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## **Working with girls and young women**

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### *Introduction*

Effective working with girls and young women who have been drawn into the criminal justice system is considerably hampered by a set of interrelated problems.<sup>1</sup> The first of these stems from their low numbers and relative invisibility in a system dominated by, and designed primarily for, men. A second set of problematic issues arises from the increasing recognition that offending girls and young women have particular and identifiable needs, stemming from what is frequently characterised as individualised troubles, which are difficult to meet effectively within a criminal justice framework. A third, and related, set of problems stems from their status as troublesome young females, and the persistence of perceptions characterising this particular group of offenders as intractable, malevolent and extremely difficult to work with (see, for example, Alder 1998; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1998; Worrall 1999, 2000b). Furthermore, in Britain, programmes and initiatives designed specifically with girls in mind are few and far between. There has been relatively little attention paid to the provision of services *for* girls, and there is a limited understanding of effective working *with* girls.<sup>2</sup> These issues, and their implications in terms of the availability and content of targeted interventions and programmes for girls and young women, are the subjects of this chapter.

### *Putting girls' and young women's offending in context*

Compared to young men, girls and young women form a clear minority at all stages of the criminal justice process. While, in recent years, and in many jurisdictions, concern has been registered about the increasing number of girls and young women being drawn into both juvenile and adult justice systems (Alder 1996; Batchelor et al 2001; Chesney-Lind 1997, 2001a; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1998; NACRO 2001), the fact

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<sup>1</sup> We are using the term 'girls' to refer to female offenders under the age of 16 and 'young women' to refer to those aged 16-20 years.

<sup>2</sup> This is less the case in the U.S. where the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) launched a multi-level approach designed to review the treatment of female juvenile offenders, develop an inventory of best practices, produce a training curriculum and develop gender-specific programmes (US Department of Justice, OJJDP, 1998).

that boys and young men are responsible for the large part of detected youth crime is well documented (see, for example, Chapter Two, this volume). A recent report by Audit Scotland (2001), for example, noted that in Scotland there are three times as many recorded male offenders as female offenders in the 8-21 age band. According to data from the Scottish Executive (2000), there are eight times as many convictions for males as for females in the 16-21 year age band. The figures for England and Wales show a similar picture. In the 10-17 year age group, approximately 152,600 young men were found guilty or cautioned in 2000 (all offences), compared to 36,400 girls and young women (representing a gender-ratio of 4:1). The figures for 18-20 year olds were 175,000 and 27,000 respectively (6.5:1) (Home Office 2001). In the US the gender ratio for both total crime and index crime juvenile arrests runs at 3:1 (US Department of Justice 1999) and young women account for less than 20% of those dealt with by juvenile justice systems in Australia (Wundersitz 2000).

The relative invisibility of girls and young women can also be accounted for by the types of offending they commit. In Scotland, female young offenders are most likely to have been convicted of miscellaneous offences (such as simple assault and breach of the peace) and crimes involving dishonesty (mainly shoplifting) (see Figure 1). In Canada, they are likely to be charged with minor property and minor assault offences, as well as failure to attend court and breach of probation (Reitsma-Street 1999). Young women in Australia tend to be charged with less serious forms of property offences (such as larceny and receiving) and for offences against ‘good order’ (Wundersitz 2000). In the US, male *and* female young offenders can be taken into custody for both criminal acts and status offences that violate parental authority (such as running away, and being ‘beyond control’). Status offences and the more trivial property offences, such as shoplifting, play a major role in girls’ delinquency (Chesney-Lind 1997).

