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GENDER-RESPONSIVE STRATEGIES

FOR WOMEN OFFENDERS

Supervision of Women Defendants and Offenders in the Community

BY LINDA SYDNEY

In response to the increasing number of women involved in the community corrections system, policymakers and administrators are reevaluating how the system handles women defendants and offenders. Gender-responsive programming, which responds to issues that affect women in particular, is an integral part of this evaluation.

As shown in table 1 (page 2), the number of women on probation nearly doubled from 1990 to 2003 and the number on parole more than doubled. This increase has sparked research examining areas that can significantly influence women offenders' potential for success within the community corrections system. Administrators, managers, and supervisors are working to oversee a growing population of women, to become familiar with what has been learned about issues for women offenders, and to make appropriate decisions about the best methods for applying that information. To help community corrections policymakers better understand gender-responsive programming, this bulletin—



FROM THE DIRECTOR

Women continue to enter the criminal justice system at alarming rates; however, scant attention is paid to the importance of gender. Correctional administrators face significant challenges regarding the programming and service needs of women, both in correctional settings and in the community.

The good news is that research and data support gender-specific approaches to working with women involved in the criminal justice system. In addition to targeting criminal behavior, many of these approaches incorporate policy-level attention to provide relevant opportunities for change.

This bulletin, part of a 3-year project titled *Gender Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*, examines gender-responsive strategies and their implications for community corrections. As defined by this project, community corrections includes probation and parole, pretrial interventions, day treatment, residential programs, community service programs, and other noncustodial interventions.

If the mission of the criminal justice system is to safeguard the community, use resources effectively, create opportunities for positive change, and help offenders become productive citizens, then we must revisit some of our efforts and acknowledge that gender makes a difference. Capitalizing on this principle and providing practical approaches will increase opportunities for women offenders to be successful.

—Morris L. Thigpen, Sr.

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) is a center of correctional learning and experience. NIC advances and shapes effective correctional practice and public policy that respond to the needs of corrections through collaboration and leadership and by providing assistance, information, education, and training.

- Summarizes what has been learned about women offenders and their issues. *Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*,¹ a report that examines the characteristics of women in the criminal justice system and the effects of current practices and policies on women offenders, forms the basis for this summary.

- Reviews the theoretical perspectives and six guiding principles for managing, supervising, and treating women offenders presented in that report.
- Discusses the application of the guiding principles in community corrections, including steps for implementation.

What Is Community Corrections?

The phrase “community corrections” encompasses a range of activities, from pretrial diversions to intermediate sanctions. The community corrections system enforces court orders (or release orders) mandating the investigation or supervision of individuals released into the community—either at pretrial, after trial but

before sentencing, after sentencing, or after incarceration. In various jurisdictions, community corrections includes day treatment, residential programs, community service programs, and other noncustodial interventions in addition to probation and parole supervision. Regardless of when it occurs, community corrections seeks to reduce the risk of reoffending, respond to victims’ needs, and help those under supervision obey the law. Women in the community corrections system may be defendants (not yet adjudicated) or offenders (having pled or been found guilty of a crime).²

Often, women’s issues conflict with traditional community corrections practices, which are designed largely for the majority

TABLE 1: WOMEN OFFENDERS ON PROBATION AND PAROLE

Year	Probation		Parole	
	Women as a percentage of total population	Number of women	Women as a percentage of total population	Number of women
1990	18% of 2,670,234	480,642	8% of 531,407	42,513
1995	21% of 3,077,861	646,351	10% of 679,421	67,492
2000	22% of 3,826,209	841,766	12% of 723,898	86,868
2003	23% of 4,073,987	937,017	13% of 774,588	100,696

Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2002b. *Probation and Parole in the United States, 2001*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2003. *Probation and Parole in the United States, 2002*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2004b. *Probation and Parole in the United States, 2003*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

of the corrections population—that is, men. Typical community corrections interventions³ often have unanticipated consequences for women. For example, women who are required to report to an officer as directed, complete community service, or attend treatment or counseling sessions may have to make childcare arrangements or bring their children with them (a practice that is strongly discouraged in many agencies and is prohibited in others). As a result, complying with these requirements may be more difficult for women than for men, who are less likely to have primary childcare responsibilities. Similarly, financial requirements often are a greater burden to women offenders because they typically have fewer financial resources than men. To incorporate community corrections practices effectively, administrators must do more than simply examine existing practices; they must assess whether those practices are fairly applied and beneficial to both men and women.

A focus group of community corrections practitioners and administrators (the Focus Group) was convened in 2003 to (1) review current community corrections strategies and assess their applicability and relevance for women offenders; (2) discuss issues particular to women offenders and examine how those issues affect women's engagement with and response to community corrections

interventions; and (3) identify changes in community corrections practices, policies, and programs required to make them gender responsive for women offenders. Specifically, the Focus Group was asked to—

- Develop a definition of gender-responsiveness for women offenders in community corrections.
- Describe the degree to which current practices reflect gender-responsive principles.
- Propose strategies for implementing gender-responsive practices, policies, and programs for women offenders in community corrections.
- Identify challenges to implementation.

- Suggest methods for overcoming the identified challenges.

What Is Gender-Responsiveness for Women Offenders in Community Corrections?

Gender-responsiveness for women offenders in community corrections involves creating a corrections environment that reflects an understanding of the realities of women's lives. (See the sidebar below). Gender-responsive strategies address unique issues that have a significant impact on women. In addition to examining community corrections policies, procedures, philosophies, and attitudes to determine whether they promote successful outcomes for women offenders,

Definition of Gender-Responsiveness for Women Offenders in the Criminal Justice System

Gender-responsiveness involves creating an environment through site and staff selection and program development, content, and material that responds to the realities of women's lives and addresses participants' issues. Gender-responsive approaches are multidimensional and based on theoretical perspectives that acknowledge women's pathways into the criminal justice system. These approaches address social and cultural factors (e.g., poverty, race, class, and gender) and therapeutic interventions involving issues such as abuse, violence, family relationships, substance abuse, and co-occurring disorders. These interventions provide a strength-based approach to treatment and skills building, with an emphasis on self-efficacy.

