

**Research Paper**  
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# Volunteering for All? A Qualitative Study of Women Ex-offenders' Experiences of Volunteering

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## CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in volunteering, with numerous government initiatives launched to encourage people to get more involved. Machin (2005) names three examples of such initiatives; Millennium Volunteers (aimed at increasing participation in volunteering of 18-24 year olds), the Black and Minority Ethnic Twinning Initiative (to increase involvement amongst black and ethnic minority groups) and the Home Office Older Volunteers' Initiative (to improve the quantity and quality of opportunities for those over 50 years old). Volunteering has become big business with more and more opportunities available and record numbers of people volunteering. National statistics suggest that between 2001 and 2003, the numbers of people volunteering formally had increased by approximately 1.5 million (Home Office, 2004).

There too has been a focus on increasing volunteering within the Criminal Justice System, with the main aim being to reduce levels of re-offending. In May 2007, The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) produced a consultation document titled *Volunteers can: Towards a Volunteering Strategy to Reduce Re-Offending*. Contained within the document is a vision for how opportunities which allow volunteers to go into prisons to support offenders can bring additional skills and expertise to the work of the prison service. Additionally, offenders volunteering whilst in prison and after their release, can build their confidence and self esteem. In sum, these two together:

*'provide an opportunity for communities to help reduce re-offending, which is of benefit not only to offenders, but also to their families, victims and society as a whole'* (NOMS, 2007, p.5).

The NOMS strategy has four key aims, which are; to increase the number and diversity of volunteers; to become more strategic in volunteer development; to improve support to volunteers; and to establish the impact of volunteering. To date there has been very little research conducted into the

issues and impacts of offenders or ex-offenders volunteering. Although the NOMS (2007) document does mention the benefits for offenders of volunteering, the focus is more on (law-abiding) volunteers going into prisons from the community.

Farrant & Levenson (2002) carried out research on behalf of Prison Reform Trust into volunteering amongst prisoners and the benefits it could make to both the individuals involved and to the prison environment. They argued that *'volunteering can increase the confidence and self-esteem of prisoners by allowing them to take responsibility at a time when most decisions are made for, rather than by them'* (p.36). However, they found that there were far fewer opportunities for women prisoners to volunteer than there were for men. They did not go on to explore offenders volunteering after their release from prison.

Research by Ellis, Howlett and O'Brien (2004) explored the link between volunteering and social exclusion. They highlighted the barriers to formal volunteering faced by individuals from black and minority ethnic groups, disabled people and people from an offending background – all of whom have been identified as being under-represented in formal volunteering. Whilst offenders were included in this research, there was less focus on them than on the other two groups so there are still unexplored questions about their participation in, and experiences of, volunteering.

Neither piece of research focused specifically on the experiences of women. It would appear from a review of the literature that there seems to be a lack of research into offenders and ex-offenders volunteering. It is felt, therefore, that this could be a timely and worthwhile piece of research.

My initial interest came from my experience of working on an education, training and employment project in London for two years, which was specifically set up to provide support to women after their release from prison. Some of the women who took part in the project undertook voluntary work as a way of gaining work experience in order to move onto paid employment in the future.

The women appeared to benefit a great deal from their volunteering and I was interested in how and why volunteering had helped them.

A further dimension to the research is my own personal experience of being a woman ex-offender and spending periods of time in custody in the late 1990's to early 2000's. Bringing those experiences into this research, I am drawn towards feminist standpoint epistemology, which is concerned with building knowledge and empowerment through women's lived experience.

According to Brooks (2007, p.55) *'Feminist standpoint epistemology is a unique philosophy of knowledge building that challenges us to (1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and (2) apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change'*. Whilst some may question the characterisation of women prisoners as oppressed women, it should be noted that many come from backgrounds of abuse, exploitation and poverty. Brooks (ibid) argues that *'while many thousands of men's lives have been recognized and recorded for centuries and across cultures, women's life stories have been documented far less often'*. My experiences of being a woman prisoner and today an ex-prisoner have shaped and altered my perception of the world, for which I make no apologies. Whilst this piece of research is not about 'telling my story', there will be points in this paper where I use some of my experiences to add further depth to the stories told to me by the women whom I interviewed.

### **Research Aims**

The aim of conducting this piece of research was to explore women ex-offenders' experiences of volunteering. There has been a focus on increasing levels of participation in volunteering in recent years but volunteering opportunities for offenders and ex-offenders have been neglected, despite the fact that it is argued that volunteering can help reduce re-offending - a key aim of the current government.

The objective was to discover whether women who had volunteered found it to be a positive and beneficial experience. The research examined the wider issues around volunteering and by doing so sought to draw up a good practice guide, which could be used by organisations interested in providing volunteering opportunities to ex-offenders as well as prison staff working in prisoner resettlement. A further aim was to raise awareness of the specific issues for women ex-offenders whilst at the same time giving hope to any female ex-offenders who may read this document.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Method of Data Collection**

The techniques used to collect data for this research were primarily qualitative, partly due to time constraints but also because this method was thought to be the most appropriate in order to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of women ex-offenders volunteering and also organisations working with women ex-offenders. A semi-structured interview was used, which provided a common framework for all interviews but also allowed for individual flexibility, enabling each woman to feel comfortable and talk about what they felt was important within the interview.

In total, eight women were interviewed for this research. It had originally been the aim to interview between 10 and 15 women but, due to time constraints and work commitments, this was not possible. After discussions with other Fellows and Griffins Council members, it was decided that eight was an adequate number of women to use for this research. The interviewees were identified and selected from women who had taken part in the employment project I had been working on and also women who volunteered to be interviewed after hearing about my research and had at some point been involved in voluntary work.

It was hoped that I would interview women who had not volunteered to find out what their perceptions of volunteering were and also to interview women who had started volunteering but



not continued to find out why and what their experiences had been. Unfortunately it was much more difficult to access these women and so all of the interviewees were women who were currently volunteering or who had been active in volunteering in the past. All interviews were tape recorded and consent gained from the women beforehand. The women were reminded that everything was confidential and that they could stop the interview at any time and decline to answer anything they felt uncomfortable with. Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes.

A further two face-to-face interviews were conducted with managers of voluntary sector organisations; one organisation which supported people with a history of substance misuse and an offending background into voluntary work and another which provided services to people with mental health problems and used a large number of volunteers, some of whom were ex-offenders.

Questionnaires were also devised to gather information from individuals working within voluntary sector organisations about their perceptions of ex-offenders and the experiences of those which had worked with ex-offenders. The questionnaire was posted on The Griffins Society website and also advertised through the Clinks network and through Volunteering England newsletter. In total, 13 individuals from different organisations responded by filling in the questionnaire.

### **The Sample Group**

Even with the author's close work connections to women prisoners and ex-prisoners and in particular those who were or who had volunteered, it was not straightforward to access women to interview about their experiences. Initially, around twenty women were contacted by letter explaining about the nature and purpose of my research and asking if they would agree to take part. This was successful in providing me with five interviews. The author aimed to recruit more women for interviews by advertising on Unlock website but, unfortunately, this only attracted male ex-offenders. The remaining interviewees came about during the course of the research by

professionals who were aware of my research speaking to women about it who then agreed to take part. The two professionals I interviewed were selected after they responded to my questionnaire.

### **Reliability and Validity**

As there were only a small number of women interviewed for the research, the findings cannot be used to generalise about women ex-offenders' experiences of volunteering. On the whole, this report focuses on the positive aspects of volunteering because this is what the women focused on. This is not to say that people's experiences of volunteering are always positive, rather, as a picture of what works, the issues and themes brought up within the report could be used as a guide to providing quality volunteering placements. Additionally, all the women who were interviewed for the research were living in London, so the findings may have a local rather than a national resonance.

### **The Outcomes**

It is hoped that the findings of this research will yield real insights into an under-researched issue and create a greater awareness of the specific issues and disadvantages facing women ex-offenders. They could also be used as a guide for organisations which are interested in involving ex-offenders as volunteers within their organisations in the future as well as prison staff working within prisoner resettlement.

## CHAPTER 2 – VOLUNTEERING IN CONTEXT

The following chapters focus on the experiences of the eight women whom I interviewed for my research as well as featuring input from professionals who have worked with offenders and ex-offenders. By exploring the common themes which emerged from talking to the women, I aim to build up a picture in the reader's mind of the journey these women went through once they made the decision to volunteer. Themes include the benefits and potential negative aspects of volunteering as well as some of the wider issues around volunteering which are specific to those disadvantaged by having a criminal record, in this case women. This chapter will attempt to define what is meant by the term 'volunteering' and put volunteering into context, before moving on to the next chapters which look at some of the themes which emerged from the interviews.

