

Missing Voices: Why women engage with, or withdraw from, community sentences

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Abstract

Baroness Corston noted the 'high rate' of women in custody for breach and Hedderman calculated that a large proportion of the 60% of women imprisoned under the umbrella of 'other offences', will be there for breaching community sentences. Despite the interest in the subject, there appears to be little available research. This project was therefore undertaken to investigate the following issues:

- What are the main barriers to women engaging with community orders and are there clear patterns that are not recognised by contemporary practice?

- Are the aims of community orders understood and/or shared by the women involved?
- Does the rigidity of structure inherent in these orders affect women differently?

The research is based on interviews with women serving sentences for breach of community orders (including suspended sentence orders) in HMP New Hall and the Together Women Project in Hull.

Whilst this research is small-scale in scope, it is hoped that the findings will inspire more extensive research in the future.

Findings

- Three themes emerged from the interviews: mental health problems, a pervasive need to feel safe; and a desire to work in a female-only environment. A striking feature of all the narratives was the occurrence of multiple, interrelated traumas.
- The concept of risk was experienced as irrelevant by the women themselves who were struggling to protect themselves from the risks posed by others. The pathways were similarly viewed as irrelevant: the women felt too traumatised to work, learn or live independently.
- The literature indicated that 'the perception of fairness' was critical to compliance (Crawford and Huckleby 2013:123) — but this research does not support this hypothesis in relation to women.
- The women's narratives reflected Covington's concept of 'experts by experience', a pool of specialist knowledge shared by survivors. Most of the women did not want generic counselling but did want support and strategies to manage their distress.
- Women's Community Centres provide a sound infrastructure to facilitate the needed support. The key ingredients include: a female-only environment; a gender and trauma-informed service; a non-judgemental/non-authoritarian atmosphere; practical help with child care and transport; empowerment and encouragement; a key worker who is an empathetic listener, gives positive feedback, and demonstrates care; swift access to counselling and mental health services; and effective links with housing and education providers.

Recommendations

- Gender awareness training should be rolled out to all probation staff in line with the recommendation from the Thematic Inspection:
 - practitioners will not 'engage women positively' unless they have the 'awareness and underpinning knowledge to work with women effectively' and 'develop ...professional judgement in relation to compliance and enforcement'
- Women's centres should provide trauma-informed services:
 - a safe place is a prerequisite for recovery and these centres can provide such a space.
- Breach reports should assess the woman in the context of her life as a whole and be presented by her key worker:
 - Breach reports are the final and chief vehicle by which women, who have disengaged, can be diverted from custody. It is thus critical that these reports are of a high quality informed by gender awareness and sound assessment skills.