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*The Female Offender: Existing gaps and underlying issues for female focussed intervention.*

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Group based therapeutic intervention to address offending behaviour and offending related issues is paramount for effective rehabilitation and working toward reducing recidivism rates. However, group interventions with offenders need to be gender specific in order to appropriately and adequately address the issues of both male and female offenders.

Both the male and female offender can be considered to have common issues. However, through my experience, it is obvious that the needs of women are often more complex and diverse from that of male offenders. The female offender commonly reports feelings of inequality through limited understanding by others of, and opportunity to effectively address, their offending related needs and issues. Issues such as financial difficulty, grief and loss, child sexual abuse, substance abuse and single-parenting are just some of the issues that can be seen to underpin their offending related behaviours. When such issues continue to go unnoticed and unsupported within intervention services it is not surprising that the rates of female offending and incarceration are on the rise.

This paper will investigate the current (group) intervention services provided to the female offender within the community correctional setting in South Australia and the existing gaps and underlying issues for female focussed intervention. Further, it will highlight the importance and significance of gender appropriate interventions and profile the characteristics and differences of the female offender in comparison to the male offender. This will then demonstrate and provide evidence of the importance of intervention being individually, specifically designed and implemented for women.

The information presented within this paper is based on my personal experiences as an Intervention Worker, anecdotal evidence and relevant literature.

### **Current Intervention Practices for Women:**

Why is it so important that female offenders be provided with gender specific intervention? The answer to this is simply: in order for them to take responsibility for, and address, their offending behaviour. There are varying amounts of literature available on the subject of female offending and much of this appears in American and English based research. However, there is an apparent lack of group based intervention programs formulated for female offenders. Group based female intervention essentially aims to support women to increase their awareness and understanding of the impact of their offending, thus reducing the likelihood of re-offending. Whilst increasing this understanding, gender specific intervention would also provide women with the opportunity to explore the issues underlying their offending behaviour. With no such programs currently designed or offered to women within the South Australian community correctional setting, this suggests a lack of accountability and level of uncertainty for women's future involvement with the criminal justice system.

Currently the South Australian Department for Correctional Services (the Department) offers a range of therapeutic programs that are designed to provide opportunity for offenders to participate in the group environment which aims to influence attitude and encourage behaviour change (Department for Correctional Services, SA, AOD Program, 2000) surrounding their offending. Each of the group programs offered by the department has a strong theoretical base of motivational interviewing which encompasses explorative

questions to increase ambivalence and evoke reasons to change (Department for Correctional Services, SA, AOD Program, 2000:10).

Combined with motivational interviewing are adult educational principles where facilitators elicit existing knowledge and skills to support the introduction of new knowledge and skills. The Mutual Aid Model of Group Work is also identified within the programs offered by the department, where participants and effective management of group dynamics support members of the group to assist each other through the group process and learn from each others experiences.

My experience of the programs offered by the Department to male offenders has been encouraging, with visible evidence of positive outcomes for many of the offenders who have participated in the group work process. The programs currently offered within the department include Alcohol and Other Drugs, Anger Management, Victim Awareness, Cognitive Skills and Domestic Violence. I see each of these programs as relevant and necessary in addressing offending behaviour and promoting change.

As positive as the programs are, there are obvious and significant gaps in opportunity for *all* offenders to address their offending. Each of the programs has been designed with the male offender in mind, and has not necessarily taken into account the specific needs and variation required when presenting to a female group. In my opinion it is vital this disparity be addressed if we aim to offer therapeutic and effective group intervention to the entire client population. Upon commencing my employment as an Intervention Worker, female offenders were offered the opportunity to join groups, which consisted mainly of male offenders. Again, these programs in my view were only considered appropriate for men. However, in order to bridge the gap that existed at the time - of women not attending therapeutic groups - the alternative option was for these groups to be mixed.