**Table 1: Females aged under 21 with a charge proved by 10 most common charges proved, Scotland, 2000**

| Main charge proved             | Number | Percent<br>(N=3,059) |
|--------------------------------|--------|----------------------|
| Shoplifting                    | 518    | 17                   |
| Simple assault                 | 443    | 15                   |
| Breach of the peace            | 376    | 12                   |
| ‘Other’ miscellaneous offences |        |                      |

|   |     |   |
|---|-----|---|
| (including non-payment of TV licence and breach of probation/community service)                                   | 278 | 9 |
| 'Other' theft<br>(includes forgery, embezzlement and reset)   | 252 | 8 |
| Crimes against public justice (includes perjury, contempt of court, bail offences and failing to appear at court) | 199 | 7 |
| Unlawful use of vehicle   | 184 | 6 |
| Vandalism   | 117 | 4 |
| Drugs   | 108 | 4 |
| 'Other' crimes of dishonesty  | 78  | 3 |

Source: Criminal Proceedings in the Scottish Courts, 2000 (Scottish Executive 2001a)

Against this backdrop, the last 15 years have seen some changes in patterns of young female offending. In the US, for example, female representation in the total juvenile index crime arrests has increased from 13% in 1990 to 25% in 1997, whilst male representation has decreased from 87% to 75% (cited in Schnelle 2000, pp.121-122). In Scotland, the number of girls referred to the Children's Hearing System<sup>3</sup> on offence grounds has risen from eight referrals per 1,000 population in 1985 to 13 referrals per 1,000 population in 1995. Meanwhile referral rates for boys have remained stable (at around 40-45 offence referrals per 1,000 population in the 8-15 age group) (cited in Hogg 1999). Of course, increases in the number of girls and young women apprehended do not necessarily imply that more are becoming involved in crime, nor do they mean an increase in the number of young females found guilty of a criminal offence. As Worrall (2001) has pointed out, drawing on recent Home Office figures, contrary to popular belief the number of juvenile females *convicted* in England and Wales has not risen overall since 1994).

The past 15 years have also witnessed increased concern about violent crime rates for girls and young women (Batchelor et al 2001). In the US, a special report on juvenile crime based on the 1997 US Uniform Crime Reports highlighted increases in juvenile crime, particularly in the proportion of violent crime committed by young females. The percentage of female juveniles arrested for violent crime increased by

<sup>3</sup> In Scotland, children aged under 16 who commit offences are normally referred to the Children's Hearing System. Children's Hearings are administrative tribunals where lay members of the public determine whether compulsory measures of supervision are required. The determination of guilt or innocence is considered inappropriate.

101% during the period 1988 to 1997, whereas male juvenile arrests increased by 42% (cited in Zager 2000, p.90). In Canada, violence by adolescent girls is the only area consistently showing an increase in reported rates of violent offending (Statistics Canada 1999, cited in Lescheid et al 2000). In England and Wales, the biggest growth in violent offending by females has been in the 14-18 year age group (cited in Gelsthorpe 2000).

These figures, although much heralded by the media as a sign of the emergence of a new young female violent offender, belie a much more complex picture. In all jurisdictions, the figures reflect an increase in the number of young women charged with minor, non-sexual, assault, rather than serious acts of violence (which remain overwhelmingly the province of men) and it remains unclear whether such changes can be attributed to *actual* crime rates or changing *responses* to crime. It should also be remembered that serious crimes of violence form a very small proportion of overall offending by girls and young women, and that this group make up a very small proportion of the overall violent crime statistics. In Scotland, for example, females (of all age groups) accounted for 7.5% of non-sexual crimes of violence in 2000. In terms of actual numbers, 315 women had a charge proven against them and of this group less than one third (96 or 30%) were under the age of 21 years (Scottish Executive 2001a).<sup>4</sup> This low base rate means that a small number of cases can make a great deal of difference in terms of percentage rises (Batchelor 2001; see also Chapter Two, this volume).

### *Sentencing patterns and paradoxes*

Debates about the significance of gender in relation to the ways in which male and female offenders are treated by the courts, and in particular whether women are treated more leniently than men, are well known. This is a very complex area, characterised by methodological dispute, theoretical inconsistency and local variation. That said, some themes in relation to girls and young women are discernible. Empirical studies of the processing of young men and young women through the criminal justice system have shown that at each key point in the system, girls and young women are less likely to receive the more serious of the options available (e.g. Chesney-Lind 1997; Wundersitz 2000). Compared to their male counterparts, they are

more likely to receive a police warning, less likely to be prosecuted, and less likely to be referred to court (Samuel and Tisdall 1996; Wundersitz 2000). At court, sentencers are less likely to use the full range of disposals for young women, compared to young men. In Britain, for example, they are less likely to receive a custodial sentence or community service order (McIvor 1998a) and more likely to be given an admonition or absolute discharge (Burman 1999; Samuel and Tisdall 1996). Probation is the most common type of sentence for female juvenile offenders in the US, where they are less likely to be ordered to long-term correctional facility custody than male juveniles (Lippincott 2000).

