

# Women's Breakout – Information Briefing

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## What is Women's Breakout

Women's Breakout is the representative body for a national network of women-centered services offering effective gender specific community alternatives to custody.

Women's Breakout exists to shape national approaches working with vulnerable women who are in contact with or at risk of becoming involved in the Criminal Justice System.

Women's Breakout provides a point of contact for consultation for a wide range of statutory and voluntary sector organisations interested in researching and evaluating the integrated, women's community solutions.

## Key messages

The majority of women imprisoned should not be there.

To prevent and reduce crime committed by women gender specific approaches delivered in women only community based organisations work best.

During one year, more than 11,000 women are imprisoned and almost 18,000 children are separated from their mothers.

Women's Breakout is the national voice for community based organisations offering gender specific alternatives to custody for women.

## Women's Community Solutions in your area

For information on the projects that are operating in your area please visit our website [www.womensbreakout.org.uk](http://www.womensbreakout.org.uk) and look at our member's directory.

## Who We Are

Women's Breakout is a third sector umbrella organisation that represents 47 voluntary and community sector organisations working with women offenders and women at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system in gender sensitive environments.

Women's Breakout has three strategic aims:

- i. To provide a credible, influential voice for the Women's Community Project sector.
- ii. To promote a consistent, informed message in strategic and partnership arenas in local, regional, national, European and international settings; and across the wider gender agenda.
- iii. To support the development and sustainability of the Women's Community Project sector by improving and demonstrating a high standard in the quality of services in this sector and by sharing learning and fostering innovation.

## Our Vision

To see gender specific approaches, delivered in women only community based organisations, integrated into mainstream rehabilitation provision thereby contributing to a significant reduction in the number of women in custody and a reduction in the number of those coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

Women with multiple and complex needs who have access to such services will be supported and empowered to take responsibility for themselves and their families and to make positive life changes.

## Aims

Women's Breakout aims to influence the development of a criminal justice system that:

- i) Seeks to intervene early to prevent vulnerable women from entering a destructive and damaging cycle of offending behaviours;
- ii) Addresses offending behaviour and the causes of offending behaviour;
- iii) Does not disproportionately damage the health and family life of women offenders;
- iv) Seeks to repair, rebuild and support a fair and equitable society;
- v) Understands and values the contribution of our member organisations to achieving successful outcomes for women.

## What are Women's Community Solutions?

Women's Community Solutions are gender specific interventions that are available through community based, third sector organisations.

As early as 1995, the Oregon Intermediate Sanctions for Female Offenders Policy Group defined effective gender-specific practice as programmes that

*"..... take into account the real differences between men and women, in their learning and relationship styles and life circumstances. They are not just those that admit only women*

*and use the same approach as men.”*

Subsequent work by Dr Barbara Bloom et al supports Baroness Corston’s recommendation for a differential approach for women offenders and suggests that if services are to be effective for women they must be designed specifically with women’s needs and risks in mind. They go on to recommend the following guiding principles for developing a gender responsive approach to criminal justice policy:

- i) Gender: Acknowledge that gender makes a difference.
- ii) Environment: Create an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity.
- iii) Relationships: Develop policies, practices and programs that are relational and promote healthy connections to children, family, significant others, and the community.
- iv) Services and Supervision: Address the issues of substance abuse, trauma, and mental health through comprehensive, integrated, culturally relevant services and appropriate supervision.
- v) Economic and Social Status: Improve women’s economic/social conditions by developing their capacity to be self-sufficient.
- vi) Community: Establish a system of community supervision and re-entry with comprehensive, collaborative services.

According to ‘*Women’s Mental Health Into the Mainstream*’, a strategic document addressing how women’s inequalities, disadvantage and discrimination impact on their mental health, the key requirements for effective services for women are that they:

- i) Promote empowerment, choice and self-determination
- ii) Place importance on the underlying causes of their distress in addition to their symptoms
- iii) Address important issues relating to them as mothers, the need for safe accommodation and access to education, training and work opportunities
- iv) Value their strengths, abilities and potential for recovery

Research conducted by Social Justice Solutions (SJS) on behalf of Women’s Breakout in December 2011 found that the top three critical factors for delivering high quality services to vulnerable women in the community were:

