

**ANALELE ȘTIINȚIFICE
ALE
UNIVERSITĂȚII „ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” DIN IAȘI
(SERIE NOUĂ)**

**SCIENTIFICAL ANNALS
OF
„ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” UNIVERSITY OF IAȘI
(NEW SERIES)**

**SOCIOLOGIE
ȘI ASISTENȚĂ SOCIALĂ
SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK**

TOM XII / Nr. 2

December 2019



Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași

**ANALELE ȘTIINȚIFICE ALE UNIVERSITĂȚII „ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” DIN IAȘI
(SERIE NOUĂ) SOCIOLOGIE ȘI ASISTENȚĂ SOCIALĂ**

ISSN: 2065-3131 (print); **ISSN:** 2066-8961 (online); **ISSN-L:** 2065-3131

The journal is edited by the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences and is published by the Publishing House of „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași.

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All submissions will undergo a peer-group review process.

The journal is published bi-annually. Number of copies / issue : 200 copies.

Web page: <http://anale.fssp.uaic.ro/index.php/asas>

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Abstracting and indexing services: *Scientific Annals of the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iasi (New Series). Sociology and Social Work Section* are covered by several major indexing services including: **EBSCO**, **PROQUEST CSA-Sociological Abstract**, **PROQUEST-Social Services Abstracts**, **PROQUEST-Worldwide Political Science Abstracts**, **CEEOL**, **Ulrich**, **IBSS**, **INDEX COPERNICUS**, **SCIOPIO** and **CNCIS** (2008-2011: **B+** category).

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Women and Gendered Penalties. Risks and Needs of Female Prisoners

Doina BALAHUR¹, George Marian ICHIM²

Abstract

This article aims to be an introduction to gender differences in the risks and needs of those in detention. First, we refer to six guiding principles for the development of a gender responsive criminal justice system: 1. acknowledge that gender makes a difference; 2. create an environment based on safety, dignity, and respect; 3. address substance abuse, trauma and mental health issues through integrate and culturally relevant services; 4. develop policies, practices and programmes that are relational and promote healthy connections to children and family; 5. provide women with opportunities to improve their socio-economic conditions; 6. establish a system of community supervision and re-entry with comprehensive, collaborative services. Starting from these six principles, the article briefly describes three dimensions of gender programs and services for female who are in detention, such as: women mental health care, connections with their children and women reintegration in community. Before discussing the gender dimensions of the detention programs, this article also refers to some aspects about women`s criminality and why female prisoners should be treated differently.

Keywords: gender justice, gender programs, women reintegration.

Résumé

Cet article se veut une introduction aux différences de genre dans les risques et les besoins des personnes en détention. Premièrement, nous nous référons à six principes directeurs pour le développement d'un système de justice pénale sensible au genre: 1. reconnaître que le genre fait la différence; 2. créer un environnement basé sur la sécurité, la dignité et le respect; 3. traiter les problèmes de toxicomanie, de traumatisme et de santé mentale par le biais de services culturels et intégrés pertinents; 4. élaborer des politiques, des pratiques et des programmes qui soient relationnels et promouvoir des liens sains avec la famille et les enfants; 5. offrir aux femmes des possibilités d'améliorer leurs conditions socio-économiques; 6. établir un système de supervision et de réadaptation communautaire avec des services complets et intégrés en collaboration. Sur la base de ces six principes, l'article

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décrit brièvement trois dimensions des programmes et services pour les femmes en détention, tels que: les soins de santé mentale des femmes, les relations avec leurs propres enfants et la réintégration des femmes dans la communauté. Avant de discuter des dimensions sexospécifiques des programmes de détention, cet article couvre également certains aspects de la criminalité des femmes et explique pourquoi les détenues devraient être traitées différemment.

Mots-clés: justice de genre, programmes de genre, réintégration des femmes.

Rezumat

Acest articol își propune să fie o introducere a diferențelor de gen în riscurile și nevoile celor aflați în detenție. În primul rând, ne referim la șase principii directe pentru dezvoltarea unui sistem de justiție penală care răspunde de gen: 1. să recunoaștem că genul face diferența; 2. să creeze un mediu bazat pe siguranță, demnitate și respect; 3. să abordeze abuzul de substanțe, traumele și problemele de sănătate mintală prin servicii integrate și culturale relevante; 4. să dezvolte politici, practici și programe care să fie relaționale și să promoveze conexiuni sănătoase cu familia și copiii; 5. să ofere femeilor oportunități de îmbunătățire a condițiilor lor socio-economice; 6. să stabilească un sistem de supraveghere și reabilitare comunitară cu servicii complete, colaborativ integrate. Pornind de la aceste șase principii, articolul descrie pe scurt trei dimensiuni ale programelor și serviciilor de gen pentru femeile aflate în detenție, precum: îngrijirea sănătății mintale a femeilor, conexiunile cu proprii copii și reintegrarea femeilor în comunitate. Înainte de a discuta despre dimensiunile de gen ale programelor de detenție, acest articol se referă, de asemenea, la unele aspecte legate de criminalitatea femeilor și de ce femeile deținute ar trebui să fie tratate diferit.