### Defining volunteering

In this research, I have been focusing on the experiences of women who have been volunteering within organisations, what can be termed 'formal volunteering'. There is no one accepted definition of formal volunteering within the United Kingdom, although various definitions can be found in government reports and research papers. The Compact Code of Good Practice on Volunteering (2005, p.4) defines volunteering as:

*'An activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives'.*

They also go on to give a longer context-setting description of volunteering by adding that (ibid):

*'Volunteering is an important expression of citizenship and fundamental to democracy. It is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, and can take many forms. It is freely undertaken and not for financial gain. The principle of non-payment of volunteers is central to this Code and to the wider sector and society's understanding of volunteering'.*

They finally say that (p.4):

*'People volunteer for many different reasons. They may choose to volunteer to develop skills or gain experience, to socialise or to give something back to society. They may also volunteer because they feel a moral duty or compelling reasons to take part in voluntary action or support a particular cause. The key element is that it is freely undertaken'.*

### **The extent of volunteering**

Within the voluntary sector, volunteers make a huge contribution. The most up-to-date statistics on volunteering can be found within the Department for Communities and Local Government Survey (2007-2008). The survey suggested that 73% of the population in England and Wales had volunteered formally at least once in the last twelve months and 48% volunteered at least once a month. A report published by NCVO (Clark et al, 2006) suggests that it would require an estimated 1.1 million full time workers to replace the formal volunteers which currently volunteer for voluntary sector organisations. This is well over twice the number of full time paid employees currently working in the voluntary sector. They estimate that to replace those volunteers would cost £25.4 billion (based on the national average wage). It is perhaps not surprising that volunteering is such big business when volunteers make such a contribution to the economy.

### **Volunteering opportunities**

The range of volunteering opportunities these days are vast with a whole range of voluntary sector organisations out there, providing services to meet the needs of many different sections of society, including: women, people with disabilities, young people, black and minority ethnic groups and people with mental health problems. Volunteers can do all sorts of things, from befriending someone who feels isolated, to assisting with sports events, to helping out a charity with office work. Some organisations are looking for volunteers with certain skills, but most give full training and are just looking for someone who is enthusiastic. It is also now relatively easy for people to find out

about opportunities, providing they have the resources and abilities to access them, by getting in touch with their local volunteer bureau or by searching online through a database of volunteering opportunities.

It has, however, been suggested that volunteering is conceptualised too narrowly by some people and seen as something which is carried out by those who are white, middle aged and middle class (Machin, 2005). This can exclude individuals and groups who do not see themselves as fitting into those groups. It has also been noted that because 'volunteering' is construed so narrowly, many understand it to involve only a limited number of activities and consequently do not identify with it or see how it could be relevant to them (ibid). The following two quotes by women taking part in my research demonstrate this particularly well:

*'Before I went to prison, I didn't know what voluntary meant...I thought it was just free work and it was just people who would make cups of tea for people. Now I've realised the voluntary sector is big and there's lots of people that volunteer and sometimes you don't realise whose volunteering and whose not' (women ex-prisoner who volunteered whilst in prison).*

*'I'd always thought that volunteering was just like in a charity shop or an old people's home and you were the person who mopped the floors or skivvied around in an organisation. I don't know whether I've just been lucky with the organisation that I started with but I didn't realise just how many opportunities would open up' (women ex-offender who currently volunteers).*

### **Who volunteers?**

The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering (Davis-Smith, J, 1998) found that:

- Young people are less likely to be involved in voluntary work than those over the age of 45
- People earning more than £25,000 a year are more likely to volunteer than those on low incomes
- Men and women are equally likely to volunteer

**Chapter summary**

This chapter has attempted to define and put volunteering into context. The defining features of volunteering are that it is freely undertaken, unpaid and that it is an activity which aims to benefit the wider community. There are now more people volunteering and a wider range of volunteering opportunities available to people. Most volunteering takes place within voluntary and community groups where volunteers make a huge contribution without which, some organisations may not be able to continue their work. Despite the fact that volunteering has grown and gone through something of an image make-over, some people may still perceive it as being irrelevant to their lives.

## **CHAPTER THREE – WOMEN IN PRISON**

Four of the eight women interviewed for this research made the decision to start volunteering whilst they were still in prison. These four women were all serving longer sentences (four years and over) and so had more time to become aware of volunteering opportunities available within their prisons and be eligible to volunteer out in the community towards the end of their prison sentences, working towards resettling back into the community.

### **Volunteering within prisons**

The volunteering experience may begin for some prisoners within the prison walls. In some prisons, there are opportunities for prisoners to provide support, advice or information services to other prisoners through a variety of peer support schemes which have been set up over the years. Such schemes include advice and information around housing, education and employment to supporting prisoners with alcohol and substance misuse issues or new prisoners when they arrive into prison on first night in custody schemes. Farrant & Levenson (2002, p.36) argued that:

*‘although physically removed from society, people in prison can play a valuable role as volunteers’.*

Peer support is based upon the principle that people have something to offer each other, which cannot be provided by other professionals. Perhaps the most well known and well established peer support scheme is the Listener Scheme.

### **Listener Schemes**

The first Listener Scheme was set up in HMP Swansea in 1991 and now operates in 85 per cent of prisons due to its success of reducing incidents of self-harm (Farrant & Levenson, 2002). The aim of the service is to provide a confidential support service to distressed prisoners, who often may feel

depressed and suicidal because of their imprisonment. Listeners are trained and supported by Samaritan staff to befriend such prisoners during times of particular distress and help to reduce feelings of isolation.

One interviewee told me about her first experience of volunteering whilst in prison as a listener:

*'My first voluntary role was with the Samaritans in Holloway as a listener. The reason I went into that was because I felt that I had a skill, because people used to come to me and tell me everything and talk to me and someone said why don't you become a listener? I found that it gave me time to not think about my own problems and think about other peoples and I think you gain strength within yourself. It also gets you out of your cell, which is a big, big thing...huge'.*

For this woman, it was an extremely positive experience which helped her cope with her own imprisonment as well as leading into other voluntary work and eventually paid work, as her skills and confidence developed. However, she didn't feel that volunteering was promoted well within the prison and that many women weren't aware of the opportunities which could be available to them, she said:

*'I was just lucky that I was in the right place at the right time and I talk to everyone anyway and it was word of mouth, like 'she's quite good at that, you should ask her to do that and then I was approached to be a peer supporter. It wasn't actually promoted from the prison side, it was more the outside agencies which were promoting it. I think it's important to promote volunteer work within the prisons because until they actually do it, the women won't realise the potential they've actually got to go and get paid employment'.*

Similar findings were found by Farrant & Levenson (2002) study; although there was good work occurring within individual prisons, it was often a result of individual committed staff members and not because of a coherent strategy. They also found that there were considerably fewer opportunities for female prisoners to volunteer than there were for male prisoners.

As one woman I interviewed said:

*'To be honest, I'm sure if the women were given opportunities, especially from prison, the prison environment would be a much better place. In a place like Holloway, a lot of women*



*are in the building and no chance of fresh air, only half an hour a day in the week and an hour in the weekend. If they had something to do, voluntary work whether it was in or out of the prison, it would make people feel valued and more appreciated'.*

### **Volunteering in the community from prison**

There can be opportunities for prisoners to volunteer outside the prison walls for external organisations, providing that prisoners are eligible to apply for a resettlement licence. However, these are only open to a small percentage of prisoners. The Prison Reform Trust study (Farrant & Levenson, 2002, p.24) into volunteering within prisons found that in all, only 1.05 percent of prisoners, or one in 95 prisoners were volunteering outside of the prison environment. In order to qualify, a prisoner must be sentenced, serving over a twelve month sentence and have completed a third of their total sentence or four months, whichever is longer. They must also pass a risk assessment. As many women in prison are only serving short sentences for minor offences and almost two-thirds of all women received into prison per year are on remand (Home Office, 2003) most are not eligible for this. This is likely to be the reason why of those interviewed, only women who had been serving longer sentences had volunteered out in the community whilst in prison.

Volunteering can offer many benefits to prisoners by, for example: improving their chances of gaining employment by them gaining work experience, improving their skills and confidence and enabling them to gain a recent work reference. For longer term prisoners who are likely to be faced on release with a labour market which has changed during their time in prison, it can be a way of gaining new skills relevant to the labour market. Particularly for women prisoners, who as a group are disadvantaged in terms of work history, (41 per cent had no work history at all according to the Social Exclusion Unit Report, 2002) it could be their first experience of being involved in any kind of work. It is also important in enabling prisoners to become familiar with the outside world after

being imprisoned, often for long periods of time. For the women I interviewed who were involved in volunteering outside of the prison walls, there were benefits which will be discussed below.

