

A Scoping Review and Evidence and Gap Map
about
Women on Remand in the UK:
What the Available Evidence Covers and What It Says

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Appendices for this report – and the list of included studies - are in a separate document, available at <https://howardleague.org/women-on-remand-scoping-review-and-evidence-and-gap-map/>

The online interactive Evidence and Gap Map is available here <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/35/Maps/womenonremand2025.html> and on the above webpage.

Who we are

This work was initiated and funded by the **Firebird Foundation**. Firebird's mission is to pursue gender equity for women and children. It has three core areas of work: women's justice including the impact of parental imprisonment on children; prevention of violence against women and girls and family court reform; and raising the bar for women and girls in sport. A core strand of its work on women's justice, is supporting a coalition of leading organisations who are working together to end the imprisonment of women awaiting trial and sentencing.

www.firebirdcollective.co.uk

The project was conducted in close coordination with experts from **The Howard League for Penal Reform**. The Howard League for Penal Reform is a UK national charity working for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison. They combine litigation, campaigning and policy work. The team includes expert prison and public lawyers, working alongside experienced communications and policy staff. They work with the media to explain the harms of prison and to shape public narratives around crime and punishment. They provide a dedicated advice line for children and young people in prison. Team meetings were conducted weekly to discuss the scope of the evidence and gap map, including inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the synthesis approach. The team was involved in pilot searching and pilot screening.

www.howardleague.org/

Giving Evidence works to make charitable giving more effective by encouraging and enabling charitable giving based on sound evidence. Through consultancy, Giving Evidence helps donors and charities in many countries to understand their impact and to raise it. Through campaigning, thought-leadership and research, we show what evidence is available and what remains needed, what it says, and where the quality and infrastructure of evidence need improving.

Giving Evidence has previously published systematic reviews and Evidence and Gap Maps on various subjects, including education, child maltreatment, and the academic study of charities and philanthropy. Giving Evidence has advised many donors and operational non-profits in many sectors and many countries over many years.

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Figure 1: Glossary of key terms

Term	Explanation
Terms about the prison / criminal justice system:	
Bailed	When a person is released from police or court custody while waiting for their trial. They may have to follow certain conditions (like staying at a specific address or not contacting certain people): bail can also be unconditional.
Closed prison/facilities	A secure type of prison where people are not free to leave. It has strict rules, locked doors, and high levels of security.
Crown Court	The Crown Court in England and Wales is the higher criminal court that hears serious criminal cases and appeals from the Magistrates' Court. Crown Court cases are usually heard by a judge and a jury, which decides on the facts of the case. The main difference between the Crown Court and the Magistrates' Court is the type of cases they hear. The Magistrates' Court handles less serious criminal offences, while the Crown Court deals with more serious crimes, such as murder, rape, and robbery. The Crown Court can impose a range of sentences, including community orders, prison sentences, and life sentences.
Magistrates' Court	A magistrates' court is the court where most criminal cases begin and where many minor crimes and family cases are heard. It is staffed by trained, volunteer members of the community, known as magistrates, who decide cases under the guidance of legal advisers. The magistrates' court also acts as a Family Court, hearing both public and private law cases related to families. Magistrates can impose various sentences, including fines, community sentences, and imprisonment. Complex criminal cases or those involving serious offenses (like murder, rape, or robbery) are passed on to the Crown Court.
Mother and Baby Unit (MBU)	Mother and Baby Units (MBU) are separate units within a prison meaning that a woman who is in prison, and allocated a space, can keep her baby with her for until the child is 18-months-old. A pregnant woman has to apply for a place on an MBU and waiting for the decision can be an anxious time for her. There are eight MBUs in the UK: six in England, two in Scotland and none in Wales.
Open prison/facilities	A less secure type of prison where people have more freedom. They might be allowed to work or study outside during the day but must return at night.
Remanded	When someone is kept in prison while they wait for their trial or sentencing, instead of being released on bail.

Terms about the research:

Evidence and Gap Map	A visual, interactive tool that systematically organises existing evidence across a broad topic area. It highlights where evidence is abundant or lacking (the “gaps”), often displayed as a matrix.
Scoping review	A scoping review is a type of evidence synthesis that maps the existing literature on a broad topic or question. It identifies key concepts, gaps in research, and the types of available evidence, but does not typically assess the quality of the studies or attempt to provide a definitive answer to a focused question.
Systematic review	A systematic review is a rigorous, structured process that aims to answer a specific research question by identifying, appraising, and synthesising all relevant studies on the topic.

Summary

Reason for this study

In the UK, many individuals are held in custody on remand before their trial - despite the possibility that they may later be found innocent or receive non-custodial sentences. This can significantly disrupt their lives, affecting responsibilities such as childcare, employment, and housing, and can also harm mental health.

Women are a significant proportion of the remand population. As of December 2024, 26% of all women in prison were being held on remand in England and Walesⁱ. A significant proportion of these women do not go on to receive custodial sentences: in 2019, 65% of women remanded into prison and subsequently dealt with by the magistrates' courts did not receive an immediate prison sentenceⁱⁱ. In Scotland, Bissell (2024) reported that although women comprise just 3.6% of the prison population, they represented 20% of forensic inpatient hospital transfers. Moreover, 33% of imprisoned women were on remand, compared to 24% of men.

Remand – and the associated uncertainty – is particularly bad for women. For example, self-harm is worse amongst women on remand than other women in prison: there were 467 incidents of self-harm for every 100 women on remand compared with an overall rate of self-harm amongst women in prison of 370 per 100ⁱⁱⁱ.

The effects of remand extend beyond the individual woman to her family and community^{iv}. This exacerbates disadvantage and perpetuates stigma. Many women in prison have dependent children: an estimated 17,000 children are affected by maternal imprisonment^v.

This situation unfolds against the backdrop of a prison system under considerable strain. The prison population in England and Wales has doubled over the last 30 years, despite a substantial decline in crime rates during the same period. This has led to overcrowded prisons and has prompted the government to initiate a comprehensive review of sentencing practices to address the crisis^{vi}.

Women on remand are often overlooked in discussions about the wider prison system. Although they are relatively few in number, they have experiences, routes into the criminal justice system (such as the types of offences, personal circumstances, and decision-making processes that lead to remand), and post-release outcomes which are distinct and warrant attention. Women of colour and those with complex needs - such as mental health conditions, and histories of trauma - are over-represented on remand, which raises concerns about the appropriateness and effect/s of remand custody. Yet, evidence about women on remand is fragmented and patchy - even the numbers of them over time, their access to rehabilitative services, how long they spend on remand, and their reintegration outcomes. There is very little investigation about why judges and magistrates use remand for women.

This study has two parts:

1. To locate and map the existing evidence base about women on remand in the UK. We present this in an Evidence and Gap Map (EGM) in Part 1. This shows what evidence exists and the topics that it covers and omits.
2. To find what that evidence says. We present this in a synthesis of the documents included on the EGM, in Part 2.

Below both parts are summarised.

The goals are to consolidate existing knowledge on women on remand in the UK in order to inform:

- anyone working on remand in the UK, allowing them to have access to all this knowledge - in one place - in order that campaigning, advocacy and programmatic work are based on the evidence that exists and therefore are effective as possible; and
- future research in this area: that it should be informed by the existing evidence (what Cochrane's co-founder Sir Iain Chalmers calls "evidence-based research"), and avoid future research duplicating what already exists.

What the literature covers, and gaps in it

We looked for documents from the last 10 years, and found more than we expected: we found 109 relevant documents discuss women on remand in the UK. But they are limited in focus and analytical depth. Though these documents have valuable insights - particularly through lived experience accounts and systemic observations - only two documents explicitly focus on women on remand.

In short, the literature reveals much about what is happening, but far less about why it is happening, what is effective, or how to implement meaningful change.

The evidence is generally methodologically weak, relying heavily on anecdotal evidence and lacking the rigour needed to establish causality or effectiveness. We found no robust evaluations: there are seven studies which relate somewhat to the effectiveness of an intervention, but none is a true impact evaluation: rather, they are descriptions of interventions, or use participant-reported effects, author's interpretations, etc. Those seven studies are outlined in the document and the appendix. There are also only two documents which relate to cost analyses.

