

# **“A bridge to change”: Experiences of participation in “VINN”— a motivational program for convicted women. A qualitative study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this study was to examine women’s perceptions after participation in a motivational and gender-sensitive program (VINN) and to explore what was experienced as helpful. The qualitative data consisted of reports and transcriptions from 13 group interviews with 65 participants on probation or imprisoned in Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Estonia and Norway. The data were analysed according to systematic text condensation. The participants’ perceptions could be grouped into the following clusters: confidence and trust, deeper understanding, change and future hopes. The women appreciated the collaborative atmosphere focusing on quality of life, autonomy, strengths, coping and resources. The most beneficial experiences reported, regardless of country, were that their personal repertoires of actions were expanded during their participation, and their confidence in their ability to desist from crime and substance abuse in the future increased. The results support the program’s salutogenic approach combined with motivational interviewing as a bridge to change. Future research should investigate whether the participants report sustainability of the changes.

## INTRODUCTION

Albeit with national variations, the median proportion of women of the world prison population is close to 5% (Walmsley, 2012). Health problems, lifetime involvement in dysfunctional relationships, substance abuse, and psychosocial and psychiatric challenges among convicted women are strongly prevalent (Covington, 2008; Desrosiers and Senter, 2007; Lindberg, 2005; Zlotnick et. al, 2008; Van Wormer, 2010). Interventions originally designed for men have often been used as standard correctional practice for women as well, although the complexity of their needs warrants gender-specific programs (Chen, 2010; Covington, 2008; Zlotnick et al, 2008). Abuse and neglect are prominent in the stories offered by these women compared to those of men (Martin et al, 2009; Chen, 2010). Studies report that imprisoned women find that few people care about them in their daily lives, and that they miss people with whom they can discuss their feelings (Covington, 2008; Desrosiers and Senter, 2008, Martin et al, 2009). Although the number of women given community sentences has increased in recent years, few studies have tested gender-specific intervention programs among women (Sapouna et al, 2011).

Generally, programs are measured by quantitative methods assessing re-offending, through self-reported criminal activity, re-arrests or re-incarceration (Andrews et al, 2011; Berman, 2004; Maguire et al, 2010). In recent years, a dispute has arisen between advocates with different perspectives on interventions, and how to evaluate them (Andrews et al, 2011). Arguments for a focus on risk reduction, needs and responsibility (Andrews et al, 2011), the Good Life Model (Purvis et al, 2011), or desistance (McNeill, 2006) may however, not be mutually exclusive.

The utility of qualitative interviews in correctional program research should be emphasized more strongly (Miller et al, 2012). There have been calls for evaluations incorporating feedback from participants to explain the relative success and efficacy of interventions (Roberts and Wolfer, 2011). With this in mind, “VINN—a Motivational Program for Women” (VINN) was designed and accredited as a complex comprehensive program tailored to women sentenced to prison or probation (Højdahl et al, 2013). The word “VINN” means “win” in Norwegian; for example, through increased personal awareness and enhanced coping strategies.

The aim of the present study was to examine convicted women’s perceptions after participation in VINN and to explore what was perceived as helpful. Using semi-structured group interviews with those who had completed the program, we explored their experiences of the program as a whole and personal change processes.

## METHODS

### *Description of VINN—a Motivational Program for Women*

The VINN- program aims to motivate women to explore what “quality of life” means for them individually, to increase their sense of coherence, and to develop the confidence to desist from crime. By expressing demands, identifying personal needs for support and sharing experiences with others, they should unlock helpful coping strategies.

The content, development, accreditation and dissemination of the VINN-program has previously been described in detail (Højdahl et al, 2013), but a comprehensive overview is provided in Table 1.

<b>1) Aims of the VINN program</b>	<b>2) Theoretical fundamentals</b>	<b>3) Content of program</b>	
Improve quality of life outcomes. Increase sense of coherence. Promote coping.  Motivate to change behaviour.  Elicit expressions of intent to desist from crime  Encourage actions to change behaviour.  Ease tension.	Salutogenesis—including sense of coherence and resistance resources (Antonovsky, 1987).  Motivational interviews (Miller and Rollnick, 2013).  Cognitive Behavioural Theory and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997).  Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1982).  Relaxation exercise, informed by Williams, Kabat-Zinn, Teasdale, and Segal (2007).	<b>Topics in VINN</b>  1) Knowing each other. 2) Identity. Who am I? 3) Communication. 4) Crime. 5) Changes and choices. 6) Economy and property crime 7) Substance abuse. 8) Sexuality and love. 9) Children. 10) Grief and loss. 11) Anger. 12) Violence. 13) Boundaries in relationships. 14) Network and relationships. 15) Summary and close. Follow up.	The long version lasts for 49 hours.  The short version lasts for 21 hours  Each session lasts three hours, and includes relaxation and work book exercises.  Homework and practical skills training is conducted between sessions.

