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‘What works’ with women offenders: The past 30 years

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Abstract In this article the authors review the development of ideas about working with women offenders over the past 30 years. They provide an overview of articles appearing in *Probation Journal* related specifically to women offenders, set in the context of criminological thinking about female offending and current government policy.

Keywords diversity, effective practice, gender, NOMS, offender management, offenders, practice, rehabilitation, supervision, what works

Making women offenders visible in *Probation Journal*

We have made a rough calculation that *Probation Journal* has published in the region of 600 articles over the past 30 years. Of these, fewer than 30 – on average one per year – have been directly concerned with policy and practice relating to women offenders. Yet, despite their scarcity, these articles, taken together, provide a fascinating picture of the concerns and changing attitudes of probation officers and academics to what might ‘work’ with women offenders. Here we provide an overview of 25 articles that we consider to be ‘key’ in shaping and reflecting these changing concerns (see Table 1). But, apart from convenience, why have we chosen 30 years (or, to be exact, 32 years) as the cut-off point for our discussion?

Notwithstanding Frances Heidensohn’s (1968) pioneering article on the sentencing of women offenders, it is generally agreed that widespread awareness of complex discrimination against women offenders in Britain was raised by Carol Smart’s (1976) classic text, *Women, Crime and Criminology*. Within a year, *Probation Journal* had published its own ground-breaking article on the subject. Mawby

Table 1 Key articles on women offenders in *Probation Journal* in the past 30 years

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>
Mawby	1977	Sentencing
Worrall	1981	Social enquiry reports and sentencing
Dominelli	1984	Community service and sentencing
'Joan'	1985	Fine default
Davies and Stewart	1987	Prostitution
Chigwada	1989	Black women
White	1989	Imprisoned mothers
Carlen	1989	Women-wise penology
Buckley and Wilson	1989	Empowering women
Buchanan, Collett and McMullan	1991	Drugs
Orme	1992	Section 95, CJA 1991
Wright and Kemshall	1994	Feminist probation practice
Hirst	1996	Programmes for women
Wincup	1996	Mixed hostels
Hay and Stirling	1998	Women-only groupwork
Shaw and Hannah-Moffat	2000	Risk assessment in Canada
Worrall	2001	Girls' delinquency
Batchelor, Burman and Brown	2001	Girls and violence
Carlen	2002	Carceral clawback in women's prisons
King and Gibbs	2003	Home detention in New Zealand
Malloch	2004	Drugs
Batchelor	2005	Young women and violence
Bloor, Okolo and Watts	2007	Pregnancy and drug treatment
Wood	2008	Response to Batchelor - risk assessment
Petrillo	2008	Response to Batchelor - programmes

(1977) challenged the dual assumptions of the 'chivalry' thesis that women offenders are less likely than men to be detected and, when they are, they are treated more leniently. His courageous conclusion that, 'when previous record is taken into consideration, females are more likely to be imprisoned than males' (Mawby, 1977:42) is still contested today by those who insist that, since women offenders have shorter criminal careers than men, *all* sentencing options will show women to have fewer previous convictions than men. But this misses the point that 'if women have short criminal careers regardless of sentence, it should not be necessary to increase the numbers being sent to prison [and] the safety of society will not be threatened by a greater and more imaginative use of community sentences' (Carlen and Worrall, 2004: 151).

The enduring significance of Mawby's conclusions was almost certainly not appreciated at the time and in the following decade *Probation Journal* published only four articles relating to the treatment of women offenders. In 1981, Worrall

suggested that women offenders were 'out of place' in the criminal justice system and were more likely than men to be processed according to their traditional role in their lives outside the court than according to their offence. This, she argued, was not necessarily to their advantage and was being unwittingly reinforced by probation officers' portrayals of women in what were then called social enquiry reports. Three years later, Dominelli (1984) exposed the contradictions in the ideology of community service that resulted in sentencers adopting discriminatory attitudes and practices in their use of community service as a disposal for women. Dominelli's arguments began to demonstrate the complex and nuanced nature of discrimination against women offenders. The issue at stake was not simply that women were not being sentenced to community service, but rather that 'the values and assumptions imbedded in society's definition of womanhood' (Dominelli, 1984: 101) were informing sentencing decisions in ways that operated to their detriment. Additionally, Dominelli raised the dilemma that continues to exercise offender managers about the nature of community service placements and whether or not women can be encouraged to undertake work that does not replicate their domestic responsibilities.