Other research highlights the importance of intersections of factors that lead women into remand, including systemic inequalities, gender-specific criminogenic needs, and inadequate support mechanisms^{vii}. Yet very few studies explore how overlapping identities (such as ethnicity, class, age, gender, LGBTQ identity, disability, nationality or immigration status) shape women's experiences and outcomes.

The literature focuses on the justice system, with much less attention given to the roles of health, welfare, and housing services - and few studies examine how these systems interact, or how they collectively shape the experiences of women on remand.

There is very little material about why remand is used e.g., why judges / magistrates use it: this is discussed in only two documents. (However, there is some material about factors that seem to increase the chance of being remanded, e.g., having complex needs.)

Overall, though the volume of material is reassuring, there are gaps around: understanding how overlapping forms of disadvantage or discrimination shape women's pathways through the criminal justice system; targeted, rigorous evidence to inform effective interventions or reforms for women on remand in the UK; and investigation of why women are remanded.

What the evidence says

Our synthesis of the evidence examines the use, experience, and consequences of remand for women in the UK. It identifies a justice system that frequently remands women into custody without subsequent conviction, and fails to provide adequate support for their complex needs.

Frequent, disruptive, and often unjustified use of remand

Women are routinely held on remand for relatively short periods - Minson (2017) found that the average remand duration for women was 37 days - yet that time is sufficient to "disrupt families, housing, and finances." One in five women on remand were not ultimately convicted. Many were primary caregivers, and as Minson notes, their imprisonment often had immediate and lasting harms on children:

"Even short periods of custody can result in a mother losing her home or her children being taken into care."

Women on remand have high and unmet mental health needs

Women on remand frequently experience serious mental health issues but are *excluded* from appropriate care and support. At HMP Eastwood Park (2022)**, 83% of women reported mental health difficulties, with one-third of them on remand. Despite this, remanded women were often ineligible for in-prison mental health services or therapeutic interventions:

"Remanded women were largely excluded from psychological and practical support" (HMP Eastwood Park, 2022).

Bright (2023) and Pitfield (2023) reinforced these findings, noting fragmented mental healthcare pathways, and a lack of trauma-informed provision tailored to women on remand. Joana (2023) reported that mental health interventions often ignored remand-specific stressors, despite high levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress documented in several studies.

Lack of community-based alternatives drives overuse of remand

The overreliance on custodial remand is often a default response to social problems, not criminal risk. As Armstrong (2023) and Campbell (2020) argue:

“Women are often remanded because of systemic failures in housing, mental health provision, and trauma-informed bail support—not because they pose a threat to public safety.”

The absence of viable community-based alternatives means that courts frequently turn to remand for women who could otherwise be safely managed in the community. This is particularly concerning given that many women on remand are charged with non-violent offences and/or are not subsequently convicted.

Racial disparities and inequities

There are ethnic disparities in remand decisions. According to Agenda Alliance (2023), 30% of Black women who attended Crown Court were remanded, compared to 26% of white women. Robson (2020) highlights the inappropriate use of remand in some cases as a de facto form of immigration control: they argue that the increasing overlap between border enforcement and the criminal justice system has fostered a risk-averse culture that disproportionately targets foreign nationals. Racialised anxieties around immigration and crime have contributed to a climate in which ‘foreignness’ itself is treated as a marker of criminality and risk. As a result, foreign national women frequently receive more punitive bail decisions. Viewed as a suspect population, their perceived lack of belonging reinforces assumptions that they are more likely to abscond. Despite being recognised as a vulnerable and disadvantaged group, they often lack the resources or support to challenge these assumptions or access viable alternatives to custodial remand.

Exclusion from core services

Remanded women are routinely excluded from key support services, including resettlement, mental health care, housing, and Mother and Baby Units (MBUs). For example, Pitfield (2023) found that remanded mothers faced inconsistent and delayed decisions about accessing MBU, heightening maternal anxiety. Osthwaite (2022) reported that women on remand were more likely to have their MBU applications denied—even when they posed no parenting risk.

Family separation and child welfare harms

Remand often results in sudden and traumatic separation from children, and criminal courts rarely assess the effect of remand on child welfare. Minson (2017) described cases where mothers were remanded without time to arrange childcare, leading to informal, unstable care arrangements and housing barriers for extended family:

“A grandmother who lacked formal parental responsibility was unable to access suitable housing, illustrating the cascading effects of remand on family stability.”

Justine’s case, as reported by Monish (2023), reveals the system’s insensitivity:

“I said [to the police]: ‘I don’t want to leave my child.’ They said: ‘You have to’ ... I didn’t hear where he was for over two weeks.”

Her experience of being held on remand, losing contact with her child, and later pleading guilty out of fear and confusion reflects wider concerns about due process and trauma in remand practices.

Conclusion

Taken together, the current use of custodial remand for women is often disproportionate, ineffective, and damaging. Women are being held in prison not because they pose a serious risk to society, but because of systemic failings, such as lack of housing, mental health support, and gender-sensitive alternatives. Remand exacerbates existing inequalities, particularly for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women, and inflicts profound harm on children, families, and communities. Despite policy commitments to reduce women's imprisonment, meaningful change has yet to materialise. The findings call for urgent reform: improved data collection, robust community-based alternatives, trauma-informed legal processes, and an end to the routine remanding of women for reasons rooted in social vulnerability rather than criminal risk.

Next, based on these findings, we discuss gaps in the literature which can be priorities for future research.

Future research needs

This review finds significant gaps in the evidence base that must be addressed to better understand and support women on remand in the UK.

First, **about why remand is used**, i.e., why magistrates and judges use it. This needs to go beyond looking at the demographics and circumstances of women who are remanded which identifies their 'risk factors'. Instead, it needs to unearth the logics that magistrates and judges use when they decide to remand defendants, and their beliefs and opinions about it. This understanding will be necessary to influence their behaviour to reduce or change the use of remand.

Second, **intersectional and subgroup-focused research** is urgently needed. Many experiences are omitted in the current literature, particularly those of LGBTQ women, women with disabilities, older women, and ethnic minority or foreign national women. Research should explore how overlapping identities and systemic disadvantages shape the experiences and outcomes of women on remand.

Third, there is a clear need for **rigorous evaluations** to identify what works to improve outcomes for women on remand. We found only seven documents that investigate effectiveness of interventions or programmes (discussed in the synthesis section, and detailed in Appendix 3), and even these were limited in quality, so unable to identify effects on outcomes. Hence policymakers and practitioners have minimal reliable evidence to inform decisions about which approaches are most effective. Future studies should use experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and cost-benefit analyses to assess short- and long-term effects.

Fourth, more **exploration of the interplay between the criminal justice system and other public services**, such as health, housing, and social care. The siloed nature of the current evidence obscures how fragmented services may compound the challenges faced by women on remand.

Fifth, **longitudinal and pathway-focused studies** that trace how women come to be held on remand, how they experience it, and what happens upon release. This should combine exploring lived experience, as well as granular and precise quantitative data. This would help to identify critical intervention points and systemic failures.

Finally, **administrative and monitoring data** should be improved and made more transparent to support research and accountability. Routine publication of disaggregated data—by remand prisoners' gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, disability, and LGBTQ status—would enable better tracking of who is being held on remand, for what reasons, and with what outcomes.

Stronger, more coherent evidence, grounded in both lived experience and quantitative detail and rigour, is essential for designing fairer, more effective responses to women on remand. Without this, there is a risk that well-intentioned reforms will continue to fall short of delivering meaningful change.

The research that is needed probably outstrips the resources to produce and fund it. So some prioritisation, and **a prioritisation process, is needed**. One model for that is a collective prioritisation exercise involving all relevant stakeholders (government, NGOs, people in the prison system and criminal justice system, people with lived experience etc.). In healthcare, a model has been developed for prioritising research within particular disease conditions (e.g., within breast cancer, or within Parkinson's disease), which brings together patients, their carers and their clinicians to identify and collectively prioritise unanswered research questions. The James Lind Alliance has used this for over 100 disease conditions. Giving Evidence has twice adapted that process: for prioritising unanswered research questions around, respectively, intensive farm animal production (battery farming^{viii}), and around charities and philanthropy^{ix}.

