

# Best Practices Tool Kit: **An Update on Gender Responsive Strategies - 2011**

From the Criminal Justice Research Center  
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*An accompanying document to our Institute for Excellence in Justice Presentation, "Women on Probation and Parole: A Feminist Critique of Community Programs and Services," given by Merry Morash and commented on by Denise Robinson and Paula Smith on May 20, 2011 at the Ohio State University*

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This Best Practices tool kit identifies research regarding practices that are considered promising, proven to be beneficial or "best practices" in the treatment of female ex-offenders on probation and parole. According to former director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Reginald Wilkinson, best practices range anywhere from practices which are empirically proven to be effective to strategies which demonstrate promise but have not yet been thoroughly evaluated.<sup>1</sup> This document briefly summarizes four studies which outline effective strategies and particular aspects of working with women on probation and parole. Following this, there is an annotated bibliography, featuring publications from the past five years which further examine the issue of women's experiences with re-entry. Note that this document serves largely as an addendum to Coretta Pettway's 2006 Institute for Excellence in Justice Best Practices tool kit, "Gender Responsive Strategies," which is available at [http://www.drc.state.oh.us/web/iej\\_files/Gender Responsive Strategies.pdf](http://www.drc.state.oh.us/web/iej_files/Gender_Responsive_Strategies.pdf).

Ohio has seen recent, mildly encouraging trends in the offender population. In the years 2009-2010, the state prison population declined by 0.2 percent, and in 2011, the state recidivism rate reached an eleven-year low.<sup>2,3</sup> Nationally, however, the number of female prisoners have actually climbed disproportionate to men in recent years.<sup>4</sup> And, in the years 1995-2006, the national female population on probation or parole rose by 56 percent.<sup>5</sup> Much like the general increase in the growth of the male prison population over the past decade, the rise in female inmates is largely due to increasingly harsher drug-related sentencing.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkinson, R. 2003. "Best Practices: What Does It Mean In Times of Perpetual Transition?" International Corrections and Prison Association 2003 Meetings.

<sup>2</sup> *Prison Count 2010: State Population declines for the First Time in 38 Years*. 2010. Issue Brief for the PEW Center on the States. At: [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Prison\\_Count\\_2010.pdf](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Prison_Count_2010.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> "Ohio Recidivism Rate at 11-year Low." 2011. ODRC Press Release, February 24. At: <http://www.drc.ohio.gov/Public/press/press397.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Frost, N., Greene, J., and K. Pranis. 2006. *The Punitiveness Report-HARD HIT: The Growth in the Imprisonment of Women, 1977-2004*. Women's Prison Association, Institute on Women and Criminal Justice: New York, NY. At: <http://www.wpaonline.org/institute/hardhit/index.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Morash, M. 2010. *Women on Probation and Parole: A Feminist Critique of Community Programs and Services*. Northeastern University Press: Boston.

<sup>6</sup> Mauer, M., and M. Chesney-Lind, eds. 2002. *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*. Washington DC: The Sentencing Project.

Female offenders have a host of issues unique to their gender status. They are more likely to be survivors of intimate partner violence and/or sexual abuse, more likely to suffer from depression, and are also more likely to be single parents than male offenders. Due to their prominent role in child-rearing, female offenders also often have a more limited job history than men.<sup>7</sup> A great deal of research demonstrates the benefits gained by women offenders who participate in gender-responsive programming. Because of their particular concerns, those working with female offenders should be aware of these women's relationships, including intimate relationships and maternal relationships, individual struggles, and their life trajectories which led them to offending in the first place. Bloom, Owen and Covington (2004)<sup>8</sup> affirm that there are six core, gender-responsive principles related to mindfully treating women offenders in the criminal justice system:

- Acknowledge that gender makes a difference.
- Create an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity.
- Develop policies, practices, and programs that are relational and promote healthy connections to children, family significant others, and the community.
- Address substance abuse, trauma, and mental health issues through comprehensive, integrated, and culturally relevant services and appropriate supervision.
- Provide women with opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions.
- Establish a system of community supervision and reentry with comprehensive, collaborative services.

The following is a consideration of research from the criminal justice field which has been published since the release of the 2006 "Gender-Responsive Strategies" tool kit.