To be included in a VINN-group and become a “member”, one must be serving a sentence in prison or be under the supervision of the Probation Service of a unit offering the VINN-program. The women apply for participation in the program themselves, and the participation is voluntarily (not based on a probation order). Yearly feed-back sessions and experience-gatherings with facilitators the last 12 years have been important in developing and revising the structure, the gender-responsive content and the facilitation of the program. Prior feedback from the staff involved in the program has been positive about the content and the perception of participant’s benefit of the program. However, the current study is the first systematic examination of the program.

### ***Settings and participants***

The examination of the VINN-program was conducted from March 2012 to May 2013. In this time period 85 groups were conducted (n= 534), with 81 % completing the program.

Correctional Services in each country approved the plans for the study and interviews, and gave permission to conduct group interviews in prisons or probation facilities. Staff involved in the VINN-program organized the visits and the interviews were conducted according to a study protocol. Only those still serving their sentence and had completed the intervention group (VINN) prior to the researcher’s visit to their country were included.

## ***Ethics***

The study was performed in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration (2008), and the ethical committees in each country approved the study. The participants had all signed informed consent forms before the start of the interview. They were assured that their responses in the interviews were confidential.

## ***Interviews and data gathering***

The Norwegian interview guide was translated into the various languages, including back translation. After a pilot study in 2011, the interviews were conducted from March 2012 to May 2013. The interviews were guided by a pre-prepared semi-structured schedule with six topics (see text box).

- 1. The program: What are your perceptions of the “VINN” program? (Content, topics, exercises, the group)*
  - 2. Relations: How would you describe your relationship with the facilitators and the group?*
  - 3. Health: How do you perceive your health?*
  - 4. Future: What are your hopes and plans for the future?*
  - 5. Coping: What may help you to deal with challenging situations you may encounter in the future?*
- If in prison:*
- 6. Context in prison: How are the social and physical conditions in the prison?*

The researcher asked open-ended questions and sought the reflections and perceptions of the VINN- program participants, related to their relations with the facilitators and the group, their hopes and plans for the future, their health and coping with challenging situations. Those in prison were asked about the facilities. We did not ask follow-up questions if participants seemed troubled, demonstrated tense body language or refused to answer.

The group interviews ran for 1½–2 hours, and mostly took place in the same room as the intervention. The first author served as moderator and conducted the interviews in all countries, using a translator when needed (in Estonia and Russia). The discussions between the participants were somewhat limited in the Estonian and Russian groups, because the moderator relied on the interpreter. In the Russian units, a security officer was nearby. During most of the interviews, the participants supplemented each other’s statements. The Scandinavian interviews were all taped and transcribed, but extensive notes were taken

during the Russian and Estonian interviews. The data were adapted to NVIVO 10 for the analyses.

### *Analyses—Systematic Text Condensation (STC)*

Systematic Text Condensation (STC) (Malterud, 2001; Malterud, 2012) was deemed the most appropriate means of understanding the processes of the VINN- program. This method comprised four main steps.

- i) The first and the last author read through all the interviews separately and established an overview and overall impression of the entire body of data.
- ii) Then the transcripts and reports were systematically reviewed with the aim of identifying “meaning units” and discussed in the research group until consensus was achieved. A meaning unit is a text fragment containing information about the research question (Malterud, 2012).
- iii) A systematic abstraction of the meaning units within each of the code groups was made.
- iv) Finally, a description of the contents of each code group was constructed. Attention was focused on the participants’ own experienced benefit. Their perceptions could be clustered as follows: confidence and trust, deeper understanding, change and future hopes.

## **RESULTS**

In total, 13 group interviews were conducted with 65 of 67 eligible participants, aged 20–67 for the current study (median age 35). Some of the original groups had few participants left, and the group members reported that their peers had been released or moved to other units. Only two eligible people declined to participate in the interviews. In one colony in Russia, all earlier participants had been released on parole at the time of the moderator’s visit.