That said, there is evidence to suggest that in England and Wales the rates of cautioning and absolute discharge for young women have fallen in recent years (Home Office, 2000; Worrall 2001), while in both Britain and in the US, the rate of detention is increasing faster for girls than for boys. According to some commentators, this constitutes a strong sign that responses to troublesome girls and young women have undergone a fundamental shift, from the more traditional 'benevolent' welfare-oriented approach to an increasingly punitive form of formal criminal justice intervention (Chesney-Lind 1997, 2001c; Howard League 1997; Reitsma-Street 1999; Worrall 2000b, 2001). Recent Howard League figures (2001) indicate that the number of girls received into prison in England and Wales increased from 79 in 1992 to 302 in 1998. Table 2 shows the steady increase in receptions into prison under an immediate custodial sentence for both male and female young offenders, over the 10 year period from 1988 to 1998. During 1999, a total of 1,233 sentenced young females (aged 15-21 years) were received into prison, more than double the number in 1995. There were 317 young females under sentence at mid-1999, a slight rise on the previous year (the average sentence length for young female offenders was 7.7 months) (Home Office 2000). Fourteen per cent of all women in custody in mid-1999 were aged under 21 years old (Home Office 2001). Girls and young women also make up a growing proportion of the national prison population in Scotland, where there was a 19 percent increase (to 336) in the number of custodial sentences for females aged under 21 between 1999 and 2000 (Scottish Executive 2002). Custody dispositions for female juveniles have also increased in Canada and the US, despite legislative attempts to promote the use of alternatives to imprisonment

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<sup>4</sup> This compares to 3,808 men who had a charge of non-sexual violence proven against them, of which 38% (1,445) were aged under 21 (Scottish Executive 2001a).

in Canada (Reitsma-Street 1999) and moves to de-institutionalise status offenders in USA (Chesney-Lind 2001b, c).<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2. Male and female young offenders sentenced to immediate custody, 1988-1998, England and Wales**

| No of prisoners (thousands) |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                             | 1988 | 1990 | 1992 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 |
| <b>Males</b>                |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| 15-17 years                 | 3.7  | 3.3  | 4.0  | 5.1  | 5.3  | 5.5  |
| 18-20 years                 | 10.3 | 9.4  | 10.5 | 11.8 | 12.4 | 14.3 |
| <b>Females</b>              |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| 15-17 years                 | 0.1  | 0.1  | 0.1  | 0.2  | 0.3  | 0.4  |
| 18-20 years                 | 0.3  | 0.3  | 0.4  | 0.5  | 0.8  | 0.9  |

Excludes fine defaulters.

Source: *Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System, 2000*, Table 7.2 (Home Office 2001)

The drift towards confinement can also be seen, in Britain, in the over-representation of girls in local authority secure accommodation. Young people can enter such institutions as a result of welfare and/or criminal justice interventions. Although the majority of young people in secure accommodation are boys, the number of girls taking up places has increased substantially in recent years (Department of Health 2001). Of the 87 children detained in secure accommodation in Scotland as at 31 March 2000, 16 were girls. This represents an increase from 31 March 1993, when only 10 of the 84 residents were female (Scottish Executive 2001b).

The welfare model which has been prominent in relation to responses to female criminality fosters a view of female offenders which ‘finds them needy, not fully responsible for their actions, and requiring, above all else, special protection and support’ (Asquith and Samuel 1994, p.77). Consequently girls and young women are more likely to be placed in custody for less serious offences. Compared to male young offenders, a greater proportion of females are in prison for petty offences (principally

<sup>5</sup> In the US girls are still likely to be detained and sent to institutions as a result of ‘bootstrapping’. This occurs where girls originally charged with a status offence are subsequently re-arrested for the

dishonesty and petty assault) and with fewer previous convictions. Assumptions about girls' needs for protection result in discriminatory juvenile justice practices, resulting in girls being dealt with more punitively than boys for behaviour that would not be regarded as criminal in adults (Worrall 1999).

