
Just Therapy for women leaving prison

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Women leaving prison and attempting to establish themselves in the community, generally do not receive a warm welcome by society and are traditionally not well served by therapeutic and social services in New Zealand. Their oppressed place in the wider society is entrenched by systems of patriarchy, power and privilege, while the high proportion of Maori and also Pacific Island women will be additionally disadvantaged, having to contend with dominant Western society structures. I will outline this group's place in the community, analysing why services have failed to reach them in the past. I will then describe changes that would occur through applying the principles of Just Therapy and ways that a Just service could be delivered.

The place in the wider community of women exiting prison and why services have not reached this group in the past

Too often this group of women falls through the cracks of existing services. Predominant community attitudes are that the women are criminals, therefore not deserving of assistance; misunderstanding that their behaviours are symptoms of wider social ills (McGrath, 2000, p. 3). Bloom, Owen and Covington (2003, p. 79) write that women offenders 'often suffer from isolation and alienation created by discrimination, victimisation, mental illness, and substance abuse'.

Gender

Underlying the situation facing women when they come out of prison is the inescapable fact that they are victims of a patriarchal society. Waldegrave (2003, p. 30) points out that a feminist critique has exposed and challenged the inequalities entrenched in the development of modern market economies, where men control public life and women are relegated to the home. Although women are now out in the working world, Waldegrave believes 'Western societies are still largely patriarchal in structure'. This is clearly evidenced by women's magazines today with their huge emphasis on beauty products, assumed to be necessities for women facing a man's world.

Women make up only approximately 5% of the total prison population in Western countries (Lashlie, 2002, p. 90), and have tended not to have their own gender-specific services, even though the Department of Corrections has recognised that women offenders have specific needs (Poels, 2005). Numbers of women in prison are increasing, although there are questions about whether imprisonment for women is a valid solution (Miller-Warke, 2000, p. 5). Dominant patriarchal meaning systems in Western society marginalise the women, (Fletcher, Shaver and Moon, 1993), resulting in this group being largely ignored by society in general, with meaning systems around their treatment largely assuming they are no different to men (Miller-Warke, 2000. p. 3).

Poverty and neglect

Women exiting prison are disadvantaged in the community, with high and complex health needs (Morgan, Wild and Williams, 2000) and tend to be severely socially excluded (Goldin-gay, 2007, p. 60), belonging to their own particular sub-culture – related to poverty, neglect and abuse. Miller-Warke (2000) quotes an independent inquiry in Britain ('The Report of the Committee on Women's Imprisonment, Justice for Women: the Need for Reform', 2000), which concluded that this group is 'socially excluded within society and that 'the community at large fails them'.

Women re-entering the community after a time in prison are severely discriminated against in society and lack community support, (Bloom, Owen and Covington, 2003, p. 82). Many women who are imprisoned have backgrounds of economic disadvantage (Ashford and Cox, 2000, p. 3; McGrath, 2000, p. 2; Conly, 1998, p. 4). A lack of understanding by mainstream society, of the causes and effects of belonging to this group, has led to the women being poorly served by therapeutic and social services as they leave prison and attempt to integrate into the community.

Culture

Indigenous women face extra discrimination, contending with dominant European culture and systems, and are over represented in the prison system (Fletcher, Shaver and Moon, 1993, Miller-Warke, 2000). In New Zealand young Maori women are over represented in the female prison population by three times, according to the most recent prison census, (Department of Corrections, 2003; Poels, 2005). Durie (1984, pp. 5, 9) points out that different cultures live different realities, and that Maori and Pacific people are likely to find society's emphasis on independence and the mechanistic viewpoint foreign. Waldegrave (1998, p. 154) explains that Maori and Pacific cultural values are traditionally communal, spiritual, ecological and consensual and it follows that welfare services entrenched in the Western value systems, which are more individualised, secular, materialistic and conflictual, will not well serve the majority of women leaving prison. Calligan (2001, p. 7), believes that 'the separation of the spiritual and the secular in everyday life is the most significant effect of colonisation on Maori in general and on women in particular, undermining the traditional status of Maori women'.

Abuse and violence

Being victims of abuse and violence increases the likelihood of women being imprisoned, 'victims flee the violence and seek anonymity in city life, surviving through prostitution, and misuse of alcohol and drugs, to dull the sharp edge of their emotional pain' (Miller-Warke, 2000, p. 7). Lashlie (2002, p. 100), is surprised that many imprisoned women are actually still alive, due to their extensive experiences of abuse.

