

## The Inspire Women's Project: Managing women offenders within the community

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**Abstract:** While the number of women offenders in Northern Ireland is relatively small compared to the number of men, it is recognised that women's experiences of the criminal justice process can differ significantly from those of men. Service provision and interventions aimed at reducing reoffending have largely been designed for the management of male offenders and there is recognition in recent research that such an approach can have a disproportionate impact on women, their children and families. This article considers the pathways to offending and how they relate to women offenders. It describes the Inspire Women's Project, introduced in Northern Ireland in October 2010, which forms part of the current strategy to manage women offenders and those women vulnerable to offending behaviour.

**Keywords:** Women offenders, gender-specific services, women's centres, Inspire Women's Project, desistance.

### Introduction

Until recently, the approach adopted to managing women offenders in Northern Ireland was no different to that delivered to men, it being assumed that the risk factors resulting in criminal behaviour did not differ between the sexes. However, recent research has shown that gender matters significantly in both the factors that contribute to criminal behaviour and the types of offence committed.

As Convery (2009) states, 'there are significant differences in pathways into and out of crime for men and women. In particular the prevalence

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of static and non-criminogenic factors identified among women who offend and the relatively low reoffending rates for women indicate different pathways for women compared with men.'

Women within the criminal justice system differ from men in that fewer women offend than men, and where they do, women generally commit fewer offences than men. On the whole, women commit less serious offences and are more likely to desist from crime (Arnall and Eagle, 2009). The literature on women offending, although largely focused on adult women and particularly skewed towards women in custody, concludes that gender matters significantly in shaping criminality (Bloom *et al.*, 2003).

There is extensive evidence that women who are involved in offending often have a history of physical and sexual abuse in childhood and into adulthood (Rungay, 2001; Gelsthorpe, 2003). Other factors associated with offending behaviour in women include weak social ties, strained family relationships, abuse of drugs and alcohol, low educational attainments, severe social exclusion, accommodation problems and the strains engendered by child-rearing responsibilities coupled with low income and dependence on state benefits (Byrne and Trew, 2008). It is therefore important that the planning of effective services must take account of the knowledge and understanding of 'factors which are unique or more relevant to women' (Hedderman, 2004, p. 242). Treating women offenders with strategies that focus on male criminogenic factors is recognised as both inefficient and counterproductive in terms of time, resources and outcomes.

Best practice strategies need 'to take into account distinctive features of women's lives and needs in order to facilitate effectiveness' (Gelsthorpe *et al.*, 2007, p. 200). The problem is compounded by the 'lack of research in decisions made by the police, prosecution, probation and courts, and practices adopted in the supervision of women in the community' (Convery, 2009, p. 21).

### **Women offenders in Northern Ireland**

According to the most recent data compiled by the Department of Justice, only 13% (3428) of those who passed through courts in Northern Ireland in 2006 were women. The most commonly committed offence type among women was 'theft', with 11% of women offenders committing this offence compared to only 6% of men.

Indeed, when offences of fraud and forgery are included, such acquisitive-type crime represents 13% of overall women offending compared to 7% for men, which would reflect the propensity for women to engage in financially motivated crimes that are often brought about by family and personal circumstances.

On 31 January 2011, PBNI was supervising 395 women offenders, representing 9% of all offenders under PBNI supervision. The main offence types for women subject to supervision at this time were theft, violence against the person and deception, fraud and forgery offences. An important difference between the genders is that fewer women than men are assessed as high risk in terms of likelihood of reoffending: 19% of women were subject to community supervision on 30 June 2011 compared to 27% of men. Likewise, 2% of all females were assessed as being of risk of causing serious harm to others (RoSH) compared to 4% of all males. PBNI statistics on reconviction in Northern Ireland show that for those offenders who received a Probation Order in 2005, 20% of women compared to 27% of men reoffended within 12 months.

