

# Is There an Evidence Base Supportive Of Women-Centered Programming in Corrections?

By Frank J. Porporino and Elizabeth Fabiano

Despite repeated calls for a gender-sensitive approach to working with female offenders,<sup>1</sup> how this should translate into practice is still unclear. Delivery of group-based programs to mixed-gender groups in community settings, for example, remains commonplace and simple adaptations of cognitive-oriented programs that were designed for men are still routine, with only slight variations for women such as altering some examples and changing a few role-play scenarios. The corrections field remains unsettled as to what particular programming needs, if any, should be addressed in interventions for female offenders, and even whether programs that emphasize personal change should be at all delivered to women in view of the risk of “responsibilization” (shifting the onus onto women themselves to manage the accumulated social disadvantages they face).<sup>2</sup>

How much does the evidence support a radically different approach for the design and delivery of interventions for female offenders? One way to answer the question is to look for areas of need that may be consistently related to offending in women, as distinct from men, an approach that has been popularized within the “what works” framework. Essentially, this sparks the search for unique and key “criminogenic” factors for women that can then be targeted in programming.<sup>3</sup> As compared with males, female offenders under supervision seem to have a higher prevalence of needs in the personal/emotional area, in marital and family relations, and in academic and vocational skills. Moreover, as compared with men, women on average are assessed as having a greater number of significant needs areas.<sup>4</sup> These findings agree with

ethnographic, descriptive literature of women involved in crime where similar factors have been captured consistently.<sup>5</sup>

## Examining Risk Factors

A tentative conclusion is that there seems to be some similarities but also some differences in what might constitute the most significant dynamic risk factors for men and women. But the evidence needed to develop uniquely different programming strategies is clearly limited within this framework,<sup>6</sup> and indeed, it has been suggested that the same general principles should apply in designing effective correctional programming for women as for men.<sup>7</sup>

However, another way to answer the question leads to some very different conclusions. The threads of evidence, from fairly diverse and growing literature, suggest that offending in women may be intertwined with life circumstances in a very different way than with men. Rather than rebellious rejection of conventional rules and norms, as is the case for men, women may offend more as a coping response to cumulative social and emotional difficulties, rooted in self-perceptions of low self-efficacy for pursuing legitimate pro-social lifestyles.<sup>8</sup>

Taking substance abuse as a factor related to offending in both men and women provides a good example. Clearly this is a target for programming, but research indicates that substance misuse may be criminogenic in a different way for men and women, and that perhaps how the problem is addressed with women should reflect the dynamics of motivation for misuse that seem to be primary.

In a study of male and female inmates participating in prison-based treatment programs, it was noted that: “Women prisoners in treatment had more serious patterns of drug use, were more likely to have grown up in homes where drug use was present, were more likely to have experienced physical and sexual abuse as children, and were more likely to have mental and physical and health problems.”<sup>9</sup> The study’s authors conclude that drug misuse seems to serve a different function for men and women; satisfying hedonistic needs for men but “alleviating physical or emotional pain” for women. Other studies have proposed a similar distinction, suggesting that women are more likely to abuse drugs as a coping response to deal with bleak life circumstances: family related problems, financial problems, poor self-image, recollections of physical and sexual abuse, as well as continued physical abuse by men.<sup>10</sup>

If substance abuse for men serves a socializing and hedonistic function, but substance abuse for women serves to fill a void in emotionally satisfying ties with others that may be connected to exploitive and abusive relationships with male partners,<sup>11</sup> then an important lesson can be derived in terms of the focus of appropriate intervention.

Similarly, complex and dynamic relations can be unraveled for female offenders, as contrasted with males, when examining more deliberately how factors such as social/economic deprivation and victimization impinge on men’s and women’s pathways to crime.<sup>12</sup> This agrees with practitioner experience that is attuned to how women face different combinations of challenges compared with men and require unique services delivered in a different way,

under different circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Some of the major areas of influence may be similar to those reported for male offenders. Yet how women experience their problems and the process or pathways that bring them into contact with the criminal justice system seem to be easily distinguishable from that of men.

