

# A pathway to danger? Evaluating the Freedom Programme

Lucy Watkins and Peter Dunn describe how attempts to protect women in prison from domestic violence can place them in danger.

*Can providing support in prison to vulnerable women who have experienced domestic violence expose them to further danger? This article discusses some of the findings of a recent Griffins Society Research Fellowship evaluation of the Freedom Programme. The Freedom Programme was devised to support and empower women who have experienced domestic violence. It has been run in a number of women's prisons as an attempt by the Prison Service to offer interventions to women under the NOMS Resettlement Pathway 8. This Pathway aims to provide support for women affected by domestic violence, as endorsed by Baroness Corston in her 2007 review of vulnerable women prisoners (Home Office, 2007).*

One of the questions the evaluation addressed was: does the Freedom Programme achieve its aim to help women develop ways of thinking and behaving that protect them, their children and others from harm? The research methods included 14 interviews with women who attended the Programme, four interviews with prison staff who were trained to facilitate the programme, and observation of two group work sessions. The research raised alarming concerns about the quality of the design and the delivery of the Programme. The evaluation also raises questions about how vulnerable women in prison can be offered the opportunities they value to share their experiences with each other in a structured and safe setting.

The evaluation's main findings included that, at the prisons studied, course delivery was not in line with the stated aims of the programme. This is in sharp contrast to requirements concerning programme integrity that apply to accredited offending behaviour programmes delivered in male prisons. There was no formal support in place for women who may have been distressed after the sessions, and resettlement issues were not sufficiently addressed. Facilitators were admirably committed to the programme but they were poorly supported and trained; and the use of male facilitators was problematic. There was no systematic assessment of women before and after the programme, meaning that facilitators knew little about the needs and circumstances of the women attending. In this article we focus mainly on findings concerning gender considerations and women's safety.

The findings support the view that women's personal safety and well-being should be vital considerations when exploring their domestic violence experiences in a prison setting. Some of the difficulties of the environment include a lack of resources to deal with strong emotions, and regular movement around the prison estate that could leave difficult experiences opened up but not dealt with (Kelland and Fraser, 2000; Scott, 2004). Women talked about how they felt safe to speak openly during the sessions; a positive finding as many women feel isolated and fearful after



experiencing domestic violence (Collins, 2008). A safe space in which to share experiences appeared to be a prerequisite for a positive experience of the group. However, one woman revealed having experienced very difficult emotions afterwards:

*I tried to do the Freedom Programme before, but it kind of done me.*

What do you mean?

*I think I self-harmed after one of them, quite seriously. I think I hung myself.*

Hearing in a group session about the effects of domestic violence on children had invoked some very strong emotions which she had found it impossible to deal with. Women should be offered additional support after sessions, but there was no evidence that the prisons made any attempt to provide it systematically for women attending the Programme. Facilitators said they would not make quieter women speak during group sessions if they did not want to. While this respects the preferences of the women, it also means that facilitators might have no idea how those women were reacting to the Programme, and it masks an unwillingness to take responsibility for enabling quiet members to participate. We suggest this resulted from inadequate training and supervision of facilitators, which has strong implications for women's safety.

The Programme draws on a 'typical' type of male dominance to help women learn how to avoid future violent relationships. Some women explained that if they saw 'warning signs' they would end the relationship. Whilst that might be a wise decision in some cases, we suggest it is a somewhat simplistic view of relationships, especially as this is when women may be most at risk of harm. Resettlement issues were not robustly addressed. This left women to decide individually how they could apply the course material to their own lives on release. We propose that addressing resettlement should be a vital component of a course aiming to equip women with skills to avoid future abusive relationships. One woman expressed her view that some of the concepts on the course were unrealistic:

*...that is a bit unrealistic because no-one is perfect and you're explaining this man as perfect, like he's going to bow down and do this for you. He's not going to want to do that every day of the week...*

The Programme should ensure that it presents a realistic view of male behaviour to avoid encouraging simplistic assumptions about relationships.

Some women interviewed revealed that they had raised the question of their own violent or controlling behaviour:

*The way I say 'Oh, darling you have to do this—I always use the word 'darling'—so it makes me feel bad now after the programme, thinking 'Am I abusing him?'. When the instructors told us that women do it as well, that's when I sat and started to look and say 'Yes, they're right'.*

However, while in this instance the facilitator seemed to have raised the possibility that women could be abusive too, there did not appear to be anywhere on the course where such complex issues could be productively explored.

Gender dynamics, of central importance when exploring domestic

violence, became diverted down some misleading routes during the sessions observed. Some women who attended sessions co-facilitated by a man felt uncomfortable discussing their experiences of abuse. Another woman was concerned about how the male facilitator might be troubled by hearing about their experiences of abusive men:

*...we're all in there basically slagging a man off for what he has done to us. I suppose it might have been a bit uncomfortable for him because you tarnish him (i.e. the facilitator) with the same sort of brush when it's not really fair to him.*

The facilitators seemed unable to help this woman make connections with the way in which an element of men's abusive behaviour is their ability to cause women to take on responsibility for men's feelings. It seems to us that the use of male facilitators may divert women away from focusing on their own needs to preoccupation with the needs of the men in their lives instead. The use of male facilitators can, we suggest, only be supported if all the facilitators are sufficiently well trained and motivated to create safe learning opportunities for the women attending the Programme.

In evaluating the Freedom Programme in two women's prisons, we were struck by how easily provision designed to make women safer might instead expose them to new dangers. What is so concerning about this is that the women interviewed wanted and valued the opportunity to share their experiences of abusive relationships with other women in a safe space. Yet they were misled by a Programme based on questionable assumptions, 'facilitated' by enthusiastic but poorly trained and inadequately supported staff. By raising one woman's awareness of the damaging effects of domestic violence on her children to the extent that, going back to her cell unsupported, she tried to kill herself after a session should in our view lead to the Programme being withdrawn until such time as the

needs of women attending can be properly assessed and skilled support provided between sessions. The government's new *Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls* (HM Government, 2009), together with Resettlement Pathway 8 and the Gender Equality Duty, should provide the impetus necessary to ensure that vulnerable women in prison are not offered inadequate interventions that undermine instead of enhance their safety. ■

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