Most participants shared information on their crimes during the interviews, and their criminal behaviour varied from homicide, robbery, violence, property crime, drug-driving, drug trafficking, speeding, theft, insurance fraud and white collar crime. Their sentences varied from three months to 16 years. The longest sentences were among the Russian.

In response to the question about the content of the VINN- program, rather than focusing on a specific topic, the participants tended to credit the whole program, regardless of country. Differences between the women’s perceptions were expressed related to the prison-conditions and their length of sentence rather than their experiences with the program. Some of the probationers wanted the program to last longer and some argued for day long-courses, rather than three hours sessions.

The content, together with the process, had given them an opportunity to create a “map of life” and to take a bird’s-eye view of their own lives. Some of the Russian women with long-term sentences argued for the importance of such a program early in the sentence, as well as at a time approaching their release date or related to follow-up after release. One of the few

criticisms concerned the homework between the VINN sessions, due to lack of available time, space, former experiences from school and privacy.

### *Confidence and trust*

Some participants expressed low expectations and even an initial scepticism towards the facilitators, illustrating an initial concern about partaking in a program such as VINN. Their increased confidence and engagement in the program was due to the subsequent experience of trust and assurance. Regardless of age, the majority of the women declared that they appreciated sharing thoughts and feelings with others in the same situation as themselves. A few argued that it had initially been difficult to be open about their crimes because of their feelings of shame. The importance of confidence in the facilitators and a presence of mutual trust between the members of the group were emphasized. They all had shared feelings of shame, guilt, pain, sorrow, loneliness, anxiety and discomfort with the group, as well as discussing how to manage negative and dysfunctional emotions.

In response to questions about their relationship with the facilitators, they described them as positive role models, honest and open minded, using phrases as: “She is my ‘idol’”, and “I want to be like her”. Most acknowledged experiencing a successful group atmosphere, sharing examples emphasising the importance of humour and sincerity at the same time. Whether the facilitators were neutral and did not mention personal experiences or gave examples from their own lives, both approaches were positively acknowledged. One Swedish participant talked warmly about “her” facilitators.

*The group-leaders were wonderful, being there for us, as a fellow human being. They elicited our feelings of confidence, trust, openness and love. We felt safe and confident. They read our body language so clearly, they were fantastic, absolutely wonderful. They were there for us. They are outstanding.*

A participant in Denmark declared the following:

*We felt that we got “space”. Each one had “space”, to come forth with our issues. There was ample room for each one of us.*

An unexpected, but positive result of the interviews illustrated that the participants displayed an attitude of “wishing other people well”. The group members recognized that they had enjoyed the others’ progress and learned from each other. They had been on the same “journey” through the topics, solving puzzles for themselves and the others. One long-serving Swedish woman voiced the following opinion:

*It has been wonderful to be part of the program and to observe the personal development and progress of the others. We all provided some pieces in a puzzle that we discovered in the course of the program.*

This was also evident during interviews in Russia and Estonia. When participants were in tears or felt anxious during the interviews, other members of the group were supportive. The Russian participants especially appreciated getting to know each other because their relations with staff and fellow inmates were strained. Others expressed how they had felt trust, unity and caring for each other. Many had never talked “privately” to anyone inside the colony

before. They acknowledged that feedback from the group had an impact on their engagement and efforts.

### *Deeper understanding*

The participants responded clearly to the question about what could be helpful when dealing with challenging situations. Many stated that they had discussed their own actions (in the past), and this had given them a deeper understanding and made them more aware of, and in tune with, their own thoughts and feelings. Most of the participants in all five countries reported that they had gained from the “Identity—who am I?” and “Changes and choices” sessions, because they cherished the opportunity to focus on personal style, strengths and resources. The topics from which they had gained less were “Economy and property crime” and “Sexuality and love”.

Many exemplified how they during the “Boundaries in relationships” topic had become more aware of the significance of clear boundaries in relationships, and of the importance of protecting oneself. Several described how a lack of boundaries in former relationships had negatively influenced their lifestyles. Some reported that this in some way had triggered their criminal behaviour as well as substance abuse, and this became evident to them during the process of the VINN program. A Danish participant with a long history of crime stated the following:

*“I think the topic ‘Boundaries in relationships’ was really good, to know where you have your own boundaries, and what you can be pushed to do. I walked the line, I felt pressured to commit crimes”.*

A Norwegian woman serving a community sentence described an increase of comprehension in this way:

*To retreat, to reflect, trying to see the big picture of what I did wrong. I needed a little push and got that from the group.*

