

Re-entry Needs of Female Ex-offenders

The number of female offenders in prisons worldwide is on the rise. According to Walmsley (2017), the number has increased by nearly 53% since the year 2000 and this increase could not be explained by a rise in world population or growth in total prison population. In Singapore, we have one of the highest proportions of female offenders in the world. The World Female Imprisonment List showed that 10.5% of Singapore's total prison population were women (Walmsley, 2017). Despite the rising numbers, research on the needs of ex-offenders, as well as effectiveness of programmes and interventions had largely focused on male or mixed samples, and less is known specifically about women (Trotter & Flynn, 2016). It is similar in our local context where the bulk of focus would usually fall on male offenders. However, this does not happen without reason. Challenges in providing comprehensive programmes to women remain an issue due to the smaller population and comparatively less serious nature of offending compared to men (Bartels & Gaffney, 2011). Even if the spotlight on men is justifiable, the consequences of failing to meet the needs of female offenders remain. Hence, a look into these needs of female offenders during their re-entry phase might be beneficial. Are women's re-entry needs really different from men's? If they are indeed unique, what programmes and services could be introduced to ease their re-entry into society?

Literature has shown differences between women and men in their pathways to crime and re-integrative needs. Modley and Giguere (2010) summarized pathways that resulted in criminality among females: (1) use of illegal drugs as a means to cope with childhood victimization of physical and sexual abuse; (2) involvement in crime to support their drug addiction or overcome financial difficulties in supporting themselves and their children; (3) involvement in crime due to poor economic conditions and desire for monetary possessions. While these may seem to apply to men as well, issues such as childhood abuse,

difficulties in supporting their children and financial dependence would be more prevalent in women. Upon release, the life history and patterns of marginalisation more often experienced by women results in unique challenges that needs to be addressed for successful re-entry (Scroggins & Malley, 2010).

Re-entry has been viewed as a gendered phenomenon as the exposure and reaction to life circumstances of women after release would be different from that of men (Cobbina, 2010). In particular, women's re-entry experiences are often shaped by their gender and victimisation experiences (Opsal & Foley, 2013). This highlights the need for programmes to be gender-sensitive, and not assume that what worked for men would work for women as well. By understanding these differences, aftercare and community-based agencies could then focus on developing policies and programmes that can allow women to reintegrate into the community successfully.

To gain a better understanding on the women ex-offender population, this paper will be examining the existing literature regarding their re-entry needs, as well as practices and programmes targeted for women.

Re-entry needs of women

Women are faced with a diverse set of challenges during re-entry. Based on the analysis of literature by Scroggins and Malley (2010), five broad areas of needs were underlined for the post-incarceration success of women. They include: (1) childcare and parenting; (2) healthcare, mental health counselling, and substance abuse treatment; (3) housing; (4) education, employment, and job training; and (5) social support.

Childcare and Parenting

Statistically, more incarcerated mothers were the primary caregiver to their children prior to incarceration, compared to incarcerated fathers (Scroggins & Malley, 2010). During their incarceration, however, mother-child relationships often suffer. It may be hard to

maintain such relationships as: (1) prison may be located far from the family home, making visits difficult; (2) caregivers may delay or refuse to let the child visit their mother in prison as it may be too stressful (Perry, Fowler, Heggie, & Barbara, 2011). In addition, parenting skills and bonds would have deteriorated due to the infrequent interactions with their children during a long period of incarceration. Hence, to counter those effects, one might consider providing parenting classes to help with regaining skills or rebuilding bonds.

At the same time, the availability of childcare is also necessary as women try to manage competing needs and duties once they return to their communities (Scroggins & Malley, 2010). For example, they may have to attend case management programmes, go for regular urine tests, engage in education and job trainings, and other programmes that may help to promote successful re-entry whilst at the same time fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives. These competing needs and duties are complicated because such programmes are mandatory and are dictated by correctional facilities. Absence may result in re-arrest or having their time spent in the community revoked. Hence, mothers would benefit from parenting and childcare services more than others. Although such services are available, there may be barriers faced when trying to engage these services. The barriers include financial considerations or availability of childcare centres around them. Recognising the role of motherhood is important for agencies working to provide programmes and services for women to facilitate re-entry. Failure to do so could easily lead to the undoing of good work in other areas.