Method for this study, in summary

We systematically conducted a scoping review of literature about women on remand in the UK. This involved systematically searching, screening and extracting information from relevant studies. We were expecting to find little research about women on remand, so we were open to a broad range of types of material. We searched academic material (e.g., journal articles, books) and non-academic material called grey literature (e.g., reports from charities, government/parliament, HM Inspectorates, think-tanks). We then screened all the material and included only documents which contain material / content about women on remand in the UK.

“Instead of just mooching through the research literature, consciously or unconsciously picking out papers here and there that support [our] pre-existing beliefs, [we] take a scientific, systematic approach to the very process of looking for scientific evidence.”

- Professor Ben Goldacre, Bad Science

To be included, studies needed to contain relevant data like numbers of women in remand over time, information of experience of remanded women, prison staff, and other prisoners (e.g., qualitative research), effects of remand on the prison system, cost analyses, evaluations of efforts to reduce the use of remand, or other types of data relevant to women on remand in the UK.

We were primarily interested in adult women in the UK who have been remanded into custody. Additionally, we were interested in family members of remanded women. Our work also sought information on professionals who interact with remanded women or their families, such as healthcare providers, police officers, magistrates, prison staff, probation and social workers, legal practitioners, community and voluntary organisations.

We included material published between 2014-24. HM Inspectorate reports about particular prisons were included if they were the latest published inspection of that prison.

We excluded news articles, short policy briefs without formalised methodologies, blog posts, opinions, viewpoints, editorials, magazine articles, conference proceedings, research summaries and letters.

This yielded 109 documents for inclusion. The method is described in detail in Appendix 1. From this information, we created the two outputs mentioned in the summary:

1. **An “Evidence and Gap Map” (EGM) in Part 1 below, which shows what literature exists about women on remand in the UK and where there are gaps.** This has 109 studies. The EGM is presented as both a ‘static’ version below and interactive versions available at <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/35/Maps/womenonremand2025.html>.
2. **A synthesis of evidence to understand what the literature says, in Part 2 below** which summarises insights, trends, and critical gaps in the evidence base.

Caveat on scope and inclusion criteria

Very few documents focused specifically on women on remand: most of the literature addresses broader topics, such as all women in prison, all remand prisoners, or the wider criminal justice system. To avoid limiting the review to very few documents, we adopted an inclusive approach: we included any document that contained material specifically relevant to women on remand, even if they were not the primary focus.

This broader inclusion strategy introduced a challenge which we call as the “mixed focus group problem.” In many cases, documents describe mixed groups—for example, a focus group of women prisoners including some on remand and others who have been sentenced—without clearly distinguishing which experiences, quotes, or findings relate specifically to women on remand. To address this, in the synthesis, we:

- included material that was clearly and explicitly about women on remand;
- included material that referred to or included women on remand, even where it was unclear which statements or findings specifically related to them i.e., which *might be* about women on remand; and
- excluded material that referred only to broader populations (e.g., all women prisoners) without offering any specific insights or data relevant to women on remand.

In this report, we denote material in the second category—which might be about women on remand—using a double asterisk (**), to show this ambiguity for readers.

This caveat is important when interpreting the findings. Though this approach allowed us to incorporate a wide range of relevant material, it also reflects the broader problem of insufficiently disaggregated data and unclear reporting in the literature.

Part 1: What literature exists about women on remand in the UK, what it covers and omits: the evidence and gap map

We found 109 documents containing material about women on remand in the UK. This section presents some overarching findings about the 109 studies and then presents the Evidence and Gap Map (EGM) which shows both areas of concentration and gaps in the existing literature. An EGM is a way of visually presenting what evidence exists to show what topics are covered by it and where there are gaps.

How to read / use an Evidence and Gap Map

An EGM is a map. We coded each included study according to the topics that it covers, and then placed it in the relevant cell/s on a grid. In the grid, the columns are thematic focus, and the rows are systemic issues. Each cell contains all the studies on that topic. So if a study relates to more than one topic, it will appear in more than one cell. If you are looking for studies on topic X, find the corresponding cell, and all the relevant studies will be there, helping you quickly identify where evidence exists (or is missing).

Figure 3 below provides a static version of the EGM. We also created an interactive online version of the EGM which is available at

<https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/35/Maps/womenonremand2025.html>. In this interactive version, you can click on a cell: this pulls up a list of the documents in it, and the abstract of each. You can also apply filters (using the button top left) to refine your search, e.g., by study design, publication date, or geographic focus.

For detailed instructions on using the interactive versions, see our step-by-step [guide](#) to using EGMs. (NB, that guide uses a different EGM - one about child maltreatment. The software has changed slightly since the screenshots in that guide were made).

Description of this Evidence and Gap Map

The EGM shows the 109 studies included in this scoping review. It displays them using three main dimensions: **thematic focus**, **systems featured**, and **specific subgroups of women on remand**.

- **Systems featured** indicate which sectors or services the study relates to, such as healthcare, social care, housing, or the criminal justice system. These are the rows.
- **Specific groups of women on remand** refer to distinct subpopulations studied, such as women with disabilities, women who are pregnant or have dependent children, or young women. The colours of the dots on the map show the groups of women discussed in the studies.
- **Thematic focus** refers to the primary topic or issue explored in the study. They are the columns. We used the themes below to categorise the studies.

Figure 2: Definitions and scope of the themes in the EGM

Theme	Definition and scope
Numbers / Trends / Prevalence / Projections	Data on the number of women on remand over time, trends in remand rates, and projections of future use
Laws / Acts / Bills / Legal Reforms	Legislation, policy changes, or judicial reforms directly or indirectly affecting women on remand
Impact of Remand / Association with Outcomes	Consequences of remand on individuals and families, links between remand and sentencing, housing, or health outcomes
Characteristics of Women on Remand	Demographic, social, and personal profiles (e.g., age, ethnicity, health, trauma history)
Systemic Issues / Experiences	Discrimination, service access, prison/remand conditions, treatment within the justice system
Reasons for Remand	Judicial decisions and factors contributing to remand use (e.g., flight risk, lack of bail address)
Interventions Relevant to Women on Remand	Programmes, services, or approaches designed to support women on remand or reduce remand use
Risk Factors	Variables statistically or thematically associated with being placed on remand
Cost of Remand / Imprisonment	Economic evaluations, cost effectiveness, or social cost of remanding women

In the **interactive online version**¹, clicking on a cell opens a window listing all studies within that intersection. This includes details such as the study title, abstract, and links to full texts where available. Hovering the cursor over a cell shows the number of studies in it, including the number associated with each subgroup.

Example: The top-left cell represents studies focused on *prevalence/trends/projections* (theme) within the *healthcare system* (system). Clicking this cell reveals that there are 17 studies in this category.

¹ Available at <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/35/Maps/womenonremand2025.html>

Evidence concentrations

As expected, **all 109 studies engage with the criminal justice system**, even when they also reference other systems. Therefore, the cells under the "crime and justice" category are the most populated across all themes.

Within the thematic dimension, the greatest concentration of evidence is seen under “**systemic issues and lived experiences**” (n=76), reflecting a strong research emphasis on structural challenges and personal narratives.

Evidence gaps

The EGM clearly highlights certain under-researched thematic areas:

- **Reasons for remand:** Only two studies explicitly focus on the reasons why women are remanded. This may be due to limited reporting or lack of clarity in the studies themselves. However, many studies indirectly touch upon risk factors that may increase the likelihood of remand.
- **Cost of remand/ cost analyses:** Only two studies examine the financial or economic implications of remanding women. This gap likely reflects a broader lack of formal cost evaluations in this area.

In terms of systems, **housing-related studies (n=22)** and **multi-sector studies (n=24)** are noticeably fewer. In contrast, healthcare—especially **mental health**—has more evidence. This may be due to greater availability of data, stronger research interest, or more structured service delivery within the health sector.

In terms of the **rate of publication of material** about women on remand in the UK, there is no particular pattern. In some other sectors, there is a pattern of work having increased or fallen over time, but not here.

