



GENDER-RESPONSIVE STRATEGIES

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FOR WOMEN OFFENDERS



A Summary of Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders

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The Gender-Responsive Strategies Project: Approach and Findings

Women now represent a significant proportion of all offenders under criminal justice supervision in the United States. Numbering more than 1 million in 2001, women offenders make up 17 percent of all offenders under some form of correctional sanction.

To improve policy and practice regarding women offenders in corrections, the National Institute of Corrections undertook a 3-year project—titled *Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*—to collect and summarize multidisciplinary research and practitioner expertise on gender-responsive strategies. The final report summarizes the following:

- The characteristics of women in correctional settings.
- The ways in which gender makes a difference in current criminal justice practice.
- Multidisciplinary research and theory on women's lives that have significant implications for managing women in the criminal justice system.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

This is the first in a series of bulletins to address the needs of women offenders with regard to gender-specific policies, programs, and services. Like their pathways to crime, the challenges faced by women offenders differ from their male counterparts. Many women entering the criminal justice system are victims of domestic and sexual violence, suffer from psychological trauma, are substance abusers, are unmarried mothers of children under the age of 18, or a combination thereof.

Being responsive in the criminal justice system requires the acknowledgment of the realities of women's lives, including the pathways they travel to criminal offending and the relationships that shape their lives. Moreover, for women offenders to successfully navigate the criminal justice system and remain free citizens in the community requires providing a continuity of services that meet their specific needs.

—Morris L. Thigpen, Sr.

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) is a center of correctional learning and experience. NIC advances and shapes effective correctional practice and public policy that respond to the needs of corrections through collaboration and leadership and by providing assistance, information, education, and training.

- Guiding principles and strategies for improving the system's responses to women offenders.

This bulletin summarizes the major findings of the report¹ and offers guidance to those throughout the criminal justice system who seek a more effective way to respond to the behavior and circumstances of women offenders. Policymakers from legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government and agency administrators should find this summary particularly useful. All are encouraged to obtain the full report for a more complete analysis of gender-responsive research and practice.

Approach

To construct a knowledge base that provides a foundation for gender-appropriate policy and practice, project staff reviewed multidisciplinary research literature in a broad range of areas, including health, family violence, substance abuse, mental health, trauma, employment, and education. This literature was analyzed to determine its application to gender responsiveness

in criminal justice practices (see sidebar “Defining Gender Responsiveness”).

Additional data pertinent to managing women offenders within the criminal justice framework were collected through national focus groups and interviews with experts representing various criminal justice agencies. Project staff conducted more than 40 individual and group interviews with policymakers, managers, line staff, and women offenders in all phases of the criminal justice system throughout the country. Written documents that included official and technical reports concerning women offenders, policies and procedures, and existing academic research were then collected

and analyzed. Finally, the Practitioner Advisory Group, representing community corrections, jail, prison, and parole professionals, reviewed multiple drafts of these findings.

Potential Benefits of Gender-Responsive Practice

Study findings indicate that paying attention to the differences in male and female pathways into criminality and their differential responses to custody and supervision can lead to better outcomes for both men and women offenders in institutional and community settings. Policies, programs, and procedures that reflect empirical, gender-based differences can—

Defining Gender Responsiveness

Being gender responsive in the criminal justice system requires an acknowledgment of the realities of women's lives, including the pathways they travel to criminal offending and the relationships that shape their lives. To assist those who work with women in effectively and appropriately responding to this information, Bloom and Covington developed the following definition:

Gender-responsive means creating an environment through site selection, staff selection, program development, content, and material that reflects an understanding of the realities of women's lives and addresses the issues of the participants. Gender-responsive approaches are multidimensional and are based on theoretical perspectives that acknowledge women's pathways into the criminal justice system. These approaches address social (e.g., poverty, race, class, and gender inequality) and cultural factors, as well as therapeutic interventions. These interventions address issues such as abuse, violence, family relationships, substance abuse, and co-occurring disorders. They provide a strength-based approach to treatment and skill building. The emphasis is on self-efficacy.*

* Bloom, B., and Covington, S. (2000). Gendered justice: Programming for women in correctional settings. Paper presented to the American Society of Criminology, San Francisco, CA, p. 11.