### **Gaining self confidence**

Many women who enter prison have already experienced extreme hardships in their lives and come from disadvantaged backgrounds characterised by abuse, addiction and poverty; prison could be seen to further stigmatise and characterise them as 'damaged women'. Baroness Corston conducted a review of vulnerable women caught up in the criminal justice system and noted that, in general, vulnerable women in prison were mothers, had substance misuse and alcohol problems. They had been sexually or physically harmed and abused (sometimes both), had self-harmed, suffered from mental health problems and were poor (Home Office 2007).

Similar findings are noted in the literature. For example, Borrill et al (2001) indicated in their research that almost two-thirds of women in prison have a drug problem, while other research has suggested that over half of women in prison have suffered domestic violence and one in three has experienced sexual abuse (Singleton et al, 1998). The Prison Service (2004) suggested that in 2003, 30 percent of women were reported to have harmed themselves compared with just six per cent of men. Although women made up just six per cent of the prison population at the time, they accounted for 46 per cent of all recorded self-harm incidents. According to Singleton et al (1998), two-thirds of women in prison show symptoms of at least one neurotic disorder, such as depression, anxiety and phobias and more than half are suffering from a personality disorder. Amongst the general population, less than one fifth of women suffer from these disorders (ibid). Much has been written over the years about the poverty of many women who go to prison. Carlen (1988) argued that crime is often a logical response to women's position and a way of escaping their situation of living in poverty.

Corston also found that although the women she met in different prisons appeared confident at first and were loud, this was used to mask their vulnerabilities and lack of self-confidence and self-esteem (Home Office 2007). When you look at the backgrounds of many of the women who end up in prison, it is not surprising that they lack self-confidence and belief. They may have been imprisoned for being offenders but many, although they would not want themselves defined in this way, have been victims themselves.

However, it is not just the backgrounds of the women's lives that can affect their self-confidence but the actual day-to-day reality of imprisonment and the lack of normal social interactions that we often take for granted.

One woman interviewee said:

*'After being in prison for so long you just get used to being amongst females and the staff members so you don't have confidence about reintegrating with other people except when you're on visits. It gave me the confidence to sit down and talk to people again. If I had come straight out and not done voluntary work it would have been very difficult and I would probably have been more nervous'.*

This is not to say that imprisonment does not affect male prisoners in similar ways, but that for women, particularly because in Western culture women's identity is constructed around notions of femininity and their roles as mothers and carers, there can be an added element of shame and that they are being punished for being 'bad women'.

A worker from a well known organisation that places offenders into voluntary work towards the end of their sentences said:

*'We notice that women offenders are often less confident than men and a lot more reluctant to talk about their offences'.*

**Feeling normal**

After spending time in prison there is often the feeling of being different and not like 'normal' people. Volunteering can help to make prisoners feel a part of society again and gain some sort of normality before they are released.

One interviewee who had volunteered towards the end of her sentence said:

*'It's a way of gaining your own confidence again, for being out there and having to get dressed up and go to work every day, when you're on the train you're just like everyone else and you're going to work. It's a good feeling'.*

Another interviewee said:

*'It gives me the chance to get used to the outside world and not feel isolated in the prison environment, you can get used to that institutional feeling and feel lost when you go out'.*

I had the opportunity of being able to volunteer outside of the prison towards the end of my prison sentence and it helped me become familiar with being outside again and having normal social interactions with people outside the prison. This was the start of me feeling, in some way, like a human being again, although nothing can prepare prisoners for how they will feel upon release, particularly after serving a long term sentence (over four years).

**Not having to disclose convictions**

For many people with a criminal record, especially those who have been to prison, the thought of having to disclose their convictions to potential employers, complete a criminal records check and face negative attitudes towards them because of their convictions can be a huge worry (this will be discussed in further detail later in this paper as it was discussed with all interviewees, not just those who had volunteered whilst in prison). Sometimes, the fear can be so great that they would rather not go through with it.

Securing voluntary work whilst in prison can take some of the pressure off, as the prisoner knows that the organisation involved will be made aware of their situation of being in prison. Someone from the prison liaises with the organisation on their behalf and so the prisoner can feel a bit more at ease.

One interviewee said:

*'The reason why I didn't have to do any of those checks is because I was still in prison, semi-open prison when I took the jobs, so the prison organised it for you basically. I'm sure, the organisation where I was working, working with vulnerable adults, that whatever your crime you would have to do a CRB check and I don't know how they would view my particular offence. I was not lucky, but it was good for me that I was in there when I got the jobs because I don't know that I would have got them off my own back, I don't know 'cos I've not tried'.*

Although the issue of disclosure is still going to come up for prisoners and ex-prisoners in the future, being accepted by an organisation the first time may increase someone's self-confidence and make it more likely that they would consider applying for voluntary or paid work in the future.

### **The importance of support**

Something which came up in most of the interviews was how important it was to have someone from inside the prison, to whom the women could turn to for support. One woman who volunteered for the last year of her prison sentence, talked about her experience of this:

*'I was still in prison when I was volunteering but the guy that gets the girls the work he's also like our mentor, someone we can always go to if we've got any problems, positive stuff too; he was fantastic and he was really hands on. He wasn't someone who got you the job and then went onto the next person, he used to pop in and see us at work and see we was all right. You knew that he wasn't there checking up on us, he was making sure that we was getting treated properly. He was fantastic and I think it's quite important that you have someone, be it a group or one person who you can fall back on, especially in our situation as offenders or ex-offenders, you need someone who you can fall back on and make sure you are being treated properly'.*

Inevitably, there are going to be issues that come up when someone volunteers from within prison. They may not want people to know that they are in prison and be uncertain about exactly who is aware of it. They may face embarrassment when faced with difficult questions or, if people aren't aware of their situation, feel bad at having to constantly pass up invitations to attend social events outside of working hours. One woman talked about her experience of having to deal with questions from colleagues:

*'Where I was working it was a really big building, about forty people working in there and I know for a fact not all of them knew where I was so sometimes it got a bit difficult like where do your children go to school and how come you travel so far if you say you live in \*\*\*\*\* and I was going all the way to \*\*\*\*\* and if someone asks you where you live you naturally say it without thinking. A couple of people didn't know initially and then they found out and I wasn't aware that they've found out but they never treated me any different, they were really kind and there was no negativity from people it was just me feeling awkward about how to answer their questions'.*

In some cases, it was reassuring to know that there was external support available, even if they didn't need to use them for a while. One woman said:

*'It's important to have someone who knows where you're coming from and to be there if you've had a bad experience that day, for example: if someone has just found out what you've done or that you're an ex-offender and they've treated you like crap. Someone you can go to and say this made me feel like this. It helps even if you don't use them for a month, to know that they're there if you need them. I think it's really important'.*

**Chapter summary**

There are a range of volunteer opportunities available for prisoners however, they are often not well publicised within prisons and there is a lack of strategic leadership for volunteering. There are fewer opportunities for women prisoners to volunteer than male prisoners and often, women prisoners may be prevented from volunteering in the community as part of their resettlement because they are serving short sentences. When women prisoners are given the opportunity to volunteer, it can have many benefits for them, including; allowing them to gain self confidence, feeling 'normal', enabling them to become familiar with the outside world before their release and helping to reduce feelings of isolation whilst they are in prison. However, if women are to take part in voluntary work, either within the prison or out in the community on day release from prison, having someone to turn to for support is crucial.

## CHAPTER FOUR – WOMEN AFTER PRISON

Women are faced with a large number of issues upon their release, including trying to gain access to and reform bonds with their children, securing accommodation, securing benefit entitlements and trying to secure employment. Unless women do receive adequate support after their release, which can aid them in successfully 'resettling' back into their communities, reoffending is more likely. Words such as 'resettlement' and 'reintegration' are misleading words as they imply that individuals were 'settled' and 'integrated' in their communities before they entered prison, which many were not (see for example Raynor, 2007). However, evidence shows one of the most things in assisting offenders to settle and stay away from crime and lead law abiding lives is gaining employment. The Trade Union Congress (TUC) has argued that:

*'Helping ex-offenders into jobs is one of the most effective ways of preventing them from re-offending: all of us are less likely to be victims of crime if we can help ex-offenders into work'* (Trade Union Congress, 2001, cited in Farrant & Levenson, 2001, p,3).

However, although employment may be an important part of the resettlement process, women experience significant barriers to gaining employment on release from prison (Cox, 2001, quoted in McPherson, 2007). Gelsthorpe et al (2007, p.13) point out the lack of availability of women specific community provision and work placements. Furthermore, many want and indeed need to work, but faced with difficulties with housing, health, community and family reintegration, employment is often not the number one priority.

Eaton (1993) interviewed 34 women ex-prisoners who had managed to transform and move forward with their lives. She found that transformation occurred as a result of access to adequate housing, employment and health facilities. Furthermore, *'Recognition by others, and the opportunity to relate as people of equal worth, had enabled these women to establish themselves in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others, as contributing and valued members of society'* (Eaton, 1993, p.101).