Bloom, B., and Covington, S. 2000. Gendered justice: Programming for women in correctional settings. Paper presented to the American Society of Criminology, San Francisco, CA.

gender-responsiveness requires intervention processes that—

- Acknowledge and accommodate differences between men and women.
- Assess women’s risk levels, needs, and strengths and construct supervision case plans accordingly.
- Acknowledge the different pathways through which women enter the community corrections system.
- Recognize the likelihood that women offenders have a significant history of victimization.
- Build on women’s strengths and values, including recognizing that relationships are important to women.
- Acknowledge and accommodate the likelihood that women are primary caregivers to a child or other dependent.

Because the community corrections system has focused historically on the majority population (men) and on those who pose the greatest risk (also men), research on the efficacy of community corrections also has focused primarily on men. Implementing gender-responsiveness for women offenders is thus a new direction for many community corrections agencies, requiring the thoughtful attention of agencies and individuals to achieve desired changes.

Summary of Gender-Responsive Research

Recent research reveals specific findings about women in the criminal justice system. Although much more information exists about incarcerated women offenders, many more women offenders are in community corrections. In 2003, roughly 10 times as many women were under probation and parole supervision as were incarcerated in prison (1,037,713 versus 100,102, respectively). Women made up 23 percent of the population on probation and 13 percent of the population on parole (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004a and 2004b).

In this bulletin, information specific to women offenders in community corrections has been identified as such; otherwise, the term “women offenders” includes women defendants, those in custody, and those being supervised in community corrections. Applying the knowledge gleaned from studying women offenders in other areas of the criminal justice system can and should inform the development of gender-responsive programming for women in community corrections. However, community corrections personnel should actively acquire information particular to their female populations.

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Characteristics of Women Offenders in the Criminal Justice System

Types of Offenses

Offenses resulting in arrests.

Arrests of women accounted for less than one-fourth of all arrests in 2002, a percentage that equates to 2,260,066 arrests. Most women were arrested for property offenses (almost 31 percent), a category that includes burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft. Additionally, women accounted for 18 percent of arrests for drug offenses and 17 percent of arrests for driving under the influence (Maguire and Pastore, 2003).

Although women constituted 23 percent of all arrestees, they accounted for only 17 percent of

violent offenders—those convicted of sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault (Maguire and Pastore, 2003).⁴ For the period 1993 to 1997, victims of violent crimes attributed their victimization to women in only one in seven offenses, a rate of 14 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999b). (See table 2, Violent Crimes Committed by Females and Males.)

Offenses resulting in probation and parole. Women on probation differ somewhat from female arrestees. Only 9 percent of women on probation committed violent offenses. The majority, 43 percent, were convicted for property crimes, 20 percent were committed for drug offenses, and 27 percent were committed for public order offenses (Bureau of Justice

Statistics, 1997). Of the women first released on parole in 1999, 16 percent committed violent offenses, 35 percent committed property offenses, 42 percent committed drug offenses, and 7 percent committed public order offenses (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001).

Substance Abuse

Several findings show that women offenders are more likely than male offenders to use drugs, to use more serious drugs, and to use them more frequently (Kassebaum, 1999). Women offenders in prison are more likely than their male counterparts to be under the influence of drugs at the time they commit crimes, to have used drugs in the month before the current offense, to have used drugs regularly (i.e., once a week or more for at

least 1 month), and to have committed the offense to get money to buy drugs. Alcohol use differs by gender, too: male offenders are more likely than women to have drunk alcohol regularly and to have used alcohol at the time of the offense (31 percent of men versus 22 percent of women) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994). Women who use alcohol and other drugs often suffer health consequences in the following areas (Crowe and Reeves, 1994):

- Physical effects, including malnutrition; damage to the liver, brain, heart, lungs, and other organs; and impairment of reproductive health.
- Accidental injuries and death.
- Infectious diseases, as a direct result of sharing drug injection equipment and lifestyle behaviors associated with drug use (e.g., crowded and unhealthy living conditions and unsafe sexual activities).

Many women commit crimes, particularly property offenses and prostitution, to support their alcohol and other drug dependencies. Thus, alcohol and other drug use, criminality, and the many health risks associated with prostitution are interconnected critical issues for women offenders.

Health

Physical. Women have unique health issues, such as those related

TABLE 2: VIOLENT CRIMES COMMITTED BY FEMALES AND MALES

Offense	Average annual number of offenders reported by victims, 1993–97		Women as a percentage of violent offenders
	Female	Male	
All	2,135,000	13,098,000	14
Sexual assault	10,000	442,000	2
Robbery	157,000	2,051,000	7
Aggravated assault	435,000	3,419,000	11
Simple assault	1,533,000	7,187,000	18

to reproduction and reproductive health. For women offenders, poverty, substance abuse, and lack of access to adequate health care significantly inhibit healthy pregnancy outcomes and successful parenting. Additionally, women offenders' reproductive health often is jeopardized by other factors, such as sexual abuse, substance abuse, and unprotected sex. Almost 4 percent of women offenders in state prisons are HIV positive, compared with slightly more than 2 percent of male inmates. From 1991 to 1995, the number of HIV-positive female inmates increased 88 percent, whereas the increase for male inmates was 28 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002a). In general, women are at greater risk than men for contracting sexually transmitted diseases and are more likely to suffer complications from such diseases, often the result of belated diagnoses.

Women offenders have a higher incidence of physical health problems than male offenders, and they are affected by certain diseases at greater rates than are men—for example, osteoporosis, eating disorders, and sexually transmitted diseases. Only recently has research focused on how medical conditions specifically affect women or how women's responses to medications and treatment may be different from those of men.

Mental. Both women and men suffer mental disorders at about the same rate, but they do not experience the same illnesses. Women are much more likely than men to suffer from mood and anxiety disorders, and men are more likely than women to be diagnosed with substance abuse disorders and antisocial personality disorders (Kessler, 1998). Women are significantly more likely than men to seek professional help for their psychiatric problems, yet only one-fourth of them receive treatment (England, 1998). Complicating treatment for women is that not enough is known about female psychological development and psychological health or the effects of gender on diagnosis and treatment, including appropriate dosages of many psychotropic drugs.