- Make the management of women offenders more effective.
- Enable correctional facilities to be more suitably staffed and funded.
- Decrease staff turnover and sexual misconduct.
- Improve program and service delivery.
- Decrease the likelihood of litigation against the criminal justice system.
- Increase the gender appropriateness of services and programs.

The Foundation for the Principles

To develop guiding principles and strategies, the gender-responsive strategies project reviewed and integrated the characteristics of women offenders, the key elements of criminal justice practice, and theories related to women's lives.

Characteristics of Women in the Criminal Justice System

The significant increase in the number of women under criminal justice supervision has called attention to the status of women in the criminal justice system and to the particular circumstances they encounter. The increasing numbers have also made evident the lack of appropriate policies and procedures for managing women offenders. Women offenders typically have low incomes and are undereducated and unskilled. They have sporadic employment histories and are

National Profile of Women Offenders

A national profile of women offenders reveals they are—

- Disproportionately women of color.
- In their early- to mid-thirties.
- Most likely to have been convicted of a drug-related offense.
- Individuals with fragmented family histories; other family members also may be involved with the criminal justice system.
- Survivors of physical and/or sexual abuse as children and adults.
- Individuals with significant substance abuse problems.
- Individuals with multiple physical and mental health problems.
- Unmarried mothers of minor children.
- Individuals with a high school degree or GED but with limited vocational training and sporadic work histories.

disproportionately women of color. They are less likely than men to have committed violent offenses and more likely to have been convicted of crimes involving drugs or property. Often, their property offenses are economically driven, motivated by poverty and by the abuse of alcohol and other drugs (see sidebar “National Profile of Women Offenders”).

Women Offenders and Criminal Justice Practice

Two key findings emerge from an examination of the state of criminal justice practice regarding women. First, because of the overwhelming number of male offenders, the issues relevant to women are often overshadowed. Second, criminal justice agencies often have difficulty applying to women offenders the policies and procedures that

have been designed largely for the male population. Most systems lack a written policy on the management and supervision of women offenders. Further, in focus groups, a number of managers reported resistance to modifying policies to reflect more appropriate and effective responses to the behaviors and characteristics of women under supervision.

Gender differences in behavior, life circumstances, and parental responsibilities have broad implications for almost every aspect of criminal justice practice. The differences between men and women involved with the criminal justice system have been documented in terms of the levels of violence and threats to community safety in their offense patterns, responsibilities for children and other family members, interactions with staff,

and relationships with other offenders while incarcerated or under community supervision.

Women are more vulnerable to staff misconduct and have different programming and service needs, especially in terms of physical and mental health, substance abuse, recovery from trauma, and economic/vocational skills. While all offenders must confront the problems of reentry into the community, many of the obstacles faced by women offenders are specifically related to their status as women. The majority of women in correctional institutions are mothers, and a major consideration for these women is reunification with their children.

The obstacles for these women are unique because their requirements for safe housing, economic support, medical services, and other needs must include the ability to take care of their children. These obstacles include system-level characteristics, such as the lack of programs and services designed and targeted for women, women's involvement with multiple human service agencies, and lack of community support for women in general.

In the full report, issues related to gender differences and their effects are described with regard to the following:

Criminal justice processing:

Gender differences have been found in all stages of criminal justice processing, including crime definition, reporting, and counting; types of crime; levels of harm;

arrest; bail; sentencing; community supervision; incarceration; and reentry into the community.² For example, women as a group commit crimes that are less violent than the crimes committed by their male counterparts. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that, according to victim accounts, only one of seven violent offenders is female. Drug offenses account for a greater proportion of the imprisonment of women than men, women have fewer acts of violence or major infractions in prison, and children play a more significant role in the lives of incarcerated women than those of men.

Classification and assessment

procedures: Most of the classification and assessment instruments in use today were developed and validated for male offenders. Because these instruments were based on the behaviors of a male offender population, they are often unable to accurately assess either the risks or the needs of women offenders and tend to overclassify women, placing them at higher levels of custody or supervision than necessary. Moreover, most instruments do not assess the specific needs of women that are tied to their pathways to offending, specifically the interconnected problems of substance abuse, trauma and victimization, mental illness, relationship difficulties, and low self efficacy.