Mixed groups raise a number of concerns about the effectiveness and complexities of group interventions for both the male and female offenders. One of my concerns was that the mixed group was often seen to be unbalanced with more men attending than women. In many cases only one woman attended the group. This could be seen to make it an uncomfortable environment for the female, but also for the men within the group setting. Clients partaking in the group could be seen at times to refrain from expressing their true thoughts, feelings and experiences for these very reasons. I also found through observation that both the women and men were holding back from the opportunity to explore the issues on a deeper level because of the gender mix, and at times avoiding the real issues. Keeping in mind that the program content has been designed primarily for the male offender, the group provided little opportunity for women to relate it specifically to the issues of their offending behaviour. For example, grief and loss can be considered an underlying issue for many female offenders. However, the setting of a mixed group provided almost no opportunity for women to explore this and feel comfortable and supported in doing so.

There are major differences working with the female offender, opposed to the male offender, thereby indicating a need to incorporate the appropriate adjustments within the program to respond to gender identified differences. In recent times I have clearly noted, through personal work practice and observation, that the rate of female offending, subsequent incarceration and community based supervision is rising. Chesney-Lind (2000) confirms this view and indicates it is not only identified in Australia, but also in America.

She highlights that there is a dramatic increase in women's involvement with the criminal justice system, with the number of Australian women under correctional supervision increasing by 71.8% from 1989-1999 (Chesney-Lind, 2000:8). What does this mean for the intervention services provided to this client group? Clearly it highlights a need for specific and effective intervention programs for the female offender, but also suggests that the number of group interventions provided to women also needs to increase.

Within one region of Community Corrections in South Australia women on supervision based orders currently account for 17.1% of the total client population. Currently the programs offered within the Department fail to match this increasing rate of female offending.

### **Why Gender Specific Interventions?**

To approach it from a generalist view male and female offenders have common problems. However, women also have a number of complex and diverse needs in comparison to their male counterpart. Scotland's Justice Department (and other studies carried out) identify the female offender as having a range of needs that differ from that of the male offender. Many female offenders usually fit into a number of the following categories:

- Are mothers, and often single mothers;
- Have no work outside the home;
- Have had problems at school and have few qualifications;
- On state benefits and in debt;
- Have accommodation problems;
- Have experienced some form of abuse;
- Have suffered psychological distress;
- Experience serious problems with substance abuse; and
- A large number have been in care as children and some have lost the care of their own children.

*Justice Online: Scottish Executive, 2004.*

With many female offenders experiencing the above complexities and issues it is paramount that these are taken into consideration when providing group interventions that not only address these needs, but do so in a supportive manner. Whitaker (2000:6) supports this view, suggesting that to make a positive impact on the lives of women offenders we must treat them as a separate group and allow them opportunity to build safe, trusting and healthy relationships.

On the surface much of these complexities, it may be argued, are also experienced by the male offender. There is no denying that this may be true in some cases. However, we must acknowledge that a high proportion of the female client group are experiencing these issues and are exposed to these difficulties, together with a societal view which can exacerbate the long standing effects and impact such experiences can have on women. Therefore, if the needs and experiences of the female offender are different, surely so should be the way in which these needs are treated.

As we know, no one person's experience is the same as another, and this is also true for the female offender. Motherhood is complex and a highly demanding need by itself, and many female offenders have children. A study carried out indicated that more than two thirds of all women in prison had children under the age of 18, and of those women only

25% reported the children to be in the care of the other parent (Travis, 1998:1). This demonstrates that a high number of women within the custodial system have parenting responsibilities but, as we know, there are higher numbers of female offenders in the community correctional setting than in the institutional environment. What are the needs that should be taken into account when working with a female offender, who is also a parent? Flexibility with child care, day to day pressures and stressors that come with parenting, such as appointments, illness, expenses, schooling and financial limitations. These are just a few of the issues women can have difficulty with, not to mention additional factors they can experience with single-parenting, such as isolation, loneliness, depression and stress.

Financial difficulty can make the role of parenting even more challenging for women. Many female offenders do not have ongoing employment outside the home (Justice Online, 2004) and are often seen to experience economic hardship (Willis & Rushforth, 2003). This may or may not be a reflection on the other area of identified need of problems with schooling and having few qualifications. Through my experiences in working with women I have noted that unemployment can reinforce the negative outcomes they can experience with single parenting: isolation, loneliness, depression and stress, and it can also be attributed to lowered self-esteem and self-worth for many of these women. Welfare benefits, which many of this client group are in receipt of, do not extend far for women who are raising children. Financial counselling to assist the management of their minimal income is a major need for many female offenders. It has not been an uncommon occurrence for women to miss important appointments or group sessions because of simply being unable to afford a bus ticket.

