

Getting Women Out: the limits of reintegration reform

Kelly Hannah-Moffat reviews the Correctional Service of Canada's community strategy for federally sentenced women.

Over the past 30 years, research has demonstrated that crime is gendered and that gender matters in shaping criminal justice responses to women and in terms of the differential effects of policies (Bloom, 2003; Carlen 2002). Considerable research has focused on the characteristics and experiences of women in prison. Less emphasis has been placed on women's reintegration and on the individual, structural and systemic challenges confronting women as they gradually regain their freedom. While Canada is considered an international leader in women's corrections, its focus on community reintegration is quite recent. This abbreviated article reviews the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) community strategy for federally sentenced women and the barriers to successful reintegration.

Creating Choices

The 1990 report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, *Creating Choices* (TFFSW, 1990) played a major role in redefining the Canadian correctional landscape. This document called for a restructuring of women's corrections to better reflect the needs and experiences of the federally sentenced women's correctional population. Whilst limited and now obfuscated (see Hannah-Moffat, 2001), this initiative's recognition of the gender and culturally specific context of women's crime represented a significant shift in Canada's approach to women's imprisonment. *Creating Choices* devoted considerable attention to reintegration and community issues. However in the post-*Creating Choices* era, CSC focused on institutionally based recommendations and channeled resources into the construction of five small regionally dispersed prisons and (more recently) four renovated maximum-security units in each of the new regional prisons. The community components of this reform initiative were largely neglected. The community-based programme services available to women have traditionally been provided by nonprofit organizations, namely the Elizabeth Fry Societies. Most gender-specific programs, services and halfway houses are centrally located in large urban centres. The continued existence of these agencies (which are also advocacy based) is precarious and contingent upon government funding formulas and programme accreditation.

In March 1996, CSC temporarily turned its attention to the deficit of community release options for women — by drafting a 'community strategy' and hosting a national workshop. In May 2002, an official seven-page *Community Strategy* was distributed to relevant stakeholders. This vague strategy presents a framework for the management of women on release in the community. Similar to *Creating Choices*, it advocates a holistic woman-centred approach to community reintegration and notes that women's needs, reintegration potential and motivation are greater than men's. Canada's relatively small female prison population is spread across a large geographic expanse — as of 21 January 2001, there were 357 women federally

incarcerated and 523 women on conditional release (a federal sentence is one that is greater than two years, anything less is under a provincial jurisdiction). Given these conditions, the *Community Strategy* favours empowering, creative, flexible, and individualised release plans that facilitate a smooth transition from the institution to the community. The strategy proposes the expansion of community programmes and advocates additional residential options for women including the development of additional government-run halfway houses, satellite apartments and the use of private houses. Responsibility for putting the *Community Strategy* into operation is diffused across local, institutional, regional and national jurisdictions. The presence of such a document suggests improved community options for women ought to be forthcoming. In the interim, women seeking or under community supervision encounter multiple obstacles.

The complexity of reintegration must be placed in a broader socio-structural context. The following themes are emerging in my current research on women and reintegration.

Transition from institution to community

Planning for effective and meaningful release interventions begins in the institution. Strong partnerships between institutional staff, community agencies and women do not exist. The responsibilities for release planning are diffused and correctional staff vary considerably in their ability to prepare women for release. Incarcerated women often report that they need additional help in release planning, accessing financial support, housing and childcare. While some regions have non-government transitional resources for women including mentoring programs, many do not. Many women in custody are not aware of community services and it is difficult to access this information while in custody. The information women receive often comes from other women and is contingent on the knowledge and accessibility of institutional parole officers and community representatives. Women's knowledge of and access to community services plays a critical role in parole preparation and ultimately release decisions.

Listening to women

In spite of the discourse of empowerment in women's corrections, there remains a problem in that practitioners fail to listen to women's analysis of their own needs. The growing emphasis on risk/need management complicates this issue (Hannah-Moffat, 2002). There is a tendency to construct women who are typically high need as risky, in part because of the multiplicity and complexity of the needs they present. Given such assessment practices, an offender's definition of her needs is often secondary to what others (community and institutional correctional staff and paroling authorities, social workers, and program deliverers) prioritise and identify as 'criminogenic'. A woman's failure to recognise, prioritise or accept responsibility

for the management of these criminogenic areas can hinder release or produce conflicts which return women to custody.