[illegible]

1. More material than expected

Importantly, many of the included documents are not formal research studies—for example, they include opinion pieces, monitoring reports, and advocacy publications. Hence, we sometimes refer to them as “documents” rather than “studies.”

2. Women on remand are often a secondary focus

Only two documents explicitly stated ‘women on remand’ as a central topic in the documents.

Women on remand are often a secondary focus, which complicates / prevents extracting findings that are specifically relevant to this group. This suggests that women on remand are frequently addressed incidentally, rather than as a distinct population deserving dedicated attention.

3. The literature prioritises lived experience, but lacks granularity / specificity and connection to policies and prescriptions

Lived experience research plays a vital role in understanding the realities of women on remand. These accounts can be powerful in revealing where and how the system can fail: a tragic example is that of Rianna Cleary, who, aged 18, was on remand at HMP Bronzefield in Surrey: she gave birth alone in her cell after her calls for help were unanswered, and her baby died (Epstein, 2020). Lived experience accounts are also essential for any meaningful reform: policy and practice cannot be improved without hearing the voice of those most affected. First-hand accounts help identify harm, illuminate institutional blind spots, and offer insight into how systems operate in practice rather than on paper.

However, much of the lived experience research about women on remand lacks specificity and is unconnected to the policies and operational practices it aims to critique or inform. For example, the accounts rarely state the demographics of the woman remanded, or her time on remand, or why she was remanded. As discussed, often the accounts of women in prison include both women on remand and those who are sentenced so it is unclear which is which. This impedes seeing how these insights might influence change. There is a need for more detailed reporting which links personal testimony to systematic analysis, to enable such research to influence policy.

4. More detailed and better quantitative data, and causal investigations are needed

There is scant **robust or detailed quantitative data / analysis**, including studies about who is remanded and why. Intersectional data — disaggregated by race, age, disability, pregnancy, parental status, and other key factors — are few, inconsistently reported, and not systematically analysed. Even basic data—such as the number of pregnant women or mothers who are on remand, or the specific remand status of individuals — are often lacking, inconsistently categorised, or buried within broader reporting on the female prison population. We found no material about LGBTQ women on remand.

Quantitative research in this area lacks the specificity and rigour needed for meaningful change—or to justify the continued use of remand at all.

Few studies use **longitudinal approaches to understand outcomes over time**, and advanced statistical or intersectional methods are rarely used. There is also a dearth of evidence about ‘what works’: only seven documents addressed the effectiveness of interventions relevant to women on remand, and all of them lacked critical design features such as control groups or valid / useful outcome measures. The one which looked at influencing magistrates’ behaviour - through training - only measured the magistrates’ satisfaction with the training, rather than attempting to ascertain whether their behaviour changed as a result. Just 26 documents discussed any interventions at all.

This evidence gap makes it nearly impossible to assess which interventions are effective in:

- Preventing women from being remanded in the first place,
- Improving their experience while on remand, or
- Supporting their wellbeing and outcomes post-release.

Without better data, regular disaggregated reporting, and rigorous analysis, the use of remand for women cannot be meaningfully interrogated or reformed. Instead, its continued use is normalised and left unchallenged. Addressing this gap is not simply a matter of research quality—it is central to building an evidence-based case for ending the use of remand for women altogether.

5. Skewed thematic emphasis

The literature heavily emphasises systemic issues and lived experience (76 documents), which provides valuable context but often lacks a strong evidential link to outcomes or reform levers. Though the 76 documents offer important contextual insights based on lived experiences—highlighting the voices of women on remand and describing systemic challenges—they often **lacked direct links to measurable outcomes**, such as reductions in reoffending, improvements in mental health, or successful reintegration. As a result, though these narratives are powerful and essential for understanding the human impact of remand, they do not provide the evidence needed to assess the effectiveness of specific interventions or policies. Conversely, few studies addressed legal reforms (n=23), the specific effects of remand (17), the characteristics of women on remand (19), reasons for remand (two), or cost analyses (two). This imbalance may reinforce anecdotal or advocacy-led narratives without grounding them in evaluative evidence.

6. Research methods used

Qualitative methods dominated the included material (55 documents): quantitative and mixed methods were underused (10 and 28, respectively). Moreover, 18 documents did not state their method or approach. The included material includes journal articles (34) and book chapters (15), and multiple other types of publication ('grey literature') including theses (four), reports (37), and research and technical briefs (two).

We also included 13 HM inspectorate of prison reports and an additional four reports published by the Independent Monitoring Board (please note we only included the most recent inspection and monitoring reports for a particular intervention). Journal articles are meant to have some kind of quality control through peer review (though that has been shown many times to be very unreliable).

Documents principally focused on England (79) and Wales (48). 12 documents focused on Scotland and five on Northern Ireland.

In sum, the literature reveals much about what is happening, but far less about why it is happening, what is effective, or how to implement meaningful change — leaving a critical gap in the evidence to support policy or intervention design.

7. Justice system dominates, but evidence is siloed

The justice system itself dominates the evidence. Other sectors are significantly less represented: healthcare (66 documents), welfare and social care (47), housing (22), and multi-agency responses (24). Very few studies examine how these systems interact, missing key opportunities to understand the cumulative impact of overlapping service failures. Moreover, intersectional considerations are notably absent: 57 documents did not mention ethnicity, and 65 made no reference to nationality.

8. Focus on specific subgroups is uneven and often limited

Finally, the focus on specific subgroups of women on remand is uneven and often limited. Some attention has been paid to pregnant women or those with dependent children (discussed in 21 documents) and to those experiencing mental health difficulties (19). However, other groups are far less represented: ethnic minority women (15), foreign national women (six), migrant women (five), women with disabilities (two), young adults (two), older women (one), and women with physical health conditions (one). No document addressed LGBTQ women on remand. Nearly half of the included studies (48) did not specify any subgroup characteristics, referring to women on remand in broad or generic terms. This lack of detailed or intersectional analysis suggests that many lived realities remain underexplored or entirely absent from the evidence.

Part 2: What that literature says

This section synthesises the findings of the various studies.

First, we explain the documents which are used in this section. For this synthesis, we excluded non-systematic reviews. That left 74 studies. Of those, 10 were excluded because their findings did not have clear, specific findings suitable for synthesis. So this synthesis draws on 64 studies.

We deliberately synthesised the findings of those 64 studies under the same themes as we used during the coding. Additionally, we introduced some sub themes to keep the findings organised. Thus the synthesis is presented in the following sections:

1. Numbers / trends / prevalence / projections
 - Prison-level data: prevalence of women on remand
 - Ethnic disparities in remand decisions
 - Challenges with data coverage and specificity, and interpreting the available data
 - Gender differences in court outcomes
2. Laws / acts / bills / legal reforms
3. Effects of remand
4. Systemic issues / experiences
 - Challenges in resettlement (housing on release)
 - Systemic issues concerning prisons
 - Systemic issues concerning courts
5. Family experience and coping
6. Effectiveness of interventions relevant to women on remand
7. Characteristics, risk factors and reasons for women being on remand
8. Cost of remand / imprisonment

Numbers / trends / prevalence / projections

Prison-level data: prevalence of women on remand

According to the Ministry of Justice (2025), as of 30 June 2024, there were 17,100 people in prison on remand in England, 900 of whom were women. This is approximately 5% of the total remand population, a proportion that has remained consistent over the past five years.

Inspection reports across the UK illustrate that women on remand are a substantial share of the female prison population. For example:

- HMP/YOI Peterborough (2023): 40% of women were on remand.
- Hydebank Wood (2024): 48% of the population were on remand. (Hydebank Wood is in Northern Ireland, where the term 'committal status' is used to refer to people held in custody while awaiting a court decision or sentence and is equivalent to remand elsewhere in the UK).
- HMP Styal (2024): 26% of women were on remand.
- Eastwood Park (2023): 30% of women were held on remand.
- HMP New Hall (2023): Approximately 50 women were on remand during the inspection.

There is some evidence of rising use of remand. In Northern Ireland, Campbell (2020) reported a 35% increase in female remand receptions in the four years 2015-2019. In Scotland, Bissell (2024) found that 33% of the female prison population was on remand in 2023—an increase from 29% in 2021–22. Women on remand were also notably overrepresented in mental health-related hospital transfers.

