

Implementing a Gender Responsive Approach to Women in Parole Decision Making: A Self-Assessment

This self-assessment has been developed to assist paroling authorities determine their current level of “gender responsiveness,” and point to areas for improvement. Correctional policies have traditionally been designed to manage a predominantly male correctional population, and then applied to women. Though these “gender neutral” policies and practices—if evidence-based—have been effective in reducing recidivism for men and women, a significant body of research specific to women has demonstrated that “gender responsive” (and trauma informed) approaches result in far better outcomes (Gobeil, Blanchette, and Stewart, 2016). Put simply, the risks and needs of women are different from male offenders. In order to be more effective, paroling authorities must evolve to be more gender responsive and trauma informed in order to achieve better outcomes with women. All aspects of parole decision making should account for the ways in which justice-involved women differ from justice involved men.

At the onset, paroling authorities should understand women’s pathways into criminal justice (Bloom, Owen and Covington, 2003). For example, a woman’s path to criminal activity often involves a cycle of abuse, poverty and drugs; and she may become involved in crime as a result of a relationship. She may:

- Have a history of trauma and abuse—50-98% of justice involved women report histories of sexual and physical abuse;
- have been convicted of a nonviolent or drug offense—28% of women have been convicted of drug offenses and 24% convicted of property crimes;
- be relatively low risk—some studies show that women are less likely to commit violent acts than men, and are less likely to reoffend once in the community;

Definitions

Gender Neutral: Evidence-based strategies, approaches, policies and practices that apply equally to men and women.

Gender Responsive: Evidence-based practices that account for the different characteristics and life experiences of justice involved men and women and adjust strategies and practices in ways that appropriately respond to those conditions.

Trauma Informed: Work intentionally to avoid triggering trauma reactions and help survivors to manage their trauma symptoms successfully by enhancing the knowledge and proficiency of paroling authorities to recognize trauma symptoms and respond appropriately.

Relational: Work with women to promote mutual respect and empathy. Understand that women’s primary motivation throughout life is a strong sense of connection with others.

Bloom, Owen and Covington (2003);
Benedict (2008).

- have mental health issues and/or a co-occurring disorder—1 in 3 justice involved women meet the criteria for PTSD; and some studies suggest that up to 73% of women in prisons and jails present with mental health symptoms;
- be a mother and/or single parent of young children—2 in 3 of women in prison are mothers of a minor child and are more likely than men to be the primary caretaker of children prior to incarceration and plan to resume their parenting role upon release; and
- continue to be victimized once paroled—some studies show that while the risk of abuse for men drops after childhood, the risk of abuse for women continues throughout their adolescent and adult lives.¹

The emerging research on the impact of trauma on the brain and body is also critical to understanding women's behaviors (Benedict, 2014). The vast majority of justice-involved women have experienced the trauma of sexual or physical violence, neglect, and other forms of victimization. In fact, a number of studies have found that many justice-involved women report experiencing some kind of physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime, with some studies noting rates of trauma histories as high as 98%.² Women's behaviors while incarcerated or on parole supervision may be a learned and internalized reaction to that past or current trauma. What may appear to be combativeness or disregard for rules and conditions may in fact be maladaptive behavior that is driven by an underlying and unaddressed history of trauma.³

Lastly, paroling authorities should recognize that women are highly motivated and driven by relationships, unlike their male counterparts; and that has implications for both their entry into and desistance from criminal behavior. Antisocial relationships are often linked to why and how she became involved in the criminal justice system. Prosocial relationships often serve as motivation to

"Historically, the research on psychological development focused on males and did not account for the unique experiences and developmental pathways of women and diverse cultural groups. Decades of research has led to a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences, strengths and needs. Awareness that relationships and societally-created barriers play a unique role in female development and offending can help improve (our) approaches."

Source: Gender Responsive Discipline and Sanctions Policy Guide for Women's Facilities (Revised, 2018), National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women

¹ For an overview of these issues, citations and references, see NRCJIW, *Fact Sheet on Justice-Involved Women in 2016* (2016) and *Ten Truths that Matter when Working with Justice Involved Women* (2012).

² *Fact Sheet on Justice Involved Women in 2016* (2016), *Ten Truths that Matter when Working with Justice-Involved Women* (2012).

³ See, e.g., NRCJIW's *Gender Responsive Discipline and Sanctions Policy Guide for Women's Facilities* (2016) for a review of these issues.

become and remain sober and crime-free, or be a better mother. The relational aspects of women's change process should be addressed by correctional authorities through programs and services to prepare women for parole. Then, paroling authorities should reflect this relational style in their communication with women. Being relational – or building trust and rapport, and establishing mutual respect and empathy – takes time. For paroling authorities, recognizing women's relational nature may mean extending the parole interview time to allow for greater engagement, being non-confrontational during interviews, and giving her opportunities to fully engage in decision making.

Equipped with gender-specific knowledge and guided by gender responsive and trauma informed approaches, paroling authorities will be better prepared to make parole decisions about women, and can serve as powerful motivators for positive behavior change.