Again, largely due to their minority position within the criminal justice system, female young (and adult) offenders are further disadvantaged insofar as fewer penal institutions mean that they are often placed long distances from home, thereby weakening their ties to the community. In England and Wales, there are just 16 prisons that hold women (three are open prisons). Cornton Vale is the only female establishment in Scotland. This makes it difficult for families (and probation officers from the home area) to visit. The provision of programmes, vocational training and recreational facilities is also affected.

### *A difficult group to work with?*

In a context of competition for scarce resources, because males outnumber females in both the adult and juvenile justice systems, and because girls and young women represent less of a threat to society generally, community-based provisions and programmes for girls and young women in custodial settings are relatively few and far between. In the U.S., where the question 'what about girls' has been more forcefully put, 35% of delinquency programmes in the US serve only males and 42.4% serve primarily boys. Only 2.3% serve only girls and 5.9% serve primarily girls (Girls Incorporated 1996). Equivalent figures are not available in Britain as there has yet to be a comprehensive review of provision of services for girls.

Establishing sustainable gender-specific criminal justice projects for female lawbreakers is particularly problematic because low numbers, short sentences, and fluctuations in demand mean that facilities are often under-utilised and therefore are not seen as cost-effective. This often results in pressure to extend provision to male offenders, which in turn leads to a decreased take-up among female offenders whose histories of violence mean they are reluctant to risk mixed projects (Carlen 2001).

Small numbers also mean that workers may have had minimal contact with young female offenders and so lack awareness of the specific needs of this particular client

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delinquent offence of 'probation violation', following the commission of another status offence, and are thus rendered liable for detention (Chesney-Lind 1997, 2001a or b?).



group.<sup>6</sup> A range of research, both in the UK and abroad, has suggested that working with girls causes anxiety amongst juvenile justice and related workers (Alder 1996; Aymer 1992; Brown and Pearce 1992; Hudson 1989; Pearce 1995; Spence 1996). Writing about troubled and troublesome girls in Australia, Baines and Alder (1996a, b) have noted that people who work in the juvenile justice system often conceptualise the behaviours and needs of young men and young women differently. Whereas girls are variously described as “hysterical”, “manipulative”, “verbally aggressive”, and “untrustworthy”, boys are depicted as “honest”, “open”, and “less complex” (Alder 1998). In the UK, Carpenter and Young (1986) have noted that youth workers find young women to be both “bored” and “boring” and “more trouble” than boys. Girls are deemed as having “emotional needs” which are difficult to address effectively, and which render them difficult and demanding. In addition, girls are considered recalcitrant, and unlikely to willingly engage in programmes and services or take up available support (Alder 1996; Worrall 2001).

Why is it that workers perceive girls and young women to be such a difficult and challenging client group? According to the sexualisation theory of female offending, ‘troublesome’ girls and young women are treated differently to young men as a consequence of a double standard of acceptable behaviour in which the deviant behaviour of women is interpreted as a symptom of problematic sexuality requiring welfare regulation not punishment (Worrall 2000b). They are constructed within a range of legal, welfare and political discourses as, on the one hand, ‘deeply maladjusted misfits and, on the other as dangerous folk devils, symbolic of post-modern adolescent femininity’ (Worrall 1999). While welfare concerns have always dominated professional responses to girls ‘in trouble’, concerns to provide protection to girls have always been mingled with anxieties about the wildness and dangerousness of girls who are ‘out of control’ (Alder 1996). Consequently, girls and young women are more likely to become caught up in the juvenile justice system as a consequence of gender inappropriate behaviours such as unsanctioned sexual activity, running away and wilfulness: activities that question feminine stereotypes of passivity, chastity and submissiveness (Chesney-Lind 1973; Hudson 1989).

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<sup>6</sup> Recent innovations in youth justice in England and Wales may however go some way to change this, although young males will still dominate in terms of numbers and degree of contact. Since April 2000, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) consisting of social workers, probation officers, police officers, education and health staff have been operating in every local authority area. YOTs responsibilities include supervision of community sentences, involvement in through care and undertaking post-release supervision.