Ethnic disparities in remand decisions

Agenda Alliance (2023) highlighted racial disparities in remand outcomes:

- At Crown Court, 30% of Black women defendants were remanded into custody, compared to 28% of Asian women and 26% of white women.
- At Magistrates' Courts, 10% of Asian and Black women defendants were remanded, compared to 7% of white women.

Robson (2020) states that foreign national women also are a growing share of remand admissions, raising further concerns about equity, access to legal support, and appropriate service provision. From 2017-2019, foreign national women made up 16.4% of the female remand population.

Challenges with data coverage and specificity, and interpreting the available data

All the systematic reviews included cited challenges in accessing remand-specific and female-specific data. Most of the primary studies in the Joana (2023) global systematic review were UK-based (n=21), and most exclusively concerned adult men. Where women were included, data were often not disaggregated by remand status, primarily due to small sample sizes.

Remand prisoners, and particularly women on remand, remain under-researched compared to sentenced prisoners, despite them being a substantial proportion of the prison population. Systematic reviews consistently reported that obtaining clear, disaggregated UK data by gender, sentence status, ethnicity, or other characteristics is difficult.

Gender differences in court outcomes

The Ministry of Justice (2025) identified several gender differences in remand and sentencing outcomes (listed below). These figures suggest that though women are often remanded, they may ultimately receive more lenient sentencing outcomes than men, pointing to potential inconsistencies in how risk and need are assessed at different stages of the justice process.

- Magistrates' Courts:
 - Women were less likely than men to be bailed or remanded.
 - Of those remanded, 58% of women were sent to Crown Court, compared to 73% of men.
- Crown Court:
 - Women were more likely to be granted bail—67% of women compared to 45% of men.
 - Of all the women who entered Crown Court, only 32% of women were remanded into custody, compared to 64% of men.

- Sentencing outcomes:
 - At magistrates' courts, 15% of women received immediate custody compared to 10% of men.
 - At Crown Court, 54% of women received immediate custody, versus 72% of men.
 - Women were more likely to receive suspended sentences: 15% compared to 8% of men.

Laws / acts / bills / legal reforms

Procedural gaps

Several reports highlight procedural shortcomings that disproportionately affect women on remand. The Towards Race Equality report (2022)** found that many women felt they had fewer rights than sentenced prisoners, calling into question the fairness of remand procedures. Similarly, Agenda Alliance (2023)** and HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2023) noted inconsistent implementation of reforms and deficiencies in risk assessment processes, which often overlook the complex needs of women in custody.

Calls for reform and alternatives to custodial remand

Several documents call for systemic reform to reduce reliance on custodial remand for women. Campbell (2020) and Armstrong (2023) advocated for gender-specific alternatives, improved bail support services, and using therapeutic jurisprudence frameworks. Armstrong (2023) further emphasised trauma-informed and gender-responsive judicial approaches, aligned with the Bangkok Rules², as strategies to reduce unnecessary remand.

Section 5 of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act

Singh (2021) explored the effect of Section 5 of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act (as amended in 2012), particularly its disproportionate application to women in cases of child harm. Women were frequently remanded when accused of "allowing" harm, even when evidence pointed to male partners as the perpetrators. In high-profile cases such as R v Green and Critchley and R v Rigby and Smedley, women were held on remand for extended periods—around six months in one case. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded these harms by delaying proceedings and limiting maternal contact with children.

Even after acquittal, many women faced lasting consequences, including barriers to regaining custody of their children and difficulties securing employment. These outcomes were often shaped by the lower evidentiary thresholds applied to women. Singh (2021) argues that the threshold of what is reasonable is set too high in these cases, and "...that the foreseeability of harm can more readily be established in the case of mothers due to conventional expectations of them that do not apply to fathers. This

² The Bangkok Rules are the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders. They were adopted in December 2010 and address the specific needs and circumstances of women within the criminal justice system.

crime of omission is all too easily proven in a culture where mothers are expected to be omnipresent and are assumed to be responsible for every aspect of childcare and child safety” (p.199 in Singh, 2021).

Effects of remand

Mental health and emotional distress

Remand frequently results in severe psychological stress. Caulfield (2016) found that many women with no prior mental health issues developed anxiety and depression soon after being remanded, with uncertainty and disruption exacerbating these effects.

Systematic reviews by Pitfield (2023) and Bright (2023) also reported high levels of emotional distress and unmet psychological needs among women in custody, including those on remand. Although most studies did not split out the data for women on remand vs sentenced women prisoners, the overall burden of mental ill-health was evident. Joana (2023) highlighted the lack of tailored mental health interventions for women in custody, constrained by inconsistent data and fragmented care pathways.

Effect/s of remand on children and family life

Inspection reports from HMP Eastwood Park (2023) and Hydebank Wood (a prison and “secure college”) (2024) identified limited support for maintaining family connections during remand, undermining wellbeing of children and other dependents, and resettlement prospects. At Hydebank, women had lower reoffending rates than men but were more likely to breach community orders, emphasising the need for gender-responsive support. One woman had been remanded seven times over two years, creating sustained instability for her and her children.

Minson (2017) also illustrated how remand disrupts families. Minson (2017) reported an average remand duration of 37 days—enough to disrupt families, housing, and finances. One in five women on remand in Minson’s sample were not ultimately convicted, indicating that the social costs of remand are often unjustified. Many of these women were primary caregivers, so their dependents may be harmed. In one example cited, a mother held on remand for over seven months left her child in the care of a grandmother who lacked formal parental responsibility. This prevented the family from being able to apply for and access more suitable housing, illustrating how remand disrupts family structures and excludes children from statutory support.

HMIP report about Hydebank Wood (2024)** and Abbott (2015)** observed that women are often detained without warning or the chance to arrange childcare. Combined with a shortage of Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) spaces—70 in the UK despite more than 60% of women in prison being mothers—this leads to emotional trauma^x. Some women only learned post-birth whether they could remain with their babies.

Epstein (2020)** found one of the system's most serious failings: as mentioned earlier, a pregnant woman on remand, gave birth alone in her cell, and the baby died. The case underscored the system's

failure to adequately care for pregnant women, provide trauma-informed care or account for the legal and medical needs of pregnant women during remand.

Barriers to accessing mother and baby units (MBUs)

Women on remand face pronounced challenges in accessing MBUs. MBUs are separate units within a prison meaning that a woman who is in prison, and allocated a space, can keep her baby with her for until the child is 18-months-old. A pregnant woman has to apply for a place on an MBU and waiting for the decision can be an anxious time for her. There are eight MBUs in the UK: six in England, two in Scotland and none in Wales.

Pitfield (2023) found that delays and inconsistencies in decision-making heightened maternal anxiety. Abbott (2015)** and Epstein (2020)** documented the emotional toll of this uncertainty, with women fearful of being separated from their infants.

Sikand (2015) reported that many eligible women did not apply, often due to lack of information—particularly for those who are not pregnant, but who do have babies in the community. When women did apply for MBUs, Ostwaite (2022) found that remanded women were more likely to be turned down than women serving custodial sentences.

Trowler's (2022) review of 39 rejected MBU applications (including applications by women on remand) revealed issues with the decision-making process for allocating MBU places in over a third. In one case, a remanded woman was denied solely based on the seriousness of the alleged offence, despite no parenting concerns and having professional support. A third of rejected applications involved women who were remanded, raising concerns about the fairness and consistency of these crucial decisions.

Systemic issues / experiences

Under this theme of systemic issues and lived experiences, many studies explored broad challenges faced by women in prison, sometimes including findings on all prisoners or all women prisoners rather than exclusively women on remand. However, we ensured that every included study contained relevant insights on women on remand, even if they were part of a broader population. Wherever possible, we highlighted the specificity of data related to women on remand and clearly noted when findings applied more generally.