Women offenders' likely co-occurrence of substance abuse, trauma, and mental health issues makes treatment more challenging. Effective mental health, substance abuse, and trauma treatments must recognize and address the intersection of these problems and provide a comprehensive approach rather than addressing each as a separate entity.

Children and Marital Status

An estimated 72 percent of women offenders in community corrections have a child or

children younger than 18 years old, and almost three out of four women on probation are single—that is, widowed, separated, divorced, or never married (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999b). These data imply that a significant number of women offenders are rearing children alone. This single parent status likely places greater demands on women offenders than on their male counterparts, and it probably involves women in other systems that make demands on them, such as welfare, education, and children's services systems.

Education and Employment

Most women offenders in community corrections have at least a high school diploma, and between 30 and 40 percent have attended some college (Bureau of Justice statistics, 1999b). Women are less likely than men to have received vocational training, and the training they have received is in what has been viewed traditionally as women's work—cosmetology, clerical assistance, food service, or health assistance. In a survey conducted by the American Correctional Association in 1990, almost 67 percent of women inmates reported that they had never earned more than \$6.50 per hour at any job (Conly, 1998). As such, the women's ability to earn a living wage through legitimate employment is reduced, and they are more likely to commit criminal acts.

Victimization and Trauma

Women offenders have experienced violence at a rate that exceeds the rate for women in the general population. Although prevalence estimates vary, a review of 16 studies estimated that 12 to 17 percent of females in the general adult population were abused as children (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999a). A 1995 survey of adults on probation found that more than 40 percent of women probationers self-reported physical or sexual abuse during their lives (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997). For female state and federal prison populations, the segments reporting prior physical and sexual abuse were 57 percent and 40 percent, respectively (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999a). Although parolees were not included in the survey, the incidence of prior abuse most likely would be about the same for women on parole as it is for inmates.

Of the 40 percent of women probationers who reported prior physical or sexual abuse, more than half reported abuse by an intimate partner (spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999a). Applying that percentage to the 937,017 women offenders on probation in 2003, approximately 375,000 of the women were victims of prior physical or sexual abuse and about 187,000 of those had been abused by an intimate partner. In other

words, roughly one in five women offenders on probation in 2003 was a victim of intimate partner domestic violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999b and 2004b).

Theoretical Perspectives on Women's Criminal Behavior

The life experiences of women offenders, and the issues particular to them, form the basis for theoretical perspectives on working with women in community corrections. Theories that explain the unique factors and influences in women's lives can guide the development of appropriate interventions and programming for women offenders. Bloom,

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—Bloom, Owen, and Covington (2003).

Owen, and Covington (2003) highlight the following theoretical perspectives as considerations for developing gender-responsive strategies for women offenders.

Pathways Theory

Women commit different crimes than men and for different reasons. Most of women's crimes are property or drug related, and fewer than one in seven violent crimes is committed by a woman (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999b). A woman's pathway into crime is most often influenced by an attempt to survive poverty or abuse, or it is related to substance abuse. A woman offender often must contend with events that exacerbate her economic instability; for example, she may have to care for a child or other dependent even though she has little ability to adequately support herself. Other factors in the pathways theory include the following:

- Women offenders' histories of abuse influence their subsequent crimes, which often are committed as attempts to escape the abuse and may lead to continued criminality (e.g., prostitution, property crimes, and drug-related offenses).
- Because of a strong need for a connection with others, many women's offenses and substance abuse are influenced by partners or other significant people in their lives.

Relational Theory

Relational theory stems from the belief that men and women have different notions of maturity: men approach maturity as a route to independence, to being self-sufficient, whereas women seek to build a sense of connection with others. These divergent goals are played out in different ways of relating to others, distinct communication styles, and varied types of responses when valued connections are disrupted or broken.

Assuming that independence (separation and self-sufficiency) is a universal primary motivation for both men and women results in underestimating the role of connectedness in women's offending behavior and rehabilitation. Forming and keeping relationships are fundamental elements in women's lives and thus influence their criminality; choice of peers; relationships with children and others; need to create "family," even in prison; substance use and efforts to regain sobriety; and response to community corrections interventions. Past experiences, including a history of abuse, may inhibit a woman's ability to form and sustain appropriate, meaningful relationships. However, community corrections is more likely to succeed if it offers interventions that increase women's opportunities to come together, establish trust,

and speak about personal issues, bond with others, and promote healthy relationships.

Trauma Theory

Trauma encompasses physical, emotional, and psychological harm resulting from direct violence and abuse. It also includes the harm engendered by witnessing violence and by being discriminated against because of gender, gender identity, race, class, or any other attribute that results in marginalization. Not all women who experience violence, witness violence, or are marginalized suffer trauma. Some have coping skills and support networks that allow them to respond to singular or cumulative traumatic events without long-term effects; others can cope initially but exhibit symptoms later.

Trauma theory posits that the effect of trauma and violence on women offenders is substantial and influences their criminality and response to justice system interventions. It does not suggest that women who have committed crimes should not be held accountable. Rather, trauma theory contends that understanding the role that trauma and violence play in a female offender's life can inform the implementation of services that will best address her issues and have the greatest potential to support resiliency and increase prosocial behavior.

Bloom, Owen, and Covington (2003) note that providing effective services to survivors of trauma should be trauma informed and include—

- Acknowledging the trauma.
- Avoiding triggering trauma reactions or retraumatizing the victim.
- Supporting the survivor's coping capacity.
- Helping survivors manage their symptoms successfully.

Addressing issues associated with trauma and violence will enhance the potential for successful outcomes—both for women offenders and the community corrections system.

Addiction Theory

Many women are arrested for drug offenses and crimes committed to support their drug use, including theft and prostitution. Women offenders' use of drugs is a complex issue, influenced by many factors, including—

- Psychological stressors (e.g., sexual and physical abuse, violence, and victimization).
- Social and cultural issues that define women's roles (e.g., those that relate to self-esteem and educational and socioeconomic limitations).