Mawby (1977) had drawn attention to the disproportionate number of women in prison for fine default and in 1985, *Probation Journal* published an article written by 'Joan', recounting her experiences of spending eight days in prison as a fine defaulter. Unfortunately, whatever insights might have been obtained from the article were negated by a misguided editorial decision not to copy-edit the piece but to reproduce all the many spelling and other typographical errors in a bid, one presumes, to demonstrate the authenticity of 'Joan's' 'voice' – and thus unintentionally reinforce the discriminatory view that women offenders are 'not like us'.

The first article about women offenders written by serving probation officers appeared in 1987 and was a spirited defence of Davies' and Stewart's unsuccessful proposal at the NAPO AGM to call for absolute discharges to be recommended in all social enquiry reports on women convicted of loitering for the purposes of prostitution (Davies and Stewart, 1987). Some five years after the abolition of imprisonment as a direct sentence for loitering, probation officers were exercised that women who were fined for this offence were often faced with the stark choice of either returning to prostitution in order to pay the fine or go to prison for fine default. Davies and Stewart argued that an absolute discharge was the only disposal that 'neither punishes nor extracts promises from women to cease an activity they either wish to, or feel they have to, continue' (Davies and Stewart, 1987: 51). It was also, they argued, the only recommendation compatible with NAPO's policy to call for the decriminalization of prostitution-related offences.

It is perhaps of note that all these articles were concerned with sentencing and community sentences for women. The assumption was that 'what worked' with women offenders was to keep them out of prison and that the role of commentators, whether academic or practice-based, was to highlight the discriminatory impact of sentencing decisions. Slowly, it was being recognized that formal equality before the law could result in inequality of impact. There was, however, an underlying optimism that once such inequality was acknowledged by the courts, the system would correct itself and the female prison population would decline. Sadly, that optimism was misguided.

By 1989, awareness of criminal justice discrimination on grounds of race and gender had become embedded in probation service culture as a whole and in probation officer training in particular. *Probation Journal* reflected this heightened professional and political sensitivity by publishing four articles on: the criminalization and imprisonment of black women (Chigwada, 1989), imprisoned mothers (White, 1989), empowering women (Buckley and Wilson, 1989) and women-wise penology (Carlen, 1989). Taken together, these articles provided a comprehensive and sophisticated analysis of the practice problems facing probation officers working with women offenders, increasing numbers of whom were being sent to prison. But they also represented, perhaps for the last time, a willingness by authors to locate those problems within a broad critique of social and criminal justice policy, unencumbered by explicit considerations of managerialism, enforcement, public protection and evidence-based agenda. Indeed, it could be argued that this period, in the run-up to the 1991 Criminal Justice Act and the introduction of the extraordinary Section 95 provisions, was the period when professionals and academics were at their most united and politically influential. It was also, however, the last time that anyone could write anything without taking account of the New Penology (risk assessment), What Works, and the killing of James Bulger – an era of lost innocence perhaps?

Making work with women offenders 'fit' with managerialism and evidence-based agenda

In 1992, a Special Issue on the Criminal Justice Act 1991 included an article by Orme (1992) on the impact of Section 95 on the treatment of women offenders. Section 95 requires the Secretary of State to publish annually such information as he [sic] considers expedient for the purpose of facilitating the avoidance of discrimination on grounds of race or sex or any other improper ground in the administration of criminal justice. Orme took issue with this laudable statement, arguing that 'it has to be set against the prevailing culture of the criminal justice system and the nebulous, marginal nature of the requirement' (Orme, 1992: 78). She doubted whether sufficient appropriate information could be gathered and, even if it could, whether it would make much difference to the working of the criminal justice system.