Poor management of mental health issues in crime and justice system

Tomczak (2022) examined four tragic case studies where individuals with severe mental health issues were remanded to prison and died by suicide. One concerns Sarah Reed, a 32-year-old woman suffering from serious mental illness, was remanded to HMP Holloway in 2015 solely to obtain psychiatric reports assessing her fitness to plead. Despite being on bail previously, her non-attendance at two psychiatric appointments led the Crown Court to order her remand. During three months in custody, only one report was completed, and her mental health significantly deteriorated. By the time of her death in January 2016, no court date had been fixed for a fitness hearing. The coroner emphasised that if the psychiatric reports had been obtained earlier, a hospital order under

the Criminal Procedure (Insanity) Act 1964 could have been imposed instead of imprisonment. The case exposed serious procedural gaps, with unclear responsibility between the Court and prison for report coordination, and highlighted the urgent need for timely, robust, and well-managed mechanisms to assess and treat mentally unwell defendants. The findings underscored the importance of judicial awareness of alternative hospital transfer provisions, and of more assessment capacity and mental health beds.

Johnstone (2024) highlighted that the absence of pre-sentence reports (PSRs), especially for minority ethnic women, leads courts to rely on incomplete or biased information when making decisions about remanding women. One probation officer stressed the importance of fair assessments, especially for women with complex needs such as mental illness or substance misuse. One example involved a woman with epilepsy remanded despite being stable, due to delays in pre-sentence reports linked to pending psychiatric evaluations.

An HMIP report about HMP Eastwood Park (2022)** revealed that 83% of women reported mental health difficulties. One-third of inmates were on remand, yet they were largely excluded from psychological and practical support. Bright (2023) noted wide variation in mental health service access across prisons and found that remanded women were rarely prioritised. Pitfield (2023) pointed to significant gaps in continuity of care, particularly in relation to maternal mental health.

Racism within the crime and justice system

Various findings suggest that systemic racism and bias affect remand decisions for women.

The Lammy Review (2017)** called on the Ministry of Justice to address systemic racism, including in remand and sentencing decisions. The Lammy Report states that racial disparities disproportionately affect Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women (Lammy Report's term), with BAME women more likely than White women to be remanded.

Studies by Ali (2020)**, Agenda Alliance (2023)**, Johnstone (2024), and HMI (2022)** found that 'racially minoritised' (Agenda Alliance's term), migrant, and foreign national women are more likely to be remanded. The Towards Race Equality report (2022)** reported that minoritised women on remand in prison often face bullying by staff and a lack of cultural competence among prison personnel.

Hales (2017) noted, based on interviews, that many migrant women pleaded guilty to get out as soon as possible. This is sometimes advised by their solicitor, and sometimes based on a belief that pleading not guilty would lengthen their time in custody and in some instances separation from dependent children. Some felt pressure from co-defendants. Asylum interviews often happened in prison, without adequate legal support. Hales (2017) recommended clearer communication of legal processes - such as indictment and pleas - through subtitled induction videos.

Robson (2020) identified four key barriers to improving decision making in courts for foreign national women:

1. Poor police evidence quality: Bail applications were undermined by weak or incomplete police reports, particularly affecting non-English speakers.
2. Limited participation in bail hearings: Interpreter delays and ineffective translation often restricted meaningful engagement, and remote hearings hampered communication.
3. Presumed flight risk: Foreign nationality was frequently used to justify remand—even when charges were minor and there were no immigration violations. Women who were victims of trafficking or lacked safe housing were especially vulnerable to this presumption.
4. Material disadvantage: Foreign national women often lacked housing, legal status, or financial support. This made it more difficult to satisfy bail conditions such as sureties (a promise by a third party to forfeit money or a valuable item) or security (a deposit of money or a valuable item by the defendant or third party), even for women of good character. In many cases, remand was effectively used as a tool of immigration control. Robson (2020) argues that the expansion of border control in the criminal justice system has led to the rise of a risk-averse culture that is directed at foreign nationals. Intimately linked to racialised anxieties around immigration and crime, ‘foreignness’ itself has become grounds for suspicion when assessing criminality and risk. This drives punitive bail decisions for foreign national women, who are treated as a suspect population: perceived not to belong and so at risk of absconding. Widely recognised as a vulnerable and disadvantaged group, they are less equipped to dispute these suspicions and have limited access to alternatives to custodial remand.

Challenges in resettlement (housing on release)

Remanded women are often ineligible for / excluded from core resettlement services: ‘resettlement’ here means housing on release. HMIP reports (2024)** from HMP Eastwood Park and Foston Hall found that support contracts (e.g. support for mental health, resettlement and interventions to support and develop positive parent-child relationships) typically excluded and were not offered women on remand, despite pressing needs around housing, mental health, and safeguarding.

A joint inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2024)** noted critical service gaps, especially in tenancy and family support. However, HMP Peterborough and HMP New Hall were praised for more inclusive approaches, offering housing, financial, and parenting assistance. Key worker continuity was highly valued by women (HMIP, 2024)**.

Carr (2016) found that disjointed communication among courts, housing agencies, and prisons frequently resulted in homelessness upon release. Carr (2016) highlighted how short prison stays and unpredictable release dates hinder planning for housing and support on release. Providers were often unwilling to engage with remanded women due to these uncertainties.

Minson (2017) observed that remand frequently disrupted housing, especially when no legal guardian could be appointed for children. Bissell (2024) found minimal planning for re-entry, with remanded women often released without support for mental health, housing, or safeguarding.

Kerr (2014) reported that in Northern Ireland, gender-responsive reforms failed to reach over half the female population at Hydebank Wood, especially those on remand or sentenced for defaulting on fines. These women lacked access to gender-specific services like Inspire, a probation-led project gender specific community supervision and interventions programme.

Lack of communication and coordination between agencies

Multiple studies highlight poor coordination between agencies. Delayed support, missed referrals, and difficulties in arranging essentials like housing or notifying employers were common. Although some prison staff were proactive, systemic fragmentation left many women unprepared for release (HMIP 2024^{**}; Carr 2016; Minson 2017).

Minson (2017) similarly highlighted a breakdown between courts and social services, with little consideration of children's welfare when mothers were remanded.

Systemic issues concerning prisons

a. Male-centric prisons

Carr (2016) contends that the prison system continues to be predominantly designed around the needs and profiles of male offenders. Although some reforms have been introduced, they are often grounded in male-oriented research and practices, raising concerns about their relevance and effectiveness for female prisoners. Carr (2016) highlights that even in women's institutions offering ostensibly 'distinctive' programmes, these are frequently underpinned by gendered assumptions that fail to address women's actual needs. According to Carr (2016), research shows that women in prison experience higher levels of distress and are less likely than men to access meaningful rehabilitative opportunities such as education, vocational training, or employment preparation. Instead, they are disproportionately assigned to domestic tasks. This gender-insensitivity marginalises female inmates—especially those on remand or serving short sentences—by neglecting the gender-specific pathways to offending, which often involve trauma, abuse, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Daily routines within such institutions tend to prioritise discipline and productivity over rehabilitation, thereby overlooking the complex and distinct needs of women in custody.

b. Lack of a female prison in Wales

The Prison Reform Trust (2014) reported that the absence of a female prison³ hindered health and justice integration. Consequently, women who are sent to prison in Wales - including but not limited to those on remand - are likely to be sent fairly far away, which impedes retaining family access etc. (Prison Reform Trust, 2014). Stakeholders suggested that dedicated facilities could improve health outcomes and reduce reoffending.

³ Despite that report being 11 years old, there is still no women's prison in Wales.

c. Inefficient facilities related sports and physical activity for female prisoners

Meek (2014)** found that exercise helped women cope with imprisonment, but both institutional restrictions and gendered factors like body image and motivation limited participation.

d. Prison staff behaviour

Kelman (2024) identified four recurring themes: trauma, power dynamics, trust, and resilience. Whereas peer support helped some women cope, staff behaviours and the prison environment often worsened trauma. The study called for trauma-informed care, improved design, and staff training.

e. Insufficient support for pregnant mothers in prison

Abbott (2018) found that women on remand faced unclear and inconsistent information about maternity entitlements while in prison. Caroline, a pregnant remanded prisoner, was ten days overdue yet still required to work, receiving conflicting advice from staff and her solicitor regarding her right to maternity leave. Her eventual leave was unplanned and occurred by chance. She was separated from her baby, and requested returning to work to manage her grief, but this was denied. Anticipated separation from their babies caused significant emotional distress for remanded pregnant women, with some expressing guilt and fear about bonding. Caroline, who had never been in prison before, highlighted how first-time, pregnant remand prisoners entered the system “blind,” and required tailored support and clear information about their rights and entitlements.

