Exploring Women’s Experience in a Hostel on Release from Custody

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Abstract: This paper explores the experience of women offenders residing in the De Paul Hostel after release from custody. Recent studies in Ireland and Britain indicate that on leaving prison women face many challenges and difficulties. The De Paul Hostel offers supported transitional accommodation for women leaving prison. This paper discusses the women’s views on their time in the hostel and their opinions about interventions from the staff and the Probation Service. It reveals the importance of the key working system whereby each woman was assigned a staff member to work with, the consistent and flexible approach of staff and the value of education and training, peer support, family involvement and practical help.

Keywords: Women offenders, imprisonment, Dóchas Centre, gender-specific services, therapeutic relationship, resettlement, De Paul Hostel, homelessness.

Introduction

This paper is based on a study exploring the views and experiences of women offenders on release from prison staying at the De Paul Hostel since 2007. The De Paul Hostel is located on the North Side of Dublin near the Dóchas Centre (Mountjoy Female Prison). It offers supported accommodation to women leaving custody. It provides six bedsit apartments, and the length of tenancy is six months. The Probation Service is the sole referral agent.

The study, between August 2011 and March 2012, set out to capture the views and opinions of women who resided there. It was prompted by the fact that since it opened in 1999 the population of the Dóchas Centre

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has increased year on year. Given the seemingly unending rise in the numbers incarcerated there, it is worth exploring services available to positively resettle the high number of women offenders in prison and prevent their return.

The literature indicates that gender-responsive services based on relationships between staff and women are effective (Malloch and McIvor, 2011). Community-based services should be based on partnership between the woman and agency (Malloch et al., 2008). The relationship between the woman and staff should be a safe one, allowing trust to develop.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with four women. From an ethical perspective it was hoped that the process would be an empowering one for the women involved. There were clear limitations to this study. For one, each of the women that were interviewed was able to manage her tenancy and had positive stories to tell. This study does not capture the views of those women who were unable to sustain their tenancies or who broke the conditions of their statutory orders. It was not possible to trace some of these women; it was possible that they had returned to the criminal justice system and were before the Courts. It would have been unethical to interview these women. A number of the women who were contacted by the management of the De Paul Hostel did not wish to participate. They indicated that they did not feel confident enough to be interviewed. There is a need for further, more comprehensive research to be conducted.

Dóchas Centre

In 1999 the Dóchas Centre opened with a bed capacity of 80. By 2003 the population had grown to 103; 2009 saw the daily average number of prisoners rise to 110 (Irish Prison Service, 2011). Dr Catherine Comiskey’s 2006 Report, Hazardous Journeys to Better Places (Comiskey et al., 2006) painted a bleak picture for women offenders in Ireland. It found that women leaving the Dóchas Centre faced serious risks to their welfare and safety: ‘Immediately upon release women’s experiences ranged from gang rape, overdose, prostitution, poly drug use, homelessness and/or some other exposure to considerable risk’ (Comiskey et al., 2006, p. 40).

In 2007, as part of a commitment by the Probation Service to respond to Dr Comiskey’s findings, a through-care model of intervention was
introduced. The De Paul Hostel was a cornerstone of this policy. It was intended to form part of a transition from custody to an independent law-abiding lifestyle. The aim of the De Paul Hostel has been to provide transitional housing that recognises the complex needs of the women and remains realistic about the progress that can be made in the space of six months. The goal is to move beyond the chaos and challenges that addiction and offending bring, and towards an independent stable life, reducing the risk of harm and of a return to the Dóchas Centre.

Currently the bed capacity of the Dóchas Centre is being expanded, with an additional 20 beds coming on stream in 2012. The new accommodation is housed in a building that was initially used as staff quarters. When construction work was taking place it was planned that this building would become a committal section of the Dóchas Centre. The accommodation was intended to comprise dormitories, with up to nine women sharing a room. This marked a departure from the ethos of the Dóchas Centre and a move away from a gender-sensitive approach. In December 2011 Michael Donnellan was appointed Director of the Irish Prison Service and his appointment has seen a reversal of this policy shift. When the new building now comes on stream it will accommodate 20 women and will be a privilege area of the Dóchas Centre rewarding prisoners for good behaviour.