From 1994 to 1998, four articles appeared in *Probation Journal* focusing on ways of integrating feminist perspectives on criminal justice into probation practice with women offenders in the context of the growing demands of managerialism and organizational accountability. Wright and Kemshall (1994) built on Worrall's (1990) concerns that women on probation expected, and responded to, different approaches to supervision than men. Their research identified the elements of a 'gender-conscious service' (Wright and Kemshall, 1994: 73) that recognized the reality of women offenders' daily lives and the obstacles they faced in reporting and engaging with supervision. Such ideas were partly reflected in 'bottom-up' initiatives within probation. The recognition that women who offend often have different needs from men and the growing awareness that female offenders frequently have histories of abuse had promoted the initial development of group work programmes for

women in some areas of England and Wales (Mistry; 1989; Jones et al., 1991). The development of these programmes was regarded as a means of ensuring that the particular needs of women were addressed in a safe and non-threatening environment that was conducive to the development of the 'reciprocal relationships', already identified as central to women's growth and change (Eaton, 1993 – see below). The establishment of a groupwork programme for women in 1993 in the Hereford and Worcester Probation Service similarly reflected the need to provide women with the kind of support that they needed, as well as to provide the courts with constructive alternatives to imprisonment (Roberts, 2002) and address an aim to contextualize rather than pathologize women offenders' problems by facilitating links with outside agencies. (Herein lay the seeds of the renowned Asha Centre, one source of inspiration for Jean Corston's (2007) proposal for women's centres.) But Wright and Kemshall went beyond these practice-based developments to call for changes at practice, organizational and structural levels to achieve 'feminist probation practice'. 'Gender is on the agenda', they conceded, 'but a co-ordinated approach is required if consistent *best practice* is to be achieved' (Wright and Kemshall, 1994: 79 emphasis added). The inclusion of the phrase 'best practice' distinguishes this article as a product of the changing probation service of the 1990s. It is in many ways a 'watershed' article – a baseline from which one can assess how much, or how little, has been achieved with and for women offenders in the subsequent 15 years.

Two years later Hirst (1996) reported on another early programme specifically designed for women offenders. Alongside developments in the Hereford and Worcester Probation Service, the principles driving the *Moving Forward* programme on Merseyside were pioneering, 'offering a unique *partnership* facility ... which takes a *holistic* approach' (Hirst, 1996: 58 emphasis added). Based on partnership arrangements with a local community-based project, the programme aimed to:

... reduce the number of women receiving relatively short prison sentences, increase the likelihood of women fulfilling their obligations to a probation order, combination order or licence within the context of National Standards, and increase the likelihood of women availing themselves of mainstream services (both voluntary and statutory) within the health, education and training, employment and social services. (Hirst, 1996: 60)

The unsatisfactory nature of hostel accommodation provision for women had been recognized from the early years of the 1990s. The small numbers requiring such accommodation meant that women either had to travel many miles from their homes to reside in women-only hostels or be accommodated in mixed hostels that reserved a small number of beds for women. In 1996, Wincup reported on research that demonstrated the difficulties in guaranteeing privacy, safety and equality of service for female residents in mixed hostels. Wincup (1996) called for greater choice for women and for more resources to be devoted to the special needs of women in mixed hostels. More than ten years on, the role of supported housing for women offenders, especially on release from prison, continues to be crucial for their resettlement (Worrall and Gough, 2008).

By 1998, offending behaviour programmes based on cognitive behavioural psychology were central to the delivery of probation supervision but, in a 'Practice Note', Hay and Stirling bemoaned the absence of such programmes for 'serious or persistent women offenders in an all-female environment in the community' (Hay and Stirling, 1998: 36). Notwithstanding the fact that the case for 'all-female' groups (with all-female staff) had been made almost a decade earlier by Carlen (1990) and was well-recognized by many female probation officers, one should be (but is not) surprised that Hay and Stirling were still obliged to argue the case again from 'first principles'.

