


The Feminization of the Community Corrections Work Force

By Jo G. Holland



Challenges abound for correctional organizations. Ever-increasing numbers of inmates and offenders under community supervision focus attention on issues of reentry and successful re-integration. Evidence-based practices are being emphasized for implementation. These and other correctional organization needs will challenge the work force of the future to provide the needed skills and abilities to perform tasks, manage workloads and embrace change. In order to understand future work force trends, it is important to understand past trends and the implications for corrections in the 21st century.

A Men's Domain

The criminal justice system has traditionally been an exclusively masculine domain, with criminal law codified by male legislators, enforced by male police officers and interpreted by male judges. And no area of the system is as reflective of this dominance as those employed throughout corrections.¹ Inherent with women entering criminal justice occupations is the perception on the part of male co-workers that a loss of status occurs with women's presence in what was previously an all-male enclave.²

The study of criminology has developed traditionally as a study by men of men and their relation to crime. Crime, men and masculinity share an intimate relationship, as crime is viewed as something men are expected to do because they are men and women are expected not to do because they are women.³ This view of gender bias is reflected by the fact that males comprise not only the vast majority of the offender population but also the majority of the work force in the criminal justice system.

Although women have been employed in corrections since the late 19th century, it was not until the 1970s that women were able to work in men's institutions. This opportunity is significant not only because of increased employment opportunities, as there are more men's institutions than women's, but also because opportunities for promotion allowed women to take advantage of a wider range of experiences in the correctional setting.⁴ In recent years, women have joined the correctional work force in greater numbers. However, the entry of women into a male-dominated profession has not been without struggle and has resulted in a dramatic change in the complexion of the correctional work force.⁵

In 1969, the Joint Commission of Correctional Manpower and Training reported that although women made up 40 percent of the general work force, they accounted for only 12 percent of the correctional work force.⁶ By 1990, the number of women in the correctional work force had increased to 43 percent, with probation and parole agencies reporting the greatest rate of increase: 52 percent and 50 percent, respectively. Juvenile agencies reported female employees at 42 percent, and adult institutional agencies had the lowest level of females at 28 percent.⁷ The National Institute of Corrections further acknowledges that women have been the “outsiders” in the traditionally male-dominated field of corrections, where both clientele and co-workers are predominately male.

Women’s Barriers

The work experience and careers of women in corrections are different from those of men, in large part due to their distribution within the work force. A study conducted for the National Institute of Corrections found that the skewed occupational distribution for men and women, particularly in the field of corrections, reflected the general pattern of gender polarization and gender segregation of occupations in the labor force.⁸ The rising work force participation of women has changed the occupational distribution very little, with women continuing to be concentrated in job categories characterized by limited mobility potential, low pay and low levels of power.⁹

Women employed in a field numerically dominated by men also face exclusion from informal work cultures; hostility expressed at the interactional level; organizational policies that promote gender segregation; differential assignments; and sexual harassment.¹⁰ In addition, support systems and networking opportunities available to men are not always available to women, nor do superiors choose to mentor or sponsor women as regularly as men. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of identifiable needs and a heightened sensitivity to the barriers encountered by women is necessary to facilitate an environment conducive to equal opportunity based upon knowledge, skills and abilities. This becomes even more significant as the trend toward the rising number of women entering the correctional work force progresses into the 21st century.

Community Corrections: The Virginia Experience

Recognizing the scarcity of research relative to women as part of the correctional work force, Norfolk State University’s Department of Criminal Justice designed a study in 2005 to examine the key issues relevant to the role of women working in community corrections.¹¹ Using a descriptive research model, data was collected from the Virginia Department of Corrections to evaluate the trends of women in the community corrections work force. The survey instrument collected information from all women employed in casework provision and administrative positions directly supporting casework services in community corrections.

In order to understand the current community corrections work force, it is important to understand historical trends. Legislation was enacted in 1942 that created a separate statewide system for the joint probation and parole administration of adults in Virginia. The Virginia Parole Board was created as the parole authority and the administrative agency for a statewide system of probation. The three-member board facilitated the organization of the state into 21 districts for the administration of probation and parole services. Of the original 24 probation and parole officers, two were women; the remaining officers, as well as the parole board members, were white males.