Healthcare and Counselling Services

Women who have been incarcerated report a higher rate of physical and mental health disorders than women who were never incarcerated (Scroggins & Malley, 2010). Incarcerated women also tend to have more health issues compared to incarcerated men due to poor healthcare conditions prior to their incarceration (Balis, 2007). The higher incidence

of health disorders among incarcerated women highlights the need for strong healthcare arrangements upon release. Moreover, Schulte and Hser (2014) had shown that the risk for health complications was higher for adults with substance use. With nearly 79% of women being incarcerated for drug-related offences (Goh, 2013), healthcare needs would be a greater concern for them after release.

Counselling programmes would do well to consider the unique circumstances of returning women offenders. Gender differences in the pathway to crime have been widely reported, in which a range of risk factors had been identified. These factors, which were seen as interconnected, include: high levels of victimisation and subsequent trauma; high levels of mental illness; and high levels of substance use (Trotter & Flynn, 2016). Many incarcerated women have experienced childhood abuse, which continues to affect them throughout life. Referring to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, Taylor (2015) stated that 40% to 57% of female inmates were sexually or physically abused prior to the age of 18 compared to only 7% to 16% of male offenders (as cited in Trotter & Flynn, 2016, p. 11).. Similarly, Goh (2013) reported that from a preliminary analysis of 102 female inmates from Changi Women's Prison, 45% had a history of physical, emotional, or verbal abuse. Having a history of abuse or traumatic experiences play a major role in the subsequent development of mental health problems, and increase the possibility of alcohol and/or drug abuse (Covington, 2003). From the same sample assessed by Goh (2013), 42% had experienced emotional distress, and 36% used substances as a method to help them cope with stress. Like Trotter and Flynn (2016), Goh (2013) also concluded that a relationship likely exists between emotional distress and substance abuse, as well as victimization and substance abuse. Therefore, it is important that these issues are addressed in counselling programmes to prevent relapse and facilitate re-entry.

Housing

Having a stable home environment increases the likelihood of having social and emotional support, as well as providing structure that is helpful for women's re-entry (Huebner, DeJong, & Cobbina, 2010). In a study based on New York City's jail, 71.9% of women (out of 704 female participants) anticipated housing as the top priority of issues they expected to face after release (Freudenberg, Moseley, Labriola, Daniels, & Murrill, 2007). Similar findings were seen in women exiting prison in Victoria, Australia, where housing was one of the most frequently anticipated challenge mentioned (Monash University Criminal Justice Research Consortium for Corrections Victoria, 2016). Some reasons for unstable housing amongst women were having to escape from an ex-partner or abuser, relocation due to work, or due to drug addiction. Women with unstable housing post-release had a higher likelihood of returning to prison compared to those who did not report unstable housing (80% vs 18%; Monash University Criminal Justice Research Consortium for Corrections Victoria, 2016). Hence, in developing an accommodation plan for women post-release, past research highlighted several points for successful re-entry: housing must be safe (e.g. free from violence or abuse by a romantic partner); accommodating to their children's needs; would not compromise their sobriety (i.e. supportive of a sober lifestyle); and affordable (Modley & Giguere, 2010).

Education, Employment and Job Training

Education, employment, and job training were important for the successful re-entry of women. As of November 2012, 54.5% of incarcerated women in Singapore had secondary level education, while only 7.4% had higher education (pre-university, diploma, and/or tertiary; Goh, 2013). At the same time, most women who entered the criminal justice system had little job skills and minimal working experience, which affected their employment opportunities upon release (Modley & Giguere, 2010). With education and skills training,

women would then be able to do better in the labour market to alleviate the situations of financial distress and its related problems, contributing to successful re-entry (Scroggins & Malley, 2010). O'Brien (2002) also highlighted the need to ensure that vocational training provided can be tied to opportunities in the labour market. For example, the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) started "Empowerment of Women Initiative", which fully sponsors a certification course in make-up skills for women. Upon graduation, they will be offered jobs in the industry, and may have the option to further pursue studies in this area (SANA, 2018). While an evaluation of the programme has not been publicly available, such courses provide women ex-offenders with the opportunity to gain skills directly related to employment opportunities.