Cuvinte-cheie: justiție de gen, programe de gen, reintegrarea femeilor.

1. Introduction

Based on a review of the available literature, it is anticipated that this study will provide a thorough analysis of several aspects about female prisoners. This article starts from six guiding principles for the development of a gender responsive criminal justice system. The guiding principles are: 1. acknowledge that gender makes a difference; 2. create an environment based on safety, dignity, and respect; 3. address substance abuse, trauma and mental health issues through comprehensive, integrate and culturally relevant services; 4. develop policies, practices and programmes that are relational and promote healthy connections to children, family and significant others; 5. provide women with opportunities to improve their socio-economic conditions; 6. establish a system of community supervision and re-entry with comprehensive, collaborative services (Bloom, Owen and Covington 2003, 51-53). In connection with that we meet four related theories: relational theory, pathway theory, trauma theory and addiction theory. Relational theory maintains that women are relational and that „the primary motivation for women throughout their life is the establishment of a strong sense of connection with others” (Covington and Bloom 2008, 16). Relational theory also maintains that women and men`s psychological development differs.

Relationships are portrayed as fundamental to women`s sense of identity and self worth (Hannah-Moffat 2008, 201). Pathway theory signals the importance of gender-specific adversities in producing and sustaining women`s criminality, namely histories of abuse, mental illness tied to early life experiences, addictions, economic and social marginality, homelessness and relationships. According to pathway theory, the profound differences between the lives of men and women shape their patterns of criminal offending (Gehring 2016, 8). Trauma and addiction theories are both used to underscore the importance of ensuring that gender penalties are „trauma informed” (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996, 472). To be trauma-informed requires service providers to shift from a logic of security and control to a logic of caring treatment. This shift avoids triggering trauma or re-traumatising the individual and requires that counsellors and other staff adjust their behavior to encourage the coping capacities of the prisoners, enabling them to manage their trauma symptoms (van Voorhis *et al.* 2010, 268).

2. Women`s criminality

In recent decades, the number of women under criminal justice supervision has increased dramatically. Although the rate of incarceration for women continues to be far lower than the rate for men. Women are arrested and incarcerated primarily for property and drug offenses, with drug offenses representing the largest source of the increase (36%) in the number of women prisoners in 1998. Interestingly, the proportion of women imprisoned for violent crimes has continued to decrease. The rate at which women commit murder has been declining since 1980, and the per capita rate of murders committed by women in 1998 was the lowest recorded since 1976. Of the women in state prisons in 1998, 28 percent had been incarcerated for a violent. Many of the violent crimes committed by women are against a spouse, ex-spouse, or partner, and the women committing such crimes are likely to report having been physically and/or sexually abused, often by the person they assaulted (Bloom 2004, 3).

Current sentencing laws are based on male characteristics and male crime and thus fail to take into account the reality of women's lives, characteristics, responsibilities, and roles in crime. Until recently, criminological theory and research focused on explaining male criminality, with males seen as the normal subjects of criminology. Historically, theories of female criminality have ranged from biological to psychological and from economic to social. Two approaches may be observed in the literature. In the first, theorists have attempted to explain female criminality individually, without recourse to theories of male criminality. Unfortunately, many such theorists employ assumptions about the female psyche that are blatantly sexist and without empirical support. The second approach applies traditional theories, developed to explain male criminality, to women. This creates the „generalizability problem” (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988, 507-508). In addressing this problem, criminologists have tested theories derived from

all male samples to see whether these also apply to girls and women (Cernkovich and Giordano 1979; Figueria-McDonough 1987).

However, while criminological theories have begun to include more accounts of the victimization of women, a gap within the literature still exists in terms of including female offenders due to diverted interests (Orr 2018, 6). Despite the inclusion of women within criminological literature, there is still an emphasis on women as victims rather than offenders (Harrison *et al.* 2015, 386).

In creating appropriate services for women in the criminal justice system, it is critical that we first acknowledge and understand the importance of gender differences, as well as the gender-related dynamics inherent in any society.