Systemic issues concerning courts

a. Inefficient support for mothers and dependent children

Minson (2017) highlighted that, whereas family courts consider children's welfare, criminal courts often do not. Judges rarely assess the effect of remand on children. Some viewed caregiving claims as manipulative; others accepted that punishing mothers' harms children.

Minson (2020)** further found that judges often failed to conduct the "balancing exercise" required by case law when sentencing mothers. Though aware of the requirement, they seldom applied it.

Monish (2023) shared the story of Justine, who was remanded after her arrest and later sentenced to eight months. During her arrest, she begged not to be separated from her 2½-year-old son, but the police insisted. Social services took her child, and she wasn't told where he was for over two weeks:

I said [to the police officers]: I don't want to leave my child. They said: 'you have to!' After a few hours, two social workers came to ask: 'do you have any relatives?' I said: No. They took my child away. After that I did not hear from them. The next day they took me to the Magistrates' Court . . . Solicitor requested the judge for bail, as I had a little child but he [the judge] said 'no'. They kept me in [remand] prison. Two weeks later I came to know about my son. After a few weeks the [prison] officer called: 'Justine you have a court hearing via video link' . . . Judge then said: 'charges number one section xx, charges number 2' [rhyming all the charges] and then: 'guilty or not guilty'? I went mad

and screamed: guilty, guilty, guilty. I couldn't understand what they were charging me for? . . . Judge gave me 8 months [custodial sentence]

Justine found the legal process confusing and overwhelming—she didn't fully understand the charges and felt pressured to plead guilty. She described the remand experience as traumatic, especially because the distance from her son's foster placement made visits difficult, worsening her emotional pain and sense of injustice.

b. Court delays

Masson (2024) reported that court delays intensified the distress of remand, creating prolonged uncertainty even for families with prior justice system experience.

Family experience and coping

Masson (2022) found that families of remanded individuals often used neutralisation⁴ to explain the offence and reduce feelings of blame. Common strategies included denial of guilt or blaming the system. Some refrained from rationalising altogether, but many maintained contact with imprisoned relatives.

In Masson (2024), families described remand as emotionally devastating, likening it to a death. First-time remand cases were especially distressing. Families reported mental strain and exhaustion. Some actively worked to secure privileges for their loved ones, but often lacked the information to do so.

Systematic reviews, especially Joana (2023), noted that the underlying drivers of remand—such as mental health crises, homelessness, and bias—are rarely interrogated in depth in the literature, despite recurring in qualitative accounts.

Effectiveness of interventions relevant to women on remand

Various interventions have been developed to support women on remand across courts, prisons, and community services. These include advocacy-based programmes, gender-specific diversion schemes, and trauma-informed care models. However, their scale, consistency, and the strength of evidence of their effectiveness are limited.

Promising approaches

Several initiatives offer encouraging models for reducing the use and harm of custodial remand:

⁴ Adopting neutralisations may enable people in prison to be viewed not as those who have harmed, or bad people, but as those who themselves have been harmed. Potential benefits of these techniques are twofold: they help to reject stigma; and explain and enable continued contact. This framework may be a useful basis for work exploring familial contact and support for those affected by imprisonment.

- Alternatives to Custodial Remand for Women (ACRW; Forrester, 2020): A court-based initiative providing rapid assessments and referrals to support women in the community. Most participants successfully avoided custody.
- Therapeutic Jurisprudence (Armstrong, 2023)**: Advocates for trauma-informed, gender-sensitive approaches in courtrooms, aligned with international frameworks such as the Bangkok Rules.
- Whole-Prison Resettlement Models: Joint inspections found that HMP Peterborough and HMP New Hall delivered inclusive resettlement support—such as housing and financial assistance—to both sentenced and remanded women (HMI, 2024**).
- Community justice: Findings from One Small Thing, a charity, (2024) show strong support for community-based alternatives. One Small Thing ran a survey which was completed by over 71 professionals. Most respondents were from the women-specific voluntary sector, followed by the wider voluntary sector and then the probation service. Respondents also included individuals from the prisons and probation inspectorate, academics and former probation officers. In its survey, 94% of respondents preferred community support over short prison sentences for women, citing benefits such as maintaining family ties and housing stability. There are many types of alternative measures existing in the UK like community orders, suspended sentences and problem-solving courts, etc. However, there is a knowledge gap among practitioners about these non-custodial pathways. The study found over half of the practitioners surveyed were familiar with community orders (56%) and suspended sentences (55%), but only 34% practitioners knew about problem-solving courts or diversion schemes (25%).

Evidence of effectiveness

We found only seven studies which assessed relevant programmes, none of which met the standard of formal impact evaluations. Most used qualitative or mixed methods to explore feasibility, acceptability, and perceived outcomes rather than measuring actual outcomes or attempting to establish causal impact.

Major limitations in these studies included: having no control groups; collecting only self-reported data; not addressing missing data (which matters because missing data may disproportionately be for people who dropped out because the programme was awful); and lack of follow-up (which prevents assessing longer-term effects). In some cases, outcomes were measured only indirectly: for example, through participant satisfaction: such measures may not relate to actual outcomes, such as participants then changing their practices.

Details and critical appraisals of these studies, including methodological limitations, are provided in Appendix 3.

The reviewed interventions included:

- Female Offender Strategy: Evaluated through two studies (one impact-focused, one equality assessment) for its aims to reduce custody and address gender-specific needs (Ministry of Justice, 2018).

- SPARC (Supporting People After Remand or Conviction): Delivered transitional support from court to custody. However, outcome data was available only for male participants (Smith, 2020).
- Specialist Neurodevelopmental Disorders (ND) Service: Embedded within a Court Mental Health Liaison framework, this initiative aimed to improve case outcomes through enhanced screening and diagnosis (Chaplin, 2021).
- Transforming Lives (Prison Reform Trust, 2014): An advocacy and research initiative targeting reductions in women's imprisonment via systemic collaboration and policy change.
- "Here and Now" (Barnardo's Scotland; Vasmani, 2019): Provided trauma-informed psychotherapeutic support, bereavement counselling, and pre-release planning for women.

Characteristics, risk factors and reasons for women being on remand

There is little research specifically into the reasons that remand is used for women, i.e., why judges and magistrates use it, which relates to how one might influence them to use it less. However, research consistently indicates that many women are remanded not solely for alleged criminal behaviour but rather due to systemic and social issues: i.e., that those 'factors' increase their chances of being remanded. These factors include homelessness, lack of a fixed bail address, untreated trauma, or discrimination. Several studies note that most women on remand are charged with non-violent offences (e.g. Carr, 2016). Ethnic minority women and Foreign National Women are also disproportionately affected, with racism and bias influencing remand decisions (Agenda Alliance, 2023; Robson, 2020; Johnstone, 2024).

Why remand is used

Only two studies explicitly examine the underlying reasons for remand decisions: Epstein (2020) and the Prison Reform Trust (2017).

There is a notable absence of research into judicial decision-making: how magistrates and judges assess risk, interpret women's personal circumstances, or weigh mitigating factors during bail hearings. This is a serious gap which significantly impairs work to reduce or eliminate the use of remand for women.

Epstein's (2020) research focused on pregnant women in prison, and found that women are routinely remanded for minor, non-violent offences, often with no evidence of risk to public safety. Courts were found to frequently dismiss or overlook mitigating factors, including pregnancy, caregiving responsibilities, and serious health conditions. Epstein argues that such social vulnerabilities—rather than disqualifying remand—often increase the likelihood of it, as courts treat them as complications to be managed through detention rather than reasons to seek community-based, supportive alternatives. The study concludes that judges and magistrates routinely fail to account for women's life circumstances, especially when they complicate the logistics of bail or non-custodial sentencing.