Positive Social Support

Positive social support has been widely acknowledged as a critical factor for successful re-entry of women. Through positive social relationships, women ex-offenders could be connected to law-abiding citizens and conventional institutions, thus building a lawful self-identity at the same time (Cobbina, 2010). Social support from family members has also been highlighted as an important reintegration component as it increases desire to change and improves self-esteem (Doherty, Forrester, Brazil, & Matheson, 2014). Having supportive family members could also help women overcome the sense of shame due to imprisonment (Doherty et al., 2014). Additionally, women often receive help from their family in the form of financial assistance, emotional support, and childcare – all of which appears to be important sources of post-release success (Cobbina, 2010). Working relationships with supervising officers also played a role in re-entry. In the study by Cobbina (2010), having a supervising officer who listened, encouraged, and provided concrete assistance (e.g. employment, medication) was regarded as important in their ability to reintegrate successfully. On the other hand, having negative support networks (e.g. having

criminally-involved family members, relationship with abusive male partners) and unsupportive supervising officers (due to lack of communication and large caseloads) often led to failure.

Women differ from men in their social network composition, where they tend to have smaller social networks than men (Reisig, Holtfreter, & Morash, 2002). This could be due to the different roles played in the home environment. In addition, women with children had even smaller social networks while having children had little effect on men's social networks (Reisig et al., 2002). The above findings imply that women might have fewer avenues for support upon release compared to men. Since women place great value on relationships, providing returning women offenders with a supportive network would be important for their successful re-entry.

Overseas Practice and Programmes

Key differences between male and female gender roles and socioeconomic identities needs to be considered when developing programmes. (Balis, 2007). Female ex-offenders are more stigmatized than males, and more likely to suffer from a "social capital" deficit (Balis, 2007). This means they might lack ways to help them gain skills and knowledge, have limited networks to find employment, or information about social assistance. Differences between genders point to the need for practices and strategies used to be more gender-responsive. According to Modley and Giguere (2010), what gender-responsiveness means in corrections is;

understanding and taking account of the differences in characteristics and life experiences that men and women bring to institutional corrections and community supervision and adjusting strategies and practices in ways that appropriately respond to these conditions. By developing and applying gender-informed strategies,

corrections professionals can promote law abiding behaviour and improve the physical, social, and economic wellbeing of women and their children (p. 13)

Empirical evidence drawn from various disciplines show that addressing the needs and challenges through gender-informed policies are essential for improving outcomes for women at all criminal justice stages (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2005). The six guiding principles of working with women in the criminal justice system have been included (Bloom et al., 2005):

1. Acknowledge that gender makes a difference
 - There is a need to acknowledge the implications of gender to respond appropriately to women in the criminal justice system. Women enter the system via different pathways, respond differently to supervision, and pose different levels of risk to the institution and community. Gender differences should be acknowledged for a successful development and delivery of services and treatment. For example, women have different communication styles from men, and would be more willing to express themselves. To effectively engage women during supervision, more listening skills and patience may be required from the practitioners (Modley & Giguere, 2010).
2. Create an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity
 - As highlighted earlier, women in the criminal justice system experience a higher rate of abuse and trauma. Hence, precautions should be taken to ensure a consistent, safe, and supportive environment that does not re-traumatise them.
3. Develop policies, practices, and programs that are relational and promote healthy connections to children, family, significant others, and the community
 - Given the role of connections and relationships in women's lives, practitioners should incorporate the concept of relationship into policies, practices, and programmes to enhance their effectiveness.

4. Address substance abuse, trauma, and mental health issues through comprehensive, integrated, and culturally relevant services and appropriate supervision
 - Mental health, trauma, and substance abuse are critical and interrelated needs faced by women during their re-entry. These issues can have a major impact on their transition from prison to the community. Many women in the criminal justice system have trauma as a presenting issue, thus workers and organizations need to use trauma-informed approaches.
5. Provide women with opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions
 - Most women enter the criminal justice system with little education and minimal job skills. At the same time, as primary caregivers, many women offenders need to find ways to support themselves and their children upon release (Modley & Giguere, 2010). Through education and training, opportunities are provided for women to improve their socio-economic conditions thus allowing them to support themselves and their children.
6. Establish a system of community supervision and re-entry with comprehensive, collaborative services
 - Upon release, women need to manage a variety of competing needs and demands. To ensure that women are not overwhelmed by the requirements of multiple agencies to help them meet different needs, services and programmes provided should be more coordinated.

