

Executive summary

Background to the research: The Corston Report (2007) highlighted the failings of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in meeting the specific and unique needs of the vulnerable women held within it, the impact of which has seen a relative wealth of research exploring the female experience when it comes to the CJS. However, what has had substantially less attention is the experiences of those who supervise these women. This has particularly been the case for women supervising women on Probation.

Within Kent, Surrey & Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company (KSS CRC), the Women's Strategy places female probation staff as central to an effective women-led service. Therefore, as part of a robust evaluation of that strategy, a close examination of the 'Women's Lead' role was seen as a priority. In particular, the routes into and challenges of being a Women's Lead, the necessity of women-led provision, the personal and professional impact of undertaking such a role, and what staff feel needs to happen in future to make the role more sustainable.

Methodology: In exploring these topics, a mixed-methods project was utilised, comprising in-depth interviews with 8 Women's Leads and 4 managers (3 Senior Probation Officers, and 1 Through The Gate Manager), and an online survey involving 13 Women's Leads (resulting in a 45% participation rate).

Findings (1): Unpacking the Women's Lead Role: Staff came into the Women's Lead role for a range of reasons – interest, as a natural evolution of a role they were already doing, or due to having been asked or (more challengingly) being required to do it. Though specialised training (e.g. trauma-informed approaches to supervision), was provided, it was often when staff were already in post. That said, great value was placed on drawing from past experience, with the best learning said to be done *on the job*. The challenges of the role were around 1) trauma-informed versus offence-focused practice (the former requiring person-centred approaches which were often at odds with the structured, task-orientated nature of the latter), 2) the time taken for

working with women (women were said to be more reliant, had considerably more involvement from other services and agencies, and generally would take longer to arrive at change because of everything else they were carrying). And 3), women service users were likely to be single parents and/or have primary care-giver responsibilities. This often meant missed appointments due to other commitments. Though staff endeavoured to work with women in more flexible ways to accommodate this, it created substantial difficulties when it came to enforcement.

Findings (2): Wellbeing, resilience and the emotional demands of supervising women:

The complexities of women's cases saw huge demands placed on staff in terms of emotional labour – in particular, empathy. In addition, lingering feelings of responsibility for the women's wellbeing (outside of probation time), saw staff constantly question their actions. The struggles of trying to leave things at work, often translated into mental health challenges for those who were not easily able to do so. In trying to do and be everything, the Women's Leads sometimes felt mired with the pressure of it all, in some cases leading to sick-leave. Importantly though, no-one talked of not being *able* to do the role, in terms of not having the skills to meet the demanding requirements of the job. The problem was situated in how the Women's Lead role was structured and understood at an organizational level. Given all this, the need for established support structures was paramount. Colleagues were said to be the most integral, offering an ear when it came to difficult or complex cases, and simply just being a friendly face. Managers were described as approachable, committed, and understanding of the demands of the job. However, their busy schedules meant finding time to meet with them was sometimes difficult. Personal relationships provided some levels of support, however, there were seen to be limitations. Though loved ones might *listen and sympathise*, by not being in the role themselves, they were unable to *understand and empathise*. Finally, support also came through clinical supervision. This allowed staff the space to air worries or grievances, relate to others experiencing similar job-related issues, and process difficult feelings. However, there were concerns about the group setting of clinical supervision, with some not feeling comfortable to talk publically about difficulties lest it exposed their vulnerabilities.

Findings (3): Strengthening the sustainability of the Women's Lead role: Staff identified the need for a more supportive, holistic model of supervision, where the

needs of the individual staff member were as important as case management reviews. Embedded in this was the investment in staff wellbeing, which was proportionate to that expected for service users – though ‘good practice’ was highly focused on the service user’s experience, there was felt to be little equivalent consideration for staff. Sustainability was a common theme, with reduced caseload allocations being a key point. Managers too saw the need for this, yet equally saw practical challenges in doing so. Sustainability was placed in more considered recruitment to the Women’s Lead role – the focus being on suitability and interest, rather than simply availability. Other suggestions were around male probation staff being able to manage women service users, however most importantly staff simply felt women should have the choice of what gender they would like to be supervised by. Finally, despite the many practical challenges and emotional demands involved in delivering women-led probation services, staff were clear about what rewards the job brought. Seeing women grow, succeed and even flourish was often what kept Women’s Leads in post.

