

'Hell hath no fury..?' Experiences of women convicted of violence

Rachel Reed

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Abstract

The experiences of women convicted of serious violence is under-researched. In probation practice, this translates into a corresponding lack of investment in offending behaviour programmes and interventions specifically focussed on working with women's violence and its origins. The Female Offender Strategy (MoJ, 2018) promotes a trauma-informed and gender-responsive approach to working with women within the criminal justice system and highlights the importance of taking a specialist approach. Given the lack of research on which to base such an approach however, specifically in relation to women convicted of serious violence, the current study focussed on attempting to capture this perspective using qualitative semi-structured interviews with seven women convicted of serious violence.

Findings

- There are significant links between women's engagement in serious violence and prior histories of trauma.
- For women in this research, anger and violence often served a protective function.
- Trauma was a significant precipitative 'snap' factor in women's accounts of their offending histories.
- It is important to provide opportunities for women's experiences to be heard and seen within the criminal justice system.

Recommendations

- Specific practice guidelines and structured interventions for women convicted of serious violence should be developed.
- Specialist training aimed at working with women's anger and violence should be made available to all probation staff working with women convicted of violence.
- Training should also be mandated for probation managers working within multi-agency settings (e.g., MAPPA) to ensure that this learning informs wider system understandings of female violence and guides appropriate multi-agency risk management strategies.
- Women who have been convicted of violence should only be supervised by probation staff who have received specific training around female violence.
- Staff working with women convicted of serious violence should have access to specific support to manage the emotional demands of this work.
- The Probation Service should invest in developing a specific programme or intervention for working with female anger and violence.
- A follow-up study focussed on the experiences of probation staff in managing, working with and responding to female violence should be carried out.
- The development of the new Assess, Risks, Needs, Strengths (ARNS) risk assessment tool should be gender responsive.