

A low security prison for women: A best practice in Western Australia

Joanna Salomone¹

Department of Justice, Western Australia

Across jurisdictions, women prisoners have largely been 'invisible' and disadvantaged due to their relatively small numbers, the 'masculinist' orientation and militaristic nature of prisons systems and their preoccupation with containment, discipline and security over service delivery.

Rapid increases in prison populations, caused in part by the 'war on drugs' of the 1980s and 1990s, inadequate resources and escalating costs have further impoverished service delivery.

The alarming increase in prison populations has created prisoner accommodation and management problems and associated systemic crises and public outcry in a number of jurisdictions, including in respect to women's prisons. These events have served to highlight the needs of women prisoners and have forced attention to long-neglected management and service delivery issues.

The level of recognition and attention to issues within women's prisons and prisons accommodating women varies, however where reforms are being implemented, they provide noteworthy examples of best practice in women's corrections.² Western Australia has been paying attention.

Background

During the 1990s, the women prisoner population in Western Australia rose rapidly within a five-year period from 5% to 7.6% of the overall prisoner population. The number of women in the total prisoner population more than doubled from 111 in 1995/96 to 237 in 2000/01.³ At a national level, the proportion of women in the prison population rose from 4.8% in 1995 to 6.6% in 2002.⁴

Women prisoners in Western Australia currently number 218 (as at 8 January 2004). Of those, 120 are non-Aboriginal and 98 are Aboriginal. Aboriginal women comprise around 40% of the female prisoner population, while Aboriginal people overall constitute only 3.2% of the Western Australian population.⁵

Of particular concern have been equity issues identified in respect to accommodation standards and access to services and programs, as well as particular issues affecting women prisoners, including parenting and family issues, health needs and so on.

In response, a *Women Accommodation Strategy* was developed by the Western Australian Department of Justice. In December 1998, a previously 'mothballed' juvenile facility, Nyandi was reopened to house low-security adult women prisoners.⁶ The facility provided a 'spill over' for Bandyup Women's Prison, the only dedicated women's prison in the state. (Some regional facilities also accommodate women.)

This 'temporary' measure provided a relatively less restrictive environment for low-security women in the metropolitan area, however facilities were nevertheless grossly inadequate for adult women, particularly those with children. While policy permitted accommodation of infants with their mothers during the crucial first 12 months of life, the inadequate facilities meant relatively few children were able to remain with their mothers in prison.

Nyandi became entrenched as the second women's prison in the state while officially remaining an annex of Bandyup. Despite its limitations, the facility helped manage a rate of women's imprisonment that has been nearly double the national average.

In 2001/2002, subsequent to a change of government, the newly appointed Western Australian Attorney General, Jim McGinty, with Department of Justice officials, embarked on a fact-finding mission overseas, investigating best practice approaches to women's corrections. His *'Report on a Visit to Canada, Minnesota and England'* described, among others, the merits of the Canadian approach, which had more than halved the female imprisonment rate in that jurisdiction.⁷

Subsequent to the *'Report on a Visit...'* a project proposal for a purpose-built low-security prison for women (LSPW) was developed and approved. The overall aim of the project was *'development of a progressive new philosophy ... to achieve world's best practice in management of women prisoners'*.⁸

Rationale for new directions

During the 1970s and 1980s, a 'nothing works' attitude prevailed across correctional jurisdictions worldwide. However, more recently there has been a resurgence of interest in prison programming and rehabilitation.

Many correctional agencies now support a 'criminogenic needs' approach to rehabilitation programs. However, evaluation of 'what works' in addressing offending, has not always or necessarily addressed gender issues. Most often program opportunities and resources are directed towards prisoners designated 'high risk', for example, sex offenders and violent repeat offenders. However, relatively few women fit these categories.

'What works' programming most often means 'what works with male offenders' rather than what works for women and/or for Aboriginal women specifically. In Canada, however, women's programming is given a clear focus with particular attention to indigenous needs. Holistic approaches have been shown to work best for women and for Aboriginal people,⁹ and are far more likely to be effective if they address personal, family and social issues as well as the cultural context and the underlying causes of women's offending.^{10,11}

Where a drug-using woman was sexually abused as a child, then that issue must be addressed if 'self medication' by illicit drug taking and any associated law breaking is to stop, and if her mental health status is to improve. Similarly, if women commit fraud or engage in prostitution, underlying issues of poverty and unemployment, social alienation, lack of education and employment skills and 'sexually transmitted debt' (ie: debt incurred via male partner's activities) or other relevant issues, must be addressed. Where cultural alienation is also part of the context, fostering cultural and community connection and 'healing' may be an important aspect of programming and service delivery.