The need for continuity of care is an important practice to better support women during their re-entry. In the study by Doherty et al. (2014), women highlighted the need for practical assistance to support their transition back to the community. Practical assistance was defined by the women as “concrete information on what to expect upon release (release planning); enhanced coordination of services (i.e., substance abuse intervention or mental health care); better communication between correctional staff in the institution and in the

community; and information sharing” (Doherty et al., 2014, p. 574). Such preparations can help to reduce the anxiety and fear associated with the transition (Doherty et al., 2014).

The elements for a gender-responsive programme should be relational, strengths-based, trauma-informed, holistic, and culturally competent. Here, we describe some overseas programmes. Healing Trauma (Covington & Russo, 2011, 2016) is a six-session trauma-informed intervention for women in the community previously involved in the criminal justice system. It is a short-term intervention designed to help women recover from the consequences of trauma and explore ways to enjoy healthier relationships. Four theoretical perspectives underpin the intervention: pathways theory, relational theory, trauma theory, and addictions theory. Interventions are delivered in a group setting to maintain the principle of connectedness. The aim of the programme is to allow women to identify their strengths and build on them such that they would be able to manage their emotions in healthier ways. Through the sessions, women would learn about abuse, understand the abuse they have experienced and how it had affected their lives. They would also learn coping skills to help them work through their traumatic experiences.

An earlier evaluation of the programme by Hawke (2013) showed promising results whereby 89.2% of the sample (the sample was formed by 176 women, while the programme had served 303 women across 31 groups) said the treatment goals they identified for themselves had been achieved in the first session. Having a safe place to discuss their experiences with other women who went through similar experiences was reported as the most helpful aspect of the programme. Several women also mentioned how the programme had helped them learn what a healthy relationship was, and subsequently learn to realise the aspects of their past relationships that was abusive. A more recent progress report on the programme by Frisman (2015) showed similar findings. Women appreciated being able to openly share their experiences with other women who had a similar history, and getting an

understanding of what a healthy or unhealthy relationship was. Learning how to cope with stress and having information about the types of abuse in a relationship was also helpful for them. Data for the programme is continually being collected to ensure revisions can be made if any problems arise. Since most women ex-offenders encounter traumatic experiences from childhood, having trauma-specific interventions or taking trauma-informed approaches would be helpful during re-entry. Trauma-informed approaches refer to the knowledge that the impact of trauma may affect how women respond to services and precautions should be taken to avoid re-traumatisation (Modley & Giguere, 2010).

On an organisational level, an example of an agency that takes into consideration the needs of women is Women in Prison in the United Kingdom (Women in Prison, 2017). Women in Prison provide women-only services and programmes in recognition of the distinct needs of women involved in the criminal justice system. Three women centres are run by the organisation to provide holistic support for the challenges faced by women during re-entry. In these centres, group work and case management are offered to support women on issues including housing, education, employment, finances, parenting support, substance abuse, domestic violence/abuse, mental health, and general emotional and physical well-being.

Local Programmes

Five broad areas for successful reintegration of female offenders were highlighted earlier. In this section, we study two local organizations that provide services exclusively for female ex-offenders. Specifically, we will look at how their programmes are tailored to match the re-entry needs of female ex-offenders.

Locally, the Prisons Halfway House Scheme is part of the transitional care to better meet the needs of offenders in their last stage of detention (Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises, 2018). Currently, there are eight halfway houses under the scheme,

of which one is dedicated to women – The Turning Point halfway house. The services provided in The Turning Point are catered to meet the unique circumstances of female ex-offenders:

- Residential Rehabilitation Programme

As Goh (2013) had found, nearly 79% of women were incarcerated for a drug-related offence. In the halfway house, substance abuse treatment forms a core part of the programme. Inculcating moral values and learning positive coping skills are priorities for residents during their recovery. Recognizing how women may have low self-esteem due to their past experiences of being abused, individual counselling and training workshops focuses on enhancing self-esteem and promoting a positive self-image. In addition, baking and craft workshops are also organized to impart practical skills to the women. If successful, these skills will then be translated into job opportunities in the future.

