

Research Paper

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## Moving forward: empowering women to desist from offending

Exploring how women experience empowerment, compliance & desistance during enforced contact with a women's centre and probation

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Executive summary

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## 1. BACKGROUND

This research was conducted in a context whereby probation and a third sector provider collaborate to deliver court ordered interventions specifically for women who offend. London Probation implemented two specified activity requirements (SAR) for women in November 2010. Courts can sentence women to:

- a. attend the Jagonari Women's Education and Resource Centre (WERC) to access individually-tailored support, or
- b. complete the Structured Supervision for Women (SSW) one-to-one cognitive-behavioural programme with a probation offender manager.

London Probation conducts the pre-sentence suitability assessments and retains enforcement responsibility for both SARs.

These provisions present a practice environment in which to tangibly explore the debates within the existing literature about promoting women's empowerment, compliance and desistance.

## 2. RESEARCH AIM, OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

### Aim:

- Identify the processes that empower women to develop non-criminal identities and rebuild their lives to desist from crime.

### Objectives:

- To capture women's insights about their experiences of empowerment during these enforced community sentences.
- To identify factors that can promote women's desistance.

### Questions:

- What factors do women identify as important for desistance?
- What is empowerment?
- Is being empowered an important part of desistance?
- Does enforced contact with interventions empower women, or does a court order undermine empowerment?
- What contributes to women's decisions about engagement and compliance?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study explores seven women's experiences of the SARs. Semi-structured interviews and two focus groups provided the primary data, which were analysed using the template analysis technique. A systematic literature search was conducted to formulate *a priori* themes using existing findings, which strengthened both the gathering and analysis of the empirical data.

### 4. KEY FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Impressive compliance rates

The Jagonari WERC managed 48 SARs between November 2010 and early April 2012. SSW data was requested but not made available. The overall compliance with Jagonari was impressive with almost three quarters of the women either successfully completing or continuing to comply. Significantly, almost half of the women who completed their SAR continue with Jagonari voluntarily.

#### 4.2 Women require practical and holistic assistance alongside confidence-building support to overcome barriers and move away from criminal activity

Every respondent valued the pragmatic support they received in response to their immediate concerns. Respondents had daily experiences of interpersonal, political, economic and structural barriers that remain unchanged unless support recognises the socio-political dimensions. They recounted being assisted with finances, housing, accessing childcare, and education and employment. The latter enabled women to pursue their ambitions to lead a "normal life".

#### 4.3 Provision should clearly delineate between criminal justice (focused on risk and punishment) and social support (that is individualised and holistic) in order to promote desistance.

Having made the decision to desist from offending and the public announcements of their intention, women need onlookers to recognise and validate their achievements. These supportive networks empower women to pursue their goals, overcome stigmatising labels and seek out personal redemption. A focus on punishment and criminalisation could suggest to women that they are undeserving of help and fuel suspicion about the interventions being offered.

#### **4.4 Women express preference for access to provisions that are mainstream and provide ongoing support**

Participants praised Jagonari's drop-in service that is available to all women without the need for a court order. Integrating with mainstream services that include non-offenders provide a supportive learning environment with avenues for peer mentoring. Furthermore, women have the option to return for longer term support that addresses their problems holistically.

#### **4.5 Women value the opportunity to work with professionals who treat them with respect and show genuine interest in them as individuals**

Women described qualities that made their interactions with staff meaningful. These centred on practitioners demonstrating "compassion", "understanding", "flexibility" and an active interest in securing their access to resources and support. It is noteworthy that none of the women expressed a preference for the gender of their offender managers. Women felt it more important that practitioners demonstrate sensitivity to their individual needs and provide a positive role model to move them towards desistance. Women expect offender managers to invest genuine interest in their needs and exercise influence to advocate on their behalf.