- i) Gender specific, holistic approach that is flexible and tailored to meet individual needs, offering early and intensive support where appropriate
- ii) Strong partnerships with other service providers and joint working arrangements with statutory criminal justice agencies
- iii) Women-centred services informed by service user engagement in design/delivery and service-user satisfaction

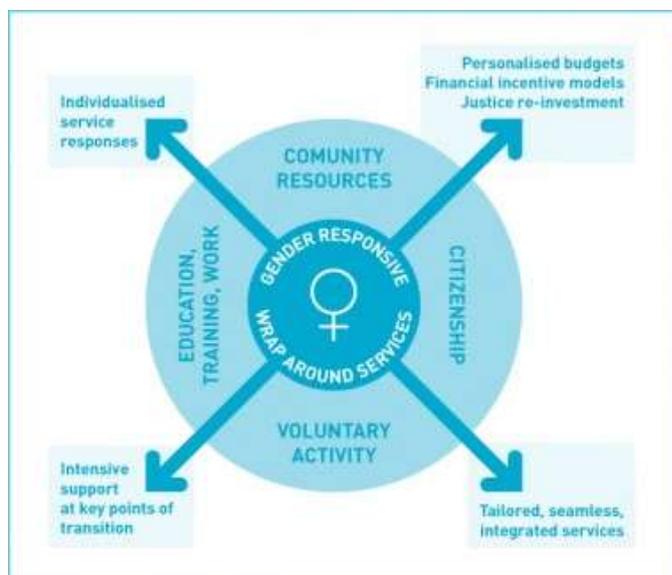
## Referrals

As women’s community solutions are committed to multi-agency working women can come to them through a variety of different roots. A woman might already be involved with the probation service because for example she is serving a community sentence and they might refer her to the women’s community service for support. A woman might receive a court order to attend a service for a period of time or she might feel that the service can offer her support and just drop in.

## Characteristics of Women's Community Solutions

Although women's community solutions will vary in their design and delivery as they are adapted to their local context, they share some core characteristics:

- A women only environment to ensure that women feel safe and secure.
- Individually tailored support that addresses each woman's unique needs.
- A holistic approach which addresses every aspect of a woman's life, to ensure that underlying causes of offending are addressed.
- A multi-agency partnership approach, working with many statutory and voluntary organisations to provide a broad range of services to women to help them address all of their needs.
- A 'one stop shop' model whereby women can access a range of services in one place or from one key worker having specialist knowledge and expertise in working with women.



## A woman's journey

When a woman attends a centre that has made a commitment to offer gender-specific community based solutions, she will be assigned a key worker who will support her to make changes to her life. They will do an assessment together, looking at the areas in her life which she might like to change, and they will then develop a support plan which will work around nine pathways to reducing re-offending. These are:

- Accommodation
- Skills and employment
- Health
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Finance, Benefit and Debt
- Children, families and relationships
- Attitudes, thinking and behaviour
- Supporting women who have been abused, raped or experienced domestic violence
- Supporting women who are or have been involved in prostitution

# Women and the Criminal Justice System – Key Facts

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## Women in custody

Fifteen years ago, there were some 1,800 women in custody. Today there are over 4,000, an increase of 114%

During one year more than 11,000 women are imprisoned and almost 18,000 children are separated from their mothers.

Imprisonment will cause a third of women prisoners to lose their homes, reducing future chances of employment and shattering family ties.

The average cost of a women's prison place is £56,415 per annum. By contrast, an intensive community order costs in the region of £10,000 – £15,000

Over half of women entering custody do so on remand. These women spend on average six weeks in prison and six out of ten of them do not then go on to receive a custodial sentence.

Most women serve very short sentences. In 2009 two thirds of all women sentenced to custody were serving sentences of six months or less.

Women represent 5% of the overall prison population.

## Women who offend are often victims

Many women have multiple and therefore more complex problems related to their offending, high rates of poly-drug use and poor mental health.

Data from Women's Community Projects shows that almost half of the women referred to the projects have needs in more than 4 areas: 48% have drug or alcohol problems, 40% have experienced domestic violence, sexual abuse or rape; 8% of women are involved in prostitution.

## Abuse

Many women in custody have themselves been victims of serious crime and sustained abuse.

Over half the women in prison report having suffered domestic violence and one in three has experienced sexual abuse.

