

Paradoxical Paradox: Exploring Probation staff attitudes towards working with women

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Abstract

Probation staff have presented differing attitudes and approaches towards working with women. To some, it is actively avoided, and it is quite common to hear from practitioners that 'working with one woman is like working with ten men'. Yet to others, it is the part of the job they most enjoy. Whilst practitioners' attitudes towards working with people having certain convictions is well investigated, the phenomenon of attitudes towards working with women is hardly discussed. This study addresses this gap by investigating the self-reported reasons for these differing attitudes and to understand whether they were based on personal beliefs or external factors that could be changed through a shift in the organisation. The study uses a two-staged, mixed method approach, involving a survey across the Midlands probation region and focus groups with two teams of staff who work exclusively with women. There was an even split between staff that preferred working with men, preferred working with women and had no preference, with similarities and differences between these groups. Key differences were found in perspectives on the meaning found within the work, training, peer support and line management. The conclusion links these findings to the new relevant HMPPS policy and makes recommendations about further organisational approaches and future research.

Findings

- There was an even split amongst research participants in terms of their preferences for working with women more than men (enthusiasts); who have no preference (neutrals); and those who enjoy working with women less than working with men (reluctants)
- All groups described working with women and the women they work with as 'complex' and 'challenging', and all groups felt that working with women was more emotionally laborious than working with men.
- Participants across all groups described higher emotional labour demands when working with women on probation. For some this included experiences of vicarious trauma.
- Research participants identified deficits in training in relation to the distinct needs of women in the criminal justice system.
- Research participants identified an absence of adequate organisational supports to carry out this work.

Recommendations

- Training should be developed and delivered to include a renewed focus on social work with an honest approach about the tensions of this in a risk management setting and a focus on women's distinct needs.
- Senior leaders and managers should model a culture of challenging negative language regarding women on probation.
- The Probation Service's Workload Management Tool (WMT) should be reviewed in respect of the allocation provided for work with women.
- Reflective practice should be supplemented by structured clinical supervision provision as standard.
- Women's specialist teams assist in consistent management of women on probation, and their work should be continued and supported.
- Women's specialist practitioners, whether in a specialist team or as a singular role within an offender management unit, must be effectively linked into other key agencies to ensure that the holistic needs women on probation supervision are met.