**De Paul Hostel**

The De Paul Hostel accommodates women leaving custody at the end of their sentence; including those on Part Suspended Sentence Supervision Orders and supervised temporary release. Women in residence are subject to either statutory supervision or voluntary supervision by the Probation Service. The De Paul Hostel has a bed capacity of six. Its occupancy levels ran at 46% in 2003 – its inaugural year.

In 2007 the Probation Service introduced a through-care model of work, which provides that women subject to post-custody supervision will work with the same Probation Officer from the point of incarceration through their sentence and on release. A woman going to reside in the De Paul Hostel on release is supervised by a Probation Officer from the Probation Team at the Dóchas Centre. The management of the De Paul Hostel moved towards relaxing the criteria for referral. This allowed the Probation Service to refer women who had higher levels of need with regard to both substance abuse and mental health issues. That year saw
occupancy levels of 72%; six women were resettled and eight were unable to sustain their tenancy.

In 2009 the occupancy levels rose by 6 percentage points to 90%, the highest level since the hostel opened (De Paul Ireland, 2010, p. 15). Four women were resettled while four were unable to sustain their tenancy. 2010 saw occupancy levels reach 95%, with four women resettled and one woman unable to sustain her tenancy.

**Women’s offending behaviour**

In order to understand what is best practice for professionals working in this area, a review of relevant literature was carried out. This revealed that ‘women’s involvement in crime has become only a little more prevalent, and the seriousness of their offending has either increased marginally or remained static’ (Hedderman, 2011, p. 29). Despite this a statistical review indicates that the number of women held in custody in Ireland and internationally is increasing.

In 2010, 1701 women were committed to prison in Ireland. This figure represents over 12% of the persons committed to prison in 2010. Between 2005 and 2010 there was an 87% increase in the number of women committed to prison. (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2011: 1)

This has become a concern for those working with women offenders (Malloch and McIvor, 2011). The reintegration of women offenders on release is of utmost importance in this context. The provision of supported housing is a significant factor that can smooth and support their return to the community. ‘Put simply it is no exaggeration to say for many women the trials begin once they are released from prison’ (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007, p. 25).

**Housing**

In 2010 The Irish Penal Reform Trust published the Reintegration of Prisoners in Ireland report, which identified housing as key to successful reintegration and highlighted the De Paul Hostel as one of two services where: ‘The provision of services structured around multiple needs transcends the usual remit of a housing project by acknowledging that people in need of housing often require more than just a roof over their head’ (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010, p. 27).
The Corston Report (Corston, 2007) shows that more women than men were remanded in custody and the nature of women’s offending is less serious. The report also pointed to the importance of housing. ‘In particular, more supported accommodation should be provided for women on release to break the cycle of repeat offending’ (Corston, 2007, p. 11).

**Gender-sensitive approach and a therapeutic relationship**

Research indicates that it is imperative to adopt a gender-sensitive approach; one which recognises that women offend for different reasons to men: ‘The consistent message from research literature on women offenders includes the fact that they tend to have a history of unmet personal, health and structural needs, compounded very often by substance misuse and childcare responsibilities’ (Sheehan et al., 2010, p. 349).

Women’s journey into the criminal justice system is often characterised by experiences of childhood sexual abuse, sexual abuse as an adult, homelessness and substance abuse. Their problems are compounded by their roles as mothers (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007).

Research literature highlights the importance of the relationship between the professional and the woman as the foundation to achieve change. Such an approach recognises ‘the complexity of women’s problems, the significance of stigma, trauma and abuse, the importance to women of the supervisory relationship, the relevance of self-efficacy and the nature of barriers to compliance’ (Malloch and McIvor, 2011, p. 325).

Research also supports the therapeutic relationship as the driver for change in working with women offenders. ‘The relevance of a strong relational dimension to effective services for women ... has been highlighted by a number of commentators’ (Sheehan et al., 2008, p. 302).

For a supervision relationship to be therapeutic it must be based on identifying strengths within the woman. The Fawcett Society commissioned Gelsthorpe et al. (2007) to undertake a study of provision for women offenders in the community. ‘The authors found that in contrast to their personal relationships which women described as abusive and/or controlling, relationships with their supervisors (social workers or project workers) were usually said to be characterised by openness, trust and a degree of reciprocity and women often reported receiving valued
practical assistance and support from them’ (Malloch and McIvor, 2011, p. 334).

A gender-sensitive approach also recognises that women offenders can face high levels of stigma and become isolated from family and friends. ‘Double deviance’ refers to how many women found themselves twice punished for deviant behaviour; by the criminal justice system and by informal sanctions from family and society (Heidensohn, 2006, p. 2).