In May 2011 there was an average of 48 women offenders in prison in Northern Ireland, which represents 3% of the total overall prison population. This is a comparatively low rate compared with Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and most of Western Europe. Women are more likely than men to be committed to custody on remand (48% compared with 34%). While the number of prison receptions for men decreases after 28 years of age, the same is not true of women, with a high percentage of committals into custody among women aged 40–49 years. Women subject to community supervision orders tend to be older: just over a third (34%) of male offenders compared to 46% of females are aged 35 and over.

### **Pathways into offending behaviour**

With regard to the factors that shape criminal behaviour, or pathways into crime, there is ongoing debate and discussion as to the appropriateness of applying the 'risk, need and responsivity model' to women offenders. The risk need model is based on criminogenic needs/dynamic factors and has 'become highly influential in guiding research and practice in the criminal justice area' (Hollin and Palmer, 2006). Formal risk and assessment measurement tools such as the Assessment, Case Management and Evaluation System (ACE) (Best,

2007) and the Home Office Offender Assessment System (OASys) (Raynor, 2000) were developed for use in predicting the likelihood of further offending and case management.

It has been argued that the 'dynamic risk factors' that have influenced such assessment were constructed through investigations among predominantly male offenders and therefore concerns have been raised as to the applicability of these assessment tools in assessing women's needs (Blanchette, 2004). These concerns have led to the emergence of the 'pathways' approach, which recognises the needs of women offenders and those who are at risk of offending as being multiple, complex, interrelated and distinctive (Gelsthorpe and Sharpe, 2007). The 'pathways perspective' incorporates a whole life perspective in the study of crime causation. Based on extensive interviews with women offenders, it sequences life events that shape women's choices and behaviours.

This approach has established that women enter the criminal justice system in different ways from male offenders in terms of:

- the role of violence, trauma and substance misuse
- the type of offence and reoffending patterns
- the impact of responsibilities for children and other dependent family members and a reduced ability to support self and children
- connections with violent and substance-abusing partners (Bloom *et al.*, 2003).

It is necessary to understand the specific and significant pathways that need to be addressed in order to provide a strategic, proportionate, holistic and integrated approach to the management of women who offend. The pathways that most impact on women's lives include financial, family and child care responsibilities, education and employment, accommodation and mental health.

### **Poverty and financial difficulties**

Studies of the experiences of women offenders and their characteristics show that poverty, social exclusion and deprivation are significant pathways to offending. Byrne and Trew (2008) in their Northern Ireland study state that offending by women commonly occurs in the 'contexts of restricted resources and limited choices'. For most women in their study the motivation for offending was triggered by finance-related

problems such as poverty, parental and child care responsibility and dependence on state benefits. In a study of reintegration needs of women prisoners in Northern Ireland, Roberson and Radford (2006) found that 64% of women were dependent on social security benefits prior to their committal to custody. Debt and financial pressures and having to cope as a single parent were identified in PBNI pre-sentence reports as relevant issues for women (Bailie, 2006). Financial difficulties were also cited by Gelsthorpe *et al.* (2007) as the most significant dynamic risk leading to offending by women, which may 'severely restrict how successful they may be in avoiding further offending' (p. 17).

### **Children and family**

For women who experience lack of child care support, a community sentence can present serious difficulties in terms of endeavouring to comply with the conditions of the order and at the same time caring for the needs of their family. These conflicting demands by their very nature impinge more heavily on women offenders than on men. Helping women to maintain their family ties and responsibilities is critical in any strategy aimed at reducing offending. Even taking the offending out of the equation, it is important for female offenders' emotional and psychological health that practical advice and support be available to them and their families.

### **Education and employment**

Many women offenders have low educational achievements and lack basic skills and abilities (Department of Justice, 2010). Enhancing employment and employment opportunities in particular is 'an important focus for gender specific interventions' (Arnall and Eagle 2009). The Independent Monitoring Board (2008, para 2.10) stressed the particular importance of employment and accommodation on release from custody to reduce the likelihood of women reoffending.