Drugs, violence and risk assessment – the new preoccupations in work with (young) women offenders

The past decade has once again seen an average of one article per year in *Probation Journal* specifically concerned with the offending behaviour of women and, for the first time, girls. By 2000, risk assessment had become the overarching preoccupation of the probation service but its potentially discriminatory implications for women offenders were a matter of concern. Two Canadian academics, Shaw and Hannah-Moffat (2000), provided a scathing critique of the ways in which Canadian corrections, widely regarded as enlightened and 'woman-centred', had failed to deliver equality of justice for women. The article included two arguments that have had enduring implications for work with women offenders. First, they exposed the sleight of hand by which women prisoners who were recognized as being low security risks but having high treatment needs came to be re-classified as 'high risk', as a result of *need* being redefined as a dynamic risk predictor. Second, while claiming to be 'empowering' women (many of whom were also Aboriginal), the continued emphasis on a psychological model of individual pathology resulted instead in the 'responsibilization' of women. 'Thus, it is *their* responsibility to take programmes and to change, and *their* responsibility to take those measures seen by *others* as likely to reduce their re-offending' (Shaw and Moffat, 2000: 169).

The following year, in a Special Issue on Youth Justice and Young Offenders, two articles reflected a wider concern in the media and society that girls were 'getting more violent'. Both articles challenged the basis of this concern and argued, in different ways, that what was changing was not so much the behaviour of girls as the attitudes of society in general, and the criminal justice system in particular, to that behaviour. Batchelor, Burman and Brown (2001) reported on a large-scale research study into the perceptions of violence among girls in Glasgow, concluding that:

... there is little evidence that girls are using physical violence to any great extent, either towards each other or anyone else – apart from their siblings [but] the study does reveal a fairly high level of routinized verbal abuse ... and fear of sexual assault. (Batchelor et al., 2001: 131)

Worrall (2001) argued that concern about girls' supposed increased violence could be at least partially explained by a shift from welfare-oriented approaches to young women's offending towards greater criminalization of their behaviour. Both articles called for practitioners to take greater account of girls' experience of violence in their daily lives, to recognize their resilience and resourcefulness in negotiating their way through these experiences and to listen more to their views. Failure to do these things will render the most well-intentioned programmes ineffective.

By 2005, Batchelor had completed a further study of young women imprisoned for offences of violence and wrote an article on victimization and agency in the lives of such young women (Batchelor, 2005). The article was later (2008) chosen as the best inaugural article published in *Probation Journal* and provoked two responses from practitioners. Wood (2008) and Petrillo (2008) (in separate articles) attempted to reconcile the insights from Batchelor's work with the demands on the modern probation officer to utilize actuarial risk assessment tools (Wood) and to deliver cognitive behavioural programmes in prisons (Petrillo). Petrillo, in particular, argued grounds for optimism that such a reconciliation is possible, given sufficient imagination, commitment and partnership between statutory and voluntary providers.

King and Gibbs' (2003) report on a small-scale study of home detention in New Zealand highlighted the differing experiences of men and women as recipients and 'sponsors' (co-residents who offer support) of electronic monitoring. They found that women were proportionately more likely than men to be released from prison on home detention and for longer periods. They were more likely to be compliant, valuing the opportunity to fulfil their domestic responsibilities, and more likely to experience a sense of shame. Such findings support the argument that, since women are less likely than men to re-offend *regardless of sentence*, a greater use of alternatives to custody, including electronic monitoring, will not increase the threat posed to society by the majority of women offenders.

Drug-using women offenders first appeared in *Probation Journal* in 1991 when Buchanan, Collett and McMullan reported on a research study in Merseyside. The use of illicit drugs by women posed a challenge to both traditional images of women as responsible wives and mothers and feminist portrayals of them as victims of male abuse. Instead, Buchanan et al. called for 'the portrayal of female offenders which explores rational action and culpability within the context of the concrete daily reality of their lives' (Buchanan et al., 1991: 61). 'Women make choices in circumstances not of their own choosing' seemed to be the new message of the 1990s.

By 2004, the extent of drug-related offending among women was apparent and Malloch wrote comprehensively about the differential experiences of women made subject to court-mandated drug treatments designed primarily for men. She warned of the dangers of blaming individual women for their own failure to make progress while disregarding structural issues and gaps in provision. She called for a greater recognition of the holistic needs of women and argued for an avoidance of 'twin-track systems (criminal justice and "the rest") in the allocation of resources and services, particularly for women' (Malloch, 2004: 305).