## Education system

One in four women in prison has spent time in local authority care as a child.

Nearly 40% of women in prison left school before the age of 16 years, almost one in 10 were aged 13 or younger. 30% of women were permanently excluded from school.

## Homelessness

19% of women were not in permanent accommodation before entering custody and 10% of women were sleeping rough.

A Prisons Inspectorate survey found that 38% of women in prison did not have accommodation arranged on release.

Around one-third of women prisoners lose their homes, and often their possessions, whilst in prison.

## Mental Health and self harm

51% of women sent to prison have severe and enduring mental illness, 47% a major depressive disorder, 6% psychosis and 3% schizophrenia.

30% of women (as compared to 10% of men) have had a previous psychiatric admission before they come into prison.

In 2009, there were 24,114 recorded incidents of self-harm, with 6,977 prisoners recorded as having self-harmed. Women accounted for 43% of all incidents of self-harm despite representing just 5% of the total prison population.

Of all the women who are sent to prison, 37% say they have attempted suicide at some time in their life.

## Substance abuse

Prior to imprisonment 85% of women were smokers, 75% had used illegal drugs and 40% drank alcohol in excess of the recommended limits.

52% of women surveyed said that they had used heroin, crack, or cocaine powder in the four weeks prior to custody. However, practitioners report that women may hide or underplay substance misuse through fear of losing their children.

## The 'crimes'

Most women are held on remand or serve short sentences for non-violent crimes.

Most women serve short sentences, 62% for 6 months or less, for non-violent crimes.

Over a third of women in prison are serving sentences for theft and handling stolen goods

In the 12 months to June 2011 80% of women entering custody under sentence had committed a non-violent offence, compared with 70% of men.

28% of women in prison had no previous convictions – more than double the figure for men (13%).

13% of women serving sentences of under 12 months had no previous convictions, compared with only 8% of men.

## Family life

Many women offenders have children or are the primary carer for disabled or elderly dependents.

52% of the women engaging with women's' community projects have children.

It is estimated that more than 17,240 children were separated from their mother in 2010 by imprisonment.

When women are sentenced to custody it has a profound impact on family life, just 5% of children stay in their own homes when their mother goes to prison.

Children with a parent in prison are three times more likely to have mental health problems or to engage in anti-social behaviour than their peers.

Nearly two thirds of boys who have a parent in prison will go on to commit some kind of crime themselves.

It is estimated that four out of 10 young women in prison are mothers.

Only half of the women who had lived, or were in contact with, their children prior to imprisonment had received a visit since going to prison.

Maintaining contact with children is made more difficult by the distance that many prisoners are held from their home area. This is particularly acute for women given the limited number of women's prisons; in 2009 there were 753 women held over 100 miles from home.

One Home Office study showed that for 85% of mothers, prison was the first time they had been separated from their children for any significant length of period. It also showed that 65% of mothers in prison were serving their first custodial sentence.

21 prisoners with dependent children took their own life in the 12 months to 31 August 2009 (men and women). Approximately 30% of prisoners who take their own lives had no family contact prior to their deaths.

## Prison doesn't work

Women released from custody having served a sentence of less than 12 months are more likely to reoffend than those who received a community order; in 2008 the difference in proven reoffending rates was 8.3%.

51% of women leaving prison are reconvicted within one year – for those serving sentences of less than 12 months this increases to 62%.

For those women who have served more than 10 previous custodial sentences the reoffending rate rises to 88%.

## What does work?

Enabling women to access support for amongst other things, housing, training, drug and alcohol addiction, benefits and debt advice can be a key turning point in breaking the cycle of offending.

More than half of the women who have accessed Women's Community Projects provision have consistently engaged with projects for longer than 3 months.

In 2010 a higher proportion of women than men completed their community sentence successfully or had their sentences terminated for good progress on both community orders (69%) and suspended sentence orders (74%) versus 65% on both orders for men.

## Foreign national women

At the end of September 2011 there were 650 foreign national women in prison, 15% of the women's prison population.

46% of foreign national women in prison are serving a custodial sentence for drug offences, compared to 21% of women of British nationality. Women imprisoned for drugs importation are largely from Nigeria, Jamaica and South Africa.

16% of foreign national women imprisoned are there for fraud and forgery offences (usually possession of false documents)

# Women's Breakout Contact Details

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