- The importance of relationships, particularly with children and family.
- Loss of self-image and disempowerment.
- Health risks, including high-risk behaviors resulting in frequent medical problems and a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS (Kassebaum, 1999).

Research shows that what works best for women offenders is substance abuse treatment framed in a holistic (treating a broad range of needs) perspective that is humanizing, long-term, and child friendly (Covington, 2000). Most often, however, women offenders enter treatment systems that have been used by and tested mainly on men. In contrast, gender-responsive treatment that takes into account what is known about women offenders recognizes their different pathways into crime, acknowledges and treats trauma and victimization issues, and accommodates women's need for connection with others. In 1994, the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) defined 17 critical issues that should be addressed within a drug treatment program for women (see "Comprehensive Treatment Model for Issues Critical to Women"), and in 1999, Patricia Kassebaum reiterated those 17 areas as critical issues in a comprehensive treatment model for women offenders (Kassebaum, 1999).

Comprehensive Treatment Model for Issues Critical to Women

Within the treatment program, counselors should address the following issues:

- The etiology of addiction, especially gender-specific issues related to addiction (e.g., social, physiological, and psychological consequences of addiction and factors related to the onset of addiction).
- Low self-esteem.
- Race, ethnicity, and cultural issues.
- Gender discrimination and harassment.
- Disability-related issues, where relevant.
- Relationships with family and significant others.
- Attachments to unhealthy interpersonal relationships.
- Interpersonal violence, including incest, rape, battery, and other abuse.
- Eating disorders.
- Sexuality, including sexual functioning and sexual orientation.
- Parenting.
- Grief related to loss (e.g., loss of the substance that was being abused and emotional losses related to the woman's children, family members, or partner).
- Work.
- Appearance and overall health and hygiene.
- Isolation related to a lack of support systems (which may or may not include family members and partners) and other resources.
- Life plan development.
- Childcare and child custody.

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. 1994. *Practical Approaches in the Treatment of Women Who Abuse Alcohol and Other Drugs*, reprinted in *Substance Abuse Treatment for Women Offenders: Guide to Promising Practices*, 1999. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, p. 40.

Guiding Principles

The theoretical perspectives previously discussed suggest that certain significant factors can affect women’s outcomes in the criminal justice system. These theories, along with other research from a variety of disciplines, form the foundation for the guiding principles that were developed to address concerns about managing, supervising, and treating women offenders throughout the criminal justice system (Bloom, Owen, and Covington, 2003). (See “Guiding Principles for Implementing Gender-Responsive Strategies for Women Offenders”). The Focus Group evaluated current community corrections policies, programs, and practices for congruency with the guidelines. The Focus Group also identified changes needed to implement gender-responsive programming for women offenders in community corrections. The results of their efforts, organized around each of the guiding principles, are presented in the following section.

Acknowledge That Gender Makes a Difference

The first step in implementing gender-responsive programming is to sincerely adopt the belief that women offenders are significantly different from men offenders. Community corrections programs have been applied to

Guiding Principles for Implementing Gender-Responsive Strategies for Women Offenders

- **Principle 1: Gender.**
Acknowledge that gender makes a difference.
- **Principle 2: Environment.**
Create an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity.
- **Principle 3: Relationships.**
Develop policies, practices, and programs that are relational and promote healthy connections to children, family, significant others, and the community.
- **Principle 4: Services and supervision.**
Address substance abuse, trauma, and mental health issues through comprehensive, integrated, and culturally relevant services and appropriate supervision.
- **Principle 5: Socioeconomic status.**
Provide women with opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions.
- **Principle 6: Community.**
Establish a system of community supervision and reentry with comprehensive, collaborative services.

Bloom, B., Owen, B., and Covington, S. 2003. *Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, p. 76.

and evaluated on the majority population—men—with little assessment of their benefit for women. Community corrections personnel need to understand the characteristics of women offenders and the theoretical perspectives related to their behavior and criminality, and embrace the goal of providing services that are responsive to women’s risks and needs. Such agency buy-in should occur at all levels. Acknowledging

gender differences should result in a rigorous analysis of current community corrections policies, programs, and practices as they pertain to women, followed by making changes where they are needed.

For example, most community corrections agencies use some sort of risk and needs assessment to determine case classification and services provision (Jones et

al., 1999). The assessment tool provides a standardized method for decisionmaking and case planning, but it can overlook specific populations (e.g., women offenders) if relevant issues are not explored. Assessment information maps the course for subsequent individualized interventions and should therefore address issues relevant to women offenders. Such gender-responsive assessment includes attention to the characteristics and life events that affect women offenders' potential for successful outcomes in community corrections (see "The Three R's of Case Planning").

Applying this principle in community corrections—

- Allocate sufficient staff and other resources to address gender-responsiveness.
- Strive for policies, programs, and procedures that are *gender responsive* (addressing the unique needs of women offenders), not *gender specific* (made available only to women). For example, a substance abuse treatment group may be gender specific (designed for women) but fail to be gender responsive if it does not address the critical issues that affect women's substance abuse and addiction.
- Learn about gender differences and issues particular to gender and share this information with others.
- Conduct internal and external strategic planning, including goals for specific employment positions, to develop and implement appropriate gender-responsive policies and procedures.
- Offer training to staff at all levels that provides information, builds skills, and addresses attitudinal change.
- Ensure that staff working with women understand and appreciate gender differences and act accordingly.
- Share information internally and externally with criminal and noncriminal justice system entities to increase gender-responsiveness.

The Three R's of Case Planning

As officers develop case plans for individual offenders, they should test each plan against the three R's:

Relevancy. Is the case plan for supervision pertinent to this woman? Does it take into account the circumstances and issues that affect women's criminal behavior and potential for successful outcomes under supervision?

Research based. Have the goals, objectives, and activities of the supervision plan been developed using current research and literature on best practices for implementing gender-responsive strategies?

Realistic. Can the woman offender reasonably be expected to achieve the goals and objectives outlined in the case plan within the time allotted? Has appropriate information been included about the woman's involvement in other systems and those systems' requirements for her? Has a plan for collaboration and coordination with the other systems been developed?

