

Commission on Women Offenders: contribution from Joint Faiths Advisory Board in Criminal Justice

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Introductory remarks

The mission of the Joint Faiths Advisory Board on Criminal Justice¹ is to promote constructive action, from an interfaith perspective, on issues related to crime and its prevention, victims of crime, offenders and their families, prisons and the criminal justice system in Scotland.

In particular, the Board believes in the inherent worth of reconciliation, forgiveness and restoration of relationships throughout the criminal justice system, and this response is therefore framed with this belief in mind.

The issue of female offenders is one which has been a priority for the Joint Faiths Advisory Board on Criminal Justice. Members on the Board have direct experience of working with women who are either in, or have recently left, Cornton Vale, and therefore welcome the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Commission.

Justice, in its widest sense, should be a community responsibility, bringing with it community obligations. The care of the believing community is desperately needed by offenders and their families, in particular, the need for supportive and ongoing care on a personal and communal level.

It is surely true that if we approach rehabilitation properly we significantly reduce reoffending. If we offer support to families and to ex prisoners we make reoffending less likely. Working with prisoners and their families can only be for the common good. When we stand together to support and to love then we create community, a just community and when we do that then lives are turned around.

Faith Communities call for the radical abandonment of self interest in order to care for all who are in need, who are excluded, who need a second chance, who need to be loved. This is done through Chaplaincy within Prisons, standing beside men and women throughout their sentence and providing support and care. The Faith Communities wish to participate in the ongoing care of those who find themselves returning to the community after a prison sentence and their families.

What are the key challenges in dealing with women offenders in the criminal justice system and how might these be overcome?

As the Scottish Government itself has acknowledged, most women offenders who find themselves in Cornton Vale have complex and often chaotic lifestyles; the 2008 report Equally Well demonstrates this quite starkly, when it states that 98% of women in Cornton Vale have addiction problems, 80% mental health problems, 70% have been abused, and 50% self-harm.

Prison is neither a rehabilitation centre nor a care centre for those with mental health issues; no matter how high the standard of prison staff and their desire to make a difference; prison is neither the right place nor atmosphere to deal with rehabilitation or to provide structures or support to help the vulnerable lead fulfilling lives.

¹ The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office provides Secretariat services for the JFABCJ. The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office is administered by the Church of Scotland, Scottish Charity No SC011353

Many women who are in Cornton Vale are there as a direct, or indirect result of domestic violence; taking the blame for minor offences because of fear of their partners, or directly because of committing violent crime against an abusive partner. For many women a custodial sentence offers a respite from much worse circumstances at home. This is clearly an unsatisfactory solution and what they need is support in their own communities to address their domestic problems. We also need more safe places for women to provide them with respite care.

Criminal justice interventions must therefore start from a position of paying attention to the specific needs of women. One of the key differences between the experiences of men and women in the criminal justice system is the issue of the care of dependents, particularly children.

The vast majority of women offenders are mothers and their prime worry on being taken to prison is their children. Whether they express this or not, everything else fades into insignificance in the face of their desire to be reassured that their children are safe and cared for. In essence they can rarely deal with anything at all because of their fear for the safety and welfare of their children.

Given that many women are serving short sentences, the trauma of separation of mother and child has long-reaching and deep psychological effects that far outweigh the intended consequences of a short sentence. The JFABCJ strongly advocates the use of community disposals, which enable women to continue to remain with their children. The JFABCJ also believes that a wider exploration of the benefits of restorative practices as an alternative to custodial imprisonment is needed across the Scottish criminal justice system, but would have significant positive benefits in relation to women offenders.

How effective are the existing structural and funding arrangements in delivering positive outcomes for women offenders?

Lack of movement and progression in life is a soul destroying experience. Some women have lived in the small space of Cornton Vale for 9 or 10 years, and there is little difference between conditions upon entering and when preparing for release from prison. Although some women have access to the Independent Living Units, there are only a small number of places available here. The enhanced use of other establishments to accommodate women, HMPs Greenock, Inverness, Aberdeen and most recently Edinburgh, provide a further range of options and the opportunity of closer community links.

The Joint Faiths Advisory Board on Criminal Justice has close connections with the Stirling Interfaith Community Justice Group, and commend their work to the commission. This group plays a significant role in the Family Centre at Cornton Vale. Most of the women in Cornton Vale are not from the immediate surrounding area of the prison, and therefore visitors often have long journeys to make. The high number of children visiting the prison also heightens the need for a safe and welcoming space. Having one prison covering all of Scotland makes it difficult for families to visit for regular contact with children, many of whom will be at an age where not seeing mum for weeks has a destructive effect on their lives. The Stirling Interfaith Community Justice Group has recently completed a project to re-furnish the Family Centre at Cornton Vale (the area used by mothers and children during authorised private visits) and has also provided consoles, screens and appropriate games for the regular visitor's area. This gives children a separate area to allow adults to converse without "little ears." It also gives the children space if they feel overwhelmed by the visit. In this area, there are also "story bags" that the children can take to the table and share with the offender. It allows an opportunity for engagement between adult and child.