Women's services and programs:

Substance abuse, family violence, and their struggle to support themselves and their children are the

main factors that drive women into crime. More often than their male counterparts, women need gender-specific services such as protection from abusive partners, childcare services, access to reliable transportation, and realistic employment opportunities that allow for self-support. In general, research shows an insufficient number of programs for women under any type of supervision that will help them prepare for career-oriented training and address issues common to women offenders such as sexual abuse, victimization through violence, and low self-esteem.

Staffing and training: In terms of staff training, standard training protocols often neglect or minimize information about woman offenders. There is a perception among correctional staff that women offenders are more difficult to work with than their male counterparts. Preparing staff to work with women offenders requires increased knowledge about women that will help staff members develop the constructive attitudes and the interpersonal skills necessary for working with women under correctional supervision.

Staff sexual misconduct: In the past decade, the problems of staff sexual misconduct have received significant attention from the media, the public, and many correctional systems. Most of the published work describes the problem in the institutional setting; however, the problem exists throughout the criminal justice system. Although

the more publicized pattern of misconduct appears to involve male staff with female inmates, it is important to note that female officers have also been involved in serious misconduct. Sexual harassment may retraumatize women with a history of abuse and diminish their ability to heal and engage in programming. Further, standard procedures in correctional settings (e.g., searches, restraints, and the use of isolation) can act as triggers to retraumatize women who have histories of abuse.

Theoretical Perspectives Related to Women's Lives

Gender-responsive principles and strategies are grounded in three intersecting perspectives: the pathways perspective, relational theory and female development, and trauma and addiction theories.

The Pathways Perspective

Research on women's pathways into crime indicates that gender has a significant role in shaping criminality. Women and men enter the criminal justice system via different pathways. Among women, the most common pathways to crime are based on survival of abuse and poverty and substance abuse. Recent research establishes that, because of their gender, females are at greater risk of experiencing sexual abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, and single-parent status. For example, girls and young women often experience sexual abuse in their homes;

in adulthood, women experience abuse in their relationships with significant others. Pathways research has identified key issues in producing and sustaining female criminality, such as histories of personal abuse, mental illness tied to early life experiences, substance abuse and addiction, economic and social marginality, homelessness, and dysfunctional relationships.

Relational Theory and Female Development

Theories that focus on female development, such as the relational model, posit that the primary motivation for women throughout life is the establishment of a strong sense of connection with others. Relational theory developed from an increased understanding of gender differences and, specifically, of the different ways in which women and men develop psychologically. According to relational theory, females develop a sense of self and self-worth when their actions arise out of, and lead back into, connections with others. Therefore, connection, not separation, is the guiding principle of growth for girls and women.

The importance of understanding relational theory is reflected in the recurring themes of relationship and family in the lives of women offenders. Disconnection and violation rather than growth-fostering relationships characterize the childhood experiences of most women in the criminal justice system. Women are far more likely

than men to be motivated by relational concerns. For example, women offenders who cite drug abuse as self-medication often discuss personal relationships as the cause of their pain. The relational aspects of addiction are also evident in research indicating that women are more likely than men to turn to drugs in the context of relationships with drug-abusing partners to make themselves feel connected.

A relational context is critical to successfully address the reasons why women commit crimes, the motivations behind their behaviors, how they can change their behavior, and their reintegration into the community.

Trauma and Addiction Theories

Trauma and addiction are inter-related issues in the lives of women offenders. Although they are therapeutically linked, these issues historically have been treated separately. Trauma and addiction theories provide the integration and foundation for gender responsiveness in the criminal justice system. Trauma has been the focus of a number of studies, and various experts have written about the process of trauma recovery.³ Because the traumatic syndromes have basic features in common, the recovery process also follows a common pathway. A generic definition of addiction as "the chronic neglect of self in favor of something or someone else" is helpful when working with women.⁴ Some

women use substances to numb the pain experienced in destructive relationships.⁵ Women who abuse substances are also vulnerable targets for violence.