A rather unsettling article appeared in the 'Comment' section of *Probation Journal* in 2007. Addiction psychiatrists in Stoke on Trent, Bloor, Okolo and Watts, discovered that women on a court-mandated drug treatment programme were six times more likely to become pregnant than women on voluntary drug treatment programmes or women in the general population. They speculated that the most likely cause was the improved health and increased stability of the women but they could not discount the possibility of greater social interaction with men on the intensive programme! The authors mused that 'more studies on coerced pregnant drug users [sic] are needed to provide better understanding and ensure that this group benefit maximally from the services available to them' (Bloor et al., 2007: 268). Quite!

Despite increasing official acceptance that the needs of women offenders were different from those of men and required different provision, the belief that relatively minor and superficial modifications to existing provision within existing structures was all that was required was tenacious. In another Special Issue on Prisons, Prisoners and Resettlement, Carlen (2002) introduced the concept of 'carceral clawback'. She argued that we should resist the myth that, as a result of feminist-informed reforms, women's prisons were becoming benign places of treatment and rehabilitation. She warned against being distracted from the reality that prisons (including women's prisons) are places of control where matters of security will always prevail over more constructive considerations such as education, drug treatment or rehabilitative programmes. Thus, any attempt at prison reform must also be accompanied by a commitment to reducing the numbers of women being sent to prison. Non-custodial projects were also vulnerable to 'carceral clawback', she argued, to the extent that they were dependent on state funding and accreditation and therefore had to be vigilant that their woman-centred principles were not compromised by the demands of contemporary penal policy.

The parallel world of research into women, crime and criminal justice

There has been no shortage of either academic research or official reports into women, crime and criminal justice over the past 30 years. Much of this literature focuses on women in prison but some is specifically about the sentencing and community supervision of women offenders and all of it argues, explicitly or implicitly, that too many women experience unnecessary prison sentences.

As Mawby (1977) suggested, women are not necessarily sentenced more *leniently* than men, but they *are* sentenced *differently* (Gelsthorpe, 2007), though the reasons for this remain elusive. Farrington and Morris (1983), for example, found that sentence severity for men was related to the key factors of offence type, current problems, the number of previous convictions and legal representation, while it was most strongly related to the factors of social problems, convictions in the previous two years, the number of Theft Act offences in the current court appearance (shoplifting) for women. Age was significant for males, but marital status for women. Moreover, women only received more lenient sentences because they committed less serious offences and were less likely to have been previously convicted. Home

Office research in the 1990s (Hedderman and Gelsthorpe 1997; Hedderman and Hough 1994) began to identify drugs and violence as the two groups of offences where women were likely to be sentenced with equal severity as men though, even here, there were some counter-intuitive comparisons. The key to these statistical differences seemed to lie in the qualitative findings that, in summary, magistrates continued to view women offenders as 'troubled' rather than 'troublesome' and remained susceptible to gender role stereotyping that advantaged some women and not others, on grounds that were not necessarily relevant to the offence committed.

Worrall (1990) wrote one of the first academic books specifically on women being supervised in the community. She highlighted the dilemmas facing probation officers who wanted to achieve the best results for, and do the best work with, women offenders yet were confronted by ideological and professional demands that often conflicted with the demands and responsibilities of the daily lives of women offenders. Probation officers recognized the structural and personal oppression experienced by women offenders but they also recognized that the women themselves often colluded with stereotypical descriptions of themselves as good wives and mothers or as being emotionally unstable. Most of the women Worrall interviewed did not see themselves as 'real criminals'. They committed their crimes out of economic necessity or as a response to intolerable emotional stress. Key themes emerged – loneliness, fear (including fear of the power of experts and officials), low self-esteem, bewilderment, anger – frequently suppressed into depression – and a sense of not being listened to, heard or understood. Perhaps frustratingly, they were not radical in their views – they did not want to break out of their traditional roles. But they did want the worst effects of those roles to be alleviated. The help they appeared to appreciate most was friendship, material help and the opportunity to make some real choices for themselves – however trivial those might seem to others. But the women were not simply passive recipients of supervision. They were not prepared to organize their lives to suit the experts – however well-intentioned – and, if forced to do so, would find subtle ways of resisting and eluding such control.

