

An evaluation of The Freedom Programme: A prison support programme for women who have experienced domestic violence

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Abstract

This research evaluated The Freedom Programme - a group work support programme for women in prison. Three research questions were addressed: does the programme help women to develop ways of thinking and behaving that protect themselves, their children and others from harm; is the programme of equal value for BME women, lesbian women etc. as it is for white heterosexual women; and to what extent do women value the process of being able to discuss, share and explore issues with other women? The research questions were addressed through 14 interviews with women who attended the programme, four interviews with facilitators and observation of two sessions.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews and participant observation revealed that The Freedom Programme had a number of limitations. Women generally found the programme enjoyable, liked the opportunity to discuss their experiences with other women and felt that they had learned about warning signs which would prevent future abusive relationships. However, some of the problematic issues were (i) the course raised awareness of domestic violence issues which was not in line with the official programme aims (ii) there was a lack of support outside of sessions (iii) resettlement issues were not addressed and (iv) there were issues with the processes of the programme including staff training and use of male facilitators.

Recommendations

- The programme aims should be in line with the programme content. Facilitators should be fully aware of the programme aims and work towards these.
- Facilitators should ensure that all women attending the programme are enabled to speak and contribute to the sessions.
- The programme should ensure that women are fully and systematically supported, during and after sessions, particularly when their awareness is raised of the impact of violence on their children. The programme should not be run in prisons unless effective procedures to ensure support is available after sessions can be put in place.
- The course manual should be revised in consultation with service users. Facilitators should attempt to provide women with more balanced expectations about the highs and lows of future relationships.
- Supervision for facilitation skills to maintain programme quality and integrity should be introduced.
- Facilitators should devise a policy for recruiting women for the programme that successfully identifies all women who might potentially benefit from attending. This should include pre-course interviews to assess women's backgrounds and individual needs. Information should also be provided to women before they start the course.
- Male facilitators should not be used on the programme until such time as all of the concerns about their use can be effectively addressed.
- NOMS should consider how the programme can contribute to meeting the particular resettlement needs of women prisoners who have been affected by domestic violence.
- The individual needs of each woman on the course should be addressed. The course should be delivered in a way that enables all women to attend regardless of sexuality, nationality, culture etc.