

Research Paper

2022/04



A Paradoxical Paradox: Exploring Probation staff attitudes towards working with women

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Executive Summary

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Background

In 2006, Baroness Corston was commissioned by the Home Secretary to conduct a review on vulnerable women in the UK (United Kingdom) criminal justice system. What followed from the Corston Report (2007) was an acknowledgement that the justice system had primarily been built on what was thought to work for men but often led to disastrous outcomes for women. Notably, the Female Offender Strategy (2018) later set out the government's commitment to address these failings and better support women through a gender-informed approach. As part of this strategy, HMPPS have started to encourage probation practitioners to deliver gender-specific services in sentence management by case workers 'specialising' in working with women either individually or as part of a women's specialist team (Morley and Rushton, 2023). This women's specific probation practitioner role was scrutinised by Kerry Ellis Devitt (2020) where a growing reluctance for staff to work with women was highlighted. This study looked to unpick variations in probation staff attitudes towards working with women and better understand what, if anything, could be done to encourage more staff to work in a specialist way.

The current research: Using a two staged mixed methods design, this study set out to explore practitioners' views on working with women and the resources available to them to conduct this work. In particular, the research aimed to;

- Identifying the barriers, enablers and systemic issues impacting on staff attitudes towards working with women.
- Explore potential changes that would increase the number of staff interested in working in women's specialist teams.

An online survey was sent out to all probation practitioners across the Midlands region throughout November and December 2023, yielding 46 responses. Descriptive analysis of data was then performed to develop questions for follow-up focus groups held with two women's specialist teams in February and March 2024. A total of 20 practitioners attended across the groups and verbatim transcripts were recorded which was later analysed thematically to draw out patterns and themes.

Key findings:

The role of language: Data from the surveys were split into three groups; enthusiasts, neutrals and reluctants, based on their attitude towards working with women. All groups described working with women as ‘challenging’ and ‘complex’ and 43 of 46 respondents reported that it was more difficult than the work with men. In the focus groups, staff described working with ‘layers’ of multiple and complex needs. Most participants in the survey suggested that it was their own experiences of the work rather than what they heard that affected their opinions but participants in the focus groups reported that negative views were widely shared across the organisation and felt that working with women was de-prioritised by their senior leaders.

Impact of the work and accessing support: Working with women was identified by survey respondents as more emotionally laborious and triggering higher levels of vicarious trauma. The impact of the work was offset to an extent by those working in specialist teams through peer support and having a line manager that understood women’s distinct needs. They felt that this enabled them to use professional discretion, especially when it came to enforcement decisions. There was however a general agreement that the work required better professional support and time for ‘reflective practice’.

Finding meaning in the work: Many survey respondents identified an ability to ‘relate’ to the women’s experiences. For some, this enabled them to work more compassionately with women and better understand the circumstances that led to their offending. For others, it compromised their ability to manage risk effectively. Male respondents were likely to either feel that their gender inhibited them to work well with women or that they were willing to do so but their gender was seen by others as a prohibiting factor. There was also a sub-theme around goal orientation. Staff who were focused on processes were more likely to describe the work as ‘draining’ and ‘demanding’ and more likely to identify as reluctants. Whereas staff who were more focused on outcomes and holistic needs were more likely to identify as enthusiasts and describe the work as ‘rewarding’.

Resources: Training and exposure to working with women positively correlated with how enthusiastic staff felt about the work. This was however offset by workload pressures. Focus group participants explained that whilst an enthusiasm for the work meant that they were more hopeful about achieving positive outcomes for women, they would have to work ‘above and beyond’ the time afforded for each case to do so.

Summary points: The practitioners in this research have outlined the complexities of working with women on probation as demonstrably more challenging than when working with men. Underpinning these complexities are multiple layers of contrasts, or “illusionary paradoxes”. Expecting practitioners to work in an environment which does not call out the need to balance women’s holistic needs against the pressures of managerialism is setting them up to fail. It affects their feelings of emotional fatigue and contributes to them becoming ‘reluctant’ to working with women. To an extent, this can be offset through peer support and being supervised by line managers that also understand the complexities of the work. However, we suggest that the probation service could go further and create a more gender-specific service through guidance, policy and targets that effectively and transparently address the paradoxical paradoxes felt by frontline staff.

Recommendations

Women's Specific Training: Whilst there is now some training available for working with women on probation, this is not mandated. The misconceptions and inaccurate statements made about women on probation could be challenged effectively by this requirement. Furthermore, we believe that the training offer should go further still. Structuring a training offer to include a renewed focus on social work with an honest approach about the tensions of this in a risk management setting and a focus on women’s distinct needs would encourage a holistic approach to working with women and considering the ‘woman first’ approach. This would address some of the challenges of working with women which are borne out of the contradictions of what is needed and what the service requires of practitioners.

Language: Senior leaders and managers should be modelling a culture of challenging negative language regarding women on probation. Careful consideration of language so that we don’t undermine women, pathologise their trauma or conflate risk and needs must be encouraged. This approach will address the tendency to transfer the complexities of the job onto the women themselves.

Changes to the Workload Management Tool and Organisational Approach: A strong finding from all survey groups and focus groups was the view that the workload management tool did not go far enough in allocating sufficient allowance to practitioners working with women. We strongly recommend a review to the WMT specifically from the perspective of working with women. Rather than trying to fit the WMT to women, instead we suggest starting with the woman and taking a methodical and considered approach to defining what is required to achieve better outcomes and

then applying this to the WMT. Undoubtedly from what participants have told us, this will highlight gaps in work which is recognised and those areas which are currently being fulfilled by practitioners going 'above and beyond'. In relation to these gap areas, considerations should be made by the organisation to change the practice requirements and approach to accommodate these specific areas.

Staff support: Our research evidences the increasing degree of emotional impact that practitioners experience because of work with women on probation. Support from specialist managers who demonstrate understanding of the specialist nature of this work goes some way to managing this impact. Specific reflective practice being routinely offered is recommended to manage this emotional impact on practitioners. This could be further supported by structured clinical supervision as standard in probation offices and particularly in any women's specialist teams.

Women's Specialist Teams: There is clear evidence that women's specialist teams assist in consistent management of women on probation. They provide flexible, carefully managed approaches with compassion and a gender specific response. Crucially they also offer fellow colleagues' compassion, support and motivation which is critical when women's specific practitioners are working in such emotionally laborious roles.

Multi-Disciplinary Team working: Women's specialist practitioners, whether in a specialist team or as a singular role within an offender management unit, must be effectively linked into other key agencies to ensure that the holistic needs and *layers* of the woman's needs are met. Being part of a multidisciplinary team allows for the probation practitioner to define their role better. This is likely to reduce the actual workload of practitioners but also their sense of paradox. Best practice for this approach is advocated by others as a whole systems approach linked to a woman's centre.

Unravelling the paradox: To de-mystify the sense of paradox by specifically drawing out the tensions that exist for the probation practitioner, particularly regarding the expectations in relation to working with women should be visible across policy and operational guidance. This is most easily done through ensuring that all policy is developed in a collaborative way, reflecting the realities experienced by practitioners and considering the emotional demands of the job.

ENDS