## *Gendering needs*

Where programmes for girls do exist, many have the traditionally narrow focus of sexuality and pregnancy prevention which, although beneficial, are too restricted in scope to meet the complex needs of young women in trouble. A *gendered* reading of youth problems shows that, although young men and young women in trouble share a set of universal needs, there are also key differences in terms of behavioural issues, domestic expectations and risk factors. The different gendered experiences of young women render them in need of different and innovative strategies.

Girls in trouble are not only perpetrators of criminal behaviour, but frequently also have extensive experience of physical, sexual and emotional victimisation. Analysis of Scottish Children's Reporters' Administration (SCRA) data relating to girls referred to the Children's Hearing System on offence grounds has shown that, compared to boys, offending girls are more likely to have originally come to the attention of the Reporter for being the *victim* of an offence, such as neglect or sexual abuse (Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate for Scotland 1998, p.12). In her study of adult female prisoners in Scotland, Loucks (1997) revealed that one of the most universally shared attributes of female inmates was a history of violent victimisation (82% of respondents had experienced some form of abuse during their lives). Emotional abuse was most common (71%), followed by physical abuse (60%), then sexual abuse (47%).<sup>7</sup> This last form of victimisation was most common during childhood and was often perpetrated by fathers or other male relatives or guardians. Evidence from the US shows that a third of women in prison there have been physically or sexually abused before the age of 18, a third have grown up in homes where adults abused alcohol and drugs, one in five have spent time in foster care and, by adulthood, nearly half have been the victims of sexual or physical violence at the hands of a partner or spouse (Chesney-Lind 1997).

The high proportion of child sexual abuse experienced by young female offenders may contribute to the commission of status offences such as truancy and running away from home, which in turn provide a pathway to offending behaviours such as drug or alcohol abuse and prostitution (Belknap and Holsinger 1998; Chesney-Lind 2001b,c). Almost 90% of the women in Loucks' study had experience of illicit drug use and about

half felt their drug use was problematic. Academics and practitioners alike agree that clear correlations exist between the victimisation of women and girls and high-risk behaviours such as serious drug abuse, suicide and self-harm (Acoca and Dedel 1998; Boswell 1996; Covington 1998; Howard League 1997). One reason for this close connection is the capacity of both psychoactive substances and self-injury to (temporarily) block out distressing experiences and dull emotional pain (Motz 2001).

### *Working with girls and young women*

Clearly any effort by the system to respond appropriately to the offending behaviour of young women needs to take account of their gendered experiences in order to be effective. But what exactly should effective provision/programmes look like? As the discussion above has indicated, in Britain, there are very few programmes or projects designed specifically for female offenders, with girls and young women perhaps the most neglected offender population. Inevitably, then, evaluations for these programmes/projects are similarly scarce (Kendall 1998), particularly in the UK. Much of the existing research relating to work with female offenders originates in North America, particularly the US, and tends to have been gathered in custodial rather than community settings (Durrance and Ablitt 2002). Nevertheless, a range of effective community-based programmes serving young women offenders in the US have been identified, and successful programmes have been shown to share similar characteristics. These are outlined below.

### **Holism**

Successful programmes and projects appear to employ a comprehensive and holistic strategy aimed at addressing girls and young women's multiple needs in a continuum of care. Successful inter-agency communication is important both in terms of ease of access and minimisation of inter-agency distrust or subversion of each others' endeavours when sharing the same group of clients (Carlen 2001).

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<sup>7</sup> Young female offenders in Loucks' study shared broadly similar characteristics to the adult female population, but the small number involved made reliable comparisons difficult.

## **Developing a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment**

For work with girls and young women to be effective, they need to feel confident that they are capable of making changes in their lives. To be confident, they have to achieve a sense of self-esteem, to feel that they have personal worth and something to contribute (Alder 1996; Eaton 1993). Allowing young female offenders to make informed decisions about issues that affect them promotes a sense of self-efficacy. If they are to make meaningful and responsible choices, they need to be advised as to the availability of resources and the implications of their decisions (Dauvergne-Latimer 1994).