### **Merry Morash's Qualitative Evaluation of Re-entry Services for Women in a "Gender-Responsive" County – 2010**

In her 2010 book<sup>9</sup>, *Women on Probation and Parole, a Feminist Critique of Community Programs and Services*, Dr. Merry Morash qualitatively compared the services provided to women offenders in two respective counties she labeled "Traditional County" and "Gender-Responsive County" over the course of one year. Morash did in-depth interviews with 369 women in both counties, and assessed probation/parole reports, court records, and drug test results. Approximately two-thirds of the women interviewed had drug involvement, and a variety of other offenses were represented in the sample. Morash determined that providing the following services in Gender-Responsive County garnered more positive outcomes among respondents. The following is a brief description of the elements that were cited as bettering chances for women offenders' post-release success:

- 1) *Employing probation and parole workers who are sensitive to needs common or unique to women*, thereby being equipped to help women successfully process through difficult feelings, gain problem-solving skills, and hone communication skills (e.g., assisting women with feelings of trauma or anger in a female-centered fashion).
- 2) *Providing intensive monitoring services and quality relationships with officers* – Respondents appreciated persistent monitoring by officers and programs, and more successfully left behind destructive habits and situations, instead making positive behavioral changes. Supervising officers rarely changed and therefore got to know those on their caseload more thoroughly. Women cited being more likely to respond positively

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<sup>7</sup> Morash, M., op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Bloom, B., Owen, B., and S. Covington. 2003. "Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders." U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections. NIC Accession Number 018017. At: [www.nicic.org/Library/018017](http://www.nicic.org/Library/018017).

<sup>9</sup> Morash, op. cit.

to officers who were “caring” and “fair” as opposed to being predominately “tough” in their demeanor. Gender Responsive County supervising officers required drug and alcohol assessments, and provided a case-management approach complemented by “wraparound” or supplemental community services such as mental health counseling, housing assistance, child care, or legal assistance. Officers provided case plan implementation, linked women with needed services in the community, and followed up on progress. In terms of resources, women in Gender Responsive County were also more likely to receive viable assistance in gaining job resources. Further, women were assisted in finding support/therapy groups to address their needs, and received help with practical concerns (such as getting bus tickets).

- 3) *Progressively punitive sanctioning, high level of attention in addressing drug/alcohol use* – Supervision tactics in Gender Responsive County included frequent drug/alcohol testing, an intensive drug treatment program with numerous meetings in their work release center, and electronic surveillance of women in an aftercare outpatient treatment program. According to Morash, said tactics served to “heighten women’s awareness of the downside of use.”<sup>10</sup>
- 4) *Addressing issues of inequality and injustice* – When working with women with fewer socioeconomic resources, the officers in Gender Responsive County spent considerable periods of time providing advocacy and encouragement in getting access to services such as insurance and psychological evaluation and treatment. Consequently, women who had committed offenses related to their mental illness were more likely to receive more proper treatment for their diagnoses.

#### **An Evaluation of the “Moving On” Program – 2010**

Gehring, Van Voorhis and Bell conducted an evaluative study of the “Moving On” Program, a 26-session, curriculum-based, gender-responsive, group treatment program for female offenders.<sup>11</sup> The researchers obtained recidivism data from the Iowa Department of Corrections, which implemented Moving On in 1998. They assessed probationers who started the program between 2003 and 2006, and who attended the program weekly for a six-month period, in sessions which lasted 1 ½ to 2 hours each.

The Moving On Program bases its approach on motivational interviewing (which includes interviewing and working with the client based on the stage of change or acceptance they are in regarding their problems), cognitive-behavioral intervention (which includes an emphasis on unlearning maladaptive techniques which have arisen as a response to one’s dysfunctional environment), and relational theory (which emphasizes the importance of an inherent yearning for connection to others). The overarching program goals of Moving On are to help women build on existing strengths, and learn skills to better access personal and community resources. Moving On actualizes these goals by doing the following:

- 1) Providing a group environment that is non-judgmental, challenging, empathetic, and supportive;
- 2) Helping women build a network of people that is healthy and supportive;
- 3) Teaching personal strategies to better personal situations, including problem solving, proper uses of assertiveness, regulating emotions, and making healthy decisions; and
- 4) Helping women with the many challenges of re-entering mainstream society.

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<sup>10</sup> Morash, p. 150, op cit.

<sup>11</sup> Gehring, K., Van Voorhis, P., and V. Bell. 2010. “What Works for Female Probationers?: An Evaluation of the *Moving On Program*.” *Women, Girls, and Criminal Justice*, 11(1), 6-10.