Volunteering may be only one aspect of this, but it could be the start of women developing self-worth and feeling they have something to contribute; being a part of instead of on the fringes of society.

Many women prisoners have poor or limited vocational skills, low levels of educational attainment, a lack of social and professional networks which would assist them to find employment, lack of recent work experience and a lack of motivation and self-confidence (McPherson, 2007).

Volunteering can be a good way for women to ease their way into the world of work in a non-pressured way, (discussed further in Chapter Five). However, in order for women to take that first step, they need support to be available and to be made aware of where they can turn to for help and support.

### **Lack of support**

Women face considerable difficulties re-establishing themselves after prison. Regardless of the length of sentence, but particularly if someone has spent a considerable amount of time in prison, it can be difficult adjusting to life outside of the prison gates. Although we know that prisoners need help to resettle in the community, and that successful resettlement will help reduce re-offending, in recent years there have been significant changes within the criminal justice system which mean that often, there is a lack of support available for prisoners both before and after their release.

In 1992, females comprised only 3.4 per cent of the average annual population in custody but this almost doubled to 6.1 per cent in 2002 (Home Office, 2003). During this period the annual average female population increased from 1577 to 4299. This constituted a massive 173 per cent increase in the female population compared with only a fifty per cent increase in the male population, although it is still the case that the numerical increase in male prisoners is far greater than that for women.

From 2005 to the present time, the numbers of women incarcerated have remained high, fluctuating

between 4200 to 4600. These higher numbers of women prisoners have put pressure on resources and staff, perhaps leaving women with poorer or inadequate pre-release and resettlement plans.

Alongside the growth of the prison population and an obvious stretch on resources, there have been considerable changes to the structure of the Criminal Justice System. In 2004, the National Offender Management System (NOMS) was set up in response to a government led review of the structures relating to prison and probation. Gelthorpe (2007, p.54) describes NOMS as an over-arching body, which was intended to promote efficient offender management throughout the system. Gelthorpe (2007) explains that under the NOMS system, resources are allocated according to risk of harm or reconviction based on four tiers of service delivery. According to the Fawcett Society (2004), women generally present lower levels of harm and reconviction than men. This means that women, often, will disproportionately fall into the first two tiers (made up of lower risk offenders with fewer criminogenic needs). The implication of this is that women offenders needs, may often be overlooked. They are more likely to be the subject of less intensive orders attracting fewer resources and supervised by less qualified and / or less experienced offender managers. On the other hand, men (particularly high risk sexual and violent offenders) will receive much greater attention (Gelthorpe, 2007, p.54).

The eight women I interviewed for this research all had different experiences of the probation service after their release. Some felt that there wasn't enough support and a lack of understanding around their needs. One interviewee who had been in paid employment before her release from prison said this about her experience:

*'The last fifteen months since prison have been quite busy, plus my contract ended so I had to find new work so that was another challenge again. I went to probation and told them this, I thought they were one of the main people who could enhance the volunteer work for ex-offenders because they have regular contact with them but they never once said to me 'well if you finish work and you haven't got a job would you like to do a bit of voluntary work' or 'this is what's on offer for you'. If they would have read my file properly they would have seen that I've been doing voluntary work for most of my sentence so I think they could be a*

*lot more involved than how they actually are. They don't really promote you as a person, to self develop, to gain new skills to make you employable or to go and do some voluntary work'.*

A lack of information on where to get help was a problem for another interviewee, who said;

*'I've had a lot of problems. It's been quite a long time since prison and because I haven't had the support I haven't been able to move on. I couldn't move out of being stuck in the same position because I didn't know how to. Since I've been getting support things are getting better. I needed support all the time but I didn't know how to get it. I didn't know where to go or what to do'.*

However, one interviewee indicated how having a supportive probation officer who was encouraging her was making a difference to her life;

*'I really would like to go into probation work, my probation officer is really spurring me on and has said to me there's all these different courses that if you want to be a probation officer you need. He's really spurring me on to do that, which is really good. Within 6 months I'll be off licence, completed law and legal studies OU and then I'll start, through him I think, identifying what the barriers are going to be 'cos obviously there's going to be some and how we can overcome some if possible'.*

### **What support do women need?**

The majority of the women whom I interviewed for this research had been receiving post-release support from voluntary sector agencies, which were providing services specifically to meet the needs of ex-offenders. However, the problem with projects such as these is that they are often only funded for a relatively short period of time, with further funding often being dependent on unrealistic targets being met. Considering the difficulties that many women prisoners face after their release, it is often the case that the targets are not met and funding comes to an end.

I worked on an education, training and employment programme for women ex-prisoners for two years and left because further funding was not awarded for these reasons. Having built up experience of working with this client group, it seemed quite apparent to me that any project aiming to meet the needs of women ex-prisoners needs to be funded on a longer term basis, due to the

complexity of many of the women's problems and lives. A quote which seems to sum this up quite well says that the problems of women caught up in the criminal justice system and drugs agencies:

*"large knots that have to be painstakingly unpicked, often over many years"* (DrugScope, 2005, p.63).

### **Practical Support**

The main reason that the women who took part in my research gave for volunteering was to enable them to move into paid employment in the future. For many women who have been to prison this can seem like an unachievable goal and so has to be taken in a step-by-step way. Volunteering can be one of the first steps towards getting into work but isn't always a straightforward process, especially for people with a criminal record, and needs to be broken down further. One interviewee said:

*'With how I've gone into voluntary work I think somewhere like \*\*\* (organisation working with women prisoners and ex-prisoners) or \*\*\*\* (organisation working with people with history of offending and substance misuse) they seem less threatening than going to a volunteer centre. I know a lot of people are using \*\*\*\* (organisation working with people with a history of offending and substance misuse) to get into voluntary work so that kind of project, which caters towards people who have got long gaps in employment and various issues from the past are essential in helping people get into voluntary work because it can be quite a difficult process so that kind of support is really needed. Support around application forms, CV's, around convictions all of that is massive really in helping people make that transition'.*

Because many women who have been to prison have a limited or non-existent work history and educational background and suffer from issues around self-confidence, the thought of putting together a CV, filling out an application form or going through an interview can be extremely nerve-racking. One interviewee said;

*'Filling in a volunteering application form can be very similar to filling in a paid employment application form so I think people can be put off and I was actually quite surprised at how difficult the process can be'.*

It is really important that women do receive intensive support and coaching around these issues and that organisations who are thinking about using ex-offenders as volunteers are aware of how difficult it can be for them, at least in the early days of trying to create a new life for themselves, and take steps to make the situation easier for them. A worker from a mental health charity for homeless people in London, which does use ex-offenders as volunteers, said this:

*'On our old application forms they used to have things like CV and two written sections and it was really cumbersome and off-putting and I wouldn't want to do that. Every time I write down my CV I feel uncomfortable about it. Now, it's tick boxes; tell us about yourself, what are your hobbies, interests and references. Apart from just asking people to write their name on a piece of paper it couldn't be easier for people. The interview is really informal, we want to find out why people want to work here; is it for professional reasons? A lot of people just want to explore what this looks like and that's fantastic, that's what we want'.*

### **The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (1974) and Criminal Record Bureaux (CRB) Checks**

The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (1974) is the legislation that ex-offenders have to take into account when applying for voluntary work or paid employment. The Act is short but complex and can be difficult to understand. Essentially, the Act allows sentences to become 'spent' after a certain period of time, providing the length of a prison sentence does not exceed 30 months. This means that after a period of time, ex-offenders will not have to reveal their previous convictions, if asked, to potential employers. Prison sentences of less than 30 months can become spent after three and a half, five, seven or ten years depending on the length of sentence and age at the time. Prison sentences of 30 months and over can never become spent.

When the Act was introduced over three decades ago, the aims were to assist offenders in moving forward with their lives by allowing them, as it will, 'to wipe the slate clean' after a number of years.

