

**Agenda's response to the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee investigation:
Women Offenders**

October 2017

Introduction

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this investigation.

Ten years on from the Corston Review, there is an opportunity to significantly reduce the number of women in the criminal justice system in London, and to provide more effective community options.

Prison can be hugely damaging both for women and their families and children, with 95% of children separated from their mother by imprisonment having to leave the family home to go into care or live with relatives.¹

Women can be more effectively rehabilitated outside the criminal justice system, yet community provision is under-resourced and faces ongoing cuts.

We therefore welcome the Mayor's Police and Crime Plan's focus on diverting women from the criminal justice system, recognition of the need to improve specialist community services for women and development of a new Female Offenders Service.

Women and multiple disadvantage

It is well established that women in contact with the criminal justice system face considerable disadvantage, with backgrounds of mental ill health, poverty, addiction and experiences of abuse and trauma across their lives. They tend to be the victims of violent crimes like sexual and domestic abuse and the perpetrators of non-violent ones like handling stolen goods and shoplifting.

Because they commit less serious crimes, most women in prison are on remand or serving short sentences with little opportunity to address the underlying causes of their crimes and prevent their reoffending.

Many women end up in custody because of a lack of support outside the prison gates. Improvements in mental health provision, treatment for addictions and social care in the community to help women address their needs earlier would reduce the number of women coming into contact with the criminal justice system in the first place. However, community based services such as mental health, substance misuse and domestic abuse are under pressure and specialist services for women are few and far between.

We believe the starting point of a new approach to women should be recognising that women in contact with the criminal justice system are likely to face multiple disadvantage and will need holistic, trauma informed support to address the issues they face and to tackle the underlying causes of their offending. We recommend London learns lessons from the whole systems approach taken in Greater Manchester.

Specialist women's services

Women's specialist services including women's centres have a proven track-record of providing effective therapeutic and practical help and interventions that support rehabilitation and help women

¹ Caddle, D and Crisp, D. (1997) Mothers in Prison HO Research and Statistics Directorate Findings No.38
London: TSO

turn their lives around. Specialist women's services have been shown to be highly effective in both preventing women entering prison and in rehabilitating those who do. Women's centres can help tackle the disadvantage which often lies behind women's crimes.² Ministry of Justice's own analysis shows a statistically significant reduction in re-offending rates for those who receive support from women's centres.³

The annual cost of one prison place (approximately £42,765) would support about 15 women on community orders or on diversion programmes. Modelling⁴ suggests that investing £18m per year in women's centres could save almost £1 billion over 5 years. We would therefore welcome further investment in women's specialist services across London, so that they have the capacity to divert more women from the criminal justice system.

Sustainability and continuity of these services is vital if we are not to lose the expertise, relationships and goodwill that have been built up over many years and that are necessary for joined-up interventions. The courts will not refer women to programmes unless they are confident of their durability.

Mapping the Maze – Services for women facing multiple disadvantage

Mapping the Maze, a report recently published by Agenda and AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) identifies what specialist services for women exist across the substance misuse, criminal justice, homelessness and mental health sectors in England and Wales.⁵ The report found quite patchy provision for women across these sectors, with a woman's ability to access services being dependent on where she lives. In some areas there are a range of services across sectors, in others there may only be support for one or two issues like homelessness or mental health and nothing else. In other areas there are none at all. Our [online map](#) allows you to identify what service provision for women exists in local areas, including across London.

We hope this provides a helpful tool. The report also sets out recommendations for commissioners based on the evidence of what is known to be effective in working with this group of women.

BAME Women in the Criminal Justice System

We believe there should be a focus on the particular needs of BAME and foreign national women in the investigation into Women Offenders in London. 18% of female prisoners are BAME⁶, compared to 14% of the general population.⁷ Within this, some groups of women are particularly overrepresented, most notably Black or Black British⁸ women who make up 8.8% of female prisoners, compared to 3.3% of the general population⁹. Agenda and Women in Prison's recent report, *Double Disadvantage*¹⁰, explores how gender and ethnicity combine to shape the experiences of BAME women in the system. Their particular needs and experiences must be taken into account in any new approach.

² Custody Pilot Project, Anawim, <http://www.anawim.co.uk/documents/Custody-Pilot-Project.pdf>

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/427388/womens-centres-report.pdf

⁴ Counting the Cost, Revolving Doors, http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/file/1793/download?token=_uhAj6qr

⁵ Mapping the Maze, Agenda and AVA, <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Mapping-the-Maze-final-report-for-publication.pdf>

⁶ Ministry of Justice statistics, March 2016 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2015>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2016>

⁸ 371 of the 3826 female prisoners were black or black British (Prison Statistics, 31 March 2016)

⁹ Office of National Statistics, 2011:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicityandnationalidentityinenglandandwales/2012-12-11>

¹⁰ Double Disadvantage, Agenda and Women in Prison <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Double-disadvantage-FINAL.pdf>

About Agenda

Agenda is an alliance of over 80 voluntary sector organisations - we exist to ensure that women and girls at risk of abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness get the support and protection they need. We campaign for systems and services to be transformed; to raise awareness across sectors; and to promote public and political understanding of the lives of women and girls facing multiple disadvantage.

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