

# Moving forward: empowering women to desist from offending

Exploring how women experience empowerment, compliance and desistance during enforced contact with a women's centre and probation

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## Abstract

This qualitative research explores women's experiences of empowerment, desistance and compliance. The main objective was to capture women's insights about their experiences of empowerment during their engagement with enforced community sentences. The questions asked were:

- What factors do women identify as important for desistance?
- What is empowerment?
- Is being empowered an important part of desistance?
- Does enforced contact with interventions empower women, or does a court order undermine empowerment?

- What contributes to women's decisions about engagement and compliance?

The study engaged directly with seven women sentenced to woman-specific court orders delivered within London Probation. [NB. From November 2010, London Probation implemented two woman-specific Specified Activity Requirements, available within a Community Order or Suspended Sentence Order. The two activities are the Structured Supervision for Women (SSW) one-to-one programme and sessions with Women Ahead at the Jagonari Women's Education and Resource Centre (WERC).]

## Findings

- The unanimous response to, 'what helps women on their journey to stop offending?' referred to finding underlying causes and seeking effective support.
- Crucially, early and preventive interventions can effectively empower women to overcome underlying problems and pursue conventional lifestyles (SETF, 2009; Sommers et al., 2004).
- Women who offend require practical assistance alongside confidence-building support in order to move away from criminal activity.
- Funding services in a sustainable manner would facilitate women's continued access to provisions within mainstream settings that last beyond short-lived court sentences (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007).
- Participants identified several structural barriers that limit genuine choices and opportunities (Rumgay, 2004; Worrall, 2002), including the benefits system administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) barrier to employment.
- Participants experienced a lack of control over their socio-political context that hampers their ability to move forward in life.
- Provision should clearly delineate between criminal justice (focused on risk and punishment) and social support (that is individualised and holistic) in order to promote desistance (SETF, 2009).
- Every participant's desistance focussed on 'moving forward' and the respondent feedback unanimously agreed that this title encapsulates the research findings.

## Recommendations

- Local service commissioners should commit to long-term funding to develop an infrastructure of sustainable provisions that can support women to desist from offending.
- Commissioners and service providers should coordinate and advertise local women-only services to counteract negative perceptions, improve engagement with services, and increase the avenues for women to access early intervention.
- Services should be funded and promoted to facilitate self-referral or drop-in for women to gain swift access to top-up, stabilising support, in recognition of the lapses and relapses within the desistance journey.
- Probation trusts should continually identify and endorse effective provisions as specified activity requirements that inspire sentencers' confidence and address women's needs within mainstream community settings.
- The current policy on fast delivery court reports must be reconsidered to enable practitioners to invest more time to ensure that assessments are thorough and develop individually-tailored woman-specific sentencing proposals.
- Probation trusts and practitioners must exercise their power and influence positively to continually advocate for women and tackle wider social and structural problems rather than focussing primarily on cognitive-behavioural factors and enforcement.
- Local areas should explore and develop co-location arrangements to offer women the option of attending with offender managers for court report interviews or supervision in women-only community-based premises.
- Service providers should utilise the potential for ex-offenders to provide peer support as advocates, mentors or group facilitators.
- Socio-political and collective action should challenge the oppressive systems and structures that undermine women's capacity to pursue real-life opportunities and self-determination.
- Delivery design must ensure that payment by results initiatives recognise women as people involved in complex pathways to desistance rather than focusing on simplified, binary measures of success.