However, some positions are exempt from the Act, notably those which involve working with children or vulnerable adults. For these positions, the organisation would ask the applicant to disclose all their previous convictions, both spent and unspent, and would usually ask them to undergo a criminal records bureau (CRB) check which would show up all their convictions. This is used as a safety mechanism to prevent people with serious convictions from working with these groups. However, since the Act was introduced, the list of exceptions has grown increasingly long, to the point now where there are very few which are not exempt, meaning that for many posts CRB checks are required (Humphreys, 2001, p.2). A worker from an organisation which supports people with an offending background into voluntary work said this about CRB checks:

*'Psychologically, clients often feel that they are going to be scrutinised and may well be rejected. The CRB process doesn't seem to bear the feelings and practical concerns of the client in mind. There is also a lack of clarity as to what offence(s) makes someone unsuitable. I think that the increased requirement of CRBs taking place without a concordant consideration of how the process affects clients has led to a workplace culture that can be experienced as punitive and inaccessible by clients and encourages a risk-averse attitude in organisations'.*

The Act is now almost 35 years old. Since 1974, sentencing and offending patterns have changed and there are more people being sent to prison for longer periods of time, more people whose convictions will never become spent. The impact of this is that there are now more people than ever who are experiencing disclosure problems and being restricted in the type of work they can do, both voluntary and paid work. This can happen even where their convictions are old and not relevant to the position they are applying for. Individuals are, in effect, being handed down a life sentence (Humphreys, 2001, p.5) because they can never get away from their past. One interviewee said:

*'I think the timescale in terms of how long people have to disclose should be relooked at. I think the Government have all these strategies for offenders and ex-offenders to work but they're not implementing them. I think in actual fact, the whole system needs to be revitalised'.*

The Home Office commissioned a review of the Act and a report was published called *Breaking the Circle* (Home Office, 2002). There was hope from individuals and organisations involved within the Criminal Justice System that the Act would indeed be revised and take into account the many changes which had taken place. Unfortunately the report was not acted on; offenders are not high on the political agenda even though crime and reducing re-offending are! Things could potentially get worse for those being released from prison as, from October 2009 onwards, the new Vetting and Barring Scheme, involving the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA), will be introduced. This will have a major impact on the recruitment and monitoring practices of people working or volunteering with children or vulnerable adults. Once the scheme is fully rolled out it will be illegal to hire someone in a regulated activity who is not registered with, and has therefore not been checked by, the ISA. The new scheme will cover employees and volunteers in the education, care and health industries, affecting some 11.3 million people (DCSF website, downloaded 15.9.08). It is unclear at the present time, which offences would make someone qualify for 'barring' from volunteer roles or how long people would have to wait after serving a prison sentence.

### **Disclosing convictions**

There was a wide spectrum of feelings towards disclosure, from acceptance through to deep shame, although all of the women interviewed understood why the process had to take place. There is not space to discuss all of the issues which came up so I will discuss the ones which stood out and came up the most.

### Embarrassment

Three of the women spoke about the process being embarrassing, one interviewee said:

*'The organisation where I'm working have got a copy of my previous convictions on paper. I found that really embarrassing cos there were loads of pages and it was really thick. It was*

*quite hard to bring it in and hand it to her and get her to go and photocopy it but you know, I did it and yeah...’.*

Another interviewee said:

*‘I’m not really ashamed of my convictions because they’re not that serious but I do find it embarrassing having to talk about them to a stranger’.*

### Fear

Four of the women talked about being fearful, scared and nervous about disclosing their convictions.

One interviewee said:

*‘Really , it is scary because while I was in prison and then after I came out I was working for \*\*\*\* (housing charity) who already knew all what I’d done so after that I had to step outside of that environment and go to a new organisations who don’t know that I’ve been to prison and it’s like, how are they going to look at me? That was really scary because now I’ve got to go through this whole thing ‘I’m an ex-offender, I’ve been to jail, this that and the other’.*

One interviewee was so fearful about having to disclose that she had purposely put off applying for more voluntary work after prison, even though she wanted to volunteer:

*‘Thinking about disclosure, my heart just pounds and I just don’t know how I’m going to walk into an interview with them even knowing because they’ve read a letter or having to sit there and say it. I know it’s really going to be a barrier for me and I’m not sure how to overcome it really. I just put it to the back of my mind but I shouldn’t, I should try and address it but I don’t know how to. When the time comes I will need the support...I know I will’.*

### Shame and stigma

One interviewee felt particularly ashamed about her offence and felt like it was holding her back:

*‘I think it’s a shame thing, I’m ashamed. I don’t want to keep reliving the biggest mistake in my life but I have to get on with the future. It’s something that at the moment I can’t deal with facing, I just can’t do it. I will...I have to because I can’t have gone through all the exams and stuff that I’ve gained for nothing. It would just be a total waste’.*



A worker from a health charity for women in London, which had set up a peer support project for women who are HIV positive and had been to prison said:

*'On several occasions women have disclosed to me that they find being HIV easier to live with than being an ex-offender because of the stigma and shame attached to it'.*

I found this to be quite shocking initially but could understand why someone might feel this way. The stigma around being a women offender can be deeply internalised and particularly when women are convicted of serious offence(s) they can feel great shame around this. It can be difficult to move on from these feelings, especially soon after being released from prison when feelings are extremely raw.

It struck me from talking to the women that the shame they felt was a result of feeling that they had let themselves and those close to them down. They needed to make some kind of resolution within themselves and forgive themselves for what they had done. I know myself this is not an easy thing to do and may only happen over time as people grow and put more time between themselves and what has happened in the past. Being given a chance to prove to themselves and others that they are worthwhile human beings may be part of the process of doing this. Volunteering could be one of the chances they need to help them move on and we need to find ways to help embarrassed, fearful and ashamed women to find the process of applying to be a volunteer less off putting, threatening and scary.

#### Too much information

Two of the women spoke about the amount of information that is required when applying for voluntary or paid work. One said:

*'I feel that unless you are invited to a second interview, you shouldn't have to disclose because you're sending your CV off with a covering letter to all these organisations. Half of the time they don't even get back to you with an interview. So now your personal life is*

*floating around in all these different offices! It's a very small world and I don't see that you have to disclose your convictions on a first application form. It should be the law that you shouldn't have to disclose your convictions until a second interview because it automatically gives you a handicap'.*

I recall a situation myself when applying for work and was asked to send details of previous convictions with the application form. I called the organisation up to clarify that they needed all this information and was told quite rudely that if I didn't and I was to be shortlisted, I wouldn't be called for an interview. In the end I did send off the information but wasn't shortlisted. It left me feeling vulnerable and angry. I don't consider myself to be massively self-confident, but for women with less self confidence and who are less articulate than myself, I can imagine that this process could be really damaging. I think that organisations need to be aware of this and incorporate non-discriminatory practices into their recruitment methods.

The issue of disclosure and CRB checks was a big worry for most of the women and it was clear that support was really needed around this. One interviewee said:

*'The organisation I'm with has helped me to open up and to talk about it in the right way. I think if I hadn't been with this organisation I would have been really struggling to apply for jobs and having to disclose my conviction, I think I would have found it really difficult'.*

Another interviewee made a similar comment:

*'I think with disclosing my convictions it's been very useful because I think I would have struggled if I didn't have an organisation that was so involved in helping you disclose and giving you lots of different possibilities about disclosing'.*

## Emotional support

Some of the women talked about the importance of feeling supported emotionally. One woman who was experiencing difficulties in her voluntary work said:

*'When it wasn't working out in my first voluntary place, I could go back to \*\*\*\*\* (support worker) and talk to her about it and tell her that I hate it. She was really supportive and helped me to find something else. It was really good to have someone there'.*

Another woman who had been a heavy drug user for many years found it quite difficult to adjust to a work setting in the beginning but felt really supported around this, she said:

*'My main support has been \*\*\* (support worker), I've been able to go to him with stuff. Back in the beginning I had quite bad depression and I felt quite supported around that. There were certain days I had to have off or had to leave early and he was really understanding'.*

Invariably there are going to be specific issues for some, although not all, women ex-offenders by the nature of their backgrounds and life experiences. This could mean that *sometimes* they may require a higher level of support than your average person in the beginning. However, this does not mean that this will always be the case once they have developed the skills to face day-to-day living and social interactions. One project manager summed this up quite well:

*'What seems to be the case is that our volunteers coming from an ex-offender background have more difficulties dealing with the boundaries issues. What we try and do is support them as best we can, people in those situations. My instinct was to say that they can be more challenging but they're not really. It's really important for us to work with this group, just as it's important for us to work with refugees, single mums and young people. They're not gratuitously more difficult and they provide all the benefits, if not more than anyone else'.*

**What about the risks?**

One of the concerns that an organisation may have about using volunteers who are ex-offenders can be that they are taking too great a risk. According to Gaskell (2006) the growth of risk management in the voluntary and community sector has been dramatic over the past decade. This is partly due to cuts in government spending resulting in an increase in voluntary sector organisations providing services which used to be provided by the Government. Volunteers are now carrying out work which is more complex and involves more client work than in the past. Due care does have to be taken, particularly when working with vulnerable people, for example children, young people or vulnerable adults.

However, most people who have a criminal record do not pose a risk to children, young people or vulnerable adults and it is important that they are treated fairly and not penalised for having committed an offence, particularly when it is not relevant to the role for which they are applying. Nacro (leaflet, no date) suggests ways of identifying and managing risks as well as assessing someone's suitability, which include;

- Carrying out disclosure checks
- Meeting with the applicant to discuss the role they are interested in and why
- Taking up references
- Giving them a trial period
- Holding regular supervision sessions once they are in post

An individual's offending background should not be the sole reason for denying them volunteering opportunities, unless of course they do pose a risk to vulnerable adults, children and young people.