Self-Assessment Instructions

As a paroling authority or individual parole board member, review each of the following six questions and assess each with respect to your strengths and challenges (note that if your paroling authority does not have a particular recommended policy or practice in place, it should be noted as a weakness in the interest of establishing or enhancing such policies and practices later). A brief summary of important considerations is provided for each question to highlight the kinds of issues you should consider as you respond. Once completed, discuss your responses as a board and staff. With respect to challenges, what are some steps the board can take to enhance their level of gender responsiveness? A section to make notes accompanies each question and an action plan template is provided at the end of this checklist to aid boards in outlining your next steps.

It may also be helpful to review the NPRC's Resource Guide on Justice Involved Women and other relevant literature before completing this assessment in order to gain a grounding in the issues highlighted. Please see the References and Additional Resources Section of this guide for more information about how to access those resources.

#1: The Parole Interview

Important Considerations

- Recognizing the impact of traumatic events can help to be more effective in working with women, but trauma and victimization is not an excuse for criminal behavior.
- Because she may have past trauma, avoid being confrontational.
- A quick trauma-informed approach to the interview might include: (1) explaining at the onset of the session what will happen/what will be explored during the interview process, (2) reiterating what is going to happen next throughout the interview, and (3) summarizing clearly at the conclusion of the interview what has transpired.
- Recognize her strengths and achievements, before discussing challenges and barriers.
- Provide feedback to her on assessment results and progress made towards goals.
- Explore with her what her personal goals or targets are.
- Ask her how her family and relationships might have an impact on parole supervision.
- Many parole boards report that interviews with women just take longer – allow for more time in the conduct of parole interviews with women.

Self Assessment

| QUESTION 1 | STRENGTHS | CHALLENGES |
|---|-----------|------------|
| <p><i>Does your board take a trauma informed approach to the parole interview process?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you careful to explain the interview process to her? • Do you start the interview with positive feedback by acknowledging her strengths and successes? • Do you allow her to actively participate in the interview process? • Do you allow interviews to go longer with women, if needed? | | |
| <p>NOTES</p> | | |

#2: Training and Education for Boards on Gender Responsiveness

Important Considerations

- Conducting training and providing education for parole board members and staff about the key differences between justice-involved women and men is important. Discussions about their implications for parole decision making can lead to improvements the paroling authority would not otherwise consider.
- Women’s pathways to crime and criminal justice are different from men’s. Many justice-involved women are also victims.
- Women are relational. This means they may interact differently with board members and staff than men. They may ask a lot of questions, want to tell their story, or understand with more specificity the parole process and how it impacts them.

Self Assessment

| QUESTION 2 | STRENGTHS | CHALLENGES |
|--|-----------|------------|
| <p><i>Has the board and staff been trained in gender responsive and trauma informed principles?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have board members and staff participated in training specific to women? • Are board members and staff knowledgeable about the principles of evidence-based, gender responsive and trauma informed care? • Does the paroling authority routinely provide training that includes gender responsiveness? | | |
| <p>NOTES</p> | | |

#3: Risk and Needs Assessment

Important Considerations

- Women are often overclassified on gender neutral tools and may present as higher risk than they actually are.
- Some risk factors have been shown to be significant for women that are not reflected in gender neutral tools (for example, mental health, parental stress) and other gender neutral factors (for example, employment) may reflect differently for women than men (i.e. men need to get a job and women need a job and someone to take care of her children).
- Gender-specific assessment tools (such as the WRNA, COMPAS for Women, SPIn-W) predict outcomes more accurately for women than gender neutral assessment tools.
- Some gender neutral tools have been normed differently for men and women to account for gender bias.
- Research suggests that women may have more institutional misconduct behavior and/or technical violations while on parole supervision. These behaviors may not necessarily be indicators of risk, but of learned behaviors due to trauma and survival.

Self Assessment

| QUESTION 3 | STRENGTHS | CHALLENGES |
|---|-----------|------------|
| <p><i>Is gender specific risk and needs assessment information used in parole decision making?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the paroling authority knowledgeable about gender-specific risk factors for women? • Does the paroling authority routinely review gender-specific risk and needs information as part of decision making? • Does the paroling authority use a risk/needs tool specifically designed for women (for example, WRNA, COMPAS for Women, SPIn-W) or have access to information from such tools? | | |
| <p>NOTES</p> | | |

#4: Terms and Conditions of Supervision

Important Considerations

- Clearly and simply explain supervision terms and expectations, as well as the consequences for failing to adhere to the conditions.
- If there are conditions that the paroling authority feels are most important, talk to women about them. Help her to identify one or two priority conditions that she should work on. If there are too many conditions, it may be overwhelming and result in a failure to comply.
- 60% of women released from incarceration are re-arrested and nearly a third are returned to prison—largely for technical violations, rather than new crimes. These technical violations often stem from unmet “survival needs,” such as difficulties meeting financial obligations, lower employment skills, or the inability to secure safe housing.
- Housing safety is emerging as a key risk factor for women.
- Many justice-involved women are mothers who may need additional supports if parenting children.
- Some women may also need help navigating Child Protective Services or similar agencies to gain visitation rights or regain custody of their children (if appropriate).
- Consider the extent to which financial penalties/fees could serve as a barrier to her success (consider her economic status).