Along with these challenges comes that of accommodation. Unstable accommodation is a common feature for this client group. Many women have relocated for various reasons, due to losing their home for being unable to pay rent and/or being incarcerated, and in many cases due to domestic issues, or fleeing from an abusive partner. Accommodation issues, coupled with financial problems, can make it extremely difficult for women to provide a sense of stability for themselves and their children.

Much literature and research into the characteristics and profile of the female offender all confirm that a high percentage of these women, at some stage in their life, have either been a victim of, or exposed to some form of abuse. This, Bloom (2000) argues, means women are confronting problems that can be overwhelming to their gender: issues such as sexual abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence. Not only can women experience abuse in later life, but as Raeside (1994) reports, nearly 90% have experienced childhood traumas involving witnessing or being involved in interpersonal violence. What does this mean when working with the female offender, and what specific areas of need should be considered?

There are specific factors that need to be considered when working with women who have experienced child sexual abuse. The effect of the trauma is the most significant element when working with victims. The trauma experienced can have detrimental effects upon them and their situation. Survivors of child sexual abuse, particularly women, can experience frequent and serious victimisation. More so than men, women are also more likely to react to sexual victimisation with self-blame and depression (McClellan, Farabee & Crouch, 1997), two significant areas that require awareness and intervention.

It is believed that female victims of early child abuse and neglect, as compared with those who did not experience abuse, are 'more likely to become psychoactive substance abusers' (Widom & White, 1997:302). It is believed that women are more likely to direct psychological pain they experience inwardly, often through self-destructive behaviour such as substance abuse. Raeside (1994:12) explains that 'drug use may serve to counter the lack of self-confidence and self-esteem which appear to be by-products of growing up subjected to sexual and physical violence'. Self-medication through the use and abuse of substances can often result in dependence issues, thus when attempts are made to reduce or abstain, withdrawal symptoms can often occur, which can also exacerbate the initial symptoms of traumatic neurosis (Raeside, 1994). This relates directly to the category of need mentioned earlier by Justice Online: Scottish Executive (2004) that the female offender can often display serious problems with substance abuse.

It is important to acknowledge that survivors of child sexual abuse and childhood trauma can in many cases experience entrenched grief for some time, which can even continue into their adult lives. Many have explained the overwhelming feeling of the 'loss of innocence, loss of childhood, loss of a positive future, or a future or life that may have been'. These issues of unresolved grief can then be seen to connect into, as Raeside (1994) suggests, substance abuse or further abusive relationships and mental health issues.

Many female victims of child sexual abuse often re-experience forms of abuse in their relationships as adults. Herman (1992) explains that often the survivor of abuse can have difficulty protecting herself. She may long for a nurturing and caring relationship, yet this desire can often make it difficult to establish sound boundaries, which can in turn protect her. This longing can often make it difficult for her to make a conscious and accurate assessment of danger, therefore putting her into situations where further abuse can occur. Again this confirms the idea discussed earlier that the survivor is regularly victimised during her adult life. It is believed the 'risk of rape, sexual harassment, or battering, though high for all women, is approximately doubled for survivors of child sexual abuse' (Herman, 1992:111). This is recognised frequently when working with female offenders who repeatedly find themselves victims of abuse, and within patterns they find it increasingly difficult to break out of.

There are a number of mental health problems that can be experienced and are recognised within many female survivors of child sexual abuse. Depression is the most significant and commonly recognised in women. Cutler and Nolen-Hoeksema (1991) report that depression is more common in women than men. They indicate that female abuse victims are more likely to respond to a depressed mood with thoughts that contribute to the perpetuation of the mood, and men are more likely to engage in instrumental behaviours that distract them from depression. Other mental illnesses identified in women who have been victims of child sexual abuse include general and social phobias, obsessive compulsive behaviours and multiple personality disorder (Michael, 2003). These effects can often be recognised in female survivors through a sense of self-loathing and aggression directed at themselves: self-harm, mutilation and suicide attempts. Mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and attachment disorders can also be attributed to having their children in care, in many cases the care of welfare services. Many women as mentioned earlier experienced this in their own childhood, and now are again linked with 'the system' as they are unable to appropriately parent their children and welfare intervene.