If an organisation uses good recruitment and management methods, risk can be minimised. Below is a quote from a project manager of an organisation which is prepared to take risks on ex-offenders:

*'I can't think of any instance when an ex-offender has presented any more risky or threatening behaviour than any other average volunteer, they are not distinguishable in that way, in any way. I think that's one of the false concerns that people would have about working with ex-offenders is that they have criminal activity or behaviour so they're gonna bring that here. That just doesn't hold water for us...in my experience. That's not to say that's the case with the entire population but the people we've met it's just not the case.'*

**Chapter summary**

Women prisoners are faced with a huge number of difficulties following their release, on top of trying to adjust to living back in the community. Problems include having no secure accommodation, rebuilding relationships with families and children, trying to secure benefits and employment. If women did receive adequate support around these issues, it may reduce the likelihood of them re-offending. However, in recent years, changes in the structure of the Criminal Justice System alongside a rapid increase in the numbers of people being sent to prison mean that women do not get the support they need pre and post-release. Often, support where available is provided by voluntary and community organisations who struggle to maintain funding.

Women may experience a wide range of emotions relating to their past and their future including fear, guilt and shame. Volunteering can be a way for women to start rebuilding their lives, overcoming some of these feelings and proving to themselves and others that they are worthwhile human beings. However, women may need both practical and emotional support to help them develop their confidence to take the first steps. Of particular concern to women is the issue of disclosing their convictions and an area where they need real support and understanding.

Organisations may feel they are taking a risk on volunteers with a criminal record but there are steps which can be taken to assess an individuals' suitability for a role as well as managing the perceived risks. Understanding how difficult the process is for women and thinking of ways to make it less embarrassing and scary for them is really important.

## CHAPTER FIVE - THE BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

The main reason that the women who volunteered after their release from prison gave for volunteering was to gain employment. However, when they started to talk about their experiences, what they told me indicated that they gained a lot more. I would like to open this chapter up with some quotes from women talking about how they feel about volunteering and then go into some of the benefits the women talked about.

*'It's exciting, the most exciting thing in my life at the minute, the whole thing that's going on around career and the opportunities that are out there. It feels a bit unbelievable sometimes that I can come from where I've come from and have the kind of life that I've got going on today. It feels like a second chance to be honest and that my world has just really started opening up. I feel like I've got a future for the first time'.*

*'There's so many different things you can do and it is a feel good factor and you feel like you're putting something back. Some of the volunteer work you can do is so, so, so important that that in itself gives you a buzz and a kick that what you're actually doing is really important to somebody'.*

### Volunteering as a work taster

The Social Exclusion Unit (2002) found that 41 percent of women prisoners have no work history at all. In a survey conducted by Hamlyn and Lewis (2000), it was found that of the women prisoners they interviewed who had previously been employed, the majority had been in manual work. One of my interviewees said:

*'I worked years ago; nothing really creative though, just bar work and running a video shop. I've now found myself a career because of the voluntary work I was doing before' (interviewee who now works full time for a women's charity).*

Volunteering can be an opportunity for women to experience the work environment for the first time or try a different kind of work than they have been used to which may open up other

opportunities for them. Also, because many women have a limited experience of working, together with low levels of self-confidence, they may be unsure about what it is they want to do.

Volunteering may offer them an opportunity to try things out to see if they do like it.

*'I'm working with old people, which I didn't think I'd want to do and I actually enjoy it. I suppose that's another good thing about volunteering is that it's opened up other things to me that I might not otherwise have thought about'* (volunteer support worker, formerly a receptionist).

### **Developing soft skills**

Soft skills may be seen to be a vague term, which can encompass a wide variety of workplace skills. They are the kind of skills which are often taken for granted but are, in fact, extremely important and are one of the key things that employers look for. They include skills such as the ability to communicate and interact effectively with others, work well in a team, possess self-confidence and take responsibility. They may come easily to someone who has worked for a considerable amount of time, but for women who have had little or no previous work history and chaotic lifestyles in the past, they can be difficult to acquire. Volunteering can be a valuable opportunity to help to build these skills. Below are some of the soft skills women talked about in the interviews with me.

#### Reliability

One woman said:

*'My timekeeping has got better; I was rubbish at that before and couldn't get anywhere on time! I'm becoming more consistent as a person, like I'm able to be there on time'*.

Another woman said:

*'I can't explain it but I feel I'm getting better in terms of a work sense...I'm showing up and I'm being consistent about it'*.



### Workplace and social interactions

Volunteering was important in helping women interact with co-workers and also with members of the public. One woman said:

*'Volunteering was great for me getting used to being in a work environment every day and, you know, interactions with colleagues...massively, really positive experiences I've had so far'.*

Another woman said about volunteering:

*'I gained loads of skills as well as just generally working with the public and getting back into working'.*

Volunteering may also be a way for women to start building positive relationships with people outside of their normal social network. This can be particularly important if women are trying to break out of the cycle of reoffending and distance themselves from friends and acquaintances who have been part of their drug using and offending in the past. One woman said:

*'Volunteering was a really, really positive experience, with the other volunteers that I worked with we all went and socialised together on a Friday night and I made some really good friends'.*

### Developing self confidence and self esteem

This has already been mentioned elsewhere in relation to women volunteering from prison, but it is also important for women who volunteer after their release from prison too. One woman said:

*'With the \*\*\* (advice service where volunteering) cos we get to do this four months training, that's really good cos I can take my time and I don't feel as if I'm being put in a position where I can't handle it or not like being at the other place where I had to stuff envelopes. It's good for my self-esteem because I can kind of grown into the position and take my time about it. My confidence is developing all the time as I do'.*

### Changing ways of thinking

Volunteering also helped some of the women to gain some perspective on their lives by working with other people who were also experiencing difficulties in their lives, especially for one woman who suffered from depression.

*'I get a lot from volunteering in that it makes me feel better about myself. Sometimes with the client group I'm working with it gives me a bit of perspective on well, actually my life is quite in order compared to some people so it takes me out of myself a little bit, my poor me kind of syndrome that I have going on a lot'.*

It also helped another woman to reflect on and re-evaluate how she had previously been living before prison. She said:

*'Money ruled my life. I had all this money and I didn't know what to do with it. Even though I was working at the time, I got more enjoyment from getting that lump of money (from crime) rather than my wages. Doing voluntary work, it's not the money, it's the appreciation and the achievement at the end of it that's more important. I wake up every morning rushing here. If you'd asked me that a few years ago, I wouldn't have thought that. I would have been looking at how to make my next load of money and that's the honest truth. It's made me appreciate things more and value family and just made me realise how lucky I am'.*

### Developing confidence in work related skills

The main reason women gave for pursuing voluntary work was to enable them to move into paid employment in the future. All of the women I interviewed said that their confidence in their ability to perform work related tasks and their belief that they would secure employment in the future had improved by volunteering. One woman said:

*'My initial reason for starting voluntary work was because I had lost my job and my confidence was at a low. Since I've been volunteering, I've started believing in myself again, believing that I can do things and I am capable of getting paid work'.*

One woman who had volunteered throughout her time in prison in a variety of roles, talked about how her confidence had developed, she said:

*'I gained a hell of a lot from volunteering; the main areas for me were time management, interpersonal and people skills, organisational skills and how to manage people. I was responsible for timesheets and rotas and then opening up spreadsheets and learning myself on the computer. Also getting used to talking to people in authority, I used to have to go to governors and bosses of different departments where the girls were working and say to them 'we need to come and do this, that and the other'.*

I would like to use this woman as an example of someone who developed along what I will term a positive continuum. A continuum is a word used to describe

*'a continuous sequence in which the elements next to each other are very similar but the last and the first are very different'* (Oxford Dictionary, 2001, p.185).

When this particular woman entered prison she had a limited work history, and in her own words, *'had worked but not doing anything creative'*. In 2005, whilst still in prison she received Volunteer of the Year award for her volunteering work with a well known voluntary sector organisation and by the time she had left prison, she had gained enough skills and experience that she says, *'found myself a career, instead of just a job, a career'*.

