

# Gender-specific Projects for Female Lawbreakers: questions of survival

Pat Carlen describes the benefits of projects designed for women and the elements that make such projects sustainable.

**D**espite an international concern to develop gender-specific policies for female offenders, it has been difficult to engender projects which survive for more than a year or two. The main reasons for project close-down (or change of role) are usually financial, though funding problems can mask shortcomings (e.g. change of objectives, poor or adverse publicity, loss of gender-specificity, non-use by the courts, and inappropriate expectations and/or evaluations by funders), for which lack of funding is only the presenting symptom. Interviews with managers of selected custodial and non-custodial gender-specific projects in the US, UK, Scotland, Australia and Israel (funded by ESRC Award L21630200122), suggested that, to manage effective survival without loss of identity and integrity, gender-specific criminal justice projects for women should have at least the following characteristics.

## **Resistance to erosion of gender-specificity**

The small number of females eligible for women-only non-custodial projects often results in pressure to extend the facilities to men in order to avoid loss of funding. However, there was agreement that facilities for women have to be ring-fenced, and recognised as being generally more expensive than those for men. Shared-site provision tends either to be under-used (because women's experience of male violence makes them reluctant to risk mixed projects) or (subsequent to its under-use) re-rolled as a male-only facility. Similarly, workers insisted that programmes developed in other countries or for men should not be parachuted into projects as prisoner-processing packages with universal application; instead, they must be gender-assessed and adapted to the specific histories and attributes of the women currently attending the project.

## **Evolutionary and flexible organisation**

Projects should constantly monitor the relationships between project provision and the varied or changing situations of women actually attending the project at a particular time. Furthermore, organisational needs should come second to participants' requirements, thereby ensuring that service delivery remains relevant.

## **Democratic organisation of innovation**

A democratic mode of policy-formation was seen to be a prerequisite to high staff morale which, in

turn, was seen to be essential for the success of project innovation and survival.

## **Holism**

An holistic (coordinated) approach to service delivery is desirable in both custodial and non-custodial settings, with successful inter-agency or multi-agency communication a priority. In custodial settings emphasis was on building effective working relationships with community agencies, but always under the auspices of a holistic non-essentialising approach that sees clients not as 'female offenders' but as 'women who break the law'. Relatedly, the geographical clustering of multi-agency services was identified as integral to the success of service delivery in terms of ease of access, and minimisation of both inter-agency distrust and subversion of each others' endeavours when sharing the same clients. Insistence on a realistic approach to drugs rehabilitation was common. Although they generally required project participants to be drug-free, project workers almost always insisted on giving relapsed participants 'as many chances as it takes'.

## **Principled approach to probity in human relationships**

Despite staff claims that their main concern was crime reduction, all admitted to a concern with the relationships between social and criminal justice. They saw the secret of the success of projects as being dependent on their ability to convince courts and the public of a congruity of interest in reducing recidivism by improving the quality of clients' lives in the present. This usually led to development of strong public relations policies.

## **Excellent public relations**

Larger agencies employed specialist public relations officers, but innovative project directors welcomed opportunities to address public fears about offending behaviours, project/programme risk, and to publicise the low risk presented by the majority of women who come before the courts and the gender-specific social and health issues which require address if risk of re-offending is to be reduced.

## **Questionable survival strategies for gender-specific projects**

Three survival strategies provoked unease: Employment of ex-clients -- all of the non-custodial projects visited cited the employment or involvement of former drug users or lawbreakers as an organisational strength and, in some cases, in fulfilment of a funding stipulation. Yet, none had

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developed education, training or career plans for these 'non-professional' and non-salaried or low-paid helpers. However, having had many conversations on this very issue with many ex-lawbreakers, I myself have two difficulties with the prevalent ideology that the employment of ex-offenders in rehabilitation projects is unambiguously to the benefit of all involved – though there is no doubt that, as the organisers claim, the projects are usually the beneficiaries of such authoritative, committed and low-paid assistance. First, although it is often claimed that the employment of ex-clients can confer legitimacy on organisational claims to therapeutic authority, some offenders are initially wary of 'going to projects run by people no better than myself'. Moreover, is it desirable for ex-prisoners or drug-users to be encouraged to embrace the 'ex-offender' role? Should the goodwill and experience of those who have suffered multiple disadvantage be exploited (outside a proper career and salary structure) in the service of professional and state officials? I am well aware that some of the most successful non-custodial projects for female offenders owe their existence and persistence to the vision and commitment of people who themselves were once addicts or prisoners. These visionary leaders, however, are exceptional and, even at the same time as exploiting it to benefit others, usually rise above the label 'ex-prisoner'. However, even in their case, there is no doubt that they should receive proper recompense and recognition for their labours.

### **Protection by an official or umbrella organisation versus visionary and project-specific leadership**

A majority of interviewees raised the age-old question of the merits and demerits of charismatic leadership versus organisational stability, most of them concluding that their own projects would not have survived without very strong leadership during the years when the necessity to establish the need for gender-specific women's projects was a recurring challenge. However, those who were part of a larger organisation also claimed that, because the leadership of the parent organisation had been supportive in principle, belonging to it had offered them a measure of protection against critics and funding problems. A minority of respondents cited their status as part of larger service providers or as members of an umbrella organisation as a main reason for their survival. However, when, at the same time they were part of an organisation (e.g. a mixed prison site) where males were also catered for, they were continually having to fight for recognition of women's different requirements. All respondents, while pointing to the twofold need for committed, strong and innovative leadership and stability of established organisational structure,

recognised that there were inevitable tensions between the two. In order to cherish innovation, avoid organisational stagnation and protect leaders from burn-out, there was a general insistence on the development of the evolutionary and democratic structures described above. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that in every country visited, the most common threat to gender-specific projects was posed by the overlong hours of workers driven to deliver a holistic and demanding service outside any effective official recognition that the social, economic and health burdens of women in trouble with the law are usually much more complex and expensive to remedy than those of men.

### **Accountability: evaluation, measurement, or quality**

A burning issue concerned the terms in which project staff should or could adequately account for their work, so as to satisfy employers and/or funders that they were getting value for money. All recognised the moral obligation and practical necessity (in terms of project-survival) to be accountable for the money spent, yet all felt that their funders/employers entertained unrealistic or inappropriate expectations about the job to be done and how it could be adequately assessed. Funders' unrealistic expectations were the easiest to deal with, and could gradually be changed in the appropriate direction by increase of information about the histories and experiences of the project clients and the difficulties of rehabilitating women with a myriad of social and economic difficulties. Inappropriate expectations usually involved demands that the quality of a project be amenable to quantitative measurement. However, because such expectations resulted in annual reporting requirements primarily comprised of measurements of output and performance upon which, in turn, the continuation of project funding/existence depended, they constantly exercised the minds and ingenuity of project leaders; and the limits to quantification became most apparent when projects were committed to making, and sustaining, qualitative changes not amenable to measurement, and where the assessment of those changes called for moral rather than quantitative evaluations. For when workers are faced with women on the edge of despair, one prerequisite for the maintenance of staff morale is official recognition that, in relation to such work, qualitative inputs are called for, the value of which are not amenable to measurement as performances; and that time-consuming but life-supporting responses involving listening, kindness and comfort, together with other non-programmable therapies may be good in themselves. This big gap between informed and lay concepts of the complexities of resettling female offenders suggests that there is still much educational work to be done about the complex relationships between social and criminal justice for women if gender-specific projects are to survive. ■

*Pat Carlen is Visiting Professor of Criminology at Keele University. Her latest book is Women and Punishment.*