Similarly, the Prison Reform Trust (2017) identifies domestic abuse as a key driver behind many women's remand and imprisonment. The report shows that women often enter the criminal justice

system after being coerced by abusive partners—for example, forced to commit offences under threat—or after acting in self-defence. Many are remanded for actions that stem from survival behaviours, such as minor theft, use of force, or drug possession. Crucially, courts and criminal justice agencies often fail to recognise these experiences as mitigating, instead treating them as purely criminal. There is little specialist support at the various stages from initial police contact through to court: that means histories of abuse are often overlooked, and women are remanded because their behaviour is misinterpreted as a public risk rather than a consequence of abuse and trauma.

More broadly, the literature consistently indicates that many women are remanded not primarily because of the alleged offence, but due to systemic and social disadvantages that increase their likelihood of being remanded. These include complex and unmet needs, mental health care needs, lack of community resources, and risk of self-harm.

These factors—explored in the following sections—create a context in which remand becomes a default response to unmet need, rather than a carefully applied legal safeguard. The system's lack of flexibility, appropriate services, and understanding of women's circumstances often leads to remand decisions that are disproportionate, harmful, and avoidable.

Women with complex and unmet needs

An HMIP report found that in HMP Peterborough (2023) all women on remand were reported to have complex and unmet needs. Carr (2016) found that many women serving short sentences or held on remand experienced cycles of crisis—especially homelessness, addiction, and trauma. Some women admitted to reoffending deliberately to return to custody, viewing prison as a temporary refuge in the absence of stable housing or external support. This reflects a broader pattern where women's offending and remand experiences are symptomatic of systemic deprivation, rather than individual criminal intent.

Systematic reviews by Joana (2023) and Bright (2023) reinforce this, highlighting overlapping social, health, and psychological vulnerabilities among women on remand.

Women with mental healthcare needs

Mental health concerns are especially prevalent among women on remand. Bebbington (2017) identified high levels of psychiatric morbidity in this group, underscoring the need for early and tailored interventions. Afia (2016) found that women with intellectual disabilities were disproportionately remanded - even controlling for offence type and demographics - suggesting discrimination or lack of appropriate community options.

In Scotland, Bissell (2024) reported that although women comprise just 3.6% of the prison population, they represented 20% of forensic inpatient hospital transfers. Moreover, 33% of imprisoned women were on remand, compared to 24% of men—an increase from 29% in 2021–22. These figures indicate that women on remand are both overrepresented and often face acute mental health challenges.

Qualitative accounts in Grace (2022) further illustrate how trauma, substance dependency, and psychological distress contribute to women's vulnerability to remand and criminalisation.

Lack of community-based alternatives

Armstrong (2023)** and Campbell (2020) argue that the overuse of remand is partly driven by the absence of robust community-based alternatives. Without appropriate housing, mental health provision, or trauma-informed bail support, courts often default to remand—even for women who are low risk to public safety.

Risk of self-harm

Certain risk factors within the prison environment increase the likelihood of self-harm, although remand status alone may not be one of them. Knight (2017) found that being female significantly increased the likelihood of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), with women at notably higher risk than men^{5**}. However, remand status did not, by itself, lead to higher rates of NSSI for either gender**.

Horton (2024) similarly found that remand status and ethnicity were not strong predictors of self-harm. Whereas previous contact with mental health services predicted self-harm in men, it was not a significant factor for women. The most consistent predictor across both genders was a prior history of self-harm.

Cost of remand / imprisonment

Families Outside (2023) highlighted the significant and often hidden financial burden placed on families when a mother is remanded. In addition to coping without the mother's income or childcare support, families have to absorb various costs associated with maintaining contact and providing basic support.

Nugent (2022) found that remand was not only emotionally distressing but also financially draining. On average, families travelled 74 miles per visit, spending around five hours and £70 per month on travel alone. Additional monthly expenses included £60 on snacks during visits, £100 deposited into the woman's personal account to cover costs in prison, and £55 on miscellaneous costs—totalling approximately £300 per month. For some families, this was “all of their income and most were spending around a half”. [It is unclear to us whether this refers to their entire income or some subset, e.g., discretionary income or income after housing costs.] These financial pressures added to the stress and instability already caused by the remand period.

⁵ OR 1.77, 95% CI 1.32–2.38, $p < 0.001$.

Final reflections

Taken together, these findings show an evidence base rich in anecdotes and experiential narratives, but thin in evaluations which could inform effective policy or practice, and little about why women are remanded at all. The lived experience literature demonstrates urgent need for reform and gives voice to women on remand and, in some cases, their families and support workers. Though these perspectives are powerful and necessary, they offer limited guidance on 'what works' to improve outcomes for women on remand. The scarcity of rigorous impact evaluations, longitudinal studies, and intersectional analyses provides decision-makers with insufficient evidence to design, implement, or scale interventions that are responsive to the specific needs of this group. As a result, **the collective understanding of women on remand in the UK remains fragmented and incomplete, focused more on describing problems than testing or evidencing solutions.** Identifying effective solutions - which requires rigorous impact evaluations - is essential for evidence-informed change. But more fundamentally, the lack of clarity around **why women are remanded at all**, combined with the absence of evidence on effectiveness, calls into question the very legitimacy of using remand for women. A stronger, more systematic evidence base is urgently needed not just to improve the experience of remand, but to make the case for **ending its use for women altogether.**

Strengths of this study

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first and most comprehensive scoping review to date that systematically maps all existing evidence related to women on remand in the UK. Though four previous systematic reviews have been conducted on this population, each of them was limited in scope, focusing exclusively on mental healthcare. In contrast, our review was cross-sectoral and intersectional, encompassing a wide range of systems including health, criminal justice, housing, social care, and more.

Our scoping review draws on both qualitative and quantitative evidence from across all four nations of the UK—England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—and diverse sources and study designs. It represents the most extensive and organised evidence base available on this topic to date.

This study also goes beyond simply cataloguing the literature. It synthesises insights on the lived experiences of women on remand, the systemic challenges they face, the prevalence and trends in remand practices, the effectiveness of current interventions, and projections for future policy needs. It also identifies promising practices and potential solutions to inform more gender-sensitive, humane, and effective responses across sectors.

This review serves as a foundation for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to better understand and respond to the unique needs and circumstances of women on remand—a group that has historically been underserved and under-researched. It underscores the importance of coordinated, multisectoral action and contributes significantly to the growing momentum for justice and health system reforms grounded in equity and evidence.

Limitations of our study

We limited our search to studies published within the last 10 years (2014–2024) to ensure that the review reflected the most recent and policy-relevant developments concerning women on remand. This timeframe was chosen deliberately to align with current social, legal, and institutional contexts, recognising that outdated findings may no longer be applicable. While this decision helped maintain relevance, we acknowledge that some valuable historical insights may have been missed.

The review concerns exclusively the UK: this scope was selected to build a detailed, context-specific evidence base to inform local and national policy discussions. Although global literature was excluded, we recognise the potential value of international evidence in offering comparative perspectives.

We included a wide range of evidence types, including non-traditional sources such as inspection and monitoring reports, recognising that much of the practice-relevant information on women on remand may not appear in peer-reviewed journals. However, these sources often lack standardised reporting formats or methodological rigour, which posed challenges in interpretation and classification. To ensure credibility and minimise bias, we employed a double-coding strategy in which two independent reviewers coded all sources. Discrepancies were thoroughly discussed and resolved through consensus, ensuring consistency and transparency.

Some studies that met our inclusion criteria were not available in full text, often due to access restrictions or paywalls. While efforts were made to retrieve these through institutional access and inter-library services, a small number remained inaccessible. This may have led to the omission of potentially relevant findings. However, the overall comprehensiveness of the evidence base and the breadth of included sources help to mitigate this limitation.

Lastly, the scope of our analysis was constrained by several data-related limitations. In many cases, data were not disaggregated by remand status, gender, age, ethnicity, or specific subgroups (e.g., pregnant women, women with disabilities, or mothers with dependent children). This lack of granularity limited our ability to conduct subgroup analyses. While we flagged these limitations in our coding framework and synthesis, they highlight a critical gap in current research and reporting practices. We recommend improved data collection and reporting mechanisms as a key step toward addressing the complex needs of women on remand more effectively.

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