Although research is unanimous in underlining the particularly detrimental effects of prison on women, their special needs are rarely taken into consideration during imprisonment. The fact that the proportion of male prisoners has always been vastly larger than that of women in the prison system has resulted in a general disregard to the gender-specific needs of women, as well as a denial of many services and opportunities, accessible to male prisoners.

Recognizing the need to provide global standards with regard to the treatment of women offenders and prisoners, and taking into account a number of relevant resolutions adopted by different United Nations bodies, which called upon Member States to respond appropriately to the needs of women offenders and prisoners, the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules) were adopted on 21 December 2010. The Bangkok Rules do not replace, but rather complement, as appropriate, the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) in connection with the treatment of women prisoners and alternatives to imprisonment for women offenders. Therefore, all relevant provisions in those two set of rules continue to apply to all prisoners and offenders without discrimination. While some of the rules contained in the Bangkok Rules bring further clarity to existing provisions in the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and the Tokyo Rules in their application to women prisoners and offenders, others cover new areas (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2014, 16).

This article use gender as a key sensitizing concept in a comparative analysis of the experiences of male and female prisoners. In our analysis, gender is both centred and de-centred: de-centred in that the conceptual focus is gender-neutral; centred in that the analytic framework and interpretive lens are formed around a consideration of differences in the findings between the male and female (Crewe, Hulley and Wright 2017, 1361).

3. Gender programmes and services

Majority of gender programmes in prisons begin from the premise that men and women are different in terms of their level and type of risk and need. Belknap and Holsinger (2006, 52) argue that gender responsive approaches

„require an acknowledgement of the lived realities of womens` lives, including the pathways they travel to criminal offending and the relationships that shape their lives”. In other words we can say that this acknowledgement applies to the continuum of correctional intervention from risk assessment and needs identification through to the development and delivery of treatment programmes and services. Proponents of gender responsive approaches argue that policies, programmes and procedures that reflect gender-based differences can make the management of women offenders more effective, increase resources, improve programme delivery and improve the gender responsiveness of services and programmes (Hannah-Moffat 2008, 193).

Starting from the principles described by Bloom, Owen and Covington (2003), we will make some references on women mental health care, connections with their children and women reintegration in community. *Mental health care*. To be member of the staff in the criminal justice system, it`s important to know that majority of female offenders have been physically and sexually abused, both as children and as adults. Women often have their first encounters with the law as juveniles who have run away from home to escape violence and physical or sexual abuse. Prostitution, property crime, and drug use can then become ways of life (Bloom, Owen and Covington 2004, 33).

Mental health programmes are seen as a priority, with women being considered as in particular need of these programmes. Fortin (2004, 38) say that „one major concern with women offenders is the prevalence of mental health needs. Similarly, the needs of low functioning women who need assistance in daily living skills must be addressed. Also, given the added stress associated with prolonged incarceration, timeliness of program participation is of great importance for women serving long term sentences (10 years and overs)”.

Mental health and long-term incarcerations are positioned as responsivity considerations and implied gender differences. The strategy devotes considerable attention to mental health programmes. Concerns about gender and treatment focus on and prioritise mental health needs and the needs of low functioning women. Women need to address emotional regulation issues which underlie other needs such as cognitive functioning and substance abuse. This psychologisation of women, along with the use of dominate correctional cognitive behavioural for incarcerated women, is the subject of extensive feminist critique (Pollack 2006, 614-615).

Female prisoners and their children. When female prisoners have children, problematic patterns often exist in the family life. Unfortunately, corrections programs designed to strengthen mothers' parenting skills typically focus only narrowly on promoting skill-building, but not on broader family systems issues that will serve as the context for future maternal involvement (McHale and Sullivan 2008, 195-196). As a result, any gains women make in knowledge or skills while incarcerated may be lost if they have no opportunity to participate in

decision-making about their children and no meaningful connections to active parenting during the period of incarceration (Cecil *et al.* 2008, 513).

Children outside prison are a cause of great distress to their mothers, who worry about the separation, whether the child will be taken away from them or not and how they are being cared for. Nevertheless, the rights and needs of dependent children left outside prison are rarely taken into account when taking decisions to detain or sentence their mothers (Visher and Travis 2003, 94). At the international level, the adoption of the Bangkok Rules represents an important step in this regard, as they require judicial authorities to take into account the best interests of children when taking decisions on pretrial measures to be applied to women suspects and when sentencing women offenders (Gilham 2012, 91).

Unfortunately, since women prisoners are often housed at a long distance from their homes, due to the limited number of female prisons, they are likely to receive fewer visits from their families compared to their male counterparts. However, the special needs of women to have access to their families and children are rarely taken into account in regulations relating to prison visits (Strozier *et al.* 2011, 58).