Focus Group, October 2003

Create an Environment Based on Safety, Respect, and Dignity

Based on their past experiences, many women offenders enter the community corrections system with a great deal of apprehension. Many come from abusive or violent backgrounds, have been victimized by intimate partners, and suffer from trauma as a result of victimization. Community corrections professionals must be aware of the abuse and trauma that women offenders have experienced and make every effort not to repeat that pattern of victimization. To increase the potential for behavior change, these women need to feel safe and respected and be treated with dignity. Although providing a

Fair is not treating everyone the same. Fair is giving everyone what they need.

—Focus Group, October 2003

safe environment for women offenders might seem to contradict objectives of surveillance and enforcement, recognizing the importance of personal safety to behavior change is essential.

Creating a safe physical and psychological environment entails helping offenders acquire safe housing; supplying accurate, complete and timely information to offenders; stating expectations clearly; applying the least intervention that meets the supervision objective; and addressing issues of violence in offenders' lives proactively. Women offenders should be safe from inappropriate actions from community corrections staff. Administrators must be aware of and address issues of staff sexual misconduct.

Additionally, care must be taken to avoid inappropriate nonverbal (body language, facial expressions and gestures) and paraverbal (tone and volume of voice) messages. Publications, posters, and other materials displayed in corrections

offices should be supportive and reflective of women where possible, or at minimum be neutral, neither supporting nor reflecting either gender.

In addition to being cognizant of personal safety issues, community corrections officers should treat women offenders with respect and dignity. As previously discussed, women offenders often have issues of victimization and trauma that, coupled with their status in a male-dominated culture, can result in their being too submissive to authority. Community corrections personnel should exercise authority properly, and agencies should monitor and enforce an organizational culture that provides offenders with an equal opportunity to be successful.

Addressing safety issues may suggest protocols that are contrary to departmental practices. For instance, safety dictates that officers place themselves closest to the exit when meeting with offenders. Yet for women offenders, this practice may provoke feelings of being trapped and endangered. To formulate sound protocols, administrators should consider gender-responsive practices in the context of other, possibly competing, agency practices. To resolve the example given, the officer and the offender might be situated with equal access to the exit.

Applying this principle in community corrections—

- Examine the organizational culture to elicit practice and attitudes—are women offenders treated with respect and dignity? Address both verbal interaction with women offenders and the nuances of nonverbal and paraverbal communication, including the materials (posters, brochures, documents) used in the agency.
- Conduct surveys of women offenders to determine their perceptions of the organization and their experiences with staff.
- Establish policies and protocols that recognize the importance of women offenders' personal safety yet hold women accountable for their offenses.
- Ask questions about women offenders' personal safety in their homes, neighborhoods, and work environments and formulate supervision plans to resolve safety issues.
- Conduct gender-responsive assessments to respond to the risk (or lack of risk) posed and to formulate gender-responsive, individualized case planning.
- Identify and address trauma and victimization issues among women offenders proactively.
- Develop policies for staff-offender interactions that clearly define and prohibit inappropriate

conduct, and establish procedures for reporting and investigating misconduct.

Develop Policies, Practices, and Programs That Are Relational and Promote Healthy Connections to Children, Family, Significant Others, and the Community

Understanding the importance of women's relationships and connectedness and using that understanding to develop gender-responsive strategies are key to providing successful interventions for women offenders in community corrections. Although relationships with others (family, friends, partners) are often the impetus to criminal involvement, these relationships may also support offenders' success in community corrections. Thus, relationships cannot be ignored when planning intervention strategies and developing programming. For example, a standard condition of release often mandates that the person on supervision refrain from associating with other offenders. For women offenders, who likely have significant others in their lives with a criminal history, this prohibition may distance them from people who are important to them and who can offer physical and emotional support.

Programming for women offenders should take into account their

parenting responsibilities. When possible, connections with their children should be reinforced and strengthened, not jeopardized by community corrections' requirements or lack of attention to the offenders' childcare responsibilities and the children's needs. Women's positive peer, family, and significant other relationships should be encouraged, and ties to the community should be promoted.

Do not delay doing anything until you can do everything. If you at least acknowledge a woman offender's relationship to her children and her childcare responsibilities, you can adjust her reporting schedule and required activities accordingly. That's a start, and you can build from there.

—Focus Group, October 2003

Applying this principle in community corrections—

- Hire or assign staff who recognize and respect the importance of relationships to women offenders.
- Recognize the importance of relationships and connectedness to women offenders by creating opportunities (e.g., group supervision) where women offenders can learn from, connect to, and support each other.
- Identify women offenders' family connections to understand the context of the offenders' lives, build on family interactions, and identify and access the strengths of the offenders, families, and communities.
- Define family broadly to recognize the importance of nonbiological connections.
- Train staff to establish a supportive, empathetic relationship with women offenders while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.
- Consider women offenders and their children as programming participants and, in most cases, work to support the mother-child relationship by recognizing the effect that activities mandated for the mother have on the children and by providing developmentally appropriate services to children.

Address Substance Abuse, Trauma, and Mental Health Issues Through Comprehensive, Integrated, and Culturally Relevant Services and Appropriate Supervision

The interconnectedness of substance abuse, trauma, and mental health issues for women offenders indicates that each issue should be considered in concert with the other two to develop appropriate intervention strategies. The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) recommends that substance abuse treatment address the many complicated physical, emotional, and social factors that affect women offenders' substance use and recovery. Treatment programs in local correctional facilities need to be part of a comprehensive continuum of care that continues after release from custody. CSAT recommends that comprehensive substance abuse treatment programs for women offenders include 10 essential services, which are summarized in the accompanying sidebar, "Essential Services of Comprehensive Treatment Programs for Women Offenders" (Kassebaum, 1999).