Strong pro-social relationships act as a protective factor for women offenders. ‘The research evidence presents a clear picture of close links between successful reintegration and positive lifestyle choices supported by pro-social networks’ (Deakin and Spenser, 2011, p. 243).

**The women’s views**

Two former and two current residents of the De Paul Hostel were interviewed for this study. Grace, Patricia, Tracey and Kate had their details changed in order to preserve their anonymity. These women provide a picture of what worked for them on leaving prison. They each faced difficulties on release but have managed these sufficiently to remain out of prison and the criminal justice system. From interviews with the four women a number of themes emerged, confirming much of what the literature tells us about effective work with female offenders. The women interviewed for the study had a range of unmet needs. In particular, issues highlighted were isolation from family, history of homelessness, addiction and mental health problems.

Each of the women described the welcome she received on her arrival to the De Paul Hostel.

*There was a meal made, I felt so welcome. I went up to my bedroom and opened the fridge and there was food. That was good because when you’re homeless you don’t eat. I kept thinking ‘thank God it’s clean’. (Patricia)*

The women all described an event being created by staff around their arrival to the hostel. This type of service delivery is crucial, as ‘Post Prison provision arguably needs to empower women both psychologically and materially so that women can re-evaluate and distance themselves from the attitudes and values which characterised their lives before and during prison’ (Gelsthorpe *et al.*, 2007, p. 25).
The women praised the key working system that operates in the De Paul Hostel, describing it as a partnership. Each of the women was assigned a key worker and a secondary key worker to work towards goals and manage their tenancy. Describing the process, one woman said:

*It’s trying to work a plan out for what my needs are. I think it’s good and you need it because your key worker is trying to find out what’s best for you.*

*(Tracy)*

The women said that they had prioritised attending their key working appointments. This style of working is effective because it brings the women on board and reflects their own hopes and aspirations. ‘Evidence adds up to a need to work with women in non-authoritarian cooperative settings, where women are empowered to engage in social and personal change’ (Gelsthorpe, 2011, p. 131).

The De Paul Hostel lowered its threshold for accepting residents in 2007. The aim was to meet women where they were at, rather than where services wanted them to be. This approach allows the De Paul Hostel to work with women who are taking steps to stabilise their drug or alcohol use. As a result the women felt they could be honest about their drug or alcohol status and that they could trust the staff with this information.

*I told the manager I’m still dabbling and even if I got the place and if I dabble I wouldn’t be able to come back. I remember she said to me if you use, you can still come back, that gave me a safe place, if I had a slip I could still come back.*

*(Kate)*

These supportive pro-social relationships are of the utmost importance to women who may leave custody isolated from family and friends. ‘Women offenders feel they work best with workers who listen to them – who are “straight up” and do not talk down to them’ (Nugent and Loucks, 2011, p. 19).

The literature points to the fact that women offenders can often be seen as troublesome with high levels of needs, they can require more frequent contact than men and they can have high expectations of what their social workers, Probation Officers and case workers should do for them (Malloch and McIvor, 2011).

The De Paul Hostel is staffed 24 hours per day and during working hours there is also support by volunteers. It is clear that the women
availed of this support and found it helpful. In addition to seeking higher levels of contact with their supervisors, however, female probationers were also thought by some social workers to be more responsive to less formal contact and more likely than men to seek contact with their supervisors on an ad hoc basis as issues arose (Malloch and McIvor, 2011).

The Probation Service

The Probation Service is the primary source of referral to the De Paul Hostel. The women who reside there are subject to supervision either as a result of a court-ordered Probation Bond or a Post Release Supervision Order or as part of supervised temporary release. It was clear that the women understood that there was interagency dialogue going on between the De Paul Hostel and their Probation Officer.

_The Probation Officer talks to my key worker and asks what do we need for moving on, what do I need out of this place. They are all for you, there’s no point turning against them._ (Grace)

When difficulties did arise, such as when Grace had broken some conditions of her tenancy, she appreciated the advice given to her.

_The Probation Officer said I may stop or I’d end up back inside. She was right, common sense really._ (Grace)

The partnership between the Probation Service and the De Paul Hostel works in the best interests of the women: ‘it would appear that to reflect best practice, community-based services for women should, where possible, be based on multi-agency co-operation’ (Malloch et al., 2008, p. 390). It is important that the Probation Service and the De Paul Hostel are working closely together to meet the needs of women offenders.