What can be done to maintain family links?

- encourage visits to female prisoners, and where possible assist with transportation, especially where visits to mothers are concerned. Never charge for prison visits;
- extend the length of visits when families confront difficulties in visiting due to the long distances involved, lack of resources and transport;
- provide overnight accommodation for families travelling a long way, free-of-charge (Radosh 2002, 306-307);
- ensure that visits with children are always open (allowing contact) and special rooms are available that provide informal communication in a pleasant and comfortable environment;
- if prisoners have access to telephones, increase the telephone calls female prisoners are allowed to make to their families if they are unable to visit due to the long distance;
- never prohibit family visits as a disciplinary measure in response to rule breaking by female prisoners (Smith *et al.* 2004, 192).

Reintegration in community. If women are to be successfully reintegrated back into society after serving their sentences, there must be a continuum of care that can connect them to a community. In addition, the planning process must begin as soon as women begin serving their sentences. However, women reentering the community after incarceration require transitional services from the institution to help them reestablish themselves and their families. These former prisoners also need transitional services from community corrections and supervision to assist them as they begin living on their own again (Richie 2001, 371).

The restorative model of justice is yet another means for assisting female offenders as they prepare to reintegrate themselves into their neighborhoods and communities. The framework for restorative justice involves relationships, healing, and community, a model in keeping with female psychosocial developmental theory. To reduce the likelihood of future offending among known lawbreakers, official intervention should emphasize restorative rather than retributive goals. Offenders should be provided opportunities to increase their “caring capacity” through victim restitution, community service, and moral development opportunities, rather than be subject to experiences that encourage violence and egocentrism (Pollock *et al.* 2012, 64).

The community integration programs must be design to assist offenders in their transition to the community by offering them relevant information. The programs must aims to: provide factual information surrounding community living; influence participants’ readiness to integrate into society; decrease stress associated with community living; provide an opportunity for participants to objectively evaluate their lifestyle; influence motivation to be successful; identify and develop goals that will assist with personal progress; increase awareness of possible roadblocks to goals; acquaint participants with the development of affirmative action alternatives; and increase participants’ awareness of valuable resources available in their community (Bracken, Deane and Morrissette 2009, 64; Brown and Ross 2010, 38; Baldry 2010, 255). By example, to maximise chances of a successful outcome, it is important to assess an individual woman’s needs, establish a plan to address any and all barriers to her employment, and ensure that interventions are sequenced appropriately. Very often employment is the final stage in a woman’s recovery from a life that involved offending (Carlton and Segrave 2016, 283-284). Unpaid work as a sentence can empower a person, providing a work structure and new skill sets.

Another example brings to the fore that participating in vocational, educational, and substance abuse programming while in prison decreases the chances of re-offending. Enhancing the vocational skills of incarcerated women reduced recidivism (Weiss, Hawkins and Despinos 2010, 261). Research has proven that using the traditional programming model, which was based on male prisoners, does not coincide with the needs of the female offender population. Moreover, research shows gender-responsive treatment for female offenders provides a treatment approach that can tackle the specific needs and life circumstances of women offenders individually (Fortune *et al.* 2010, 22; Herrschaft *et al.* 2009, 469; Salisbury and Van Voorhis 2009, 552). Although gender-responsive treatment has been acknowledged as effective, and there are more gender responsive treatment programs available for women, more progress is needed in identifying, creating, and implementing gender-responsive treatment programs for women offenders (Cecil *et al.* 2008, 515).

4. Conclusions

The current outlook for gender treatment and services for women offenders is mixed. Research has proven that using the traditional programming model, which was based on male prisoners, does not coincide with the needs of the female offender population. Moreover, research shows gender programmes for female offenders provides a treatment approach that can tackle the specific needs and life circumstances of women offenders individually. Although gender treatment has been acknowledged as effective, and there are more gender responsive treatment programs available for women, more progress is needed in identifying, creating, and implementing gender treatment programs for women offenders.

A key imperative arising from our analysis is the need for further critical research into post-release support structures and systems. A gender responsive approaches within the corrections and post-release realm do not necessarily produce better outcomes for women simply because they are explicitly labelled as „gender focused”. There is a burgeoning field of research documenting critical implications associated with gender responsive policies adopted in various jurisdictional contexts internationally. These include expansion and the increased imposition of risk combined with heavily structured, proscriptive frameworks for support provision that are not only failing to reflect women’s experiences and/or needs but which, at worst, perpetuate serial imprisonment and the entrenchment of social harm. There is a clear need to rethink and expand the parameters and measures of success within knowledge and practice, to reflect the complexity of experiences.

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