Points for discussion: Though not recommendations per se, this research has produced a number of points for future discussion.

- 1. Recruiting the right people into the role:** The Women’s Lead role is a demanding one, and requires much of the staff who do it. It was felt the job was best suited to those who *actively* wanted it i.e. individuals who were committed to, and passionate about, working with women.
- 2. Being mindful of less experienced staff (especially PSOs):** Though Probation Services Officers (PSOs) in the Women’s Lead role felt they were more than capable of doing the job, many talked of being thrown in at the deep end, without having any prior experience or knowledge of supervising women service users. Supporting less experienced staff, (not necessarily just PSOs), through comprehensive job-related training, or even mentoring, in the *early* stages of taking on the Women’s Lead role might provide enormous benefits in terms of helping staff feel better equipped and confident in their decisions.

- 3. Providing a more supportive model of supervision:** The emotional costs of supervising women and the unique demands of the job frequently took their toll on the Women's Leads. It was suggested that maybe a dual supervision model could be put in place – one which looked at the administrative side of the job and another which responded to the emotional wellbeing of staff.
- 4. (Related to above) Ensuring managers have the capacity to support their staff to the extent they need:** Both Women's Leads and managers noted that time was always a factor when it came to managers supporting their staff. Responding to this then, it was suggested that Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) be allotted more time (perhaps through freeing up other parts of their role) to be able to give the level of support needed to their staff.
- 5. Consider ways in which caseloads might be made more manageable:** In meeting the many needs of women service users, Women's Leads have ended up over-stretching themselves. A consideration point for senior managers might be in thinking through ways in which time might be freed up for Women's Leads, such that they are able to work with women more holistically, and do so without jeopardising their own wellbeing.
- 6. Broadening the scope of clinical supervision:** Clinical supervision was generally placed as a useful and helpful tool in managing the many demands of the Women's Lead role. To broaden its accessibility, it was suggested that it be made more available (perhaps through recruiting more clinical practitioners), not requiring staff to travel to supervision (make it geographically more available), and offering 1-2-1 sessions as an alternative to the group model.
- 7. Acknowledging some areas are less well-resourced than others:** There were notable differences amongst Women's Leads in different geographic areas as to how able they felt to do the job based on the wider support structures around them (e.g. resources, services and agencies). Though it was not necessarily asked for this to be changed, some issues were beyond

the scope of the organisation, it seemed recognition of these difficulties would likely go far in understanding why some Women's Leads consider the role more demanding than others, and as such experience more wellbeing issues because of it.

- 8. Let staff work more flexibly:** The intensity of the Women's Lead role saw staff often feel they were burning out, as they were constantly on the go. It was suggested that a future review of the Women's Lead role might see a model of work flexibility which allowed for more home-working.

- 9. As a final point, the option of gendered provision:** Though women Responsible Officers (i.e. Probation Officers and Probation Services Officers) were generally considered better placed to understand the needs of women service users, male Responsible Officers were seen as equally up to the task. It was felt by many that men should be allowed to do this where appropriate. Most significantly though, staff simply felt that women service users should have the choice of what gender they would prefer to work with. Not only might this be empowering for women service users in making the call regarding gendered supervision themselves, such flexibility in women-led provision might also carry the benefit of having more staff available to help manage the more complex and demanding nature of women's cases.

Conclusion: The research described in this report is part of an emergent, yet sparsely attended to, area of probation practice, which looks at the experiences of women who supervise women on probation. Though the focus has been solely on female probation staff at KSS CRC, the findings from this research, and the subsequent implications from those findings, have significant reach and resonance to all aspects of women-led probation service provision. Moreover, this research has also touched on the newly developing field of emotional labour in probation work, and through drawing on a gendered perspective, has offered an additional dimension to this area of work. It is anticipated that the points raised in this report might lead to some meaningful debates within the sector, and more locally, some key changes within KSS CRC which seek to better support the women who undertake this demanding, yet integral role.