The Moving On program includes nine learning modules, intended to help participants identify patterns within their own behavior, as well as the pivotal life events or particular feelings that caused them to offend in the first place. The modules are:

- Setting the context for change
- Women in Society
- Family Messages
- Relationships
- Taking Care of Yourself
- Problem Solving
- Coping with Emotions and Harmful Self-Talk
- Becoming Assertive
- Moving On

In assessing the effectiveness of Moving On, Gehring et al. compared samples of 190 women who participated in the program with 190 women who did not participate in Moving On or any other cognitive-behaviorally based program during the time period of the study. Results showed that Moving On participants had lower re-arrest rates, lower re-conviction rates, and lower rates of incarceration than their comparison counterparts. Therefore, Gehring et al. concluded that Moving On is an evidence-based program which is effective in reducing recidivism.

#### **Findings from the Women's Needs and Risk Assessment Project (WNRAP) – 2009**

A cooperative agreement between the National Institute of Corrections and the University of Cincinnati spawned the Women's Needs and Risk Assessment Project, the purpose of which was to develop assessment instruments which were gender-specific in nature, to improve upon such gender neutral instruments as the Level of Service Inventory (LSI), or the Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS).<sup>12</sup> Over 700 women from three different states (Hawaii, Minnesota, and Missouri) were given self-report surveys which were considered gender-responsive. The findings indicated that ***female probationers are less likely to reoffend than male probationers and have differing pathways to prison or jail than male offenders, therefore their treatment needs differ***. The very fact that women tend to be relatively less violent and re-offending than their male counterparts has often served as justification for not attending to the specific needs of women in correctional programming. Respondents in the WNRAP were predominately low to low-moderate in terms of their risk for reoffending. Women in the sample had relatively low rates of recidivism. Those who did have probation revocations were less likely to be in trouble for re-offending, but rather for violating rules of probation supervision.<sup>13</sup>

Since these offenders are relatively low-risk in comparison to their male counterparts, they have fewer needs which are criminogenic (such as antisocial personality-related issues) in nature. However, this study indicated that a "hands off" approach does not work well for female probationers, as a significant proportion of who are deemed low to low-moderate risk end up being arrested. Therefore, it is imperative that probation and parole providers pay close attention to the factors that contribute to re-arrest among all risk levels of probationers, namely:

- Having low self-esteem and low levels of self-efficacy;
- Being physically victimized and harassed as an adult;
- Having dysfunctional intimate relationships;

<sup>12</sup> Salisbury, E., Van Voorhis, P., Wright, E., and A. Bauman. 2009. "Changing Probation Experiences for Female Offenders Based on Women's Needs and Risk Assessment Project Findings." *Women, Girls & Criminal Justice*, October/November.

<sup>13</sup> Morash, M., R. Haarr, and L. Rucker. 1994. "A Comparison of Programming for Women and Men in U.S. Prisons in the 1980s." *Crime and Delinquency*, 40, 197-221.

- Being victims of significant abuse in childhood;
- Having a low income; and
- Having stress related to parenting.

From the study findings, Salisbury et al. offer the following program/policy recommendations:

- 1) *Screen for gender-responsive needs during assessment* – Salisbury et al. found that gender-responsive needs are a strong factor in recidivism. Being mindful of gender-responsive needs during needs assessment could assist departments in making sure women receive appropriate services, thereby reducing the risk of reoffending or violating probation.
- 2) *Establish gender-responsive caseloads* - Female probationers could be better assisted by POs who are taught to actively listen, recognize and acknowledge probationers' strengths, build rapport by establishing trusting, consistent relationships with the probationer, respond to the emotional needs of the probationer, and be a source of social support when needed.
- 3) *Train probation staff on guiding principles which meet gender-specific needs* – Gender-responsive approaches consider sociological, cultural, and psychological variability among individual women, and life experiences which are informed by gender-steered programming and supervision needs for women. Staff should be trained in theoretical foundations of certain services (such as theories regarding addiction and trauma), and how women's paths to prison and destructive behavior differ from those of men. It is also important that officers be self-aware of harboring negative gender stereotypes in their work with female probationers.
- 4) *Utilize case management strategies while providing wrap-around services to female probationers* – Because many women probationers have concurrent needs (e.g., treatment for dual diagnoses, or mental illness simultaneously occurring with substance abuse), wraparound services from multiple providers may be needed to supplement basic services. A case management and case planning approach by officers will improve the chances of effectively treating women, rather than simply referring them to outside services.