Community corrections personnel must address the triad of substance abuse, mental health, and trauma issues as part of intervention strategies developed for women offenders. They also must refer these offenders to service providers whose personnel are knowledgeable and skilled in providing integrated

Essential Services of Comprehensive Treatment Programs for Women Offenders

- Thorough assessment of the offender's needs that is female specific and culturally relevant.
- An individualized treatment plan that addresses the range of medical, substance abuse, criminal justice, and psychosocial problems.
- Testing for HIV/AIDS along with appropriate precounseling and postcounseling.
- Procurement of medical care through arrangements with community-based health-care service providers.
- Substance abuse education counseling, psychological counseling, and other women-specific and culturally appropriate therapeutic activities throughout the continuum of care and within the context of family and other interpersonal relationships.
- Family planning counseling, including information on prenatal care, birth control options, and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Training in parenting skills and encouraging mothers to participate in programs for their children.
- Interagency cooperation with other relevant agencies, particularly child welfare and community service providers, to collaborate in securing all necessary services.
- Linkages with community providers to secure needed services such as food, clothing, housing, mental and physical health care, finances, legal assistance, family planning, vocational and educational needs, and transportation.
- Inclusion of children and other family members in the prevention, treatment, and recovery process, including childcare and specialized services for children.

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. 1999. *Substance Abuse Treatment for Women Offenders: Guide to Promising Practices*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, p. 24.

treatment programs and who can provide all the services needed or make appropriate referrals for concurrent treatment. Integration, not separation, of substance abuse, trauma, and mental health treatment

provides the best potential for successful outcomes for women offenders.

Community corrections strategies and treatment services must be

It is hard for women offenders to think about complying with probation conditions when they have no place to live and their children are hungry.

—Focus Group, October 2003

culturally relevant. Gender differences are significant, as are race and ethnicity, but recognizing the influence of other aspects of culture (e.g., sexuality, religion, environment, education, and socioeconomic level) is also important. Understanding the context of a woman offender's life can inform the provision of appropriate treatment and support a supervision process with the greatest potential for achieving desired outcomes.

Applying this principle in community corrections—

- Train community corrections personnel in issues related to women offenders' substance abuse, trauma, and mental health and how each influences the other.
- Develop tools (e.g., strengths-based approaches, motivational interviews, supportive inquiries)

to identify offender and family attributes that can contribute to successful outcomes.

- Provide women offenders with the safety and comfort of same-gender groups and treatment.
- Monitor and work with community referral sources to provide culturally relevant, gender-responsive treatment.

Provide Women With Opportunities To Improve Their Socioeconomic Conditions

Women's offending is closely tied to their socioeconomic status, and rehabilitation often depends on their ability to become economically independent. Without the ability to support themselves and their children, women offenders may feel economically or socially bound to partners or others in unhealthy or even abusive relationships.

Most women offenders are heads of households and responsible for children. If employed, they likely earn less than their male counterparts. If they previously relied on public assistance and Medicaid, they may be ineligible for some types of assistance as a result of their conviction or community supervision sentence. They also may be restricted from public or federally subsidized housing.

Women's socioeconomic status may prevent them from accessing treatment or other resources

because they may not be able to pay fees or afford transportation. They also may be unable to pay for childcare.

Like other resources, vocational training and employment-readiness programs have targeted a predominantly male offender population. When offered to women offenders, vocational training has been used to prepare them for jobs traditionally considered women's work—occupations unlikely to provide a sufficient income to support a family. Women offenders should not be trained for occupations that their convictions make them ineligible for, such as for jobs in the cosmetology or health-care fields in some states. To increase their economic potential, women offenders should be given appropriate vocational counseling with skilled counselors, followed by education, training, and other skill-development opportunities.

Applying this principle in community corrections—

- As part of case planning for women, consider women offenders' financial capabilities, limitations, and obligations and how these may be different from those of male offenders and structure payments toward restitution, court fees, or fines accordingly.
- Provide vocational training, education, and skill-building opportunities that meet women offenders' needs.

- Recognize that training in occupations considered traditional for women will be appropriate for some women offenders; others will want to explore occupations traditionally considered for men.
- Recognize women offenders' childcare responsibilities and schedule vocational services accordingly; provide programming for children at the same time.

Establish a System of Community Supervision and Reentry With Comprehensive, Collaborative Services

Developing and implementing successful gender-responsive programming for women offenders requires collaborating and coordinating with other entities. Women offenders and their children likely are engaged in or directly affected by a number of other systems or organizations; for example, victim advocacy; civil, juvenile, or family courts; child and adult protective services; welfare; health and mental health; substance abuse; transportation; education; faith communities; self-help groups; employment; vocational training; housing; and emergency shelters. Each of these entities is a possible partner for collaboration and cooperation in the provision of services, whether at a program or agency level or on a case-by-case basis.

Individualized case assessment and planning facilitate comprehensive, collaborative services for women offenders by providing information that community corrections staff can use to identify and provide needed resources and services. As part of case planning and supervision, consider using an “ecomap”—a tool used more widely in other human services disciplines for mapping offender and family connections to systems and individuals. The ecomap should disclose connections and identify the strength, impact, and quality of each connection. Such an assessment can reveal whether women offenders and their families are obligated to multiple service providers, expose conflicts, identify sources of support that might be tapped in new ways, and suggest avenues for coordinating multiple services. It sets the stage for coordinated case management, a process in which service providers work together to form a continuum of support and treatment for women offenders and their children that maximizes each component's resources and contributions. Women's connections with community resources can remain and be sustaining long after the corrections contact has ended.

Use case planning information to accumulate and aggregate data on women offenders. The information can then be used to justify the development of new resources, enhance existing resources, identify

Women often pose a lower risk in a system that is designed to target high-risk offenders for increased levels of supervision and services.

areas for agency cooperation and collaboration, and plan staff training and skill development.

Applying this principle in community corrections—

- Create a comprehensive, individualized, gender-responsive supervision plan and ecomap for each woman offender.
- Use the supervision plan and the ecomap to identify other individuals, agencies, and systems that offenders are involved with, and cooperate and collaborate with those entities to coordinate services for women and their children.
- Recognize that the providers (including community corrections) of services to women offenders and their children should be interdependent and interrelated, not singular.
- Take an administrative leadership role to bring together representatives from the multiple

systems and agencies providing services to women offenders and their children to coordinate case management.