### **Accommodation**

Problems of accommodation, particularly homelessness, are frequently linked with offending and these problems are 'often complicated by mental health issues' (Roberson and Radford, 2006). Seymour and

Costello (2005) found that 50% of the women in their study in the Republic of Ireland were homeless on committal. Their results indicate that the risk of ending up in the criminal justice system is greater for homeless women than for those in accommodation. Again, this is an area where little research exists for Northern Ireland; however Robertson and Radford (2006) found that a significant percentage of women had experienced housing problems: for instance, 36% of women prisoners did not know where they would live on release and 44% and 32% respectively had had experience of living in a hostel and in care.

### **Mental and physical health issues**

While not so important in male offending behaviour, evidence indicates that physical and mental health issues are a concern for many women offenders. Depression, anxiety and self-harming behaviour are more prevalent among female offenders (Belknap and Holsinger, 2006; Bloom *et al.*, 2003). In their study of women on remand in British prisons, Hollin and Palmer (2006) found that 59% of women suffered from some form of mental disorder. The most frequently reported conditions were personality, mood, anxiety and psychotic disorders. Moreover, Talbot (2007) reported that 70% of women prisoners suffered from two or more mental health problems. A study in 2005 found that 60% of women prisoners interviewed had been taking some form of medication prior to their committal, 68% had been referred for psychiatric assessment, 88% had experienced depression and 60% had suffered from panic attacks while in prison. Almost one third (32%) of the women prisoners interviewed had attempted self-harm and almost half (48%) reported thoughts of self-harm. A PBNI study of the needs of women offenders under supervision indicated a relatively high prevalence (44%) of women offenders in Northern Ireland with mental health issues.

### **Substance and alcohol misuse**

Although substance and alcohol misuse is related to men's and women's offending, it has been suggested that it has a unique impact on women, given its high co-occurrence with other problems, particularly related to mental health and histories of victimisation (McLellan, 2006). Substance and alcohol misuse are now significant factors in women's offending in Northern Ireland. Roberson and Radford (2006) reported that 70% of

the women prisoners misused drugs and/or alcohol prior to committal to custody.

The Northern Ireland Office (2009) cites a 2008 snapshot of Northern Ireland women prisoners showing that 50% had a history of alcohol misuse and 40% had misused drugs.

An analysis of women offenders under PBNI supervision (June 2010) found that 32% had alcohol related problems, a further 9% had drug problems and 16% had problems with both alcohol and drugs. These were all factors related to their offending behaviour.

Byrne and Trew (2008) found that among women offenders alcohol misuse, as well as their offending, was linked to negative personal relations, financial difficulties, parental responsibilities, poor mental health and emotional problems. Thus it can be seen that the difficulties in managing women offenders are a number of complex, interlocking and related issues, and any strategy aimed at reducing reoffending must take account of the multifactorial nature of the problems facing women offenders.

### **Overall strategy**

In recognition of gender-specific pathways, and following a consultation process, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) in 2009 published its *Draft Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders in Northern Ireland*. The overall aim of the draft strategy was to develop a coordinated, long-term, sustainable approach to addressing the needs of women offenders in Northern Ireland. The document advocated the need to develop more creative and constructive ways of dealing with women's offending and to reduce the use of imprisonment wherever possible. The strategy has five key strands:

- to provide alternatives to prosecution and custody
- to reduce the number of women coming through the criminal justice system
- to ensure that, when women are sentenced, their needs are met in the community wherever possible
- to develop a tailored approach to the management of women in custody
- to take forward the options for developing a new purpose-built facility for women prisoners.

In 2010, following consultation on the draft strategy, the DOJ published the full strategy titled *Women's Offending Behaviour in Northern Ireland: A Strategy to Manage Women Offenders and Those Vulnerable to Offending Behaviour 2010–2013*. The ministerial foreword to this strategy recognises that in order to 'meet the specific needs of women offenders, the criminal justice system must provide a different response to that targeted at men' (Department of Justice, 2010).