### **Characteristics of Gender-Specific, Substance Abuse Treatment Programs – 2009**

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 60 percent of state prison female inmates meet DSM-IV criteria for drug abuse or dependence.<sup>14</sup> Because substance abuse is a pivotal concern in the lives of many female offenders, it is important to consider what happens when substance abuse treatment programs cater specifically to women. Oser et al<sup>15</sup> conducted an analysis of data from the National Criminal Justice Treatment Practices Survey, focusing on responses from 217 community-based, substance abuse treatment directors. Within these community based programs, approximately 75 percent of clientele were involved with the criminal justice system. Findings indicated that programs targeted exclusively at women are more likely to have female leadership, and tend to have more community support than treatment programs which are not gender specific. These programs also tend to have a greater number of treatment approaches offered to participants. Women-specific programs are more likely to offer housing assistance,

<sup>14</sup> Bloom, B., Owen, B., and S. Covington. 2005. "A Summary of Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders. *NIC Publication No. 02-0418*. U.S. Department of Justice: National Institute of Corrections, Washington, DC.

<sup>15</sup> Oser, C., Knudsen, H., Stanton-Tindall, M., and C. Leukefeld. 2009. "The Adoption of Wraparound Services Among Substance Abuse Treatment Organizations: The Role of a Women-Specific Program." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 103(1), S82-90.

mental health counseling and legal assistance, and wraparound services which have been identified as helping to reduce recidivism than programs which are not exclusively for women. These programs stress the importance of addressing both material and psychological needs of their participants, looking beyond the mere issue of addiction.

### **Annotated Bibliography:**

#### **Suggested Readings on Gender-Responsive Strategies, Research and Practices**

Blanchette, K., and S.L. Brown. 2006. *The assessment and treatment of women offenders: An integrative perspective*. Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Publisher's

**Description:** The book provides a review of the research literature to guide evidence-based practice in the assessment and treatment of adult female offenders. An historical overview of women's crime and imprisonment is followed by a global review of various theories of female criminality. The remainder of the book reviews the psychology of criminal conduct, with a specific focus on three psychological principles of effective intervention: risk, need and responsivity.

Bliss, M., Cook, S., and N. Kaslow. 2006. "An ecological approach to understanding incarcerated women's responses to abuse." *Women & Therapy*, 29 (3/4), 97-116.

**Publisher's Description:** Although women are often criticized for not leaving abusive relationships, most abused women actively attempt to protect themselves. This study proposed an ecological model to explain strategic responses to abuse, evaluating factors at four levels: Childhood, Relationship, Individual Impact of Abuse, and Community. Data were retrospectively collected from 85 incarcerated women, a population that is disproportionately affected by trauma and has unique intervention needs. Findings are discussed in terms of intervention implications.

Carr, H. 2007. "A Woman-Centered Approach for Female Offenders in New Mexico." *Corrections Today*, pp. 64-66. August. At:

[http://corrections.state.nm.us/prisons/0807\\_Women\\_in\\_Corrections\\_Article.pdf](http://corrections.state.nm.us/prisons/0807_Women_in_Corrections_Article.pdf).

**Description:** This article provides a succinct discussion of gender-responsive strategies being used in female offender programming within the state of New Mexico.

Fretz, R., Erickson, J., and A. Mims. 2007. "Re-Entry Programming and Female Offenders: The Case for a Gender Responsive Approach." *Research report prepared for the Community Education Centers*. At:

<http://www.cecintl.com/pdf/research/Female%20Offender%20Research-The%20Case%20for%20Gender%20Responsive.pdf>.

**Description:**

This article summarizes different therapeutic approaches used to work with female offenders, as well as evidence-based, effective group therapy strategies and the importance of meaningful program evaluation.

Herrschaft, B.A., Veysey, B.M., Tubman-Carbone, H.R., and J. Christian. 2009. "Gender differences in the transformation narrative: Implications for revised reentry strategies for female offenders." *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 48(6):463-482.

**Description (Abstract primarily from author):** Several studies have found that men and women differ in how they recount events and experiences. However, they may also differ in the actual experiences of events. A sample of 37 individuals with various stigmatized identities was asked to describe how their lives changed for the better after experiencing difficulty. The narratives revealed that women and men experience role transformation differently. Men refer to status-related factors (e.g., employment, structured recovery programs) while women refer to relationship-related factors (e.g., supportive relationships with friends, partners, family members, spiritual leaders or helping professionals) as integral parts of their narratives. Dominant reentry paradigms rely on a problem-centered, male model of change,

but if women transform differently, revised female-specific reentry strategies which include acknowledgement of self-esteem, relationship, and recovery issues, are necessary for women.