Most women reported a deeper understanding of the triggers of their criminal behaviour, aggressive behaviour, self-harm or substance abuse. A Russian woman, who now felt more confident, expressed the following view:

*The topic of criminality touched me. I understood how stupid the offence was and that it would have been possible to say no. I acted in a careless and inconsiderate way.*

In response to the question of social and physical conditions in the prison, several long-serving participants from non-Scandinavian countries stressed that they had little influence over their lives and the conditions inside the prison. However, they had gained an understanding of, and shared knowledge about, coping with exceptional demands. Examples of daily problems were lack of opportunity to sit on a chair, lack of medication and the risk of malnutrition due to a lack of vitamin-rich food, all of which influenced their quality of life and recovery. One woman shared the opinion that the inmates had to lie in their bunk beds in the afternoon because of a lack of other places to sit and relax. She was sentenced for drug trafficking and explained how she struggled every day to overcome the challenges of prison logistics:

*At 10:00 p.m. they shut all the doors in the dormitories in the prison. In the morning at 6 o'clock you are woken up, and there is a roll call at 6:20. But think about this—70 women have 20 minutes to use one of three toilets, wash themselves and put on their uniforms, and everybody has to stand with a name sign around their necks. Every mistake is reported.... affects the inmates here, and me, very much.*

Thus, it appeared from the responses that participation in VINN had given them a deeper understanding of personal resources and an opportunity to explore ways to utilize them while trying to survive, despite stresses and problems. Many reported that these challenges had been discussed in the group, and they declared that it had been helpful to share and discuss how to cope with the demands and strains in the best way possible.

### **Change**

A strategy that some participants reported learning was to explore personal motivation for change and actively to use the stages of change (written as a “spiral” in the work book; see Table 1, column 3), as illustrated in the following comment by a woman with drug problems:

*I feel I can use the “spiral” on everything, and it gives me some confidence if I am in a situation where I’m a bit ambivalent. I can kind of step back a little and see that I am moving at least, can’t I? I was in treatment a few years ago, and when I look at the “spiral”, I see that I have come even further now than I perhaps was at that time.*

*Something positive has happened after all. I have gained more understanding of when I am facing choices and am more aware of where I actually am. I think it (the spiral) was very good. I feel it really makes sense, related to many issues, in a situation related to choices.*

The next statement is from a middle-aged Norwegian woman serving a community sentence. This illustrated how her personal strength and coping with substance abuse had been harnessed and how she had made decisions about change:

*I am stronger now and have gotten through it (alcohol abuse). I’ve had some relapses before, but I have gotten back on my feet again. I might not have done that before.*

An Estonian woman reported that she had changed her way of thinking and behaving. In the past, when someone asked her to join in illegal activities, she did not think much about the consequences. She argued that she had changed, and she could think of alternative actions and what was “desirable” behaviour for her.

Another example of positive change in thinking was expressed regarding the relaxation exercises offered during the VINN program (see Table 1, column 3). These exercises were perceived as helpful in managing personal stress and provided “a break from worries”. One woman illustrated the effects of the relaxation exercise with words such as “being in heaven, delightful”. Another young woman in her early twenties explained that she had struggled with self-injury for many years. Participation in VINN had influenced her positively; she had changed the way she thought and felt, and was no longer harming herself. The exercises had

been helpful for her in managing her inner turmoil. Another participant in the same group said that over many years, she had experienced breathing difficulties due to anxiety. After she had learned this exercise, she had practiced it when she felt uneasy or sad:

*Doing the exercise was a kind of break from my negative emotions, the heavy or problematic areas in life. When breathing and relaxing ... it is about learning to breathe with the stomach.*

One of the few criticisms about the exercise came from those who had difficulty lying down and closing their eyes.

### ***Future hopes***

The women reported a gradual experience from the beginning to the end of the program of becoming more capable of identifying sources of quality of life, personal strengths and resources. One of the major challenges shared by the women with histories of violence, anger, and drug or alcohol abuse was coping with such challenges in the future.