This woman was pro-active in finding out about opportunities which were on offer in the prisons she was held in and took advantage of them. Through each volunteering opportunity she undertook, she was able to enhance her skills further, which enabled her to progress both personally and professionally. Starting off as a listener, she worked her way up to becoming a coordinator of the Listeners; worked for the CARAT's team providing support to other prisoners with substance misuse issues and running peer support groups; became a wing representative and sat on boards for racial and suicide awareness and was also approached to take part in a groundbreaking peer research project which she was paid for. When she moved prisons, this led on to voluntary work out in the

community for this organisation as an advisor for black and ethnic minority women, which then enabled her to gain more skills which led her onto paid work in the last year of her prison sentence. She was then offered employment for this organisation at their head office following her release from prison. She recently changed jobs again and says this:

*'It really is an exciting time for me, especially being within a new organisation but I've also been given my own role and things to do which I will be the lead on a lot of the projects that are going on. It's scary but also exciting as well. The freebies were good because they got me into places and my foot in the door and my name known but now it's a bit more than that, I want to make my career progress and I want to earn some money. So yeah, I've now found myself a career and because of the job I was doing before I've now got this job. I don't think that would have all been possible if I didn't gain the skills that I gained through doing the voluntary work. I think volunteering is really, really important for self-development because it gives you a chance to develop the skills that you already do have but also learn new skills and maybe as well teach you what you do like and don't like.'*

This woman was clearly determined to use volunteering to her advantage and gain as much from it as she could. She offers some advice to other women who are in a similar situation based on her experiences:

*'I think you still have to look at it, even though it is voluntary, like a job. You can't just come into volunteering thinking it's just something to do...I can't be bothered, I don't have to go today if I don't want to because they're not paying me. It's not like that, especially if you want to move forwards in whatever it is you want to do. You have to be structured within yourself of what you want to do. Give yourself a time scale...ok, well I'll do this voluntary work for six months and in that time I want to achieve this that and that. I think that if the organisation sees your commitment they will promote you within your voluntary work...would you like to come in for an extra day or take on more responsibility.'*

### **Summary of chapter**

Many women ex-prisoners want to gain employment and build a career for themselves. However, this may feel impossible due to the disadvantages they face in the labour market, for example having a criminal record, limited work history and lack of qualifications. Volunteering can provide many benefits to the women and open them up to opportunities which they had never thought possible. Some of the benefits include, experiencing the work environment for the first time, developing soft

skills and work related skills, which in turn helps to develop their self-confidence and self-esteem.

For some of the women involved in this research, volunteering really was a life changing experience which has included making a successful career for themselves. However, in order to do this, women do have to put in hard work, show commitment and treat volunteering as if it were paid work.

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## CHAPTER SIX – POTENTIAL NEGATIVE ASPECTS TO VOLUNTEERING

Throughout this paper, I have primarily focused on the positive experiences women had whilst volunteering and how it helped them move forward with their lives. It was clear to me that the women I spoke to had gained a great deal from volunteering. However, there can be certain negative aspects to volunteering, which in turn can affect the kind of experience a volunteer has and whether they are likely to continue volunteering. This is also likely to influence how effective the relationship between the volunteer and the organisation is and the quality of work the volunteer produces. Below are some of the negative aspects the women brought up during the interviews.

### Boring and repetitive work

Volunteering can sometimes be typified by being asked to carry out boring tasks. There are elements to most people's work which may be considered to be boring but have to be done. However, it is unfair to expect a volunteer to exclusively carry out boring and repetitive tasks. They should be offered a variety of tasks, where possible, to allow them to utilise and develop their skills. One woman started off volunteering for a large, well known health charity and spoke of her experience:

*'I thought it was going to be really good in the events department but I ended up just stuffing envelopes. I didn't feel like I was getting anything out of it. The whole point of volunteering is so that I can go and apply for a job and I've got skills I can bring to a position where I'm going to get paid. It was demoralising. I stayed there about two months and then left. I tried to stick it out but it never got any better...I've got better things to do than stuff envelopes thanks'.*

### Exploitation

This is closely linked with the point made above. There can be a tendency for people to feel exploited when they are not being paid for the work they are doing, whilst at the same time being consistently asked to do work which is not helping them to gain new, if any, skills. Organisations

should think about the tasks they need doing, draw up a role description and make sure the volunteer understands what is being asked of them before offering them voluntary work. One of the women spoke of her experience of feeling exploited in her voluntary work placement;

*'It just felt as though they had everything sewn up and they had people to do jobs and they wanted volunteers to do the stuff they didn't want to do'.*

Another said:

*'In my experience it is quite hard to find somewhere decent because there are a lot of places that will take you to do the rubbish jobs or to do jobs that they don't want to pay someone to do. Then you don't get the benefits really'.*

Another woman who worked for a well known homelessness charity spoke about seeing other volunteers being exploited:

*'We had some volunteers within some of the services and the managers of the services used them for really boring jobs or they would have service users come in as volunteers of evening times and have them washing cups, emptying bins and making tea'.*

### Lack of support and supervision

Although all of the women I interviewed had eventually got to a place where they felt they were benefitting or had benefitted from volunteering, three of the women described volunteering at organisations where they didn't feel supported and as a result left to search for something which could better meet their needs. One woman said:

*'I just got passed around and it was whoever needed something doing and they'd just tell me what they wanted me to do and I wouldn't see them for the rest of the day. There was no talk of training me or helping me and I never felt that I could talk up about it so I decided the best thing to do would be to leave and try somewhere else'.*

Another woman said:

*'There were times at one organisation where I wasn't really told too much about what I was supposed to be doing. I used to feel a bit unsure about asking because it was a really busy*

*office and I felt a bit overwhelmed. I found that a bit frustrating and I did leave in the end because something else had come up so it just felt like it had come to a natural end to be honest'.*

It is not unreasonable for a volunteer to expect similar treatment to paid employees in an organisation where they are volunteering. For example, they should have a named point of contact within the organisation, access to support and supervision and encouraged to undertake training where possible. Supervision sessions don't have to be too formal and can be used as an opportunity for both the volunteer and the supervisor to address any problems and needs as well as develop a positive relationship. All of the above are in line with good practice guidelines.

#### Working for no payment

I bring this up because the findings from my interviews surprised me. I was expecting women when asked about not being paid to say that they felt that they were being exploited but actually, the opposite was true. Although most of the women said not getting paid was a financial disadvantage, they felt they were getting rewards in other ways which equalled getting paid, such as training, lunch and travel expenses, work experience and even extra things such as getting the costs of a passport paid. One woman even said that she felt that not getting paid was an advantage because it gave a certain sense of freedom in not being bound by money. This particular woman had quite mixed feelings about going back to work and so for her, volunteering seemed a less threatening and pressured alternative.

Another woman said:

*'Before prison I used to work Monday to Friday and sometimes six days a week, all I thought about was the pay check. I probably could get a paid job tomorrow but because I enjoy the environment I'm working in and feel the work is so important, I don't want to leave until someone else comes in'.*



Whilst the women involved in this research did not see not getting paid as a negative aspect of volunteering and it was in fact a positive for some of the women, it is important that volunteers are encouraged to claim for their out of pocket expenses, such as travel and lunch allowance and expect to be paid promptly. Organisations should also be aware that some women may find it difficult to find the money for their travel expenses and be prepared to pay for this in advance if needed.

#### Volunteering: A long term process

The main reason the women I interviewed gave for volunteering was to get them into a position where they could become employable. The length of time the woman had volunteered for varied; one woman had volunteered for around six months and then left due to starting a college course, four of the women had been volunteering for a year, one woman had volunteered outside the prison for a year before being released, another woman for nineteen months before being released and one woman had volunteered for most of the seven years she spent in prison, both inside and outside the prison walls.

At the time of writing this report, six months after interviewing the women, four of the eight women were in paid employment, whilst the other women were still volunteering hoping to move on to paid employment. This would seem to suggest that given the considerable length of time the women were volunteering, it can be a long term process. Here is what one woman said;

*'If you want to go in somewhere and go up the ladder, I don't necessarily think volunteering that could happen. It may...it may happen but not in all places that you'll volunteer; you'll just go in and be in the same position. If you want to prosper in a career I don't think volunteering is necessarily gonna do that for you'.*

Additionally, most of the women I interviewed had volunteered for more than one organisation, some because they didn't feel sufficiently challenged in the voluntary work they were doing, others

because they didn't feel supported well enough by the organisation or because they wanted to try something else that was more suited to them.

One woman said:

*'At the moment, I'm enjoying what I do but it's taken me quite a while to get to that point...it took me quite a while of going to different places'.*

### **Summary of chapter**

The main argument of this research paper is that volunteering can be used as a positive aspect of women prisoners' resettlement back into their communities and that it can help them build a new life for themselves, develop new skills and assist them with gaining employment in the future.

However, getting to this point may be a long term process and there are other certain negative aspects to volunteering which may affect the kind of experience a woman has and whether she chooses to continue volunteering. These include, consistently being asked to carry out boring and repetitive work, feeling exploited and not receiving adequate support and supervision. Women ex-prisoners may lack the self-confidence bring up these issues and so choose to leave. If an organisation has made a commitment to using volunteers with a criminal record then they should also make a commitment to treating them fairly, which will provide immense benefits not only to the volunteer but to the organisation also.