In 1948, legislation created the Department of Welfare and Institutions, making all three parole board positions full time and shifting administrative responsibilities for field services from the parole board to the department.¹² Significant changes occurred in 1973 with the expansion of the parole board from three to five members, and for the first time, both women and blacks were represented on the parole board. In 1974, the Virginia DOC was established as a separate agency.

The newly formed Virginia DOC was clearly an agency dominated by white males. It was not until the early 1970s that a second female chief probation and parole officer was realized. The first black chief, Sherman P. Lea, was appointed in August 1984. The first black female chief was appointed in March 1993. In September 1994, the second black female, Eva Ferguson, was appointed as chief. She continues to act in this capacity and remains the only minority female chief. As can be approximated from an examination of this data, significant change occurs in 10-year increments.

In April 2005, there were 12 female chief probation and parole officers from a total of 43 district offices throughout the commonwealth of Virginia. Four of the districts possessed black males as chief officers and the remaining 27 districts were headed by white males. Demographically, 28 percent of the community corrections chief probation and parole officers were female, with 2 percent being minority females. Nine percent were minority males and 63 percent were white males. Community corrections promotes and practices a balanced approach to offender supervision. Regarding the current study, the question becomes: Does community corrections practice a balanced approach within its work force?

The study sample comprised 407 women representing the total female work force employed in casework provision and administrative positions supporting casework services as of April 2005 in 43 probation and parole districts and 10 day reporting programs within the Virginia DOC. The aggregate sample included 12 chief probation and parole officers, 20 deputy chief officers, 292 probation and parole officers, and 20 surveillance officers. A total of 255 people returned the survey, generating a return rate of 62 percent.

The study sought to address the following questions:

- What roles have women been engaged with historically as part of their participation with the correctional work force?
- What barriers have women encountered in pursuit of their career in community corrections, including interpersonal, organizational, occupational and cultural?

- How have women responded to workplace barriers?
- What support systems have facilitated career enhancement opportunities?
- What is the perception of future career growth opportunities for women within the community corrections work force?

Based upon the review of literature and inferences gleaned from selected theories, it is believed that women who entered the community corrections work force during the past decade have experienced fewer barriers in their career growth and development. There are currently more women in the field, with some having achieved senior management or executive-level positions. These women model positive career potential and allow mentoring opportunities for those who are in early career stages.

Analysis of demographic data reveals that the typical woman employed in community corrections in Virginia is a white probation and parole officer 35 years of age or younger who is working in an urban probation and parole office. Approximately 72 percent of female correctional employees are probation and parole officers. The number of female employees decreases as advancement in job classifications are reviewed: 15 percent are senior probation officers, 6 percent are deputy chiefs and 4 percent are chiefs. Approximately 75 percent are white, and 25 percent are minorities. The preponderance of women (45 percent) report working in an urban setting, and the fewest (23 percent) report working in a rural setting. A total of 32 percent work in an urban/rural setting defined as a district office comprising both a city and surrounding counties that reflect a rural flavor. Work site becomes important not only in terms of the offender population served but in work force complexities impacting recruitment, hiring and retention.

Promotions. An indicator of an open, nurturing work environment is whether employees are willing to seek promotions. Findings further reflect that women employed after 1994 are more likely to apply for a promotion (96 percent) than women employed prior to 1994 (89 percent). The willingness to apply for a promotion is not the same as expecting to be promoted. Findings confirmed that women hired since 1994 have more confidence in their ability to be promoted (71 percent) than women hired prior to 1994 (61 percent). NIC reports in its 2003 assessment of executive leadership training for women that upward mobility of women through the ranks tends to be strongly influenced by organizational factors, including seniority, training and recognition of work performance. As women are more confident in its ability to seek promotion opportunities, it becomes incumbent upon the organization to support processes necessary to facilitate opportunities for advancement.

Networking and support systems. Mentors assist in learning how to navigate the system, making important introductions and steering the right course.¹³ Findings confirmed that a majority of respondents (70 percent) agree or strongly agree that they have been mentored by women. There is even a stronger consensus that female workers help newly employed women become integrated into the work environment. The results emphasize the importance, especially early in a career, of developing support systems to facilitate learning and integration into the work force.