What changes would occur through applying the principles of Just Therapy?

A Just Therapy would incorporate 'a belief in a universal spirituality that acknowledges the sacredness of people's stories, particularly in their exposure to pain ... and is essentially about relationships in all cultures' (Waldegrave, 2003, p. 66). In applying the principles of Just Therapy it would become clear, in listening to the women's stories, that they are in fact victims of an oppressive world, where their pains from a life of abuse and violence have not been recognised.

A Just Therapy would acknowledge that most crimes committed by women are related to social problems, such as being victims of abuse and resulting drug addictions (Harden and Hill, cited in Miller-Warke, 2000) and having been trapped in poverty (Phillips and Harm, cited in Miller-Warke, 2000).

Listening to the women's stories would lead to understandings that women ex prisoners are different to men, because they have experienced gender domination and in the majority of cases violence and abuse at the hands of men. Writers agree that women arrive to prison along different pathways and have different rehabilitative needs to men (Miller-Warke, 2000; Lashlie, 2002; Bloom, Owen and Covington, 2003, p. 76) and a Just service would bring into the open new discourses, realising how the women have been marginalised by a dominant male world.

Addressing marginalising factors: Just Therapy is described by Waldegrave, (2003, p. 64) as freeing therapy from its 'cultural, class, gender and modernist constraints'. Issues that cause marginalising of certain groups in society are addressed, with critical contexts being explained by Waldegrave to be culture, gender and socio-economic factors. All these factors strongly influence women who are imprisoned; therefore a Just Therapy approach is surely needed. Waldegrave goes on to say that Just Therapy has grown out of understandings that power differences and injustice cause many mental health problems. Women in prison experience all sorts of mental health issues, suffer from powerlessness and are victims of an unjust society. There is not general recognition in the community of underlying causes of women's criminal behaviour being entrenched in cultural, gender and class discrimination, or of them being the victims of violence and abuse and surviving any way that they are able.

A Just service for women would understand their behaviours as symptoms of their oppressed lives, bringing knowledge of unjust systems and meanings causing their marginalisation to the surface. Assumptions that the women can be cured of their conditions such as anxiety, depression, personality disorder etc by medical interventions and social science would be questioned and more liberating meanings would be created, described by Waldegrave (2003, p. 68) as inspiring resolution and hope. Waldegrave points out that in Just Therapy, the therapies and services need to be developed by people from their own cultures. The women themselves need to be involved in devising ways of working that will be respectful and just, understanding what they have suffered and how new futures can be created.

Social justice: Paulo Freire (1999, p. 37) believes that there is 'an ethical responsibility to struggle to unveil situations of oppression' and a responsibility to work in ways which facilitate the oppressed in uncovering their realities. A Just service would explore the reasons behind circumstances i.e. developing understandings of what has led the women to prison. These factors, be they cultural, socio-economic or gender related (probably all three) need to be openly addressed to allow informed discussion and a change in attitudes of society. Just Therapy is committed to social justice (Waldegrave, 1994, p. 3), understanding people's problems as involved with broad structural inequalities in society and examining power differentials. Raheim (2008) explains how therapists need to examine operations of power and privilege that dominant groups in society enjoy, in order to provide services that are Just. Deconstructing professional privilege (Raheim, 2008), led to a growing consciousness of 'insider knowledge', and the importance of making space for this knowledge to be heard and valued. This is the knowledge of the women themselves.

Respect: Waldegrave (2003, p. 71) says that respect for women's knowledge, respect for marginalised cultures and respect for the survival of low income households underlies a Just Therapy approach. Women coming from prison therefore command much respect in a Just approach, as they are marginalised for all these reasons. One of the guiding principles for gender-responsive services is regarded by Bloom, Owen and Covington (2003, p. 77), to be the creation of an environment based on safety, respect and dignity. Women's Prison Association services in New York City build on client experiences and strengths (Conly, 1998, p. 7) which is a Just way to provide services.

How could a Just service be delivered?

A Just service would be delivered from the perspectives of the women themselves. How do they want to run their services? The stories of the women will want to be told, and of their children. A Just service includes the children with their mothers, where they belong. A Just service liberates the women by listening to their histories and crying with them, believes in them and stays beside them. A Just service sees how the women are connected and help each other, how they reflect the love of people for each other and their children and how they are hurt children themselves surviving in a hell on earth.