## CHAPTER SEVEN - WHAT CAN MAKE VOLUNTEERING A GOOD EXPERIENCE?

Throughout this piece of research I sought the views of professionals and women ex-offenders on what they see as good practice in relation to volunteering. The hope is that this information will be useful to organisations which provide volunteering opportunities or would like to in the future, particularly to women who have been to prison or have a criminal record. Below I will focus on the three key points to come out of conversations and correspondence with both groups.

### Individualised volunteering

People will naturally have different motivations for volunteering and expectations of what they want to get out of it. Women ex-offenders have ambitions and a desire to succeed the same as the rest of the population as this research has highlighted. They have dreams of gaining employment in the future, becoming independent and breaking the cycle of re-offending. If volunteering is to assist them in doing this, it has to be relevant to their needs and capabilities. One woman I interviewed said:

*'It is important that the volunteer work is structured in a way that is beneficial to the organisation but also to the individual as well because if it doesn't then they're going to have a bad experience'.*

A manager who I interviewed about his work with ex offenders, spoke about how the organisation tried to ensure that individuals get what they want out of volunteering:

*'We ask people...what do you want to do? They make that choice and we support it. It looks different for each person. I think that's where we went wrong in the past, thinking that everyone should look the same but the truth is, no-ones universe is the same so why should our process assume that people go through this at the same rate? People can choose take on too much and decide to back off or decide that the whole process isn't right for them. They've come through their own experience, they've gone through a process and want to share it with others, they have an idea of what that's going to look like.'*

## **Training**

Six of the women I interviewed said that receiving training for roles and to help them develop professionally was important. One woman said:

*'At \*\*\* (advice service where she is volunteering) I'm just kind of training, so for one of the days we're all just been taught different things and different areas. It's training within a group, which I quite enjoy. It's all very clear what I'm doing which is good. Previously, I haven't had a particular plan about what I'm doing or where I'm going with the volunteering. I've been doing things but I'm not sure where it's going because it's not clear. This way I know I'm training to be an advisor and that's what I'm going to be. I know what I need to do to get there which is really good'.*

Training may be especially important for women ex-offenders who, as a group, often have a limited work history as well as a lack of educational achievements. Training can be a way of building up their confidence as well as their CV. It can also be a way of letting volunteers know that the work they are doing is valued and appreciated, particularly as there are no financial rewards for their work.

*'When I was at \*\*\*\* (women's charity where she was volunteering), the work was good but then I was kind of doing a job that could have been a paid job really and I wasn't even getting any training. It was good and I enjoyed it but I still felt like I wasn't progressing and it wasn't to my advantage'.*

## **The importance of structure and support**

Women who spoke of successful voluntary work said that they felt they were well supported within the organisation where they were volunteering. Feeling supported included having regular supervision, payment of out of pocket expenses and having one person they could talk to. Below are some of the things the women said.

*'My supervision was done exactly the same as a paid employee, once every few weeks. It was really regular as if I was an employee and they made sure all my expenses were paid'.*

*'I didn't like that place because things were supposed to happen but they never did. We were supposed to have a staff meeting every week but it never happened and reviewing my things never happened. A lot of things were supposed to happen but didn't in practice'.*

Another woman said,

*'I've got a volunteer co-ordinator at\*\*\*\* (community organisation where she is volunteering) who supervises me and I can go to her...she's really good. She's got me on some training courses and she's just there for me. The good thing is as well cos I've got an illness as well and she's quite understanding of that if I can't be there'.*

### **Next Steps**

If you are a professional who is now encouraged to take on volunteers after reading this paper there are a range of resources that could help you get started. Volunteering England website has a wide range of publications and Good Practice Guides, the majority of which are free to download. They cover everything from writing policies and agreements to recruiting, managing and supporting volunteers and have a number of different publications relating to ex-offenders. Clinks, a national body that support voluntary organisations in the Criminal Justice System, also offer a number of publications about volunteering, prisons and ex-offenders which can be accessed from their publications list on their website.

If you are a female ex-offender who is now inspired to do some volunteering then it may be useful to contact the Griffins Society in the first instance. They aim to provide easily accessible information about UK resources and projects which are there to support female ex-offenders. Nacro is a crime reduction charity which also aims to support and work with ex-offenders and deprived communities. They may also be able to advise you of projects in your area or part of the country.

## CHAPTER EIGHT - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this research project was to explore women ex-offenders' experiences of volunteering and to discover whether women who had volunteered found it to be a positive and beneficial experience. There is a distinct lack of research into the effects and impact volunteering has upon ex-offenders' lives, and particularly women ex-offenders. The women who I interviewed had all benefitted from volunteering in different ways and to different levels. Some had volunteered for long periods of time whilst in prison and then out in the community on temporary licence whilst still serving their sentences. Others, had volunteered only after their release from prison, one woman started to volunteer many years later. She had not volunteered immediately on release because she felt there was a lack of support and information available to her following her release.

Prison is an ideal place for women to start volunteering because they have time on their hands and many will be thinking of making changes to their lives to help them stay out of prison in the future. However, for women serving shorter sentences, volunteering whilst in prison is perhaps not a realistic option. Only the women who had served longer sentences had volunteered whilst in prison but all had found it to be beneficial in helping them develop self-confidence, work related skills, feeling normal and becoming familiar with the outside world once again. Support, where it had been present from staff within the prison, had been valued. However, it was felt by some of the women that there wasn't enough done to promote volunteering within the prison environment. Often women are only encouraged to undertake voluntary work towards the end of their sentences, when in actual fact, women could volunteer much earlier on within the prison walls. More should be done to promote volunteering and create opportunities within all prisons and there should be a coherent strategy implemented so that good practice (development and maintenance) is fostered and is not simply left to committed individual members of staff. There should be as strong a focus

on offenders volunteering as there is on members of the community going into prisons voluntarily to work with offenders.

Release from prison is an especially turbulent time for anyone, more so for women given that many are mothers, single and homeless upon release. A lack of support makes reoffending and further imprisonment more likely. Employment is seen to be one of the most effective ways of keeping people out of prison, however this is not a realistic possibility for those women being released with nowhere to live and struggling to re-establish contact with children and families. Additionally, women ex-prisoners often have a lack of work experience and so lack the self-confidence or skills to compete in the labour market. All of the women involved in this research who weren't already in employment, aimed to gain employment in the future and were using or had used volunteering to gain experience and increase their chances of gaining employment in the future. All the women reported gaining self-confidence from volunteering and felt more positive about their futures. Volunteering had helped them gain a sense of identity and, in some cases, forge a new identity for themselves.

The shame and stigma of being an ex-offender can be especially acute for women. Many feel that they have let themselves down but more importantly their families and children and there can be a sense of deep guilt. Being given the opportunity to prove that they are a worthwhile individual to themselves and to those close to them can, in some cases, be a life changing experience as this research has indicated.

Volunteering clearly had many benefits for the women but it was also of benefit to the organisations which used them as the quote below indicates.

*'Ex-offenders are not gratuitously more difficult than your average volunteer and they provide all the benefits, if not more than anyone else'* (quote by Project Manager, Mental Health Homeless Charity).

Volunteering may not be appropriate or the solution for every woman who has been to prison and it is only one aspect, although an important one, in their resettlement. I hope if you are reading this paper you are now encouraged to consider using ex-offenders as volunteers within your organisation and that you will be able to use this as a good practice guide and learn from what the women told me worked and didn't work. I would like to leave you with one final quote to demonstrate just how much of an impact volunteering made on one woman's life:

*'It's exciting, the most exciting thing in my life at the minute. It feels a bit unbelievable sometimes that I can come from where I come from and have the kind of life that I've got going on today. It feels like a second chance to be honest!'*



## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Revise the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (1974). It is out of date and hugely damaging to ex-offenders who do want to put their past behind them and move forward with their lives. Is it useful for someone to have to disclose their convictions for the rest of their lives? If an individual has not reoffended for ten years the possibility of them doing so in the future is very slim. A case by case system which allowed for a review of an ex-offenders progress would seem to be fairer.
- Initiate a large scale piece of research into the impacts of volunteering for female offenders / ex-offenders.
- The Government should lead by example by promoting the involvement of ex-offenders in public sector agencies. If employment is one of the most effective ways of keeping people out of prison, do something to enable people to stay out of prison.
- A coherent strategy within prisons is needed to develop volunteering for offenders. This should include training for prison staff.

## **GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS**

- If you would like to use ex-offenders as volunteers you could go through a project which is specifically set up to work with this group. They will be able to offer additional support to them also.
- Take a case by case approach to individuals who apply to volunteer with your organisation and who have criminal convictions. If the conviction is not relevant to the role don't discriminate against them if they are otherwise suitable.
- Hold regular support / supervision sessions with your volunteers. This is beneficial for them and for you.

- Understand how difficult an experience it is, especially for women, to disclose convictions.

Leave off asking for information about convictions until you meet them.

- Individualise volunteering placements where you can or be realistic about what you can offer.

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