A women-specific approach is crucial if women's offending and recidivism are to be effectively addressed. Simply 'warehousing' prisoners without attending to who they are and to the underlying causes of their offending does little to prevent or reduce offending and reoffending or to protect the community from crime in the long term.

Profiling women

The 'Survey of Women Prisoners in Western Australia'¹² identified that:

- the women surveyed were generally young (72% under 36 years of age);
- a majority (63%) had children under the age of 18 years;
- most were sole parents (63% single, divorced or separated by time of release);
- 19% had been state wards at some time during their childhood;

- 40% had not completed Year 10 of schooling;
- 58% of the Aboriginal women had not completed Year 10;
- 71% were unemployed in the six months prior to arrest;
- 25% had never held a paid job (51% of the Aboriginal women);
- 67% relied on government benefits prior to arrest;
- 61% reported a previous diagnosis of physical health issue/s;
- 51% reported a previous diagnosis of mental health issue/s;
- 80% reported frequent use of alcohol/drugs prior to imprisonment;
- 67% identified a connection between their drug and alcohol use and their offending; and
- 77% reported a history of abuse either as an adult or a child.

The results of the 'Survey of Women Prisoners', along with high rates of women's imprisonment and recidivism rates in Western Australia compared to other Australian states, made it clear that the needs of the female prisoner population and Aboriginal women prisoners in particular require new approaches and strategies.

Of particular significance is the intersection of drug and alcohol issues, pervasive histories of victimization and mental health issues within a clearly, highly vulnerable population. This population consists of individuals with few skills and resources, and quite often, sole responsibility for young children. The lives of those children are severely disrupted by parental imprisonment, with long term developmental, adjustment and intergenerational implications.¹³

Positive and effective interventions could have significant intergenerational outcomes given the very high proportion of women offenders who are mothers or carers of children. Increasingly, research points to early indicators of criminal behaviour identifiable in childhood, to do with poverty, deprivation, abuse and neglect, social and economic marginalisation and family disruption — all factors linked to, caused by, and/or leading often to, the incarceration of progressive generations of individuals from the same families and communities.

To a large extent, addressing offending behaviour requires resocialization of individuals, overcoming developmental deficits and improving life chances by assisting the development of essential social, psychological, parenting, educational, vocational,

problem solving and coping skills. A focus is required on fostering the family and community connections and conditions necessary for adaptive adult functioning within society. As well, preventive approaches need to be taken to address issues for 'children at risk' and provision of individual and family support and assistance for development of parenting skills.

Operationalizing the low security prison for women

Given the limitations of existing facilities and services for low-security women in Western Australia and increasing awareness of the 'need to do things differently' in managing women offenders, the Metropolitan Low Security Prison for Women Project (LSPW) was established in 2001, with the following objectives:

- successful reintegration of women into the community together with a reduced rate of recidivism;
- an operational philosophy that recognises and incorporates the needs of women prisoners;
- reforms in the way women offenders are managed and a women's perspective in design and operation of prison facilities;
- integration of the prison into the community and community into the prison; and
- 'normalisation' of living arrangements and management approaches.

A progressive new philosophy for the LSPW was developed, based on the principles of:

- Personal responsibility and empowerment;
- Family responsibility;
- Community responsibility; and
- Respect and integrity.

The philosophy states that:

- The innovative design and daily activities of the LSPW will mirror responsibilities faced by women in everyday life and support a strong community and family focus;
- The women will contribute to society through community and voluntary work. These activities will build positive, mutually beneficial relationships with the community, enabling women to increase their capacity to take control of their lives. As prisoners return to the community, these relationships are the key to their successful integration;

- Together with improved health, work and education skills, each woman will be better able to take responsibility for her choices — thereby reducing the risk of reoffending;
- The prison aims to maximise the potential for women to positively, confidently and safely reintegrate with their families and communities;
- Community safety will be enhanced by reducing the likelihood of the women reoffending; and
- The prison environment will offer meaningful opportunities for women offenders, and rather than being isolated, the women will be supported as an integral part of the community.

The Metropolitan Low Security Prison for Women development project culminated with the commissioning of the Boronia Pre-release Centre for women offenders in May 2004 — the naming reflecting a focus on preparation of women for re-entry into the community. The Centre focuses on preparation of women offenders for re-entry into the community. The Centre provides a normalised, residential-style environment and accommodate up to 70 women. It comprises 12 units/houses, each with five bedrooms. Each woman is allocated her own bedroom and shares kitchen and other facilities with the other women in her house, including kitchen, bathroom and laundry, as is the case in a 'normal' home within the community.