In the same year, Carlen (1990) demonstrated the wide range of community facilities that were available (but rendered invisible politically) for women offenders across the country, arguing for the experimental abolition of women's imprisonment 'as a "normal" punishment for women and that a maximum of 100 custodial places should be retained for female offenders convicted or accused of abnormally serious crimes' (Carlen, 1990: 121).

Eaton (1993) researched the needs and experiences of women leaving prison who had successfully turned their lives around and introduced the conceptual triumvirate of re-direction, recognition and reciprocal relationships. In addition to having access to the structural pre-conditions of social justice – housing, employment and health facilities – the women Eaton interviewed had all made a conscious decision to *re-direct* their lives – they wanted things to be different. In probation jargon, they were motivated to change. But such motivation was not something that just happened. In order to make that decision, they had to feel confident that change was possible. And to feel confident, they had to achieve *recognition* – both self-recognition and recognition from others. They had to feel that they were people

of worth who had something to contribute. The key to recognition was *reciprocal relationships*. For many women offenders, their only experience of relationships is oppressive and exploitative. Whether in personal or official dealings their expectations have been of hierarchical relationships in which they are told what they should do and how they should behave to please other people. Anything that contributes to the breaking down of those expectations and the development of mutuality in relationships will help to motivate women towards change.

Research on women's experiences of community service/community punishment/unpaid work (McIvor, 2004) has consistently raised the same obstacles to its greater use:

- Ideological discomfort among sentencers that this is not really an appropriate disposal for women offenders;
- Practical considerations such as those of child care, mixed work groups, inadequate site facilities and shortage of female supervisors;
- Dilemmas relating to the selection of 'appropriate' placements in terms of the gendered (or gender-neutral) nature of the work;
- Women's heightened sensitivity to the stigma of visibility as offenders;
- Impact of all of the above on compliance.

Despite these problems, research also consistently indicates that women experience unpaid work as positive and as potentially beneficial in terms of raising self-esteem and confidence, learning new skills and providing access to employment.

In addition to academic research, a number of voluntary and campaigning organizations have undertaken major research projects to persuade the government to take seriously the need to support imaginative non- and semi-custodial provision for women. The Prison Reform Trust (2000), the Howard League for Penal Reform (1999, 2006), the Fawcett Society (2004) and the government's own Social Exclusion Unit (2002), as well as the HM Prison Inspectorate (1997) have unequivocally supported alternatives to custody that approach the needs of women offenders in an *holistic*, rather than piecemeal, fashion. The latest of these is the Corston Report (2007), which focuses on vulnerable women.

In 1992, Harris proposed that 'part of the problem is that it is unclear what the "better treatment of women" actually means' (Harris, 1992: 98). At the time, he was probably right insofar as there was considerable debate and nervousness about the consequences of making women offenders more 'visible'. For better or worse, women offenders are now highly 'visible' and there is a plethora of academic, professional and campaigning evidence to support the case for greater use not only of community sentences but, wherever possible, of 'normal' community facilities to address the needs of women offenders. In their recent research for the Fawcett Society, Gelsthorpe et al. (2007) suggested that there might be nine lessons to be taken into account in providing for women in the community. Provision for women offenders should:

1. Be women-only to foster safety and a sense of community and to enable staff to develop expertise in work with women;

2. Integrate offenders with non-offenders so as to normalize women offenders' experiences and facilitate a supportive environment for learning;
3. Foster women's empowerment so they gain sufficient self-esteem to directly engage in problem-solving themselves, and feel motivated to seek appropriate employment;
4. Utilize ways of working with women which draw on what is known about their effective learning styles;
5. Take a holistic and practical stance to helping women to address social problems which may be linked to their offending;
6. Facilitate links with mainstream agencies, especially health, debt advice and counselling;
7. Have the capacity and flexibility to allow women to return to the centre or programme for 'top up' of continued support and development where required;
8. Ensure that women have a supportive milieu or mentor to whom they can turn when they have completed any offending-related programmes, since personal support is likely to be as important as any direct input addressing offending behaviour;
9. Provide women with practical help with transport and childcare so that they can maintain their involvement in the centre or programme (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007: 54).