Education and training

Baroness Corston’s Report recommended that ‘Life skills should be given a much higher priority within the education, training and employment pathway and women must be individually assessed to ensure that their needs are met’ (Corston, 2007, p. 48). Each of the four women I interviewed attended courses throughout her time in the De Paul Hostel.
There was an expectation by staff that the women would avail of education and training and it formed an important part of the work they had to do. The approach of the staff was one of support and involved enabling the women to take steps towards a return to education and training.

*I knew I was going to have to do something. My key worker rang the course, said to me there’s a guy who wants to talk to you and she just handed me the phone. I started yapping, went for interview two days later and then got a place on it a couple of weeks after that.* (Kate)

The women also stated that education and training had given a structure to their day.

*I was going to my course from eight in the morning until the evening. The whole day was gone, that was grand, I was kept busy.* (Patricia)

Beyond providing the women with a routine, education also built on what they had achieved in custody.

*I got the bug for learning in prison. I had no qualifications before I went to prison.* (Tracy)

Education and training empowered these women and increased their self-esteem and self-belief.

**Rules and conditions of tenure**

All the women understood the need for rules and conditions in the De Paul Hostel.

*Rules have to be there because if the rules weren’t here in the house, the house would go to bits.* (Kate)

Other women agreed; in particular, one former tenant spoke about how in hindsight she appreciated that there was a purpose to the rules. Patricia spoke about how when she left the De Paul Hostel she missed the security and safety that the rules had given her. In her new home provided, through a housing agency, there was less support and staff left at six o’clock in the evening. Patricia understood that this was part of a move toward independent living but she struggled with this.
In terms of the rules and conditions, each woman felt that she could raise issues and concerns she had. They agreed that they had a say in how the house functioned and could raise matters they were frustrated with with the staff.

Oh yeah, anytime I have a problem and I go to any of the staff, it’s sorted, they deal with it and in a professional manner. (Grace)

These views reflect the mutual respect present in the De Paul Hostel, with the women feeling they were treated as equals. ‘Self-efficacy, or self-confidence, is highly relevant to the notion of empowerment and valued by gender-responsive and feminist scholars as a protective factor for women’ (Salisbury et al., 2009).

**Peer support**

The De Paul Hostel encourages women to interact, though it also encourages boundaries in their relationships with one another. There are two communal meals a week and there are group activities. Women can be at different stages of recovery, and there is a need to balance everybody’s needs in the house. It is of interest to see how the women managed these relationships.

No one would ask you anything here. If you wanted to say something, the girls will listen but they won’t ask you. (Grace)

One woman described how when she was struggling to maintain a drug-free status she could rely on peer support not to use drugs or drink alcohol.

The other girls that were here at the time were a great help. I’d say I’m dying for a drink, one girl might be going out and she’d say don’t go out, what do you want in the shop and I’ll get it. (Kate)

The sharing of these pro-social values enforced the ethos of the house.

**Family and friends**

‘Whether or not women are accepted back into the community upon release from prison has a major impact on their ability to reintegrate’ (Fortune et al., 2010, p. 22). The research indicates that many women
become isolated from friends and family when they are sentenced to a custodial sentence. It is important that services support women to rebuild relationships with their family and friends in order to reduce their isolation. The women spoke about how living in the De Paul Hostel allowed them to rebuild relationships with their family. Kate spoke about how her addiction had resulted in her children worrying about her. She said of the De Paul Hostel:

They were delighted I was here and their partners were delighted. My children were made to feel very welcome here. If they visited there would be tea and biscuits laid out for us. (Kate)

She commented that she had lovely memories and photographs taken during her time in the De Paul Hostel. Overall the women felt that their families were welcome to visit them.

**Moving on**

The women expressed different views about moving on from the De Paul Hostel. Two of the women had moved on to other housing and availed of transitional accommodation run by a housing association. Their new homes afforded them more independence with less support than they had been used to at the De Paul Hostel. One woman, Patricia, had left before the roll-out of the De Paul Hostel’s outreach service. Patricia had limited support from her family and found the move to new housing difficult. She missed the support she had enjoyed at the De Paul Hostel.