Self Assessment

| QUESTION 4 | STRENGTHS | CHALLENGES |
|---|-----------|------------|
| <p><i>Are conditions tailored to address women’s risk and needs?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there gender responsive and trauma informed resources, supports, treatment programs and safe housing in the community? • Do gender-specific parole supervision caseloads exist? • Are parole supervision staff trained in gender responsive and trauma informed principles? • Do parole conditions account for the fact that she may be parenting children? | | |
| <p>NOTES</p> | | |

#5: Collecting Gender-Specific Data

Important Considerations

- It may be hard to disaggregate data by gender due to low base rates, small program sizes and the like, but it is essential to do so in order to gain a better understanding of how parole policies and practices affect men and women the same, or differently.
- Consider the opportunities to conduct qualitative as well as quantitative research to gain a better understanding of the parole process from a gendered lens.

Self Assessment

| QUESTION 5 | STRENGTHS | CHALLENGES |
|--|-----------|------------|
| <p><i>Do you have quality control, evaluation, and research methods that account for gender?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are parole statistics, research and other quantitative data disaggregated by gender? • Does the paroling authority have gender-specific performance measures? • As a board, have you discussed what kind of data and information you would like to review on a regular basis to inform your decision making about justice-involved women? | | |
| <p>NOTES</p> | | |

Action Planning

Now that you have assessed your board or agency’s performance on responding to the unique issues facing and posed by justice-involved women, use the following action planning tool to reflect on your discussions and “ratings”, and to consider further where your Board might undertake efforts to strengthen practice.

| Issue | Action Plan Steps |
|--|-------------------|
| The issues and opportunities that I would like for my Board to explore to enhance our work with justice-involved women include: | |
| What needs to be done to start exploring these issues? | |
| For each issue you have identified above, identify one specific step that you could take to bring this issue to the attention of other members, discuss it with key individuals, or gather information about this issue. | |
| For each issue, identify a key individual (a “champion”) and initial step that you would like to have taken to help your Board move forward. | |
| Indicate whether each issue is a long-term issue or a short-term issue (short-term issue = something that can be handled without additional resources or legislation, and that can be accomplished within six months; long term issue = requires more investment of resources, changes in legislation, or work over time.) | |

| Issue | Action Plan Steps |
|---|-------------------|
| <p>For short term issues, indicate three things that need to occur in the next 30 days, and indicate the person who will be responsible for each action.</p> | |
| <p>For long term issues, indicate three critical changes that need to occur in the next six months in order to make substantial progress on this issue. If resources, legislative changes, policy changes, etc. are required to make substantial progress, indicate necessary steps that must occur, and the person responsible.</p> | |
| <p>Develop a list of the key priority areas on which you will be focusing as you work to strengthen practice with your own board. Identify the strategies or approaches that you will pursue in gaining:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visibility for this issue with the board as a whole; • Consensus or “buy-in” from your colleagues on the board; and • The mechanism(s) you will be using to move forward (e.g., committees, staff support, training, routine board meetings, etc.) | |
| <p>Articulate the potential challenges of the implementation of these strategies; as well as the resources or assets that would assist in implementation.</p> | |

References

Benedict, A. (2014). *Using Trauma-Informed Practices to Enhance Safety and Security in Women's Correctional Facilities*. National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women. Retrieved from: <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Using-Trauma-Informed-Practices-Apr-141.pdf>

Bloom, B., Owen, B. & Covington, S. (2003). *Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections. Retrieved from: <http://static.nicic.gov/Library/018017.pdf>

Gobeil, R., Blanchette, K., and Stewart, L. (2016). A Meta-Analytic Review of Correctional Interventions for Women Offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 43 (3), March 2016, 301-322.

National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women (2018). *Gender Responsive Discipline and Sanctions Policy Guide for Women's Facilities*. Retrieved from: <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Combined-Discipline-Guide-031518.pdf>.

National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women (2016). *Fact Sheet on Justice Involved Women in 2016*. Retrieved from: <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

Additional Resources

The following resources will be useful to parole boards and agencies who are considering enhancements to their approaches to working with justice-involved women:

National Parole Resource Center (2012), *Paroling Authority Self-Assessment Toolkit*, available at <http://nationalparoleresourcecenter.org/toolkit2/>

National Parole Resource Center (2014), *Resource Package for Paroling Authorities on Criminal Justice Involved Women*, available at <http://nationalparoleresourcecenter.org/resource-package-justice-involved-women/index.htm>

National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women (2012), *Ten Truths That Matter When Working With Justice Involved Women*, available at http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Ten_Truths_Brief.pdf

National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women (2014), *Gender Responsive Discipline and Sanctions Policy Guide for Women's Facilities*, available at <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/discipline-guide>



For Additional Assistance

Technical assistance may be provided to paroling authorities or agencies who are interested in receiving it. For more information, contact Leilah Gilligan, Project Manager, National Parole Resource Center, at lgilligan@cepp.com.

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