Eighty-five percent of women hired since 1994 and 81 percent of women hired prior to 1994 agreed that women networking with other women is a need in the DOC. Without access to informal networking opportunities, women lack a mechanism for input and experience barriers to career development. Networking, like mentoring, is an area of importance for organizational success.

The literature has consistently emphasized the importance of support systems to enhance career development. According to the data, 76 percent of women hired since 1994 are likely to receive support from other women, whereas women hired prior to 1994 indicated 71 percent agreement. With traditionally androcentric occupations, women supporting women to facilitate navigation of organizational process provide a valuable asset.

Career aspirations. Since 1994, women employed in community corrections are half as likely to identify probation and parole officer as a career goal (8 percent vs. 18 percent) and almost twice as likely to have a career goal of administrator (16 percent vs. 9 percent). The desire and interest in upward mobility is encouraging. Research supports the finding that women employed in community corrections do not see opportunities limited to entry-level positions and have confidence in seeking upward career options.

Findings further reveal that women in community corrections hired since 1994 are more likely to expect the highest positions they will achieve in their career to be: a senior probation and parole officer (36 percent vs. 24 percent), a deputy chief probation and parole (25 percent vs. 23 percent), or an administrator (6 percent vs. 5 percent). As the number of women continues to increase in the community corrections work force, the coalescence of career opportunities and career aspirations takes on increased relevance.

The Challenge Ahead

Although males continue to comprise the majority of offenders and senior managers, the number of women entering the correctional work force is increasing. As such, corrections must challenge itself to expand the parameter of knowledge regarding women in the work force. Directing future research toward expanding the knowledge base, with inclusion of other minority employees, would enhance organizational processes. The work force of the twenty-first century demands appreciating diversity, not just tolerating or managing it.¹⁴

The impact of the traditional role of women in corrections will need to be examined with organizational efforts directed toward understanding how to effectively integrate all members of the work force. In order to open doors for women in corrections, there is a need to facilitate organizational processes to ensure neither internal nor external barriers inhibit career development opportunities, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The organization will need to guard against gender bias generated by job duties. Ongoing support of professional networking opportunities will need to be promoted, including mentoring and a work culture focused on inclusion versus exclusion. Current female employees must forge relationships with other

women to support career growth and development. In order to support women and other minorities, organizations should accept them in the workplace, take them seriously, demonstrate respect, treat them equally, provide education and training, and maintain flexibility.

Correctional agencies will be challenged in the years ahead by a smaller qualified work force, increasing workloads, and increasing competition to recruit, hire and retain qualified staff. In this emerging climate, women will need to develop strategies for interacting at all levels of the organization, demonstrate knowledge while building credibility and focus energy toward building coalitions. Recognizing and understanding the implication of work force trends enable correctional agencies to prepare effectively for the future of corrections in the 21st century.

ENDNOTES

¹ Chapman, J.R., E.K. Minor, P. Rieker, T.L. Mills and M. Bottum. 1983. *Women employed in corrections*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.

² Merlo, A.V. and J. Pollock. 1995. *Women, law and social control*. Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon.

³ Naffine, N. 1996. *Feminism and criminology*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

⁴ Merlo, A.V. and J. Pollock. 1995.

⁵ Morton, J.B., ed. 1991. *Change, challenge, and choices: Women's role in modern corrections*. Lanham, Md.: American Correctional Association.

⁶ Morton, J.B. 1991.

⁷ Morton, J.B. 1991.

⁸ National Institute of Corrections. 2003. *Assessment of NIC's executive leadership training for women*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, NIC.

⁹ Chapman, J.R. et al. 1983.

¹⁰ Martin, S.E. and N.C. Jurik. 1996. *Doing justice, doing gender*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

¹¹ Holland, J.G. 2005. *Gender and the community corrections work force*. Norfolk, Va.: Norfolk State University, Department of Criminal Justice.

¹² Keeve, P.W. 1986. *The history of corrections in Virginia*. Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia.

¹³ Kouzes, J.M. and B.Z. Posner. 1995. *The leadership challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

¹⁴ Kouzes, J.M. and B.Z. Posner. 2003. *Credibility: How leaders gain and lose it, why people demand it*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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