Some of the women interviewed had experienced difficulties with their mental health, others were in recovery from addiction and some were isolated from their families. It was important that the women who did move on were housed with a housing association. They were on the road to independent living but continued to need support. The importance of a comprehensive outreach service is clearly highlighted by the women as it can take account of their different levels of need and support them to move on from the De Paul Hostel.

**Implications for social work practice and policy in Ireland**

There are a number of implications for social work practice and policy when working with women offenders. These include the following.
1. Flexible and intense service: The Probation Service and other social work agencies should note that a flexible service with high levels of support is likely to be the most effective way of working with women offenders (Malloch and McIvor, 2011). The women interviewed for this study clearly benefited from frequent and intense support from their key worker, staff and volunteers based in the De Paul hostel.

2. Practical help: The role of practical help should not be underestimated and should be incorporated into working with women offenders. Where this was offered to the women who were interviewed it gave them a sense that they were valued and supported, and acted as a component in building trust.

3. Intimate partner violence: The two women who had moved on from the agency had availed of accommodation with a housing agency that works with women made homeless through domestic violence. It is important to recognise the role intimate partner violence has played in some of these women’s journeys. It would be helpful if professionals were aware of the dynamics involved in relationships marked by intimate partner violence and addressed these with the women.

Recommendations

1. Each of the women interviewed spoke positively about their time in the De Paul Hostel. The interviews highlighted a gender-sensitive approach that attempted to meet the women’s unmet needs. Lessons should be learnt from the De Paul Hostel about elements of good work with women offenders. This information could be used to develop further services for women leaving prison in Ireland. In particular its ethos of a gender-sensitive approach and its delivery of a women-only service should be incorporated into additional residential and non-residential programmes for women offenders. The importance of the therapeutic relationship, in particular the emphasis on partnership and mutual respect, should be noted.

2. The women interviewed for this study were aware of interagency dialogue between the Probation Service and the De Paul Hostel. By and large this was positive and the women expressed an understanding of the need for joint working. It is clear that the Probation Service and the De Paul Trust work well together in the best interests of the women.
3. The findings of this study highlight the need to develop step-down accommodation from the De Paul Hostel. The hostel caters for women at different stages in their recovery from addiction. This has its value – the women who were struggling to maintain sobriety found the support of their peers invaluable. Difficulties arose where women felt that others’ relapsing was impacting on their own recovery. Some of the women interviewed felt there should be different accommodation units for women who were stable. Step-down accommodation would benefit women who have achieved change but still require support to sustain this. It would allow them to stabilise in one housing unit and have a level of after-care to support this change in another.

4. Finally, the study calls for the expansion of the Outreach Service for former residents. While residing in the De Paul Hostel the women described having a flexible service at their disposal. This level of service delivery did not create dependency but did foster a sense of empowerment. An outreach service should be client-led and should allow the clients to dip in and out of the service as they require. It should remain in place for a significant period of time: arguably that of the current six-month period.

**Conclusion**

Women offend for different reasons to men. Their offending is linked to a range of unmet needs and problems that prison can accentuate. It is important while working with women post-release that community based services firstly recognise these issues and adopt a gender-sensitive approach. Furthermore, service delivery needs to adapt to engage and intervene in these women’s often chaotic lives. Community-based services need to be based on partnership between the woman and the agency. The relationship between the woman and staff should be a safe one, allowing trust to develop.

Tracy, Kate, Grace and Patricia are the experts on their experience of leaving custody and offending behind. Their views and opinions are strengthened by what the literature tells us about working with women offenders. These women described how they could be isolated from friends and family, face stigma from society; that in some cases they struggled to move on from the De Paul Hostel and missed the safety and sense of community it provided for them. They understood the
importance and value of rules and conditions at the De Paul Hostel, they responded well to being treated as equals by the staff, it was clear that mutual respect played an important role in building trust, and they appreciated the practical help that eased their return to the community.

There were challenges for these women in leaving the Dóchas Centre and returning to the community. They had to manage conditions of release, Statutory Court Orders and supervision. What was important was that they could problem solve with the staff without shirking their responsibilities. Notwithstanding the challenges of residing with five other women, who were at different stages of recovery, these women were able to avail of peer support and seek help from staff when matters became difficult. This also shows the development of important life skills in boundary relationships with peers.

The De Paul Hostel is focused on the women’s needs on leaving custody. There is much for service providers to learn from these women and their hostel experience about what constitutes effective practice in working with women offenders leaving custody and successfully resettling in the community.

References


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