Livers, M. and T. Hiers. 2007. "Gender-Responsive Programs: Addressing the Needs of Female Offenders." *Corrections Today*, August. At:

[http://www.aca.org/publications/pdf/Livers\\_Aug07.pdf](http://www.aca.org/publications/pdf/Livers_Aug07.pdf).

**Description:** This article gives a review of services provided by the state of Maryland in its treatment of female offenders.

Reisig, M., Holtfreter, K., and M. Morash. 2006. "Assessing Recidivism Risk Across Female Pathways to Crime." *Justice Quarterly*. 23(3), pp. 384-405.

**Author's Description:** Guided by Daly's (1992, 1994) pathways to crime framework, we use a sample of women under community supervision in Minnesota and Oregon to evaluate the LSI-R's (Level of Supervision Inventory—Revised, used to classify offenders as "high," "medium," and "low" recidivism risks) performance across offender subgroups. The results show that the LSI-R misclassifies a significant portion of socially and economically marginalized women with gendered offending contexts. Predictive accuracy was observed for women who did not follow gendered pathways into criminality, whose offending context was similar to males, and who occupied a relatively advantaged social location.

Ritchie, P. 2006. *Annotated Bibliography on Women Offenders: Prisons, Jails, Community Corrections, and Juvenile Justice, Web Accessible items from 2001 through March 2006*. U.S. Department of Justice: National Institute of Corrections Information Center. At:

<http://nicic.org/Library/021385>.

**Description:** This annotated bibliography provides a citation and brief description of 99 items accessible on the web on women offenders' in prison, jail, community corrections and girls in the juvenile justice system.

Salisbury, E.J. and P. Van Voorhis. 2009. "Gendered Pathways: A Quantitative Investigation of Women Probationers' Paths to Incarceration." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 36(6): 541-66.

**Description:** This article is an analysis of survey and interview data from 313 female probationers. Findings indicated three gendered pathways to female offender incarceration, including; 1) childhood victimization as it relates to mental illness and substance abuse, 2) offenders' dysfunctional intimate relationships for that engender adult victimization, and 3) how social and human capital affect employment/financial problems which increase the likelihood of imprisonment.

Schram, P., Koons-Witt, B., Williams, F., and M. McShane. 2006. "Supervision Strategies and Approaches for Female Parolees: Examining the Link Between Unmet Needs and Parolee Outcome." *Crime & Delinquency* 52(3): 450-72.

**Description:** This article provides an assessment of the needs of 546 female parolees indicated at the time of intake. Findings indicate that women are chronically underassessed for having addiction treatment needs as well as employment, housing, and other assistance needs. Such underassessment may be due to increasing use of parole supervision or custody instead of treatment programs in parole agencies.

Shaffer, D., Hartman, J., and S. Johnson Listwan. 2009. "Drug Abusing Women in the Community: The Impact of Drug Court Involvement on Recidivism." *Journal of Drug Issues* 39(4): 803-27.

**Description:** This article includes an assessment of the recidivism tendencies of moderate to high-risk drug court participants and probationers. Findings indicate that female drug court participants had much lower rates of recidivism than their counterparts on probation.

VanGundy-Yoder, A. 2008. "Gender Responsive Programming for Female Offenders." *Agenda for Social Justice by the Society for the Study of Social Problems*. At: [http://www.sssp1.org/File/Agenda\\_For\\_Social\\_Justice\\_2008\\_Chapter\\_7.pdf](http://www.sssp1.org/File/Agenda_For_Social_Justice_2008_Chapter_7.pdf).

**Description:** This article discusses challenges specific to female offenders, as well as policy solutions and recommendations to increase gender responsiveness in treating offenders.

Van Voorhis, P., Wright, M., Salisbury, E., and A. Bauman. 2010. "Women's Risk Factors and Their Contributions to Existing Risk/Needs Assessment: The Current Status of a Gender-Responsive Supplement." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 37(3): 261-88.

**Description:** Van Voorhis et al. tested a series of gender-responsive assessment models for their contributions to widely used gender-neutral risk needs assessments given to offenders. These assessment tools provided a more accurate understanding of the following aspects of female offenders' lives : (a) parental stress, family support, self-efficacy, educational assets, housing safety, anger/hostility, and current mental health factors in probation samples; (b) child abuse, anger/hostility, relationship dysfunction, family support, and current mental health factors among prisoners; and (c) adult victimization, anger/hostility, educational assets, and family support among released inmates.