Women in the community often report that while there is a focus on criminogenic risks/needs, the factors that are 'believed' to cause offending, little attention is given to basic survival needs. These include: negotiating welfare systems, obtaining identification, securing legitimate long term employment, finding and securing safe affordable housing, re-establishing familial relationships — especially with children (which may mean negotiating the child welfare system), dealing with the stigmatisation of a criminal record (which often impedes access to the above) and confronting the fears and responsibilities of freedom. Women have to overcome not only the pains of imprisonment but also the patterns that led them to their imprisonment, and they better than we understand this pattern and are in a position to make a meaningful change. The desire to service all women's needs can result in over-programming.

The meaning of difference

CSC's *Community Strategy* stresses the expansion of programmes. However, it omits details on several long standing concerns. For example, the existence of a program does not guarantee its availability or access. Access to existing programs is often limited by the size, location and timing of the programme, static start and stop dates — waiting lists, childcare, and transportation are obstacles many women face. The absence of programming makes it difficult for women to prepare for parole hearings and it may delay release. A significant number of women eligible for parole waive their right to a parole hearing or postpone hearings. The reported reasons for these decisions are frequently unavailable or incomplete programs. The completion of the program after release does not appear to be feasible and case file reviews suggest this option is rarely explored. The persistent deficiency of transitional community programming means women remain in institutions longer than necessary.

While the development of holistic woman-centered services remains a rhetorical target in CSC, the small and geographically dispersed female offender population complicates women's access to meaningful gender specific programmes. Gender is portrayed in many CSC narratives as critical to programme and policy development. However, correctional bureaucracies and staff (many of whom received gender sensitivity training) grapple with how to use this gendered knowledge to usefully transform organisational practices, to override existing gender neutral policies or to espouse alternatives. There are few specialised community services accessible to women and even fewer for discrete subgroups of women who commit violent or sexual offences or who have complex mental health needs.

The female population is ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse. A paucity of services exists for these women. The programming challenges are magnified when cultural or ethnic differences are introduced. The intersection of racial oppression, cultural differences and gender add layers of complexity. Providers need to broaden their understanding and analysis of ethno-cultural concerns and cultivate links with multi-lingual and ethno-cultural agencies that are in a better position to meet a woman's needs. Many such agencies offer counseling and educational and employment services in a cultural relevant environment, however, many are unfamiliar with the problems and barriers resulting from conviction. Stronger links with such organisations can assist women in

initiating longer-term relationships with agencies that can meet their needs once their sentence is complete.

To accommodate women offenders, corrections will have to think outside the box and significantly modify traditional approaches to programme delivery. New approaches to women's programming, which are strength-based, or involve stepped or 'wrap-around services' should be reviewed and considered as they represent an uncultivated alternative. Wrap-around models of service provision, for example, place a greater emphasis on strengths than compliance, and recognise the responsibility of systems to provide services collectively, rather than in isolation. These issues are being identified as important aspects of 'what works' with women (Bloom, 2003). Such approaches will present new challenges, however what remains uncertain is the actual level of commitment CSC will make to the creative, flexible and individualised service delivery proposed in its *Community Strategy*.

Empowering or controlling strategies?

There is a tendency to view community living as a liberated space somewhat free from the surveillance and restriction associated with prison, yet community practitioners are often entangled in power relationships with the women they work with. Women faced with the difficult task of reintegration often require more support than control. Change is a process and part of that process involves failures and sometimes, bad choices.

Having a good relationship with parole supervisors and other service providers is central to women's reintegration. A successful reintegration plan is one that moves towards autonomy and away from control by others. Research on women who manage to stay out of the system indicates that those most likely to 'succeed' take control of their lives and thus change directions. They report that such changes involve perseverance and personal struggles with long-term support and strategically placed help (Eaton, 1993). This places the onus on the corrections community to cultivate a supportive environment. Many anticipate (perhaps naively) this long awaited *Community Strategy* will go beyond rhetoric to inspire some innovative approaches to community reintegration. ■

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