A New Vision: Guiding Principles for a Gender-Responsive Criminal Justice System

NIC's report on gender-responsive strategies documents the need for a new vision for the criminal justice system—one that recognizes the behavioral and social differences between men and women offenders that have specific implications for gender-responsive policy and practice.

Principles and Strategies

Empirically based evidence drawn from a variety of disciplines and effective practice suggests that addressing the realities of women's lives through gender-responsive policy and programs is fundamental to improved outcomes at all criminal justice phases. The following guiding principles are designed to address concerns about the management, supervision, and treatment of women offenders in the criminal justice system. Together with the general strategies (see sidebar "General Strategies for Implementing Guiding Principles"), the guiding principles provide a blueprint for a gender-responsive approach to the development of criminal justice policy.

Guiding Principle 1: Acknowledge That Gender Makes a Difference

The foremost principle in responding appropriately to women is to acknowledge the implications of gender throughout the criminal justice system. The criminal justice field has been dominated by the rule of parity: Equal treatment is to be provided to everyone.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the exact same treatment is appropriate for both women and men. The data are very clear concerning the distinguishing aspects of men and women offenders. They come into the criminal justice system via different pathways; respond to supervision and custody differently; exhibit differences in terms of substance abuse, trauma, mental illness, parenting responsibilities, and employment histories; and represent different levels of risk within both the institution and the community. To successfully develop and deliver services, supervision, and treatment for women offenders, we must first acknowledge these gender differences.

The Evidence

The differences between women and men are well documented across a variety of disciplines and practices, and evidence increasingly shows that the majority of these differences are due to both social and environmental factors. Although certain basic issues related to health, such as reproduction, are

influenced by physiological differences, many of the observed behavior disparities are the result of gender-related differences, such as socialization, gender roles, gender stratification, and gender inequality. The nature and extent of women's criminal behavior and the ways in which they respond to supervision reflect such gender differences, including the following:

- Women and men differ in levels of participation, motivation, and degree of harm caused by their criminal behavior.
- Women's crime rates, with few exceptions, are much lower than men's crime rates.
- Women's crimes tend to be less serious (i.e., less violence, more property- and drug-related offenses) than men's crimes. The gender differential is most pronounced in violent crime, where women's participation is profoundly lower.
- The interrelationship between victimization and offending appears to be more evident in women's lives. Family violence, trauma, and substance abuse contribute to women's criminality and shape their patterns of offending.
- Women respond to community supervision, incarceration, and treatment in ways that differ from those of their male counterparts. Women are less violent while in custody but have higher rates of disciplinary infractions for less serious rule violations. They are influenced by their responsibilities and concerns for

their children, by their relationships with staff, and by their relationships with other offenders.

Guiding Principle 2: Create an Environment Based on Safety, Respect, and Dignity

Research from a range of disciplines (e.g., physical health, mental health, and substance abuse) has shown that safety, respect, and dignity are fundamental to behavioral change. To improve behavioral outcomes for women, it is critical to provide a safe and supportive setting for supervision. A profile of women in the criminal justice system indicates that many have grown up in less-than-optimal family and community environments. In their interactions with women offenders, criminal justice professionals must be aware of the significant pattern of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse that many of these women have experienced. Every precaution must be taken to ensure that the criminal justice setting does not reenact women offenders' patterns of earlier life experiences. A safe, consistent, and supportive environment is the cornerstone of an effective corrective process. Because of their lower levels of violent crime and their low risk to public safety, women offenders should be supervised with the minimal restrictions required to meet public safety interests.

