



PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR  
GENDER-RESPONSIVE APPROACHES FOR  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction & Guiding Principles	p. 3
Guiding Principle 1: Acknowledge that gender makes a difference	p. 3
Guiding Principle 2: Create an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity	p. 4
Guiding Principle 3: Develop policies, practices, and programs that are relational and promote healthy connections to children, family, significant others and the community	p. 5
Guiding Principle 4: Address substance abuse, trauma and mental health issues through comprehensive, integrated and culturally relevant services and appropriate supervision	p. 5
Guiding Principle 5: Provide women with opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions	p. 6
Guiding Principle 6: Establish a system of community supervision and reentry with comprehensive, collaborative services	p. 7
Recommendations for creating a community strategy for criminal justice involved women in California	p. 9

Prepared by Barbara Bloom, Ph.D.

With support from the Rosenberg Foundation and the Women’s Foundation of California

Photocredit: Daniel Arauz

## INTRODUCTION

The National Institute of Corrections Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders (Bloom, Owen & Covington, 2003) report documents the need for a new vision for the criminal justice system, one that recognizes the behavioral and social differences between female and male offenders that have specific implications for gender-responsive policy and practice.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Theoretically-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 guiding principles that follow are intended to provide a blueprint for a gender-responsive approach to the development of criminal justice programs and services for women.

GENDER	Acknowledge that gender makes a difference.
ENVIRONMENT	Create an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity.
RELATIONSHIPS	Develop policies, practices, and programs that are relational and promote healthy connections to children, family, significant others, and the community.
SERVICES AND SUPERVISION	Address substance abuse, trauma, and mental health issues through comprehensive, integrated, culturally relevant services, and appropriate supervision.
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	Provide women with opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions.
COMMUNITY	Establish a system of community supervision and re-entry with comprehensive, collaborative services.

## 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, with equal treatment 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 female and male 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.

Wherever possible, assessment instruments used should be normed for women. A strength-based perspective should be used throughout the assessment process (i.e., what strengths does the woman have that can be used in her treatment plan?) The assessment process should be appropriate for the woman's language, culture, literacy level, and cognitive functioning.

EXAMPLE: Women-centered risk and needs assessments have been conducted in a range of jurisdictions (jails, prisons, community-based programs), using the University of Cincinnati's Women's Risk/Needs Assessment, the Women's COMPAS, or the Level of Service Inventory - Revised with a gender-responsive supplement for women. There is also the Women Offender Case Management Model (WOCMM) which has been used in Connecticut and other states.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLE 2: CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT BASED ON SAFETY, RESPECT AND DIGNITY

Research from a range of disciplines (e.g., 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 all services. 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 recreate the abusive environment that many women offenders have experienced in their lives. Consequently, correctional practices such as cross-gender pat searches, shackling, and isolation should be avoided. A safe, consistent, and supportive environment is the cornerstone of a therapeutic process. Because of their lower levels of violent crime and their low risk to public safety, women offenders should, whenever possible, be supervised and provided services with the minimal restrictions required to meet public safety interests.

EXAMPLE: Community-based programs such as the Female Residential Multi-Service Center (FRMSC) in Sacramento, CA, operated by Bridges, is a strength-based, trauma-informed, and family focused program designed to provide comprehensive programming for women parolees that addresses each woman's pathway into the criminal justice system. It is the Bridges FRMSC vision to provide a safe environment where women are treated with dignity and respect while receiving gender-responsive services.

## 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 female 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 female offenders
- Relationships between women in an institutional setting
- Process of women's psychological growth and development
- Environmental context needed for programming
- Challenges involved in reentering the community

EXAMPLE: The Maximizing Opportunities for Mothers to Succeed (MOMS) Program, which is operated by the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, offers an innovative collaborative approach designed to reunite incarcerated mothers with their children, improve the health and well-being of family members, and reduce recidivism among MOMS clients. The program combines a gender-responsive curriculum, case management, and housing followed by a range of community-based post-release services including access to substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence and other supportive services. Continuity of care, coupled with integrated service delivery is the cornerstone of the MOMS program.

The Female Offender Treatment and Employment Program (FOTEP) provides residential drug abuse treatment, comprehensive case management, vocational services, and parenting support to women coming out of prison and their children.

## 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 both women's programming needs and successful reentry. Although they are therapeutically linked, these issues have historically 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 that play a vital and often unrecognized role in the evolution of a woman's physical and mental health problems.

The concept of integrated treatment for women with co-occurring disorders (CODs), as originally articulated by Minkoff (1989, 2001), focuses on the need for correspondence between the treatment models for mental illness and addiction. The model stresses the importance of well-coordinated treatment of both disorders. Dual recovery treatment goals are emphasized, as well as the need to employ effective treatment strategies from both the mental health and the substance abuse treatment fields.