Challenges in Implementing Gender-Responsive Strategies

Several forces sustain the generally inadequate practices and strategies for working with women offenders in the community corrections system. These forces are present within the criminal justice and community corrections systems and within the larger public community. As in other organizations and systems, generalized resistance to change may exist because of inability to see that it is needed, budgetary concerns, or a belief that change is difficult. This organizational resistance may produce an inertia that challenges the implementation of gender-responsive programming for women. Some probation and parole officers say that working with women is difficult and that they would prefer to supervise men, despite the higher risk levels, lengthier criminal histories, and greater incidence of violent offenses among men (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999b). Focus Group participants noted the following perceptions as contributing to the view that supervising women in community corrections is more difficult:

- Women often pose a lower risk in a system that is designed to target high-risk offenders for increased levels of supervision and services. Consequently, the demands made by women offenders are sometimes viewed as burdensome, inconvenient, and distracting to officers who are trying to apportion time to the higher risk cases.

A one-size-fits-all approach to developing gender-responsive strategies will not be sufficient.

- Women may view the officers and agents as sources of potential support or help. Officers who define their primary duty as one of monitoring compliance may be frustrated with the expectation of providing support or helping women find appropriate community resources.
- Women face demands that most men do not, including child or other dependent care, mandates from providers of public assistance benefits, and, in many cases, child protective system involvement. These demands may compete with or even

contradict community corrections directives.

- Women offenders often suffer from trauma and victimization, and officers may feel uncomfortable with or incapable of dealing with these issues and unsure of their ability to secure appropriate resources in the community. Often, community corrections officers have not received training in how to respond to offenders as victims.
- Women substance abusers' needs differ significantly from those of men, yet women are often placed in treatment programs that have treated only men. The unavailability of gender-appropriate treatment resources virtually ensures a lengthier and more difficult recovery process for women.
- Most women make less money than men but often have the same court fees and fines and the same responsibility for complying with court or agency directives. Women's lack of financial resources can be a serious impediment not only to complying with payment schedules, but to myriad other events (e.g., paying for mandated treatment and acquiring transportation to report as directed and keep appointments at referral agencies).
- Women's need to connect with others and establish trust predisposes them to form attachments to the community corrections officer.

Women may want more of the officer's time, share more details about their lives, and relay more intimate information yet be indirect in asking for what they need. Officers may find this burdensome and time consuming, and they may feel uncomfortable with this level of intimacy.

Addressing attitudes and stereotypes with accurate information and training should be a primary objective when administrators implement gender-responsive strategies. Addressing a belief system that maintains the current less-than-effective status is crucial to making positive changes. Administrators should also be prepared to respond to the argument that "we do not do this for men, why should we do it for women?" In response to that query, *individualizing* case planning has long been an accepted practice in community corrections; responding to gender differences is an important part of making that case plan *individual* and can secure better outcomes.

Criminal Justice and Community Corrections Systems Challenges

Other challenges to implementing gender-responsive strategies for women offenders include the following:

- Because women constitute a smaller percentage of the population, they may receive less attention and fewer services.
- Minority women are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice and community corrections systems. Black and Hispanic women constitute only 37 percent of the women under community corrections supervision, yet they represent 59 percent of the women in jails and 63 percent of the women in state prisons (Bloom, Owen, and Covington, 2003).
- Women often are not determined to be at high risk of reoffending, so they do not receive the support or resources reserved for high-risk offenders.
- Meeting the demands of day-to-day workloads leaves little time or energy to thoughtfully address any new issues, including women offenders' issues.
- System complexity precludes quick, easy programming changes.
- Systems may lack or have poorly defined missions and goals.
- Systems have inadequate knowledge of women offenders' issues and continue to treat women like men.
- All women are not alike, and gender should not be used as the sole criterion for determining community corrections interventions with women offenders. Among other things to consider are differences in age, sexual preference, and culture. Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach to developing gender-responsive strategies will not be sufficient.
- Tough-on-crime stances and lack of discretion in sentencing (e.g., "three strikes" laws and mandated sentences for drug offenses) have reduced options for responding to offenders by requiring severe sentences, even though underlying circumstances of the offenses suggest lesser interventions could suffice.

Public and Community Challenges

Forces outside the community corrections system that impede the development of gender-responsive strategies include institutionalized gender bias—the gender-related dynamics inherent in any society or institution. Institutionalized gender bias is evidenced by the male-dominant culture's greater influence and females' reduced influence, which is reflected in reduced social, political, and economic opportunities.

Gender stereotypes that result from gender bias define roles for women and men but are more limiting for women because they incorporate the values, behaviors, and ethics generally ascribed to men. For example, women are ascribed roles of nurturers and caretakers, and women offenders are not only offenders, with the accompanying stigma attached to that stereotype, but also bad mothers (Covington, 2002). Rarely do male offenders receive labels as bad fathers because of their offenses. Racism, classism, sexism, and

Implementing gender-responsive programming for women is not a *women's issue*, it is a *management issue*.

—Focus Group, October 2003

gender stereotypes combine to create a societal perception of women offenders as contributing less value and therefore being less deserving of resources. They also reduce women's ability to effect change.

Additionally, public perceptions of the criminal justice and community corrections systems present challenges. Often, the public expects easy answers, but the systems are far too complex to provide them. In other cases, a disconnect exists between what the public wants and what the criminal justice and community corrections systems believe the public wants. Assuming the public wants offenders to be dealt with punitively may dictate harsher sentencing. Yet, there is evidence of public support for rehabilitation over incarceration, such as the passage of Proposition 36 in California, which enacted a treatment-instead-of-prison program for certain offenders and was approved by 61 percent of the voters (Drug Policy Alliance, n.d.).

Public attention involving women offenders most often focuses on providing for the needs of the affected children. The women's needs can be easily subsumed by the attention and consideration given to the children, when both the women's needs and the children's needs should be identified and addressed.

A major challenge to implementing gender-responsive programming is the scope of the needed changes; so many areas within community corrections and in the larger culture need to be addressed that implementation appears overwhelming. The complexity of the undertaking is further compounded by a dearth of evaluative research on gender-specific interventions; however, research is ongoing. Anecdotal evidence indicates that gender-responsive programming will better address women offenders' needs and result in improved outcomes for women offenders, the community corrections system, and communities.