The Evidence

Research from the field of psychology, particularly trauma studies, indicates that environment cues

behavior. There is now an understanding of what an environment must reflect if it is to affect the biological, psychological, and social consequences of trauma. Because the corrections culture is influenced by punishment and control, it is often in conflict with the culture of treatment. The criminal justice system is based on a control model, whereas treatment is based on a model of behavioral change. These two models must be integrated so that women offenders can experience positive outcomes. This integration should acknowledge the following facts:

- Substance abuse professionals and the literature report that women require a treatment environment that is safe and nurturing. They also require a therapeutic relationship that reflects mutual respect, empathy, and compassion.
- A physically and psychologically safe environment contributes significantly to positive outcomes for women.
- Safety is identified as a key factor in effectively addressing the needs of domestic violence and sexual assault victims.
- Custodial misconduct has been documented in many forms, including verbal degradation, rape, and sexual assault.
- Assessment and classification procedures often do not recognize the lower level of risk to public safety presented by women both in the nature of their offenses and in their behavior

while under supervision. This can result in placement of women in higher levels of custody than necessary in correctional institutions and in inappropriate assessments of their risk to the community.

- Women offenders' needs for personal safety and support suggest the importance of safe and sober housing.

Guiding Principle 3: Develop Policies, Practices, and Programs That Are Relational and Promote Healthy Connections to Children, Family, Significant Others, and the Community

Understanding the role of relationships in women's lives is fundamental because the theme of connections and relationships threads throughout the lives of women offenders. When the concept of relationship is incorporated into policies, practices, and programs, the effectiveness of the system or agency is enhanced. This concept is critical when addressing the following:

- Reasons why women commit crimes.
- Impact of interpersonal violence on women's lives.
- Importance of children in the lives of women offenders.
- Relationships between women in an institutional setting.
- Process of women's psychological growth and development.
- Environmental context needed for effective programming.

- Challenges involved in reentering the community.

The Evidence

Studies of women offenders highlight the importance of relationships and the fact that criminal involvement often develops through relationships with family members, significant others, or friends. This is qualitatively different from the concept of “peer associates,” which is often cited as a criminogenic risk factor in assessment instruments. Interventions must acknowledge and reflect the impact of these relationships on women’s current and future behavior. Important findings regarding relationships include the following:

- Developing mutual relationships is fundamental to women’s identity and sense of worth.
- Women offenders frequently suffer from isolation and alienation created by discrimination, victimization, mental illness, and substance abuse.
- Studies in the substance abuse field indicate that partners, in particular, are an integral part of women’s initiation into substance abuse, continuing drug use, and relapse. Partners can also influence the retention of women in treatment programs.
- The majority of women under criminal justice supervision are mothers of dependent children. Many women try to maintain their parenting responsibilities while under community supervision or while in custody, and

many plan to reunite with one or more of their children on their release.

- Studies have shown that relationships among women in prison are also important. Women often develop close personal relationships and pseudo families as a way to adjust to prison life. Research on prison staff indicates that correctional personnel often are not prepared to provide appropriate responses to these relationships.

Guiding Principle 4: Address Substance Abuse, Trauma, and Mental Health Issues Through Comprehensive, Integrated, and Culturally Relevant Services and Appropriate Supervision

Substance abuse, trauma, and mental health are three critical, interrelated issues in the lives of women offenders. These issues have a major impact on a woman’s experience of community correctional supervision, incarceration, and transition to the community in terms of both programming needs and successful reentry. Although they are therapeutically linked, these issues historically have been treated separately. One of the most important developments in health care over the past several decades is the recognition that a substantial proportion of women have a history of serious traumatic experiences. These traumatic experiences play a vital and often unrecognized role in the evolution of a woman’s physical and mental health problems.

The Evidence

The salient features that propel women into crime include family violence and battering, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Other considerations include the following:

- Substance abuse studies indicate that trauma, particularly in the form of physical or sexual abuse, is closely associated with substance abuse disorders in women. According to various studies, a lifetime history of trauma is present in approximately 55 to 99 percent of female substance abusers.⁶
- Research shows that women who have been sexually or physically abused as children or adults are more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs and may suffer from depression, anxiety disorders, and posttraumatic stress disorder.
- Co-occurring disorders complicate substance abuse treatment and recovery. An integrated program concurrently addresses both disorders through assessment, treatment, referral, and coordination.
- Research conducted by the National Institutes of Health indicates that gender differences, as well as race and ethnicity, must be considered in determining appropriate diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease.
- Experience in the substance abuse field has shown that treatment programs are better able to engage and retain women clients if programs are culturally targeted.