## **Importance of Grief and Loss:**

Taking into account the specific needs of the female offender that have been highlighted there is one specific need that is linked specifically to each of these needs, but is also the most significant, and in many cases the most overlooked of all needs – grief and loss. Grief can be a complex experience. However, it is believed by many theorists that if carried out properly grief work can assist the bereaved person to return to normal functioning (Caplan, 1990).

Many women who have experienced the needs mentioned earlier have also to some degree experienced a form of loss, which for most results in a grief reaction. Loss of employment, employment opportunities, loss of relationships including partners and children, accommodation loss, loss of financial independence, grief associated to past traumas/abuse, abortion and miscarriage, loss of self through self-destructive behaviours (substance abuse) are just some of the losses the female offender may be exposed to and face.

Unfortunately, one thing in life is certain and that is that we cannot prevent loss from occurring and Caplan (1990:40) believes that grief in response to loss 'is an inescapable consequence of caring'. This holds true in much of what I have recognised within the female clients with whom I have worked. They often take on the nurturing, caring role at times in the most volatile, hostile, abusive and disenfranchised of circumstances and as a result can experience a deep sense of grief when their role, in their eyes, fails.

## **Offending Patterns of the Female Offender.**

Like any other form of criminal activity female offending is not a new development by any means. However, the ways in which the female offender was perceived and defined began to change significantly during the 1960's and 70's. Much of this can be attributed to the feminist movement which 'dramatically expanded the role definitions for female felons' (Stone, 1985:54). Prior to this time criminological views of women were unfounded, outlandish and labelling with much of the crime being seen as women's way of failing to adhere to cultural standards of proper feminine behaviour, and as being immoral, devious and deceitful (Pollak, 1950).

As more research and studies into female criminology has been carried out a much more accurate picture of female offending patterns has emerged. Women's offending does differ in a number of instances from that of the male offender. Overall women are less likely to have committed violent offences, and more likely to have been convicted of crime involving drugs or property (Bloom, 1999:22). However, The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) indicates that the primary offences for which women are incarcerated include drug offences, assault and robbery. Drug offences still remain a prominent feature for women, having almost doubled in the last 10 years.

The male offender in comparison is much more likely to be incarcerated for more violent crimes, including serious assaults and homicide (Mouzos & Rushforth, 2003). For the women that are convicted of violent offences in most cases it is committed against other women (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Women are also considered to carry out more property related offences such as shoplifting and larceny. There is also research to indicate that

fraud and misappropriation offences are more likely to be committed by women than men (Shaw, 2000:3). There are varying theories and beliefs as to why women offend. However, women (like men) commit crime for a variety of reasons although most theorists do support the view that women's motivation for offending and the type of offending usually differs from that of men (Morris, A. 1987).

Female offending is recognised as different to that of male offending. This supports the earlier view that female offenders differ significantly from male offenders, therefore the interventions provided also need to accommodate these variances. Should we fail to acknowledge these founded and recognisable differences, and appropriately respond to them, it would be a disservice to the client group, the criminal justice system and community as a whole who we aim to protect through effective rehabilitation services to the offender in order to reduce recidivism.

### **Intervention Appropriateness**

When carrying out any form of group intervention it is vital that it is tailored to meet the needs of the group, and is appropriate for the client group that is being targeted. This is also the case when working with a specific gender. Whitaker (2000:4) states that, from a correctional perspective the management and treatment of female offenders should be different, simply because gender responsive interventions are more successful.

What is it specifically that needs to be considered in order to make group interventions appropriate for the female offender?