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland set up the Inspire Women's Project in October 2008 'to develop and deliver in the community a new, enhanced range of women-specific services which directly contribute to reducing women's offending through targeted community based interventions' (DOJ, 2010) This is a pilot project that will run until March 2012 and will pilot the development and refining of a range of women-specific services to meet the needs of women offenders. It plans to co-ordinate community provision for women offenders and present a model for use throughout the PBNI.

### **The Inspire Women's Project**

The Inspire Women's Project provides probation supervision for women offenders subject to community supervision on relevant orders and licences, prepares pre-sentence assessment reports, and offers resettlement opportunities for a small number of women on day release. The project encourages women offenders to address their complex needs in order to reduce the likelihood of further offending, by adopting a holistic and 'women-centred' approach to dealing with the issues that lead to offending.

The project provides a women-only space for women to attend Probation appointments, complete offence-focused programmes such as the Think First Programme, a Home Office accredited cognitive behaviour programme for women who have more than three previous convictions, anger management programme, alcohol management programme and drug counselling, which are delivered by both Probation staff and a range of other support programme providers. Inspire also runs the GOALS UK programme, which is a life coaching programme aimed at increasing self-esteem and responsibility.

Inspire Women's Project has a core team of four Probation Officers, a NIACRO worker, a project worker employed by the Women's Support Network (WSN), an administration officer and manager, with access to the overall professional support provided by the Probation Board for

Northern Ireland. Childcare is available within Inspire and, if appropriate, can be sourced locally through a range of providers.

The Inspire Women's Project has developed links beyond Belfast City and with a wide range of service providers across the voluntary sector. These partner agencies deliver a range of services and support to women attending Inspire, and, for example, include the Prison Arts Foundation (PAF), which delivers a creative arts programme with a focus on creative writing, and the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse (FASA), which provides drug and alcohol services. Barnardos provides a parenting programme and family support. NIACRO has one worker permanently based at Inspire to provide support services in assisting women to resettle in their communities. NIACRO also provides Jobtrack for Women, and has a staff member dedicated to providing employment advice, support and training to women both in custody and in the community. The project has commenced a pilot programme with Business in the Community which provides mentoring support to women seeking employment.

Inspire also liaises with a wide range of other statutory, voluntary and community agencies including housing, Social Services, Women's Aid, Addictions N.I., etc. Inspire is keen to develop restorative justice practices and refers to projects such as Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Northern Ireland.

One significant development is the strategic partnership between Inspire, NIACRO and the WSN, which provides a model of partnership between the statutory, voluntary and community sectors in the provision of services to women offenders. The three organisations developed the Women Community Support Project (WCSP), which provides a range of services to women both in the community and in custody. This partnership allows for individual programmes to be tailored and provided by the agencies involved, thus ensuring a more efficient use of resources. One of the main benefits is that the offer of support is provided to women subject to community supervision orders, those in custody and – particularly importantly – those who are beyond the duration of their probation order. This longer term provision supports key needs (e.g., employment, health, financial advice).

The WCSP also provides training for staff in women centres in working with women who have had experience of the criminal justice system. This capacity-building programme was developed and delivered by NIACRO and is currently being rolled out to other women

centres/women's groups in Northern Ireland. It is now accredited by the National Open College Network ([www.nocn.org.uk](http://www.nocn.org.uk)). The partnership has been strengthened by the employment of a project worker to act as the support worker between WSN and Inspire. Her role is to take referrals from the Probation Staff working within Inspire for women to engage within women centres and support groups in their area. This has assisted the referral process and provides practical support to women as they link with the women centres.

### **Guiding principles for working with women within Inspire**

#### *Gender matters*

The Inspire team is based on the emerging knowledge of what works with women offenders in the community (Gelsthorpe *et al.*, 2007). The starting point is that gender matters. The primary focus of Inspire is to ensure that women fulfil the requirements of the court order; it does so by adopting a women-centred approach. Many of the women have histories of sexual abuse and violence, and other experiences that can be very distressing. It is important to provide a safe, women-only environment where women can be assisted to address the impact of these experiences, to improve self-esteem, be empowered to take control of their lives and thus reduce the likelihood of their reoffending.