And thus, picking up on Carlen's (1990) earlier suggestion that there are in fact lots of possibilities for provision in the community for women, the authors pose nine questions for commissioners of services in the modern day probation service (NOMS), which encourage consideration of what is available (or what might be adapted) locally, in 'holistic' fashion.

Government responses and the future of 'What Works' for women offenders

It would be unfair to argue that the government has failed to respond to these concerns, but it has only done so in the past five years. Prior to that, the official view was that 'What Works' for women is 'What Works' for men with some relatively minor adjustments to cover topics of particular relevance to women and to modify programme delivery to take account of women's differing 'responsivity', the latter meaning, in practice, that women tend to talk more than men in group settings and to adopt a more holistic attitude to their problems, being reluctant to focus specifically on a single issue (Worrall, 2003). Notwithstanding these concerns, and the fact that women's offending still tends to be under-explored and less well understood than offending by men, it is now recognized that women have different 'criminogenic needs' (or crime-related needs as we prefer it). Whilst research evidence indicates that some factors may be similar (unemployment, and substance

misuse for instance), how the difficulties have come about and how they contribute to offending may be different for women and men, and there are others which appear to be more specific to women too (physical and sexual abuse for example) (Hollin and Palmer, 2006). There is now a body of work which supports interventions which are informed by women's needs. Blanchette and Brown's (2006) comprehensive analysis of the assessment and treatment of women offenders serves to highlight the need for gender-sensitive risk assessment and for treatment services to be delivered in style and mode that match the learning style and needs of offenders. This has obvious implications for the focus and content of probation practice since it means delivery of programmes where there is also viable transportation, protection from abusive partners and attention to childcare needs, alongside attempts to address women's relational needs.

The Women's Offending Reduction Programme (WORP) was launched in 2004 and aimed to tackle women's offending in order to reduce the numbers of women in prison. This programme focused on improving community-based services and interventions that were better tailored to the needs of women by encouraging collaboration between government departments and other agencies within the framework of the new National Offender Management Service and the new sentencing powers of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007). One result of this was the provision of over £9m for the Together Women Programme (TWP) to fund one-stop-shop provision with linked key workers to facilitate women's access to services in the community. As we have seen, this was by no means the first time such provision had been made available to women but it was the first time the government had fully funded and supported such projects.

The evaluation of these demonstration projects thus far has been positive (Hedderman et al., 2008). Together Women has been seen by local stakeholders as 'filling an important gap in provision by linking up what was already available more effectively and by adding to the range of services available' (Hedderman et al., 2008: 26). The 'women only' nature of the projects has proved to be important, as have service users' feelings that the staff in the centres (projects) seem 'genuinely interested in them as individuals' (Hedderman et al., 2008: 26). Whilst the pattern of referrals has been varied (with some reluctance amongst younger members of probation staff to refer women to the centres) most of the service users interviewed after several months of contact with Together Women reported that they felt 'more optimistic about their chances of dealing with problems' (Hedderman et al., 2008: 26).

Other initiatives include the Reducing Re-Offending National Action Plan – cross government work on resettlement and rehabilitation. The strategies identified in the plan for addressing offenders' needs revolve around seven pathways: accommodation; education, training and employment; mental and physical health; drug and alcohol misuse; finance, benefits and debt; children and families; and attitudes, thinking and behaviour. All are intended to take account of women's needs, although evidence that they have done so was found wanting by Jean Corston in her (2007) review of vulnerable women within the criminal justice system, and she recommended the adoption of two further pathways (8 and 9) to address women's needs relating to domestic violence, and sexual exploitation and prostitution (Corston Report, Recommendation 14).

