Discussants Comments—“Gender Responsive Strategies: Responding to Women Offenders”
November 17, 2006

Wendy G. Smooth
Associate Professor, Department of Women’s Studies and The Kirwan Institute for the Study of
Race and Ethnicity
The Ohio State University

General Comments:
An exciting element of this report, “Gender Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and
Guiding Principles for Women Offenders” (Bloom, Owen and Covington, 2003), is its
fundamental understanding that women are indeed different from their male counterparts in terms
of the factors that have lead to their incarceration and the services needed to move them towards
again becoming productive citizens. In this way, it is reflective of debates within the women’s
policy community around the best ways to approach women’s empowerment. Some have argued
that the most appropriate way of addressing women’s needs in society is to treat them as equal to
men, which in the case of women offenders would mean providing them the same services as
those extended to men offenders. This report soundly makes the case that such an approach does
not take into account the differences that exist in respect to men and women’s pathways into crime
and differing life experiences. It embraces the notion that women are different and by virtue of this
difference, they should be afforded services that are tailored to meet their special needs.

Q1. While this report is ground breaking in its attention to the multitude of gendered conditions
that shape women’s experiences with the criminal justice system, there is little attention to the
ways in which race informs women’s experiences and attitudes regarding the criminal justice
system. The literature on race and crime is quite extensive, yet within that literature, so much of
the focus is on men offenders. However, here with gender as the primary category of analysis,
there is little attentiveness to race. How might thinking about the intersections of race and gender
inform this work?

When we use the framework of intersectionality, it forces us to consider the ways in which
multiple categories of identity inform how people experience the world. With this in mind, how
might other categories of women’s identities factor into how they experience the criminal justice
system? Likewise, how might attentiveness to the multiplicity of women’s identities in terms of
gender, race, class, and sexuality inform the types of strategies that will best suit their needs? You
seem to move in this direction in Chapter 3 of Gender Responsive Strategies discussing the needs
of women impacted by substance abuse, mental health issues or who have suffered from trauma.
However, I am always struck by the way in which race changes the parameters of most debates,
and I am curious about how race intersects with gender and other categories of identity for women
offenders.

Q2. In 2003, I had the opportunity to research African American women’s access to and attitudes
toward the domestic violence service delivery system in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska. This work
led us to interview African American women incarcerated in two of Nebraska’s women’s facilities.
Most of these women’s stories illustrated links between domestic violence and their incarceration.
Yet, in these facilities there were few programs, if any focused on domestic violence. As such, these women were still faced with addressing unresolved anger issues and their acceptance of abusive relationships. Can you discuss the importance of offering domestic violence programs in prison facilities such that women are empowered to break the cycle of abuse? Can you discuss efforts that have successfully brought domestic violence service providers and prison administrators together to address these challenges women offenders so often face? In your work, have you found “best practices” that can serve as models for domestic violence service providers and prison administrators?

Q3. Your work has already made an important contribution by identifying the core need to recognize women offenders as having needs that differ from their male counterparts. It goes a long way in striking at the core of how best to improve women’s life conditions. However, it seems to me that documenting and specifying the nature of women’s experience is just the first of many challenges. The most substantial obstacle it seems is convincing prison officials, policymakers, and even tax payers to invest in gender specific programming for women offenders. What in your assessment is the best strategy to convince reluctant actors to invest their limited resources on gender specific approaches?