Programmes for women have to consider issues of gender, race, poverty and abuse (Bloom, Owen and Covington, 2003, p. 88) and this would then be a Just service. A Just Therapy approach would be in partnership with the women, finding out from them what services they require. Dutreix (2000, p. 3) describes from a client perspective a Just Therapy of acknowledging the strengths of the women, in surviving dreadful hardships in an oppressive society where they are powerless. The Support for Women Exiting Prison (SWEP) programme at the Melbourne City Mission works from a Just Therapy approach, in assuming the women know best about their own lives and require resources and facilitation to develop their own solutions (Ashford and Cox, 2000).

Honouring people's stories of survival is an important aspect of Just Therapy (Waldegrave, 2000, p. 74) which has to be applied to the women as survivors of oppression. New threads of meaning can be woven with the women, in sharing the gifts of their painful stories, appreciating the sacred, spiritual qualities of their telling and offering reflections, as described by Waldegrave (2000, p. 75) that are liberating and 'inspire resolution and hope'. Lashlie (2002, p. 106) uses the metaphor of likening the telling of the women's stories to exposing a deep wound that has been covered with bandages. Removing the bandages is slow and painful but with crying, the tears start a long healing process, 'we all move on from the hurt and grief in our lives if someone listens to our story'.

New narratives of empowerment can be created with the women, which accept them as strong and capable and new discourses of respect for surviving and for helping each other. Goldingay (2007, p. 87) observes in her study of women prisoners in Christchurch Women's Prison, that the older prisoners engender a culture of respect in the younger ones. Poor and working class women, especially non white women, possess qualities of strength, confidence, assertiveness and decision making ability that they have developed through having to look after themselves and dependents, under conditions of economic deprivation and hardship, (Hooks, 2000, p. 87). New stories can be created with the women, which recognise that they have the strength to change the behaviours they have learned, from their experiences of the world.

Peer support: A Just service would be involved with empowering those who have personal knowledge of this group of women, be it from a Maori perspective, women who have suffered abuse or poverty and especially women who have themselves survived imprisonment and moved on in their lives. Just services would open doors for such workers, who as part of the women's culture, have the potential to provide healing for their own, beyond the possibilities of social science interventions (Waldegrave, 1998, p. 157). The use of peer support and the development of peer networks were identified as promising programmes for women offenders, by a national American survey of programmes, conducted by the Michigan State University (Conly, 1998, p. 22). In Scotland the Routes Out Of Prison (RooP) service for women leaving prison, involves former prisoners using their experiences of turning their lives around, working with prisoners prior to and on release (Taylor, 2007) and has recently been awarded a \$2 million Lottery grant (BBC, 2008).

A post structural approach will be useful in delivery of a Just Therapy. To go beyond searching for problems within the women, to an understanding of how their situations are related to their interactions with society and how they can change and recreate their identities (Thomas, 2002, p. 87). Feminist thought encourages a determination to question existing meaning systems and to value women's stories and their own interpretations of their stories (Russell and Carey, 2003, p. 9).

Supportive networks are considered to be intrinsic to a successful service (personal communication with ERS, ex inmate Christchurch Women's Prison). Morgan, Wild and Williams (2000) discovered that significant issues for women include requirements for extensive support and for family reunification support. Dutreix (2000, p. 3) cites Davis (1990) as suggesting support involves practical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual assistance and says that women who are avoiding their old social circles will be in particular need of support.

Environments of support and encouragement are found to be most successful for women. Just services would be provided in ways that reflect the particular aspects of women, who have frequently been victims of power and abuse throughout their lives. Having been traumatised, the women seek care and love if the service is to be ethical. At Taryn House, in South Australia, the motivation to change is provided by the women's own experiences (McGrath, 2000, p. 4). Here a sense of community, which both supports the women and where what they have to offer is valued, has created a Just service.

Supportive relationships: In bringing gender issues to the forefront, a Just service would understand that the theme of relationships and connections threads throughout the lives of women prisoners, irrespective of culture (Bloom, Owen and Covington, 2003, p. 79). Experiences of the Support for Women Exiting Prison (SWEP) programme show that developing rapport and engaging with women in trusting relationships is important (Ashford and Cox, 2000), with no time limit to support and also values developing relationships with the women's children and their extended family.

It has been found that continuity of service and enduring support relationships are vitally important for women (Ashford and Cox, 2000; Dutreix, 2000, p. 4; Conly, 1998, p. 8). Bloom, Owen and Covington (2003, p. 8) report that women will require a therapeutic relationship, that 'reflects mutual respect, empathy and compassion'.