- Social services

Re-entry needs are also addressed in the halfway house. Information and resources such as academic assistance, financial assistance, career counselling and job referrals are given to residents to ensure their smooth re-entry. This is useful for the female ex-offenders especially since most suffer from a “social capital” deficit as compared to men. The information and resources provided attempts to negate the lack of resources available to them in their social circles.

- Aftercare services for ex-residents

As mothers, wives, or daughters, the Asian family expects the female offenders to return home upon release and resume their responsibilities almost immediately (The Turning Point, 2013). However, the ex-offenders may not be well equipped to cope with the pressures so soon after their release. Programmes are in place at the halfway house to prepare them for such eventualities. Additionally, continued care is given to residents as

they leave the halfway house to ensure that they are not engulfed by the stressors from their family.

Similarly, iC@RE Hub is an organization that provides temporary shelter to help and support female ex-offenders and women in recovery from addictions (iC@RE HUB, 2018). The Individual Transitional Accommodation Programme (iTAP) addresses the immediate accommodation needs of female ex-offenders. The importance of having safe and secure housing for women to reduce re-offending was highlighted earlier. With iTAP, they would be provided with stable housing and also other services to support their recovery. The support services listed below are provided with the unique needs of women in mind:

- **Befriending:** Understanding that women are relational in nature and need personalised attention, each client will be assigned a befriender.
- **Counselling & Therapy:** Counselling is used to equip the clients with essential coping skills and to rebuild their lives and familial ties.
- **Job placement & Permanent housing arrangements:** Support is provided for vocational training to help them find sustainable employment.
- **Throughcare and Aftercare:** Continuity of care is provided to clients throughout their recovery journey.
- **Referrals to community partners:** Referral services to relevant community partners are provided to help clients meet their needs. This would overcome their problem of “social capital” deficit due to the lack of connections and resources.

While the services in these organizations may apply to both male and female offenders, there are certain elements to differentiate between the two. Recognizing that women tend to be more relational than men, these organizations place a greater emphasis on helping them to develop and rebuild relationships. As most women are the main caregivers in their households, skills are taught on how they could cope with the responsibilities as they

return home. Another area where the organizations seemed to have tailored their programmes is in terms of counselling sessions. Taking into account the history of abuse that women suffered from, their focus during sessions is to address low self-esteem and negative self-image. Despite the highlighted differences, we have to acknowledge that the model of intervention used is similar to that used for men. Tweaks and adjustments have been made to those interventions to target women's specific needs.

Implications and Recommendations

While there are a few programmes and agencies in Singapore targeted at women specifically, research on the topic is scarce. Nevertheless, from the review above, there are several important considerations for services to be provided for women ex-offenders in Singapore.

Firstly, research should be conducted to identify the needs of women ex-offenders in Singapore. This will allow practitioners and policy-makers to understand the factors that result in the success or failure of their re-entry into the community. The need for more local research was emphasised by Modley and Giguere (2010), who stated that "cultural issues also need to be appropriately integrated into the program design in order to increase retention and impact on women" (p. 14). Also, the neighbourhood that women return to also plays a role in their re-entry. In the United States, women ex-offenders will return to the same neighbourhood and conditions without receiving services that could help to address their needs (Richie, Freudenberg, & Page, 2001). While the concept of neighbourhood may be different in Singapore, women ex-offenders will also most likely return to the same environment, and may be required to travel further to get access to such services. As the studies reviewed here are from western societies, it is unclear whether the significant cultural

differences between western and Asian societies render the finding inapplicable to the local context.

Additionally, there is a need to advocate for gender-responsive risk and needs assessment, as well as programmes and interventions. Most risk and needs assessment tools, such as the Level of Service Inventory (LSI), have been developed largely based on male populations (Trotter & Flynn, 2016). Moreover, research had found that including gender-responsive factors in the assessment tools would be more predictive of women's reoffending (Trotter & Flynn, 2016). Therefore, it can also be implied that there is a need for gender-specific interventions and programmes that can target the unique challenges faced by women as they transit from prison to the community. More specifically, researchers can also study the necessity of developing entirely new programmes modelled on the risk and needs of women or whether the current practice of modifying male intervention programmes is sufficient for effective treatment.