In response to the question about hopes and plans for the future (see text box), most women argued that they had become more conscious of their needs in life and the people that they wanted as friends and loved ones. One woman declared the following:

*I see a bright future now; I did not have that before. It is the group that has made it so.*

Some women had increased their awareness of “unwanted” behaviour and expressed the view that they would be more confident and assertive in their behaviours in the future. Others made comments such as the following:

*“This has strengthened us all. It’s about what we want of life, which choices I will make in the future, and not returning to the “friends” who got us in here.*

Thus, in response to the question about future plans, many of the women declared that they had to take one step at a time. They referred to adopting commitments and new practices as a challenge. A woman who had problems with drugs and was to be released in a few weeks stated the following:

*I’m trying to learn how to take one step at a time, and that not everything needs to happen at once. My plan is to apply for treatment.*

Similar stories were shared by other women, here exemplified by a woman with a long history of relapses:

*It takes time to change me. I’m taking short steps, and each time, I shall walk properly. I’m in no hurry, but I have to rely more on myself and my confidence. Therefore, in the future, I will have to have trust in myself, assess the issues and options. I must think: this may not be right for me. I have become more confident and assertive.*

Many participants expressed increased optimism, reported new and more positive actions and were already making positive decisions. Some of the Russian women declared that participating in the program had positively influenced their communication style, eased their adaptation to the prison system and facilitated self-regulation of affective states. Because of this, none of the Russian women that had participated in VINN had been sanctioned for inappropriate attitudes or acts. They declared that many former participants were conditionally released ahead of schedule.

## **DISCUSSION**

The main findings in the present study were that most of the women appreciated participating in the VINN- program; regardless of age and country, and that their personal repertoires of actions were expanded. They described their participation as a process of being on a common journey, as solving a puzzle in their lives. Overall, this seemed to have increased their comprehension and sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1987). They reported learning from each other at an affective and cognitive level, and this had a positive influence on their personal hopes, demands and experiences.

According to recent research, interventions are more likely to be successful if they target motivational factors and provide a sense of hope. Helping offenders to increase their self-efficacy empowers them to change (Sapouna et al, 2011). This is supported by Caverley and Farrall (2011), who argue that offenders who are motivated to change and are hopeful about the future, will manage better to desist from offending.

The results presented in this study illuminate how the change process was experienced among the convicted women during their participation. Discussing this in light of Antonovsky's (1987) theory of salutogenesis and Motivational Interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2013) may provide a broader view and deeper understanding of convicted women's motivations to change. The salutogenetic model is concerned with how people survive, adapt, manage stress and stay well, and the relationship between coping, health and stress. According to Motivational Interviewing, the following four processes seemed important in helping the participants to change: engaging, focusing, evoking and planning.

### ***Engaging: The relational foundation***

The participants in the present study confirmed the significance of the atmosphere in the groups by conceptualizing the importance of acceptance, including how the facilitators and the group members were identified as partners, as they listened carefully to each other with a focus on others' strengths. They valued being listened to as individuals, and the facilitators had an important task as role models. A collaborative and helpful working relationship is a basic process and foundation for engaging people in changing their behaviour (Miller and Rollnick, 2013). These authors argue for activating a person's own motivation and resources in a partnership, and for regarding the person as an expert on him/herself (Miller and Rollnick, 2013). A respectful relationship with a focus on strength, as well as criminogenic needs and risk, is associated with positive outcomes in probation (McNeill and Whyte, 2007).

### ***Focusing and comprehensibility***

The women reported that their unique experiences and challenges had been in creating a focus together, as well as their adaptation to the environment. This corresponds with

salutogenesis, which focuses on active adaptation as ideal in treatment (Antonovsky, 1987). Furthermore, the women wanted to focus on enhancing the sense of belonging to their families and to improve this, as well as to find someone to trust and share thoughts and feelings within their daily lives. Some of these women reported daily stressors and experiencing strong negative emotions.

The relaxation exercise, informed by Williams et al (2007), was perceived as helpful in keeping their attention in the present moment without judgment, and as a break from heavy or problematic areas in current or by thoughts about past life. Obtaining focus was key. These exercises developed into important coping strategies when participants faced stressors, in line with Antonovsky's argument: "*Confronted with a stressor, a person wishes to, and is motivated to, cope (meaningfulness); believes that the challenge is understood (comprehensibility); believes that resources to cope are available (manageability)*" (Antonovsky, 1996 p. 15). He discusses three kinds of life experiences that may strengthen a person's sense of coherence: consistency, underload–overload balance, and participation in socially valued decision-making. Both underload and overload are regarded as stressors in his salutogenic approach. Facing stressors such as negative feelings may improve self-awareness and comprehensibility, and is thus an important investment in identity, which is a crucial resistance resource (Antonovsky, 1987).

Many of the participants had experienced significant underload and perceived fewer opportunities for decision-making while serving their sentences, and described the sentence as a burden.