#### **4.6 Focusing on self-esteem and cognitive-deficits runs the danger of de-contextualising women's struggles**

Participants experienced a lack of control over their socio-political context that hampers their ability to move forward in life. Respondents recounted the inhumanity, unfairness and injustices that left them feeling powerless, even if they had previously been empowered and strengthened psychologically. Empowerment requires long-term commitment and recognition that psychological and social aspects are dynamically interrelated.

## 5. PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

### 5.1 Sustainable funding for long-term holistic services

The lack of sustained funding is a longstanding obstacle facing woman-specific services. Under-funding during the current economic downturn and competing priorities generates fierce competition for the limited grants available.

**RECOMMENDATION: Local service commissioners should commit to long-term funding to develop an infrastructure of sustainable provisions that can support women to desist from offending.**

### 5.2 Early preventive intervention

There is an economic case for early intervention to prevent women coming to costly criminal justice attention. Similarly, savings would be gained by sustaining support to prevent women's offending from escalating. Most respondents were unfamiliar with local provision and said they wished they knew how to access one-stop-shop provisions prior to their criminal conviction.

**RECOMMENDATION: Commissioners and service providers must coordinate and advertise local women-only services to counteract negative perceptions, improve engagement with services, and increase the avenues for women to access early intervention.**

### 5.3 Easy access to services

Jagonari provides a welcoming, non-judgemental environment within their weekly drop-in service to facilitate women's routes into services for the first time or as repeat service-users.

**RECOMMENDATION: Services should facilitate self-referral or drop-in for women to gain swift access to top-up, stabilising support, in recognition of the lapses and relapses within the desistance journey.**

### 5.4 Probation Trusts should take a radically different woman-centred approach

**RECOMMENDATION: Probation trusts must continually identify and endorse effective provisions that can be imposed as Specified Activity Requirements that inspire the Judiciary's confidence and address women's needs within mainstream community settings.**

**RECOMMENDATION: The current policy on fast delivery court reports must be reconsidered to enable practitioners to invest more time to ensure that assessments are thorough and develop individually-tailored woman-specific sentencing proposals.**

### **5.5 Women should be supported as individuals with the capacity to contribute to society**

Punitive approaches that blame and label women for their failures as citizens do not promote desistance. Taking a cognitive-deficit approach to empowerment fails to recognise the real-life limitations on women's opportunities and choices.

**RECOMMENDATION: Probation trusts and practitioners must exercise their power and influence positively to continually advocate for women and tackle wider social and structural problems rather than focussing primarily on cognitive-behavioural factors and enforcement.**

### **5.6 Co-location within community settings**

All participants valued Jagonari's women-only environment, especially compared to the intimidating probation offices.

**RECOMMENDATION: Local areas should explore and develop co-location arrangements to offer women the option of attending with offender managers for court report interviews or supervision in women-only community-based premises.**

### **5.7 Utilise peer support and mentoring**

Participants valued the peer support within the women's centre. It was empowering for women to voluntarily access provisions that were mainstream and open to all women rather than focused on their criminal justice status. Ex-offenders have expertise in relation to successful desistance, so involving these women to support their peers provides further redemptive opportunities.

**RECOMMENDATION: Service providers should utilise the potential for ex-offenders to provide peer support as advocates, mentors or group facilitators.**

### **5.8 Challenging structural inequalities**

The structural inequalities that exist within society must be actively challenged at all levels, including legislative, strategic and policy.

**RECOMMENDATION: Attention should turn to socio-political and collective action that can challenge the oppressive systems and structures that undermine women's capacity to pursue real-life opportunities and self-determination.**

### 5.9 Humanising women's experiences

Payment by Results (PbR) is fast becoming a reality for community sanctions. The simplistic PbR model does not match with women's multiple vulnerabilities and complex routes to desistance.

**RECOMMENDATION: Service delivery design must ensure that payment by results initiatives recognise women as people involved in complex pathways to desistance rather than focusing on simplified, binary measures of success.**

ENDS