Guiding Principle 5: Provide Women With Opportunities To Improve Their Socioeconomic Conditions

Addressing both the social and material realities of women offenders is an important aspect of correctional intervention. The woman offender's life is shaped by her socioeconomic status; her experience with trauma and substance abuse; and her relationships with partners, children, and family. Most women offenders are disadvantaged economically, and this reality is compounded by their trauma and substance abuse histories. Improving socioeconomic outcomes for women requires providing opportunities through education and training that will enable them to support themselves and their children.

The Evidence

Most women offenders are poor, undereducated, and unskilled. Many have never worked, have sporadic work histories, or have depended on public assistance. Additional factors that affect their socioeconomic conditions include the following:

- Most women offenders are heads of their households. In 1997, nearly 32 percent of all female heads of households lived below the poverty line.
- Research in the field of domestic violence has shown that availability of material and economic necessities—including housing, financial support, educational

and vocational training, and job development—is essential to women's ability to establish lives apart from their abusive partners.

- Research on the effectiveness of substance abuse treatment has noted that, without strong material support, women presented with economic demands are more likely to reoffend and discontinue treatment.
- Recent changes in public assistance due to welfare reform (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families programs created under the Welfare Reform Law of 1996) affect women disproportionately. They negatively affect women's ability to support themselves and their children by making them ineligible for benefits. Even when eligible, women may not be able to apply for benefits until they have been released from custody or community supervision. They cannot gain access to treatment or medical care without Medicaid. Additionally, their convictions may make them ineligible for public housing or Section 8 housing subsidies.

Guiding Principle 6: Establish a System of Community Supervision and Reentry With Comprehensive, Collaborative Services

Women offenders face specific challenges as they reenter the community from jail or prison. Women on probation also face challenges in their communities. In addition to the stigma of being identified as an offender, they may carry additional

burdens, such as single-parent status, decreased economic potential, lack of targeted services and programs, responsibilities to multiple agencies, and a general lack of community support. Navigating through myriad systems that often provide fragmented services and have conflicting requirements can interfere with supervision and successful reintegration. There is a need for wraparound services—that is, a holistic and culturally sensitive plan for each woman that draws on a coordinated range of resources in her community. Types of organizations that should work as partners to assist women who are reentering the community include the following:

- Mental health providers.
- Alcohol and other drug treatment programs.
- Programs for survivors of physical and sexual violence.
- Family service agencies.
- Emergency shelter, food, and financial assistance programs.
- Educational organizations.
- Vocational training and employment services.
- Health care.
- The child welfare system, childcare, and other children's services.
- Transportation.
- Self-help groups.
- Consumer-advocacy groups.
- Organizations that provide leisure and recreation options.

- Faith-based organizations.
- Community service clubs.

The Evidence

Challenges to successful completion of community supervision and reentry for women offenders have been documented in the research literature. These challenges can include housing, transportation, childcare, and employment needs; reunification with children and other family members; peer support; and fragmented community services. There is little coordination among community service systems linking substance abuse, criminal justice, public health, employment, housing, and child welfare. Other considerations for successful reentry and community supervision include the following:

- Studies from such fields as substance abuse and mental health have found that collaborative, community-based programs offering a multidisciplinary approach foster successful outcomes among women. Research has shown that women offenders have a great need for comprehensive, community-based wraparound services. This coordinated or case management approach has been found to work effectively with women because it addresses their multiple treatment needs.
- Substance abuse research shows that an understanding of the interrelationships among the women, the program, and the community is critical to the

success of a comprehensive approach.

- Data from woman offender focus groups indicate that failure to meet the following needs puts women at risk for criminal justice involvement: housing, physical and psychological safety, education, job training and opportunities, community-based substance abuse treatment, and economic support. All of these factors—in addition to positive

role models and a community response to violence against women—are critical components of a gender-responsive crime prevention program.

Policy Considerations

As agencies and systems examine the impact of their operations, policy-level changes are a primary consideration (see sidebar “Gender-Responsive Policy Elements”).