What is currently available to divert women out of the criminal justice system and how effective is it? What more could be done?

In line with the Scottish Government's emphasis on preventative spending, JFABCJ believes in the importance of early intervention. Literacy, parenting skills, and the building up of skills are important in breaking a cycle of low self-esteem which is endemic amongst women within the criminal justice system. Alongside this, it is also important to look beyond the crime; trying to address the underlying causes of behaviour, rather than simply focusing on punishment. The role of community is vital in this.

How can community sentences be more effective at reducing the likelihood of reoffending?

Meaningful community sentences enable offenders to pay something back to the community in which they offended while still maintaining the links to their homes and families which can enable them to build a future without continuing to offend.

If we believe in the importance of the relationship between mother and children, we need a more holistic approach, community led and with positive discrimination. Community-based disposals which are at a time which enable women to maintain family contact, i.e. not scheduled for a time when mothers are dropping children off, or picking children up from school, for example, are vital. There is no point in diverting women away from prison, but ending up with the same situation in which they are unable to manage childcare.

For all women, whether mothers or not, it is vital that community sentences are meaningful, involving learning experiences and building up self-esteem. As previously discussed, many women who find themselves in the criminal justice system have chaotic lifestyles, and so community sentences on their own will not solve the problem: there needs to be proper support networks in place to help women tackle addiction and self esteem issues, and address domestic abuse situations.

How can we ensure short and longer term prisoners get more consistent support and have their needs addressed throughout their sentence and after release?

JFABCJ welcome the role of chaplaincy in providing a safe space for all prisoners, recognizing the importance of emotional and spiritual support for prisoners, regardless of belief. Enabling religious observance for prisoners, including making provision for specific religious requirements to be met is in itself a way of maintaining links with faith communities. However, there is also more practical support which can be offered, both within prison, and on release.

Inside the prison, access to services and facilities can often be problematic. While acknowledging that the additional places for women which have been made available at HMP Edinburgh this summer have significantly reduced numbers at HMP&YOI Cornton Vale, overcrowding is an obvious barrier to access. This comes back to the issue of reducing the female prison population both by reducing the number of short-term prison sentences and by improving support in the community.

Requiring women to share cramped cells and bunk-beds, adds to discomfort and stress because of the lack of personal space. In order to avoid the regular humiliation caused by

current sanitation arrangements, it is important that residential blocks are updated to address this situation.

More programmes which address offending behaviour, such as addictions and anger, should be available to all who require them. Preparations for release must include more on home making, budgeting, relationships and employment. More help with personal care and the use of leisure time should be offered.

The process of release, if managed well, can set an important precedent, giving ex-offenders a sense of self-respect and hope. Initiatives such as "leaver's packs," which ensure that women leave prison with appropriate information, clothing, and a carry-all instead of stigmatising items that mark them as prisoners, can have a positive effect on reintroduction.

Release can be stressful as travel home from prison may be problematic for many ex-offenders. Making the transition as smooth as possible, by providing travel information such as bus and train timetables and direct assistance where appropriate, can significantly reduce stress levels and create a more positive reintroduction.

Community support post release is important. Often the best help comes from those who have 'been there and done it'. Voluntary organisations such as the Preshal Trust have succeeded in providing a support network for ex-offenders at risk of re-offending, where others have failed. Even what seems to be the simplest of support on release; the offer of a cup of tea, a mentor, can be the difference between a woman coping and not coping on release. We are aware that women often leave prison and return straight back to the partner who abused them, the pimp or the dealer. Mentoring may not stop this situation happening, but it may give women the self-esteem they need to access services and to turn their life around. Voluntary organisations which provide support for ex-offenders in the community are valuable and need to be given support and financial backing.

How can we maintain contact with families and children during prison sentences?

Visitors Centres can be extremely useful as they provide direct, easy access to methods of support, information, and assistance. Located in proximity to prisons, they have the potential to be utilised by many different client groups. JFABCJ believes that all of Scotland's prisons require visitor centres, but the need for this facility is particularly strong at Cornton Vale.

Visitor Centres at HMP Perth and HMP Edinburgh and throughout England show that a better relationship can be maintained between the prisoner and the family. The family also gets much greater support because of the Visitor Centres. These centres, therefore, have an important role to play in reducing re-offending. Visitors Centres which offer support and information, with guidance and care, both practical and spiritual, can only benefit the families of those who are serving prison sentences. It may well be that that this offer of support is the crucial factor enabling a family to survive the effect upon them all of a prison sentence. If voluntary and statutory services alike work at encouraging and upholding the family then a prisoner will be released to a supportive, strong, situation which would enable that prisoner to move forward in life and to have the self esteem necessary to make changes to living.

This is work which JFABCJ believes the Scottish Prison Service should support, and roll out to all prisons across Scotland.