- Women have problems that tend to be specific, and overwhelming to their gender. Problems such as sexual abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence and single parenting (Bloom & McDiarmid, 2000). These are aspects that in almost all instances are raised during group interventions with women. These issues need to be responded to appropriately, in a caring, supportive and non-threatening environment where women can disclose such issues should they feel comfortable doing so.
- Female offending behaviour differs from that of male offenders, therefore criminogenic needs will differ. This needs to be considered when addressing offending behaviour and criminogenic needs in the group setting.
- The above point also raises issues of victimisation. Many women, through their past experiences, have been victims of serious and in some cases horrendous crimes. Although we must not discount that these women have offended, we must also acknowledge and provide a balance in which their experiences of victimisation are also recognised.
- Another prominent need that should be considered and addressed within female group based interventions is the issue of self-esteem and self-worth. This appears to be a common need for many female clients within the criminal justice system. So many, it appears have lost their self-esteem, if it ever existed at all, their self-worth and as a result display signs of self-loathing. This need requires time to be addressed within the group context and provide a sense of hope to the women that self-esteem, with work, can be regained.

- Large proportions of female offenders have a history of, and often on-going issues with, substance abuse. Group interventions need to address such issues sensitively and appropriately for women.
- Many women within the Criminal Justice System are recognised as having mental health problems (Hooper, 2004). Many studies carried out indicate figures of 80% and higher of women having mental health issues. Intervention therefore needs to appropriately manage this within the group setting by addressing the concerns of the women relating their mental health concerns should they arise.
- The intervention provided needs to meet the learning abilities of the group and, as we know, many female offenders have low education levels, and therefore presentation styles may vary from group to group.
- Issues associated with single parenting, such as restrictions and conflicting demands (Ie. child-care, transportation issues, illness, other commitments and appointments) need to be taken into consideration when providing group interventions and the appropriate adjustments to fit with this may need to be made. For example not running sessions that conflict with school holidays and times of taking children to and from school
- Most, if not all, female group interventions will require a strong presence of grief and loss awareness, understanding and principles. This will need to be approached in a sensitive and appropriate manner by experienced facilitators who are trained in this area. It is also recommended that female group interventions are facilitated by female facilitators who can provide a non-threatening and comfortable environment for participants.

## **Understanding Victimisation**

Intervention carried out within the community correctional setting should not exclude the female client group from the opportunity to take responsibility for their offending through group based interventions. After all, when a crime is committed victims are left as a result and it is important all offenders, including women, understand the impact of their behaviour. Many women in their own right, whether they later turn to offending or not, have been victims of crime themselves. In many cases these can be considered to be more serious, violent and horrendous crimes (ie. child sexual abuse, physical abuse, rape, domestic violence) than those they carry out themselves. Does this make their offending justifiable? No it does not, although it does provide further reasons why female intervention programs should differ from that provided to the male offender. Often during group interventions with women their own experiences of victimisation will arise. Therefore, programs should be designed and workers trained to appropriately manage the issues of victimisation and provide women the opportunity to explore and address these sensitive issues which are also linked to grief and loss principles.

Female victimisation is very real for many women who are supervised by the criminal justice system. However, as Morris (1987) suggests it not just the rates of victimisation that can generate women's fear, but the nature of the victimisation. These characteristics as described by Morris are vital in the provision of male and female interventions. These characteristics are:

- *Most women are victimised by men.* Therefore suggesting they enter into a mixed gender group would be completely inappropriate and unjust.
- *Women are more likely to know their attacker.* This can cause a number of ongoing psychological issues which can make interventions all the more challenging (ie. trust issues)
- *Women are more likely than men to experience long-term emotional distress after victimisation.* This can again present issues such as depression and grief and loss over the course of the intervention.
- *Women are more likely than men to experience some blame for their victimisation.* This would need to be appropriately managed and addressed should issues of guilt and blame arise during the intervention.

## **Importance of Group Based Interventions**

Therapeutic group based interventions are considered to be more beneficial and effective to the offender than individual based counselling. It is believed that a persons self image is more often than not derived from the reflection they see in the eyes of others (Bunston, Pavlidis & Leydon, 2003). Therefore, therapeutic group interventions can be a very powerful force for change.

Group work can offer a very creative, intensive and personally exciting way of enhancing and strengthening one's sense of self (Bunston, Pavlidis & Leydon, 2003:41) and this has been noted within female group interventions carried out within community corrections. Many women quoting past experiences have commented on the experience of group therapy as positive, influential and empowering. This is not specifically because of the content of the program delivered, but rather the exposure to hearing the experiences of others in similar situations, which essentially is the most powerful element of group work.