## Intervention's Role

The key question to ask, then, is how can intervention most appropriately reduce the impact of these factors for women? Instead of asking what should be corrected, corrections professionals may need to look at what should be strengthened for women, what key "protective" factors might be able to transition women out of their cycle of crime and further disadvantage. There is evidence to suggest that women attempt to neutralize or excuse their offending in "relational" themes much more so than men and that they resort to reasoning that incorporates higher moral and interpersonal imperatives.<sup>14</sup> The tendency for women to be sensitive to and care for others can lead to their being more self-critical rather than self-protective, and an awareness of the thoughts and feelings that underlie this maladaptive cycle can become crucially important.<sup>15</sup> For men, intervention most often should involve approaches for challenging anti-social attitudes, values and beliefs. For women, it may be more appropriately oriented to motivating and enhancing their range of "me-centered" coping and decision-making skills.<sup>16</sup>

A recently formulated good lives model (GLM), which parts ways significantly from the predominant risk/needs paradigm within what works, provides a helpful organizing framework to guide development of women-centered programming.<sup>17</sup> The focus of intervention in this model is on the individual's preferences and strengths and on the opportunities that person would like to develop. Self-validating, protective, me-centered, adaptive coping and decision-making can become fundamental to this process in working with female offenders and this should be expressed in the content and materi-

als that the program might incorporate, the ordering, sequencing and set-up of topics, the methods used in elaborating on and reinforcing messages, the techniques and methods of delivery, and the integration of learning that should be followed.<sup>18</sup>

## Recommendations

Central to GLM is how people who work with women offenders might go about instilling some meaningful and sustainable motivation for change. In working with women, this demands accepting their ambivalence about giving up offending, since this is asking them to give up something of value. Replacement goals that are also of value have to be motivationally negotiated with the individual and this requires particular skills of motivational interaction.

First, listening skills and the ability of "reflecting" sentiments or ideas back to women is absolutely essential where a collaborative rather than challenging atmosphere has to be created. Common roadblocks to development of intrinsic motivation have to be avoided (e.g., persuading, analyzing, judging, giving advice, etc.). Moreover, special attention has to be paid to the inevitable ebb and flow of intentions to change as issues are raised and as the level of effort required to change becomes more clearly defined. In addition, the program should afford considerable opportunities for women to express themselves as the "expert" in their own lives. Further, flexibility in covering content areas has to be afforded where there is judgement exercised in effective use of storytelling, metaphor analysis, group discussion, examples from popular culture, and other techniques and methods to underscore messages and energize the group process with women. Finally, women need to safely, though not over-indulgently, be permitted to share their feelings about themselves and their lovers, friends and family. For group-based interventions, there is evidence that this is more likely to occur in women-only groups.

A strong case can be made for the adoption of specific methods that can provide women with the resources, support and opportunities to build

on their existing strengths and competencies. But it behooves correctional practitioners to understand how and why these methods must be presented in particular ways, at the right times and in the right supportive context to make a difference in women's lives. Women's receptivity to develop new skills can be channeled if they see the point — but they will see the point only if they are dealt with in a motivationally effective way, are adequately prepared and supported, and are strengthened and made to feel safe and capable to handle their life difficulties.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Hannah-Moffat, K. 2000. Prisons that empower: Neo-liberal governance in Canada's women's prisons. *British Journal of Criminology*, 40(3):510-531.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Dowden, C., R. Serin and K. Blanchette. 2001. *The application of the Community Intervention Scale to women offenders: Preliminary findings*. Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, Research Branch, R-96.

<sup>4</sup>Van Voorhis, P. and L. Presser. 2001. *Classification of women offenders: A national assessment of current practices*. Washington, D.C.: NIC.

<sup>5</sup>Owen, B. and B. Bloom. 1995. Profiling women prisoners: Findings from national surveys and a California sample. *The Prison Journal*, 75(2):165-185.

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<sup>7</sup>Dowden, C. and D. Andrews. 1999. What works for female offenders: A meta-analytic review. *Crime and Delinquency*, 45(4):438-452.

<sup>8</sup>Porporino, F., M. Van Dietan and L. Fabiano. 2003. *Theory and application manual for a women's program: Motivating female offenders to change.* Ottawa: T3 Associates Inc.

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<sup>9</sup>Langan, N.P. and B.M. Pelissier. 2001. Gender differences among prisoners in drug treatment. *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 13(3):291-301.

<sup>10</sup>Peugh, J. and S. Belenko. 1999. Substance-involved women inmates: Challenges to providing effective treatment. *The Prison Journal*, 79(1):23-44.

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<sup>11</sup>Chesney-Lind, M. 1997.

<sup>12</sup>Porporino et al. 2003.

<sup>13</sup>Bloom et al. 2003.

<sup>14</sup>Mears, D.P., M. Ploeger and M. Warr. 1998. Explaining the gender gap in delinquency: Peer influence and moral evaluations of behavior. *Crime and Delinquency*, 35(3):251-266.

<sup>15</sup>Porporino et al. 2003.

<sup>16</sup>Porporino et al. 2003.

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<sup>17</sup>McMurran, M. and T. Ward. 2004. Motivating offenders to change in therapy: An organizing framework. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 9:295-311.

<sup>18</sup>Porporino et al. 2003.

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