Overcoming Challenges

Implementing gender-responsive programming for women offenders requires agency and individual changes. It also requires cooperation with justice and nonjustice agencies and organizations at the management and staff levels. To help community corrections agencies and staff address the needs of women offenders, the following steps are suggested:

- **Envision the future.** Be forward thinking and proactive in anticipating and planning gender-responsive programming for women offenders. Practitioners should approach the concept of gender-responsive programming with an open mind and should believe that each woman will succeed.
- **Encourage and support agency buy-in.** Fully embracing the goal of gender-responsive programming includes garnering support from administrators and individual staff. Develop education and ongoing training to secure support.
- **Find a champion.** Someone with skills, enthusiasm, and passion will help overcome inertia and propel the development of gender-responsive strategies. Empower and support the champion.
- **Gather information.** Develop a body of quantitative and qualitative information about women offenders, their characteristics and attributes, and what works to increase their potential for success in community corrections.
- **Assess current policies and practices.** Objectively evaluate each current policy and practice in the context of gender-responsiveness: was it designed to meet the needs of women as well as men; does it offer parity for women; has its effectiveness been evaluated with women offenders?

- **Develop a strategic plan.** Figure out what can be done immediately, what can be done in the next 6 months, and what can be implemented within 1 year, 2 years, and in the future to achieve programming that is fully gender responsive.
- **Allocate resources.** Make gender-responsive programming a priority by allocating sufficient funds for needs assessment and to develop system resources. Identify gender-responsive strategies that can be implemented with limited or no increased funding. Women offenders are already being supervised on caseloads. Individual officers' thoughtfully considered modifications of their supervision protocols can increase gender-responsiveness.
- **Collaborate with other criminal and noncriminal justice agencies.** Community corrections agencies and personnel should be proactive and creative in forming multisystem linkages to provide a comprehensive array of services for women offenders and their children. Strive to include as many partner areas as possible—e.g., schools, employment, health care and treatment (including mental health and substance abuse), child protection, public assistance, housing, recreation, faith-based, advocacy—and work from a

As more women are sentenced or released to community corrections supervision, the community corrections system has an obligation to develop appropriate interventions and strategies for promoting successful outcomes.

strengths-based perspective, believing that solutions can be achieved.

- **Provide training.** Training should be provided to all levels of staff and should encompass the application of gender-responsive strategies for women in all areas of community corrections programming and administration.

Developing gender-responsive policies and programs is not an event; it is a process. As such, it takes place over time with input from various sources. Practitioners and agencies should view the criminal behavior of women offenders within the context of the

women's lives and plan interactions and interventions that take that context into account. If addressing all aspects of community corrections practices is impossible, agencies may want to begin with any one of the following steps:

- Implement gender-responsive assessments.
- Enhance presentence investigations and reports to include information about offenders' victimization and trauma.
- Screen women offenders under supervision for issues of domestic violence and victimization and refer them for appropriate services.
- Consider women offenders' responsibilities for childcare or other dependent care when scheduling appointments or making referrals for treatment or other services.

Once the mindset of implementing gender-responsive strategies for women offenders is adopted, agencies and officers can identify many opportunities for developing gender-appropriate community corrections responses.

Community Corrections' Responsibility to Women Offenders

As more women are sentenced or released to community corrections

supervision, the community corrections system has an obligation to develop appropriate interventions and strategies for promoting successful outcomes. Data on women offenders show that specific issues significantly affect their pathways into the system and the strategies that will lead to their successful release. Histories of physical or sexual abuse, substance abuse, and physical and mental health issues dictate the need for the community corrections system to review its responses to women offenders, to develop appropriate assessment protocols, and to secure appropriate gender-responsive treatment services. Additionally, as women offenders' relationship needs and their obligations to children and family become better understood, community corrections can develop intervention strategies that more appropriately address offenders' needs and the needs of their children.

The guiding principles and strategies outlined in this bulletin can provide a foundation for improving the community corrections system's responses to women offenders. Building on that foundation will result in an increased measure of success for women offenders, a brighter future for their children, a more responsive community corrections system, and safer communities.

Notes

1. Bloom, Owen, and Covington, 2003. The report is available at <http://nicic.org/pubs/2003/018017/pdf> or by contacting the National Institute of Corrections Information Center at 1860 Industrial Circle, Suite A, Longmont, CO 80501; 800-877-1461 or 303-682-0213, or e-mail asknicic@nicic.org.
2. Issues related to female juveniles are not addressed in this bulletin.
3. For example, reporting schedules, mandated employment, urinalysis, electronic monitoring and other surveillance methods, community service, referrals to community resources, and fees, fines, and program costs.
4. Please note that these statistics include both female juveniles (ages 10–17) and adult women (age 18 or older).

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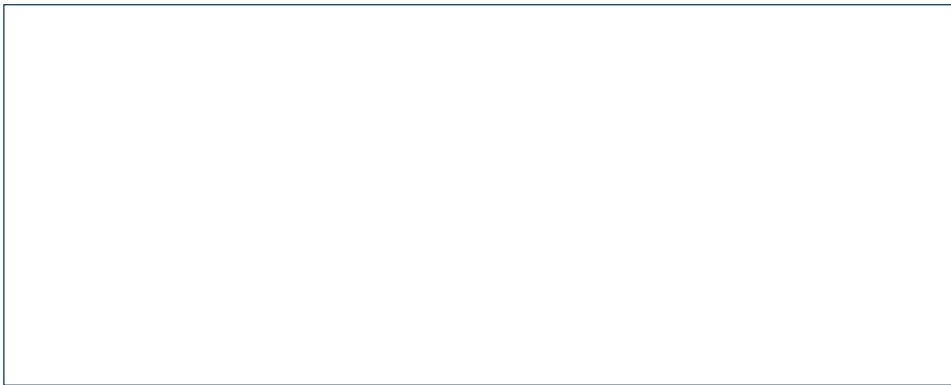
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