## **Gender-specificity**

One of the key criticisms of the concept of ‘empowering women’ is that it has been appropriated by the *What Works* agenda as a means of ‘responsibilising’ women – making them responsible for engaging with programmes of change and managing their own risk assessment (Hannah-Moffat 2000; Shaw and Hannah-Moffat 2000). Yet the actual power of young female offenders to effect change is limited by oppressive structures, such as age, gender, class and race. It is therefore important that those working with young female offenders acknowledge not only their individual agency, but also the wider structures that impose on them (Chesney-Lind 2001b; Kendall 1998). Young women will only change their lives ‘if and when they have access to the structural preconditions of social justice – housing, employment and health facilities’ (Worrall 1999).

Programmes, projects, and services need, therefore, to be gender-specific, age-specific, and culturally-specific. Gender-specific programming refers to programme models and services that comprehensively address the special needs of a targeted gender group, such as adolescent girls. Such programmes are rooted in the everyday experiences of girls and incorporate an understanding of female adolescent development (Greene, Peters and Associates 1998). In other words, they are not simply ‘women only’ programmes that were designed for men, but rather take account of the evidence in relation to the criminogenic needs and protective factors which are particularly associated with girls. Paradoxically, gender-sensitive programmes developed with women in mind are of questionable suitability for girls and young

women. Age is a crucial factor both in defining, and in meeting, the needs of this particular group.

### **Recognising/addressing abuse issues**

Where they are the survivors of – or currently in – an abusive relationship, girls' and young women's sense of self-efficacy is likely to be damaged. Work with young female offenders, therefore, must assist them in developing an understanding of their victimisation and encourage them to accept the power not to participate in abusive situations in the future (Greene, Peters and Associates 1998). They also need opportunities to address the feelings of anger and frustration that often contribute to their offending behaviour. Many girls inevitably require specialised counselling, however, research suggests that approaches that rely primarily on the provision of counselling alone are not likely to succeed (Chesney-Lind 1997)

### **Talking and listening to girls and young women**

In addition to looking at issues surrounding abusive relationships, successful work with girls and young women who offend needs to develop resources that utilise the experiences of women themselves. Young female offenders frequently have a great deal to say for themselves (Batchelor 2002). They need to be listened to and their insights incorporated into work with them (Alder 1996; Batchelor et al 2001; Burman et al 2001; Chesney-Lind 1997).<sup>8</sup>

The importance of involving participants in the development of meaningful programme initiatives has been highlighted by Dixon (2000). She criticises the rigidity of the current *What Works* ideology, arguing that a preoccupation with 'programme integrity' stifles spontaneity and creativity. This is seen to impact both on programme effectiveness and programme development:

The point is that for change to occur offenders need to experience the value of change efforts for themselves. This is unlikely to emerge when offenders go through the motions

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<sup>8</sup> That said, a word of caution may be necessary insofar as not all young women may be able to participate meaningfully, or to the same extent, and so universal applicability of participation by girls and young women may be inappropriate. Whilst a central principle of the Children's Hearing System in Scotland is the participation of young people, recent research suggests that many find it hard to express themselves and their contributions are notably brief (Hallett and Murray 1998).

prescribed to them by others. The exchanges in the group have to strike a personal chord with each offender. Each has to feel that at various points something uniquely relevant to her or him has happened, and that the exchange makes sense to the person in terms of personal life experiences. (Dixon 2000, p.18)

According to a report by the National Council for Research on Women:

When girls' collaboration is solicited through authentic and meaningful ways, through involvement in the design and implementation of programmes, girls can gain leadership skills, develop supportive intergenerational relationships and experience themselves as active participants in social change. (1998, p.87, cited in Worrall 2001)

## **Relationships**

This directs us towards the crucial significance of the relationships between workers and young people in supporting change (McNeill and Batchelor 2002). As Durrance and Ablitt note, in their evaluation of the Women's Probation Centre in England and Wales, 'Women respond to an environment that recognises their individual worth and provides a supportive and positive atmosphere. The examples set by staff in their interactions with others, and within the group are crucial' (2002, p.248). Whereas boys are more likely to adhere to rules because they respect rules or want to avoid consequences, girls are more likely to co-operate where they have established a relationship with workers and feel they respect them and have their best interests in mind (Ryan and Lindgren 1999). For many girls and young women who offend, their only other experience of relationships is subordination, exploitation and abuse. Interactions between young women and workers can provide a context for young female offenders to participate in positive relationships.