Through looking at the pathways in which women become involved with the criminal justice system, there can be a greater understanding of what is necessary in community-based services and interventions. The common themes highlighted are healthcare support, counselling for abuse victims and substance abuse therapy. As these factors are often interrelated, it would be prudent to have a single point of intervention.

Relating to a point raised previously, women are faced with competing needs other than their rehabilitation intervention. To increase the likelihood of women continuing with their intervention, providers should ensure that other needs, such as childcare, can be taken care of while women are in session. For example, a study by Marsh, D'Aunno & Smith (2000) showed that programmes which provided access to childcare services led to more effective substance abuse treatment. In general, different types of childcare arrangements should be made available for mothers in different situations to assist in their re-entry efforts. Providing

child-minding services at agencies where women need to attend their sessions may be a good option to consider. Programmes provided by organizations should be holistic such that various, competing needs faced by women can be attended to in a comprehensive manner.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that gender makes a difference and has implications on how women respond to services and interventions. This also has implications on how agencies and policy-makers can respond to the re-entry needs of women. The issue of acknowledging gender differences has been raised by the United Nations in the “Handbook on Women and Imprisonment”. In the handbook, the author highlighted the need to use research as basis for policy formulation to account for gender-specific reintegration needs of women (Atabay, 2014). As support from the public is important for the implementation of policies, it is also important to raise public awareness on the background of women offenders and the effectiveness of policies and programmes aimed at improving their reintegration process (Atabay, 2014).

Conclusion

This paper highlighted several needs specific to women upon re-entry into the community. Literature reviewed pointed out 5 broad areas where female ex-offenders would require support. While these areas might not be exclusive to female ex-offenders, the method of intervention will definitely have to be tailored to suit the needs of the female ex-offenders. For example, in terms of childcare and parenting, female ex-offenders will require greater practical support due to norms where females are often the primary caregivers. In mental health treatment, females tend to have a higher incidence of past abuse which can be easily overlooked if not targeted. For housing and employment, the needs of female ex-offenders can be hugely amplified if they are dependent on an abusive spouse in the past or a partner whom is involved in substance abuse. Finally, social support is necessary for both males and

females in their re-entry into the community. However, female ex-offenders often face a greater struggle especially if their social network was limited in the past due to the amount of time spent caring for their families. This might have an effect on both their available resource as well as their ability to build connections with others. As a result, when providing pro-social support to male and female ex-offenders, the approaches taken would have to be varied to suit the intended party.

While conducting the review, we noticed that the five broad areas highlighted above overlooked two important aspects of being a female ex-offender. One of the most apparent differences between male and female ex-offenders is the risk of sexual abuse. Females are at a much higher risk of being victims of sexual abuse. Therefore, it may be beneficial to educate women ex-offenders on the risks, prevention and appropriate responses to sexual abuse. Another distinct attribute of being female is the possibility of pregnancy and giving birth. And in our culture, this is often followed by the responsibility of caring for the child as a mother. This biological difference could be especially important for our women ex-offenders. As females, there is a risk of having unwanted pregnancies or being left to care for their babies on their own. This will have an adverse impact on their recovery as well as lead to another generation of neglected children. Hence, they need to be aware of the decisions they make regarding the relationships they engage in. To summarize, researchers can look at whether appropriate interventions should be directed towards helping women ex-offenders make safe decisions on relationships and sexual behaviour.

Several gender specific overseas and local programmes targeted at women were looked at in this paper. As expected, all of these programmes had aspects which catered to the needs of female ex-offenders. The uniqueness of these programmes concurred with the evidence highlighted on the needs of women ex-offenders. Even so, much of the literature on female ex-offenders was from overseas, and local research is scarce. Local programmes will

benefit more from research done locally as it will allow for greater understanding of female ex-offenders in Singapore. For example, future research can explore the possibility of having gender-specific assessment tools for local female ex-offenders. In turn, this will enable interventions to be focused directly on the specific needs of the women ex-offenders, as identified by the assessments.

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