#### *Encouraging appropriate change*

The dependence of many women offenders on men, substances, prescription medication and welfare benefits can result in feelings of hopelessness and despondency. Women need to have meaningful options that will allow them to make responsible choices. Women also need to be supported and encouraged to experience the success associated with making positive, responsible choices. Probation staff through the use of programmes and motivational interviewing will encourage women to engage in courses available within the community. The NIACRO and WSN staff members actively assist women in attending such programmes.

### **Evaluation of the project**

An initial evaluation was carried out by the London South Bank University in July 2010. A mixed methodological approach was adopted

which combined an analysis of quantitative data and semi-structured qualitative interviews with women offenders and stakeholders involved in the development and delivery of the Inspire Women's Project. The main findings from this evaluation include the following.

Having a women-only service was identified as an important element of the project in that women felt more comfortable, able to open up and discuss key elements of their offending behaviour and personal circumstances. This aspect of provision at Inspire was considered by those interviewed as particularly important for women offenders who had experienced domestic and sexual violence.

*And I thought thank God it's just women, there's nobody judging me. And they don't judge so it's brilliant ... and women feel more comfortable in a room full of women rather than men because, not myself personally but women I've come in contact with, have been abused and all sorts so it's very important for them too. It was interesting for me to watch on the sidelines how important it was for them type of women. (Interview 8, 53 years old)*

*I think it's quite a good idea whenever it's just females especially when you're having a class or stuff 'cause it's easier to talk when there's just females here. (Interview 37, 25 years old)*

According to women offenders, one of the better features of Inspire is the attitude and behaviour of the staff. The Probation Officers and staff from voluntary and community projects were seen to be non-judgemental, supportive and empathetic, all of which were instrumental in building positive rapport, encouraging women to accept being on probation and facilitating their engagement with the project. Women offenders reported that this approach allowed them to be open, to talk more about their situation, to seek appropriate support and to move on with their lives.

*I just think it's a great facility [Inspire], the support that you get with it and they're non-judgemental as well. I could phone my Probation Officer tomorrow and say, you know, 'I've relapsed, I'm sitting here drunk' and she wouldn't, she wouldn't criticise and look down her nose at me she say 'right well how can we fix this? How can we get this back on track?' and I know that I could just come down here and press that buzzer and there'd be somebody available for me. It's just, for me personally, it's been fantastic ... Just the support and the non-judgementalness, if that's the word. (Interview 13, 48 years)*

The evaluation acknowledged the importance of Inspire alongside other statutory and voluntary agencies to provide practical support in areas such as domestic violence, dealing with childhood sexual and domestic violence, mental health, debt management and housing issues. As noted in the evaluation, this support provides a sense of progression and change in women's lives.

*[NIACRO worker] helped me with filling in forms to get my sickness benefit, she helped me with housing. She actually took me out to look at houses and things that were frightening me which were wee tiny things and she calls at my house, she's on the other end of a phone if I need her and I've never had that support before. She's incredible. (Interview 32, 58 years old)*

Twenty-eight (76%) of the women offenders interviewed reported that their self-esteem and/or self-confidence had improved as a direct result of their engagement with Inspire.

*I couldn't talk about anything, I would go to talk and then it was crying and then I couldn't get a word out and then I couldn't talk about that and then this shakiness would start and if somebody asked me a question I'd start crying again. I was a wreck, an absolute wreck. But only for this place I don't know where I would have been and I doubt that I could have done it on my own. (Interview 25, 56 years old)*

*My confidence grown a lot since being able to come down here and speak to [Probation Officer] about things and I'm more determined to go out and do things more compared to a couple of years ago when I would have just gone and buried my head in the sand and that was it. Now I'm more determined to get out and do things. (Interview 27, 38 years old)*

The ACE score is used by the PBNI to assess offender risks and underlying criminogenic and social needs. Scores are calculated across a range of 11 components to create an overall score out of 99 which provides a measure of the risk of reconviction (Raynor, 2000). An examination of ACE scores for 309 women offenders showed an average three-point reduction between a woman's start date with Inspire (21) and her most recent score (18). The average ACE level reduced from medium to low over this time. Given that the majority of women fall into the low to medium categories in their likelihood of reoffending, this reduction in ACE score is statistically significant.