### ***Evoking: Preparation for change***

Evoking involves eliciting the person's own motivation for change and includes active participation (Miller and Rollnick, 2013). The women in this study declared that their confidence in utilizing alternative coping strategies to overcome and deal with demands, such as substance abuse and violence, were evoked. Their self-identity and reflections on social support were reported as improved. Self-identity and social support are among the most prominent resistance resources (Antonovsky, 1987). Some voiced confidence in where they wanted to navigate, and they had prepared changes, such as for whom they would be setting boundaries.

### ***Planning: the Bridge to change***

One of the most beneficial experiences reported by the women was the expansion of their personal repertoire of possible actions during their participation in VINN. This, together with their increased sense of autonomy and commitment to changing their behaviour, was experienced as a "bridge to change" in their recovery process. Even women who had struggled to cope with daily demands reported enhanced willingness to seek alternatives to problem behaviour, and some reported planning and applying for treatment. This illustrates the process of change that they were in.

The journey to find the right bridge is described as a flow, from evoking and preparation to planning (Miller and Rollnick, 2013). Similarly, Antonovsky uses the metaphor of the "stream of life" and poses the question: "Wherever one is in a stream, what shapes one's ability to swim well?" This reveals the importance of active adaptation to an inevitably stressor-rich environment (Antonovsky, 1991).

Some of the probationers in the current study voiced the opinion that serving a community sentence in combination with the VINN program was a “second chance” that we interpret as increasing their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Some of these women expressed feelings of shame and sorrow about their sentences. However, they gradually developed the courage to face these feelings in a safe atmosphere. Their participation and interaction with the others in the group and the real world seems to have positively influenced the way in which they subsequently structured their daily lives. Some probationers living in the community declared that they had already crossed a “bridge”, found a job, started school and earned their own money. This corresponds with salutogenesis and with Bandura’s cognitive theory (1997), applied as an explicit change model in VINN. This particular combination of motivational, cognitive and behavioural factors in the VINN- program emerged as important, and in this study was central to finding a bridge to change. Their long-term challenges were maintaining the positive changes (Prochaska and Levesque, 2002) by continuing to rely on resistance resources (Antonovsky, 1987).

### ***Limitations***

The results of this study must be seen in light of some limitations. Although it was conducted in the “natural” settings of the correctional facilities in which the women served their sentences, the results cannot be generalized to what women completing VINN in the five countries would express after release. The women gave credit to the program, but some may have been influenced by knowing that the first author who moderated the interviews had developed the program. However, most appreciated this and expressed increased confidence in sharing their thoughts and feelings about stress, their struggle in managing their lives, their shame, sorrows and future hopes. A criticism against this study is that one of the authors of the VINN- program also has been a researcher in this study. This paper is not considered an external evaluation, but a quality assessment, that will provide important information for further development, the teaching of facilitators, reaccreditation and improvement of the intervention, as it pinpoints what the participants identify as important to them. As the agencies involved aim for knowledge-based and effective gender-sensitive programs, this study is part of that process and it was important to include one of the key developers. This author had a unique position, being in charge of developing the original intervention, organizing the implementation in all countries and co-ordinating the study, for which transparency was required. The closeness of the collaboration with the academic partners and authors during the development of the study, and the procedures for analysis with STC, supported this transparency (Malterud, 2012). This enabled thorough discussion of the validity of the interpretation and the assessment.

### ***Impact of study results***

This study increases understanding and knowledge about women’s experiences in a motivational program in correctional facilities. To our knowledge, no other study has used group interviews with those who have completed an identical gender-sensitive intervention and used the same interview guide (with minor adaptations) in different cultures and correctional contexts in five European countries.

The results presented provide support for the view that the current version of the VINN- program successfully integrates the salutogenic approach (Antonovsky, 1987) in combination with the communication style of Motivational Interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2013,

Walters et al, 2007) as a bridge to change. This is important with regard to one of the main questions in the correctional literature, concerning what helps to prevent people from offending, and how quality of life can be increased and desistance enhanced (McNeill, 2009).

This study suggests that participation in the VINN- program, regardless of where and how they were serving, increased the women's capacity and confidence regarding their ability to desist from crime and substance abuse in future, promoting a more constructive identity and increased quality of life. The current results are important for practitioners when they work with correctional programs for convicted women. Future research should investigate the processes of motivation, and ways to desist and to maintain changes, thereby increasing our understanding of women's need for follow-up after release.

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