General Strategies for Implementing Guiding Principles

The following general strategies can be applied to implementation of each guiding principle:

Adopt	Adopt each principle as policy on a systemwide and programmatic level.
Support	Provide full support of the administration for adoption and implementation of the gender-responsive principles.
Resources	Evaluate financial and human resources to ensure that implementation and allocation adjustments are adequate to accommodate any new policies and practices.
Training	Provide ongoing training as an essential element in implementing gender-responsive practices.
Oversight	Include oversight of the new policies and practices in management plan development.
Congruence	Conduct routine procedural review to ensure that procedures are adapted, deleted, or written for new policies.
Environment	Conduct ongoing assessment and review of the culture/environment to monitor the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behavior of administrative, management, and line staff.
Evaluation	Develop an evaluation process to assess management, supervision, and services.

Gender-Responsive Policy Elements

Create parity: Develop an understanding of parity or “equal treatment” that stresses the importance of equivalence (of purpose and effort) rather than sameness (in content).

Commit to women’s programs: Create an executive-level position and provide appropriate resources, staffing, and training to ensure that women’s issues are a priority.

Develop procedures that apply to women offenders: Review existing policies and procedures and develop operating procedures that address the needs of women offenders in such areas as clothing, personal property, hygiene, exercise, recreation, and contact with children and family.

Respond to women’s pathways: Develop policies, programs, and services that respond specifically to women’s pathways in and out of crime and to the contexts of their lives that support criminal behavior.

Consider community: Develop strong partnerships for community and transitional programs that include housing, training, education, employment, and family support services.

Include children and family: Facilitate the strengthening of family ties, particularly between mothers and their children.

Conclusion: Addressing the Realities of Women’s Lives Is the Key to Improved Outcomes

This bulletin documents the importance of understanding and acknowledging differences between men and women offenders and the impact of those differences on the development of gender-responsive policies, practices, and programs in the criminal justice system. Analysis of available data indicates that addressing the realities of women’s lives through gender-responsive policy and practice is fundamental to improved outcomes at all phases of the criminal justice system. This

review maintains that consideration of women’s and men’s different pathways into criminality, their differential responses to custody and supervision, and their differing program requirements can result in a criminal justice system that is better equipped to respond to both men and women offenders.

The guiding principles and strategies outlined in the full report and this bulletin are intended to be a blueprint for the development of gender-responsive policy and practice. They can serve as the foundation for improving the ways in which criminal justice agencies manage and supervise women

offenders in both institutional and community settings.

Ultimately, commitment and willingness on the part of policymakers and practitioners will be needed to actualize the vision and implement the principles and strategies of a gender-responsive criminal justice system. Reducing women’s involvement in the criminal justice system will benefit the women themselves, their communities, and society. Such efforts will develop a more effective criminal justice system and generate positive effects for generations to come.

Notes

1. See Bloom, B., Owen, B., and Covington, S. (2003). *Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections. NIC accession no. 018017.
2. Harris, K. (2001). “Women offenders in the community: Differential treatment in the justice process linked to gender.” Information session on supervision of women offenders in the

The full text of *Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders* may be obtained free of charge from the National Institute of Corrections Information Center. The Information Center can be reached at 800-877-1461. Information on this report and other available documents can be found on NIC’s Web site at www.nicic.org.

www.nicic.org



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3. Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

4. Covington, S. (1998b). Women in prison: Approaches in the treatment of our most invisible population. *Women and Therapy Journal* 21(1): 141–155.

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6. See Brown, V., Melchior, L., and Huba, G. (1999). Level of burden among women diagnosed with severe

mental illness and substance abuse. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 31(1): 31–40. Browne, A., Miller, B., and Maguin, E. (1999). Prevalence and severity of lifetime physical and sexual victimization among incarcerated women. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 22(3–4): 301–322. Najavits, L.M., Weiss, R.D., and Shaw, S.R. (1997). The link between substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder in women: A research review. *American Journal on Addictions* 6(4): 273–283. Owen, B., and Bloom, B. (1995). Profiling women prisoners: Findings from national survey and California sample. *The Prison Journal* 75(2): 165–185. Teplin, L.A., Abram, K.M., and McClelland, G.M. (1996). Prevalence of psychiatric disorders among incarcerated women. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 53(6): 505–512.

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