EXAMPLE: The Connecticut Women's Services Practice Improvement Collaborative (WSPIC) is a unique collaboration among the Connecticut Women's Consortium, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and non-profit providers. The goal of WSPIC is to enhance the behavioral health system for women by incorporating best practices in gender-responsive and trauma-informed programming. WSPIC continues to be an exchange between community-based service providers, women in recovery, the research community, and policy makers.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLE 5: PROVIDE WOMEN WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THEIR SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Generally, women offenders are underemployed and unemployed, work fewer hours than men, make less per hour than men, and are often employed in temporary low-level occupations with little chance for advancement. Women's offending is closely tied to their socioeconomic status and rehabilitation often depends on their ability to become financially independent. Without the ability to support themselves and their children, women offenders may feel economically or socially bound to partners or others in unhealthy or abusive relationships. Although male and female offenders face many of the same issues, women often face a set of circumstances that add additional barriers, particularly if the women are the sole custodial parent for children (Thigpen, 2010). Improving socioeconomic outcomes for women requires providing opportunities through education and training so they can support themselves and their children. In a survey of jail inmates, women indicated that work and vocational training were among their program priorities (Gray, Mays, and Stohr, 1995).

EXAMPLE: Vermont Works for Women offers support for women coming into the community after incarceration. The organization provides a range of services that allow participants to form long-term relationships with a volunteer mentor, learn new skills and develop a plan for supporting themselves upon their release. Some of their programs focus on non-traditional careers – building trades, renewable energy and efficiency. Others support women new to the workplace with part-time transitional jobs, mentors and life skills classes.

Project ReMADE is a small pilot entrepreneurship program for formerly incarcerated women led by Stanford Law and Business schools.

## 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 female offender stigma, they may carry additional burdens such as single motherhood, decreased economic potential, lack of services and programs targeted for women, responsibilities to multiple agencies, and a general lack of community support. Navigating through a myriad of systems that often provide fragmented services and 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 services within her community.

For example, the types of organizations that should work as partners in assisting women who are reentering the community include the following:

- Mental health systems
- Alcohol and other drug programs
- Programs for survivors of family and sexual violence
- Family service agencies
- Emergency shelter, food, and financial assistance programs
- Educational organizations
- Vocational and employment services
- Health care
- The child welfare system, child care, and other children’s services
- Transportation
- Self-help groups
- Consumer-advocacy groups
- Faith-based organizations
- Community service clubs

EXAMPLE: The Women’s Reentry Achievement Program (WRAP) is supported by a U.S. Department of Justice Second Chance Act grant. WRAP is a collaborative partnership between Solano County Health and Social Services, Solano County Sheriff’s Office, Solano County Probation Department, Solano County Office of Family Violence Prevention, Youth and Family Services and Mission Solano. WRAP provides pre-release services for incarcerated mothers and their families. Services after release include intensive case management, transportation, employment services, parenting classes and individual/family counseling.

The Los Angeles County Women's Reentry Court (WRC) is an innovative alternative to criminal prosecution of female parolees and probationers facing a new felony charge. The program aims to reduce recidivism and support successful community reintegration among women offenders by providing access to intensive treatment services, case management and employment support. In lieu of state prison or local jail, this program provides evidence-based, gender-responsive treatment services including substance abuse treatment, mental health services, housing, employment assistance, child reunification and domestic violence counseling.



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING A COMMUNITY STRATEGY FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVED WOMEN IN CALIFORNIA

In light of the fact that the majority of women who are involved in the criminal justice system in California do not pose a threat to public safety, it is in the interest of public safety that the State of California work towards developing a comprehensive community strategy that provides women with opportunities to be productive members of their communities.

The following recommendations are proposed:

- I. Consider the least restrictive alternatives to custody consistent with public safety
- II. Secure custody (jail or prison) should be used as the option of last resort
- III. Non-custodial and community-based placements and services should be utilized in lieu of incarceration
- IV. Sentencing and pre-trial alternatives should be developed by expanding non-custodial and community alternatives
- V. Partnerships between criminal justice and community providers who provide services to criminal justice-involved women and their families should be created and enhanced
- VI. Criminal justice and community programs and services should be integrated through a collaborative structure that coordinates a women-centered multi-agency system
- VII. This collaborative multi-agency system model should include a gender-responsive risk and needs assessment, individualized treatment plan, and coordinated case management. It should offer an array of services including, but not limited to: housing, job training and placement, education, health care, mental health services, drug treatment, family violence, life skills, family reunification and childcare
- VIII. The community (police, judges, sheriffs, probation, citizens, etc.) should be educated about the value of a community strategy for criminal justice-involved women and their families

## CONTACT

Karen Shain, Criminal Justice Policy Officer, [karens@womensfoundca.org](mailto:karens@womensfoundca.org) | [www.womensfoundca.org](http://www.womensfoundca.org)

*the* WOMEN'S  
FOUNDATION  
*of* CALIFORNIA

ROSENBERG FOUNDATION