*I do think that in here stops me reoffending because I've heard the experience of prison, what it's like ... Plus there's support here and I don't want to go down that line again, that's why I keep coming here, because I don't want to. I want to keep myself out of trouble and this keeps me out of trouble.*  
(Interview 22, 42 years old)

Although it was not possible to access formal data concerning reoffending for this initial evaluation, interviews with women offenders showed that self-reported reoffending had substantially decreased due to engagement with Inspire. Of the 37 women offenders interviewed, 29 (78%) reported that they had not committed any further offences since becoming involved with Inspire. Four (11%) women had committed further offences although all reported that their involvement with Inspire had changed their attitude and helped avoid further offending.

The evaluation report concluded that Inspire had developed:

an innovative and dynamic model of provision for women offenders and has made significant progress towards achieving its core aims. It has been particularly successful in the creation of a diverse and growing network of partner organisations through which a range of excellent support is provided at low cost to the statutory sector. The Inspire Women's Project is viewed highly by women offenders, probation officers, partner organisations and policy makers.

It highlighted the need for the project to be extended beyond the Greater Belfast area and for support structures for women who had completed supervision orders, and also pointed to the need to develop formal arrangements with accommodation providers.

## **Conclusion**

The standard established models for dealing with offending behaviour and rehabilitation, having been developed for male offenders and their characteristics, fail to address the needs, offending issues and lifestyle circumstances of women offenders. Women offenders have significantly different pathways into and out of crime from men. They tend to be of low risk, have a lower rate of reoffending and have different support needs, particularly in relation to familial and child care responsibilities, financial difficulties and victimisation in personal relationships. Hence,

the recognition that 'one size fits all' does not work with women has led to the development of an alternative and gender-specific strategy to deal specifically with the needs and requirements of women offenders.

A woman-specific approach should cater to the different needs – social, economic and familial – as well as the psychological consequences of women's feelings of inadequacy, shame, social exclusion and *powerlessness* and their lack of self-esteem and self-worth.

The Inspire Women's Project was set up in Belfast in October 2008 'to develop and deliver in the community a new, enhanced range of women-specific services which directly contribute to reducing women's offending through targeted community-based interventions (Department of Justice, 2010). Thus, its strategy is to provide a gender-specific, holistic, supportive approach to encouraging change and desistance from offending.

This strategy is strengthened by the adoption by Inspire of a 'women-only' environment in order to encourage the women offenders to cooperate at the beginning of their community supervision order and then facilitate referral to appropriate community resources. A 'women only' environment encourages women to open up, especially those who have been subjected to domestic and personal violence and sexual abuse.

A major emphasis of the Inspire approach is to focus on enhancing the women's strengths and capabilities as well as taking account of their criminogenic needs and the diverse range of the women in terms of age, culture and familial responsibilities.

A significant achievement of the Inspire project has been the development of the partnership approach with other statutory, voluntary and community agencies, through which a range of excellent support is offered to women offenders at low cost to the statutory sector. Although it has only been in operation for a relatively short time, the project received a positive evaluation, being deemed 'an innovative and dynamic model of provision for women offenders' that 'has made significant progress towards achieving its core aims'.

It is recognised that there is a need for continuing involvement and development of policy and practice in the management of women offenders. The challenges are in extending the Inspire model beyond the Greater Belfast area. Given the current economic climate it would not be feasible to have centres in other areas of Northern Ireland, but the model could be applicable for use throughout the province. There are similar structures that will support the model of partnership. PBNI is working

with NIACRO, WSN and their counterparts in the rural areas such as the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, and will complete a mapping exercise of resources available beyond Belfast. Work has already commenced with one women's centre outside the Belfast area. It is important that consideration be given to how to ensure that the services for women are consistent with the values and principles of the approach described above.

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