic. And while most of the staff we interviewed across the range of services saw criminal justice as irrelevant for some clients, they recognised that it was an important tool in the FJC armoury. Further, all service providers seemed to have a good working relationship with the other agencies.

## IX. Conclusion

Our study suggests that the FJC may well be a collaborative opportunity whose time has come. That there seem to be obvious benefits to co-located working: victims do not need to travel from place to place, telling their story afresh with each new agency; they do not lose faith as one service does not know or seem to care what another is

offering; and, most importantly, they can get advice and practical help with their diverse legal, practical, and emotional needs in one building. And while some victims use just one or two of the services, many take advantage of more, and become aware of services with which they were not previously familiar and on which they may draw in months or years to come. This article has focused however on one main aspect of the FJC – its potential to empower its clients and it is to this point that we return in concluding.

Our interviewees described the difficulties of acknowledging abuse and seeking help. Their assessment of the FJC was grounded in their experiences of long-term abuse and controlling behaviours and how they needed, and were, in the main, receiving the help to break through their isolation. The majority of clients emphasized the importance of being made aware of all the available legal choices alongside other help-seeking options that could be accessed through social services or through counselling and therapy. From this perspective, the FJC seems to provide individualized support without pressuring clients into particular courses of action. The women we interviewed described their experiences of being supported as personally enabling and they used the language of empowerment. In turn, service providers spoke explicitly about taking victims on the road to empowerment and about the very visible outcomes when this went well:

> You have many women that come back completely different from how they first came in. They've got a new life, their self esteem's so high now, and they can't even believe that they're living the life they're living now compared to maybe a year or two ago. So as long as the women come back and tell us that they're happy and that's all we can hope for, keep them safe initially and then help them to get their own life together and be in charge of their own lives. (staff)

However, this not only requires dedicated co-located staff, but a good understanding of the diverse needs of victims and, in particular, of distinctive types of abusive relationships and how resilient and open to change victims might be at any particular time. Drawing on 'stages of change' theory and notions of empowerment, FJC staff seem to be developing a better understanding of how to meet the needs of victims of abuse than has previously been seen among police and other more victim-centred services (Hoyle 2007). To further develop these skills, they need an even better understanding of domestic victimisation, as indeed we all do. Notwithstanding

years of academic attention, they would benefit from more thorough empirical research, employing qualitative methods that measure motivations and impacts of abuse (Saunders 2002) and how these influence help seeking. Further research should test Johnson's (2008) claim that types of abuse shape the ability and motivation of women to extricate themselves from damaging relationships, and the kinds of assistance and advice they are likely to profit from. As Johnson has put it, there is a need to better comprehend how 'different types of intimate partner violence develop in different ways during the history of a relationship, and that they have quite different consequences … causes, and that they therefore require different interventions both at the individual level and in the development of general social policy.' (2008: 4). Which victims need which types of help at what stage are crucial questions for all service providers and for policy makers who must decide how best to use scarce resources. As Liang et al put it:

> … qualitative research and client-centred intervention approaches are needed to stretch our understanding beyond generic, professional conceptualizations of help-seeking – toward models that more accurately capture the diverse experiences of battered women in defining [domestic abuse], their decisions to seek help, and the types of help they choose. (2005: 82).

This small study cannot show whether our interviewees were typical of the many victims who pass through the Centre. Nor can it demonstrate whether these victims' experiences of empowerment were permanent or merely transient, and whether they had lasting impact on their relationships and the likelihood of them experiencing further abuse. A more ambitious project could interrogate the vast database of all cases dealt with by the FJC and provide statistically rigorous data on further abuse as well as the many static and dynamic risk factors correlated with abuse, as well as interviewing a larger sample of clients. Additionally, the academy as well as those providing services to victims would benefit from a more developed theoretical understanding of 'empowerment' in order that it can be more rigorously measured and attempts made to better understand its relationship with other individual and contextual variables such as victim resilience and other emotional resources, and to measure the influence of structural variables such as social class, age and race on empowerment. The focus should now be on developing theoretical and empirical work on domestic violence that takes account of these differences and helps Family Justice Centres to fully realise their goals to empower victims and to provide

individualised, tailored support when their clients are most able to take advantage of it.

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