Another way of playing to young female offenders' strengths is by recognising the complex and often positive ways their relationships provide an opportunity for them to structure their lives and resolve conflicts (Worrall 2001). Whereas work with boys and young men tends to be more successful where it takes place in a structured, rule-bound environment, successful programmes for girls 'focus on relationships with other people and offer ways to master their lives while keeping these relationships intact' (Belknap et al 1997, cited in Dougherty 1999, p.119). This highlights the

advantages of community-based over custodial disposals, and in particular points to the possibility of utilising peer support and involving families in work with girls and young women. Research into the prevention of violence and anti-social behaviour in the US points to the advantages of utilising informal interventions for young people aimed at peers and other key components of their social environments (National Institute of Mental Health 1999). Peer support programmes which tap into girls' affinities for close and supportive relationships are being successfully developed to combat bullying and physical violence in schools, and there are moves to extend these to probation programmes.

### **Informalism and Re-integrative Strategies**

In recent years, the more informal approach offered by restorative justice has been heralded by some advocates as an appropriate means of controlling and dealing with the offending behaviour of young people (Morris & Maxwell 2001). Girls have long been seen as amenable to more informal elements of social control such as that exercised through the family and social networks (Cain 1989). Building on their 'natural' affinity for forming relationships and their verbal eloquence (compared to boys), the more informal strategies of mediation, family conferencing, and programmes informed by the underlying principles of shame and re-integration have been put forward as viable alternatives to traditional approaches to female criminality. Some feminist writers, however, have counselled caution at the wholehearted adoption of the principles of restorative justice for girls and young women (Alder 1998; Worrall 2001). Many girls behave badly precisely because their experience of informal social control (particularly within the home) has been abusive and brutalising. What's more, the concept of 'shame' – which encourages self-blame – has certain connotations for girls, given that it is denotative of failure (Alder 1998).

### **Sustainability**

The main reasons for winding down projects for female offenders are usually financial, however lack of funding can mask other shortcomings, notably: change of objectives, poor or adverse publicity, loss of gender-specificity, non-use by the courts, and inappropriate expectations by funders. Based on the impressions and experiences

of managers of gender-specific programmes in custodial and non-custodial settings, Carlen (2001) found a general convergence of opinion regarding attributes of sustainable projects. These include a resistance to the erosion of gender-specificity; an evolutionary and flexible organisation (whereby the relationships between project provision and the varied or changing situations of those attending the project are monitored); a holistic (co-ordinated) approach to service delivery; a democratic model of policy-formation to enhance staff morale and project success; and a principled approach to probity in human relationships. Successful projects are likely to have the ability to convince courts of a congruity of interest in reducing recidivism by improving the quality of clients' lives in the present.

### *Conclusion*

Despite their growing numbers within the criminal justice system, girls and young women are generally not a priority for service and programme provision. In comparison with young men, the 'problem' posed by young women is small, and resources therefore tend to be targeted at the former. Despite media accounts to the contrary, the risks posed by the majority of girls and young women who offend are relatively slight; their offending is rarely serious, and their needs are not best met within custodial settings. Nevertheless, the growing numbers of girls drawn into the criminal justice system cannot be ignored. This upward trend renders the question 'what about girls?' even more fraught. As this chapter has argued, girls who offend present very different circumstances and needs than their male counterparts do, and effective gender-responsive programmes and interventions need to address this fact, and take into account the multitude of unique issues that bring young women into contact with the law. The key lies in ensuring that any initiative developed to tackle the problems caused by 'troublesome girls' is flexible enough to address the specific experiences and concerns of those same girls. The challenge then is to develop effective and credible non-prison based programmes that take into account the social realities from which young female offenders come and to which they will return. This requires more research, more training and the informed development of more gender- and age-specific initiatives and, above all, a commitment to keeping girls' needs on the criminal justice policy agenda.



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