The *National Service Framework: Improving Services to Women Offenders* (Ministry of Justice, 2008a) draws on the Corston Report and other reports (from the Probation and Prison Inspectorates, for example, as well as the 2006 Gender Equality Duty) to outline a strategy to underpin provision for women offenders (as a generally vulnerable offender group) 'at all stages of their journey through the criminal justice system, with the aim of breaking cycles of re-offending and keeping socially excluded women at risk of offending out of custody' (Ministry of Justice, 2008a: 4). It is expected that NOMS and delivery partners will use the framework to develop detailed, costed service specifications for women in custody and in the community. In essence, the framework serves as a blueprint for action and good practice in the regions, although it should be acknowledged that some of the precepts outlined – in terms of women-only provision, for example – are questioned. In Appendix B (Ministry of Justice, 2008a: 26), for example, we find the note '... although women-only services will be most suitable for many women, this may not be the case for all. In a difficult financial environment, prioritization also applies to working with women'. We await further developments in terms of details and costings in each of the NOMS regions, bearing in mind that NOMS developments will now also be able to be informed by the process evaluation of the Together Women demonstration projects as described above.

Two further developments are worthy of note. Firstly we consider the Ministry of Justice's review of progress following the Corston Report (Ministry of Justice, 2008b). This report outlines initiatives taken over the past year, including the setting up of a cross-departmental Criminal Justice Women's Unit to manage and co-ordinate the work on Corston across all relevant departments, and the establishment of the National Service Framework for Women Offenders (to which we refer above). More importantly, we learn of the identification of a site in Bristol for piloting an integrated approach to women offenders – providing access to a range of community-based services and residential services (not unlike Centre 218 in Glasgow). It is evident too that the Ministry of Justice is committed to providing additional resources in 2009 to build the capacity of one-stop-shop services at women's centres and other specialist provision for women in the community. There is no specific mention of women's post-prison accommodation needs, but there is emphasis on the need to reserve custodial sentences for serious offences and, where appropriate, to make alternative sentencing provision for drug offences (including drug couriers). The Sentencing Advisory Council produced a consultation paper on this in April 2009. Further, The Offender Management Guide to Working with Women Offenders was formally launched on 11 December 2008. The Guide complements the National Service Framework for Women Offenders by identifying good practice. As an example of official discourse, the *Framework* and its accompanying *Guidance* are to be welcomed as (finally) embracing the very wide range of research and recommendations that have been made by various academic and professional writers. What remains to be seen is whether this discourse can be translated into properly resourced provision, especially in light of the recently announced cuts to the National Probation Service budget and the replacement of Regional Offender Managers with Directors of Offender Management.

We might also reflect on Ballinger's (2009) argument (in relation to victims of rape and domestic violence) that the state/government is adept at introducing reforms that appear to address women's concerns but, because they focus on formal, gender-neutral laws and self-defined 'objective' procedures, leave the existing social order of gender relations untouched. There remains a sense that the structure and procedures, if not the content, of the *Framework and Guidance* have been produced by an organization that is inescapably focused on the 80 per cent of offenders and 94 per cent of prisoners who are men. As Ballinger also argues in relation to victims, the test of the commitment of the state comes when funding decisions are made for it is through the 'financing of the social order' that governments 'do gender'. By what criteria will provision for women offenders be assessed for funding? What then will happen to women-only provision, to provision that genuinely empowers and 'normalizes' women offenders and encourages women to challenge gendered power?

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to demonstrate that probation officers have both reflected and influenced research about women offenders for at least the past 30 years. We have divided that time into three eras: first, an era of concern to make women offenders 'visible' in sentencing discourses; second, an era of concern to create space for women offenders within policy and practice discourses of managerialism and evidence-based practice; and, third, an era of concern to resist the 21st century backlash of 'gender-neutral' approaches to drug-related and violent offending, risk assessment and resettlement. While acknowledging that government policy has belatedly responded to these concerns, we remain sceptical that, in the current economic climate, sustained funding will be made available for women-focused services. We have highlighted that researchers and writers have had constantly to reiterate the principles underpinning what works with women offenders (Gelsthorpe, 2006) and that repeated (and repetitive) research findings have all too frequently led only to yet further calls for yet more research. Despite this air of pessimism, there are pockets of optimism too, and we hope that we have also demonstrated how much work has been done, and continues to be done, by dedicated probation officers – both male and female – to ensure that rates of imprisonment and recidivism among women remain proportionately as low as they are. This is something that is all too rarely celebrated.

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