

Community penalties for women - the need for evidence

Frances Ablitt expresses concern about the lack of 'What Works' research into community penalties for women.

A criminal justice system for women

Suppose men didn't offend. If we had to set up a system purely to deal with the present numbers of women offenders, what would it look like? Courts would be smaller and cover bigger areas. Prisons, if they existed at all, would be small and locally based. Community penalties would be handled by an agency organised into units, each of which would cover an area large enough to produce a caseload of reasonable size. Programmes for offenders would be geared to the criminogenic needs of women.

Of course, the system we have is nothing like this. Because the overwhelming majority of offenders is male, everything, from the size of units and areas to the disciplinary methods of penal institutions, is geared to the characteristics of the typical, which is to say male, offender. The result is an inevitable and seemingly intractable bias against women offenders which operates in subtle and unrecognised ways. The effect for community penalties is a

Probation Service divided into areas which struggle to muster sufficient numbers to justify, for example, women's groupwork programmes. Hereford and Worcester's pioneering Asha project succeeds by busing in all its women offenders to a central point; so far, no other area has followed this example. The Inner London Probation Service is the only area with a probation day centre programme specifically for women.

There are pockets of good practice in the provision of other community penalties. Community Service projects have been arranged to take account of childcare needs for example. Nevertheless it remains the case that the range of appropriate community penalties available to courts is likely, in all parts of the country, to be greater for male offenders than for women.

The evidence for effective practice

These same structural problems, which have made the provision of appropriate services to women offenders so difficult, have worked to prevent effective research into the needs and characteristics of women offenders, and into the effectiveness of various types of intervention in addressing female reoffending. Put

simply, with the exception of large women's prisons, most criminal justice agencies just don't handle enough individuals to produce a sample worthy of statistical analysis. I suspect that this is a major factor behind the often-referred-to lack of hard evidence about effective work with women offenders. What studies have been done have generally been conducted in women's prisons in North America and their applicability to British conditions has to be taken on trust.

Characteristics of women offenders

Fortunately, perhaps, most of what good evidence there is about the distinctive characteristics of women offenders matches well with the observations and hunches of practitioners in the field. By far the most important difference between male and female offenders lies in the incidence of abuse in the histories of women. There seems to be a rough consensus around the figure of 50 per cent as the proportion of women offenders who have experienced physical or sexual abuse (generally by men), either as an adult or child. (The equivalent figure for male offenders appears to be about 20 per cent or lower. These figures rely on self-disclosure; the true figure may be higher.) Perhaps inevitably, in view of the general dearth of research, no causal link has been definitively established between abuse and offending, but there is some evidence to suggest this, and it seems scarcely credible that no such link exists. Some of us who work with women notice also their low self-esteem and lack of empowerment, and suspect that, if there is a path from victimisation to offending, the route might lie this way.

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We need too to acknowledge an element in women's offences which tends to remain hidden; I refer to the possibility of coercion. It is common to read prosecution evidence which shows that a woman offender has acted with a (usually male) accomplice, particularly in offences such as credit card fraud. Very often the woman ends up in court alone, because her evidence does not implicate the other person. In discussing her offence with a probation officer, she may hint that she has concealed his identity for fear of possible reprisals. Women (but rarely men) are often convicted of smuggling drugs into prisons during visits. It is hard to escape the conclusion that some degree of intimidation exists in at least a proportion of these cases.

What about existing programmes?

The cognitive behavioural approach, which is nowadays seen as the best way forward in reducing reoffending, works well with women offenders and in this respect an effective programme for women will substantially resemble one for men. However, good practice is not necessarily achieved by placing women in mixed groupwork programmes. They are likely to be in a very small minority and the dynamics of the group will tend to place them at a real disadvantage, particularly if they are survivors of male abuse. Most

groupwork material carries an inherent male bias in its subject matter. There may also be a problem in that women, whose verbal and reasoning skills differ from those of men, will find the pace of a male group inappropriate.

Designing programmes for women

There is a strong case for separate programmes for women. Although the theoretical basis may not be radically different, a women's programme should include material relevant to their lives and experience, and be paced to accord with their abilities. I would argue also that an effective programme needs to acknowledge the effects of abuse, and be able to arrange access to appropriate services. Employment and training sessions must take account of childcare responsibilities and the difficulties of low pay. The programme will need to recognise the range of reasons why women offend, including the kind of coercion referred to above - this is an element which professionals find hard to deal with, because it does not conform to our necessary model of the offender as a free agent. However, just as we find it appropriate for programmes for young male offenders to address the effects of peer pressure, we need to find ways of helping women offenders resist equally powerful pressures from men seeking to control them.

The way forward - research and after

The current emphasis on evidence-based practice is right and inevitable. However, if restrictions are placed on the development of innovative programmes too soon, we run the risk of perpetuating a system

which places women offenders at a disadvantage. The lack of information about women offenders has to be overcome: the means must be found to undertake good-quality research on effective practice with them. In the meantime, we must continue to develop ways of working with women that acknowledge the reality of their difference from men.

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