There are three mother and child units — each of which will be able to accommodate two mothers and their children. Other units will also be able to accommodate women and children if required. Children to age four will be able to be accommodated with their mothers, and school-aged and other children will have access to extended visits. In addition, there is intermediate-care accommodation for women requiring temporary additional support or respite from the self-care environment.

The facility operates under a dynamic security model with staff chosen for their interpersonal skills and suitability to work with women and children in a low-security environment. A self-care model has been implemented, with women providing for their own daily needs, including cooking, cleaning, budgeting, shopping for essentials, laundry and other tasks, with the guidance and assistance of staff where necessary.

Residents participate in a 'full constructive day' of meaningful activity including education, training, work, personal development, domestic programs, and recreational opportunities. Drug management includes provision of drug treatments including pharmacological and therapeutic treatment programs.

These measures are supplemented by employment of a 'passive alert' dog on site as required along with ion detection equipment.

Selected women offenders participate in voluntary and community work. The family and community contact necessary for maintenance of essential relationships and development of re-entry supports are facilitated. Specially recruited volunteers enhance the delivery of services and provision of essential supports to the residents, their children and families.

Conclusions

The development of the Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women offenders has been based on extensive research of the literature, best practice approaches and preferred models of service delivery, and was informed by the deliberations of a Project Reference Group. This included international, interstate and local experts in the fields of women's imprisonment, restorative justice, women's health, family services, Aboriginal studies, pastoral care, women's advocacy and social policy.

Project Reference Group member Janet Sue Hamilton (lately Warden of the Edmonton Institution for Women), along with representatives of other best practice jurisdictions, contributed significantly to the development of a Western Australian model for the management of women prisoners. The provision of expert advice and program, training and operational

models facilitated development of appropriate service delivery approaches.

Another important feature has been extensive consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders. A Community Advisory Group (based on the Canadian Citizens' Advisory Committees) has provided input into project development and continues its work since operationalization of the facility, providing women with essential community contacts and opportunities. The Community Advisory Group was formed from self-nominated local business and community representatives and local residents.

Boronia Pre-release Centre will set new standards for women's corrections and represents a new approach to management of women prisoners. It adopts a forward-looking model that recognises the diverse needs of women, and is intended as a benchmark for reforms across Western Australian prison services overall.

Further Information about Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women may be obtained by contacting:

Christine Ginbey
Project Manager and Superintendent
Department of Justice
Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women
14 Hayman Rd
BENTLEY
WESTERN AUSTRALIA 6000
Tel: (08) 9212 3500
Email: christine.ginbey@justice.wa.gov.au

- ¹ Department of Justice, C/— Nyandi Prison, 3 Allen Court, Bentley, Western Australia, 6102.
- ² McGinty, J. (2001). *Report on a Visit to Canada, Minnesota and England*. Attorney General, MLA, Minister for Justice and Legal Affairs. Government of Western Australia. http://www.justice.wa.gov.au/content/files/Womens_prisons_trip_final.pdf
- ³ Ministry of Justice. Annual Report 2000/2001. Government of Western Australia, p. 39.
- ⁴ Gelb, K. (2003). 'Women in Prison — Why is the Rate of Incarceration Increasing?' *Evaluation in Crime and Justice: Trends and Methods Conference*. Australian Institute of Criminology and Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- ⁵ Department of Justice. (2004, January 8). *Weekly Offender Statistics Report. Planning, Policy and Review*. Government of Western Australia.
- ⁶ Ministry of Justice. (1999). *Women's Accommodation Strategy*. Offender Management Division. Report No. 1. Government of Western Australia.

- ⁷ Op.Cit., McGinty (2001).
- ⁸ McGinty, J. (2003). *Nyandi Prison Redevelopment*. Speech to Parliament. WA Attorney General. Government of Western Australia.
- ⁹ Department of Justice. *Executive summary: Profile of Women*. June 2002. Government of Western Australia. <http://www.justice.wa.gov.au>
- ¹⁰ Dauvergne-Latimer, M. (1995, September). *Exemplary Community Programs for Federally Sentenced Women: A Literature Review*. Correctional Service of Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/fsw27/toce.shtml>.
- ¹¹ Correctional Service of Canada. (1994, July). *Correctional Program Strategy for Federally Sentenced Women*. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/fsw18/toce.shtml>
- ¹² Op.Cit., Department of Justice. WA. *Executive Summary: Profile of Women*. (2002)
- ¹³ Greene, S. et al. (2000). 'Cycles of Pain: Risk Factors in the Lives of Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children'. *The Prison Journal*, 80(1), 3-23.