



The core components of a gender sensitive service for women experiencing multiple disadvantage: a review of the literature

Executive Summary

This literature review was commissioned by AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) and Agenda, the Alliance for Women and Girls at Risk, as part of the Mapping the Maze project funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust. The aim was to review the literature to inform a minimum threshold to be used to map service provision across England and Wales for women experiencing multiple disadvantage.

This review takes as its starting point the five areas of disadvantage faced by women set out in the Women at Risk report (McNeish and Scott 2014), namely: contact with the criminal justice system; experiencing homelessness; involvement in prostitution or sexual exploitation; experiencing severe mental health problems; and experiencing serious drug and alcohol problems. For the purposes of the review, the definition of disadvantage is also extended to include all forms of violence against women and girls.

A small scale systematic search strategy was employed. Documents comprised both peer reviewed and unpublished material. 14 articles met the inclusion criteria from the academic databases and a further 55 documents were found elsewhere spanning a wide range of research knowledge such as mixed method evaluations including social return on investment (SROI), service reviews, and national service standards. A large part of the literature involves testimony from women accessing services or with lived experience of multiple life stressors.

The review highlights that, regardless of which sector a service is based in, women are likely to present with a myriad of support needs. Women tend to enter some services (e.g. homeless and social support services) at a later stage than men, when problems have escalated significantly and they may be less ready to begin their recovery journey. Despite widespread evidence of the multiple forms of negative life experiences that women accessing health and social care services face, dominant service delivery models do not address the complexity of many women's lives in an integrated manner.

A number of key themes emerged from the review:

- The values and approaches underpinning the delivery of different services are as important as the delivery itself. This is neatly summed up by the mission statement of one Women's Community Centre which "seeks to work with partners and other agencies to challenge that which degrades and diminishes women."
- The quality of relationships emerges as what women often value most in the provision of services. In particular, non-judgemental attitudes by staff were identified by both service users and practitioners as being important for building trust and successful relationships.

- The most successful services worked from a strengths-based empowerment model. The avoidance of behaviours that may replicate those of a woman's abuser are particularly important for women who have experienced controlling relationships from family members, intimate partners or pimps. Progress is also facilitated by relationships built on faith in the positive possibilities that each woman is capable of achieving.
- These approaches work best when they go hand in hand with practical service delivery which is holistic, addresses the multiple needs of women and is offered in a women only space.
- Emotional safety can only be fostered when physical safety is provided. For women who have experienced violence and abuse, the male dominated nature of many day centres and mixed gender substance treatment services makes them threatening and frightening. Women only spaces are deemed crucial to facilitate safety on both an emotional and physical level.
- Holistic and needs led interventions, where women do not have to identify and isolate specific issues to receive a service, emerge as a key theme, which is a stark contrast to the basis on which most services operate.
- Given that every woman's life, experiences and needs are different, it follows that holistic service provision means different things to different women, and so need to be tailored appropriately. This means collaborative and proactive working with a range of specialist organisations and that staff need to be trained and supported to understand all the key issues and how they are related. This includes being aware of the individual but also relational and social contexts in which women operate.
- For Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women, specialist BME services are highly valued and should be part of a tailored support package for this group of women.
- Women value having staff to advocate on their behalf with a wide range of external services, such as child protection and housing.

The review also explores the relevance of trauma informed care principles in developing gender sensitive services. Trauma informed care is a " strengths based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment" (Hopper et al 2010).

The term is now well established within North American behavioural services and with its five core principles of trauma awareness, safety, trustworthiness, choice and collaboration, and building of strengths and skills clearly has much in common with the gender focussed approaches explored in the review. Most significantly, in common with women centred working, the trauma informed approach recognises the wider socio-political influences in women's lives. What it adds to other models is an increased focus on the need to address the psychological impact of trauma in service delivery.

The review concludes that the way a service is delivered is as important as what is delivered, and highlights the strength of trauma informed services and compatibility with women centred working. It ends by identifying several gender sensitive service assessment tools.

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