Females' sense of self is believed to manifest and develop differently in female-specific groups as opposed to co-ed (mixed) groups (Bloom & McDiarmid, 2000). This again confirms the argument that gender specific groups are the best and most appropriate option for therapeutic group intervention. For female therapeutic groups in the community correctional setting to be successful there are a number of aspects that need to be considered including:

- Intervention needs to be flexible to meet the identified needs of the group.
- Culturally sensitive interventions. In most groups participants are from varying backgrounds, ages and experiences and it is important that intervention workers are sensitive and considerate of this.
- Accountability and responsivity to the offender. Many female participants wish to gain from the group work experience and are receptive to the treatment. It is vital intervention workers are responsive to this.
- Flexible presentation style to best meet the learning styles and needs of the participants.
- Providing a trusting, supportive and non-threatening group environment. Many women can have difficulty trusting and feeling comfortable with new people and new situations.
- Recognition of the needs and demands of single parenting pressures female offenders can experience (child-care, appointments, financial, accommodation).

Appropriate measures should also be taken to ensure effective selection and screening of group participants in order to establish an appropriate and positive group for all involved. Some pre-group considerations by facilitators would include:

- Personal histories  
Marital status, children etc.  
Offending history  
Known enemies  
Intervention history, programs / interventions previously undertaken
- Mental Instability  
Current mental health status (PTSD, Bi-Polar, Depression)  
Medications currently taken  
Mental health services currently linked with.
- History of Victimization  
History of past abuse (Domestic Violence, Sexual, Physical).
- Current Alcohol and Other Drug Issues  
Current use of, or withdrawal from substances.  
Use of prescribed medications to treat addiction  
(I.e. Methadone, Buprenorphine)

Having an awareness of potential influential factors, such as those mentioned, can assist facilitators to prepare for any underlying issues or dynamics that may arise during the group process. This will support facilitators to appropriately manage such situations should they arise within the group format.

### **Intervention Tools for Working with Women:**

It is important that facilitators are aware, when providing any form of intervention to any client group, of the tools that would assist the facilitation process. Some tools to be mindful of for female focussed intervention include:

- The intervention setting needs to be a safe, comfortable, supportive and non-threatening environment for the women. This increases the likelihood that the intervention will be successful in addressing their issues, as they are more likely to share with others if they feel comfortable doing so.
- Acknowledge client's own and personal incidence of victimisation. However, encourage participants to separate this from the impact their own offending has had upon their victim/s.
- Sensitive and empathic intervention that acknowledges their own experiences, but does not take away from the serious and significant effects their own offending behaviour has had upon others.
- The primary theories and principles underlying the intervention include adult education principles, as through the process of the intervention the women are able to recognise the impact of offending behaviour. Motivational interviewing also encourages

participants to self-examine the issues surrounding their behaviour. Empowerment principles also underpin the intervention as the women are supported and encouraged to explore the changes required in order for behaviour change to occur. It is important to remember that this intervention, whilst based around adult learning, is also therapeutic as over the course of the intervention thought patterns are appropriately challenged and group dynamics assist to support the notion of change.

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, this paper has outlined the differences between male and female offending behaviours, the underlying issues that can be considered as contributing factors to female offending and the importance of gender specific interventions in order to explore and address offending behaviour within a suitable context for all. We have recognised that grief and loss is a key theme that should feature in the group interventions carried out with women and be appropriately recognised and managed as it arises within the group setting. Although the research on female offending appears to be increasing the implementation of specific and suitable group intervention programs is still minimal and vastly under-represented in my view, especially given the increasing rates of female offending.

It is important that we stop avoiding the fact that women, like men, require group-based interventions to address their offending behaviour. It is time to begin openly acknowledging this gap in therapeutic group-based interventions and begin the task of designing, developing and implementing suitable interventions for female offenders across all community correction jurisdictions. This will not only provide opportunity for female offenders to explore and address their offending behaviour and related needs within a safe and supportive environment, but will also assist in reducing rates of recidivism.

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