Understanding: A Just service would recognise how traumatic and disorienting being released into the community can be for women and would provide a flexible approach to cope with unpredictable behaviours (McGrath, 2000, p. 3). A Just service realises that it is no good attempting to 'beat down' the women and then rebuild them, as being beaten is most of what the women have known (Conly, 1998, p. 6). Research into the Key / Crest programmes by the Delaware Criminal Justice Council (NIJ, 2005, p. 3) discovered that therapeutic community programmes for women were more successful with a non confrontational atmosphere.

In a Just Therapy approach the women's rage will be understood and validated by sharing narratives of their lives and helping to transform the women's pain into the better futures they desire. Russell and Carey (2003, p. 18) discuss how young women's rage has been pathologised and medicated whereas a more just, feminist perspective would be to engage with the women about the causes for their rage, thus opening possibilities for 'harnessing what this rage stands for into constructive action'.

Accommodation: Women have identified safe and appropriate accommodation on release as a major factor in not returning to prison (Dutreix, 2000; Bloom, Owen and Covington, 2003, p. 78) so accommodation support would be a vital part of a Just service.

Whanau / family: A Just service would recognise that most women in prison are parents who have sole parenting responsibility for their children, in contrast to men whose children tend to remain in the mother's care (McGrath, 2000). The particular requirements of women are illustrated by the need to keep services safe from violent partners. Listening to the women, it will become clear they wish to reunite with their children and including children will be important in a Just service, involving values of whanau / family and belonging.

Tikanga Maori: To provide Just services they must be culturally sensitive, 'therapists of the same culture as the clients are much more likely to understand' (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka and Campbell, 1993, p. 82). A Just service for the women would appreciate their own culture and be delivered by Maori for Maori women, so that, as Tuhaka explains, (Waldegrave et al., 2003, p. 177) the wairua and mauri principles of Maori heritage are valued and respected. Tuhaka goes on to say that in work with Maori, it is important to honour the concept of looking into the past in order to find the future, linking families to their own cultural values and recognising that healing comes from understanding connections to where people have come from. She believes that this differs significantly from the European approach in New Zealand. Tuhaka emphasises the importance of traditional greetings and time taken to establish connections and work as a whanau, rather than as therapist and client. She reminds us of the sacredness of women and children to Maori and suggests using metaphorical images for healing, such as pounamau representing children, in being precious taonga.

Ethical accountability: A Just organisation will need to have systems of ethical accountability, to empower the voices of marginalised cultures. As many of the women in New Zealand prisons are Maori, support organisations to provide a Just service would have to reflect at least equal Maori membership at all levels. Following the Just Therapy approach, usual modes of accountability are reversed, with any men involved being accountable to the women, and members of the dominant European culture accountable to Maori. Consensus processes would be used, such as at The Family Centre, Lower Hutt, to ensure integrity of practice. Time has to

be taken for members of subordinated groups to tell their stories and express their experiences, with sincere efforts of dominant groups to understand and value marginalised meanings. New accountabilities involving respect, humility, sacredness, reciprocity and love are needed to build trust in a Just service (Waldegrave et al., 2003, p. 88-93).

Community support: Just Therapy involves community workers and community development. Bloom, Owen and Covington (2003, p. 85) emphasise that collaborative community programmes and strong community partnerships are best suited to women's needs. A Just Therapy involves building healing and helpful systems of support, for the women in the community. To be treated justly, the pain of the women has to be tracked 'in the family, in the community, in the culture, in the society' (Waldegrave, 1994, p. 6), with the naming of what has happened to the women, the abuse, violence, and neglect by society. A Just service would bring these repeated themes of oppression and pain into the open, to walk alongside the women, addressing the factors in society causing them to be imprisoned, aiming to influence and change unjust social and economic policies.

In summary

I have described how women who have been imprisoned in New Zealand are a particularly disadvantaged group, due to issues of gender, culture, poverty, abuse and neglect. Just services to support the women when they leave prison are required, to allow them to create new lives, based on their own strengths and acknowledging them as survivors in an unjust society. I have put forward ideas and examples of how a service based on the principles of Just Therapy could be delivered, an empowering service the women would welcome, to transform their pain into a better future for themselves and their children.

Dedication

I am a wind of the sea
I am a wave of the sea
I am a sound of the sea
I am a stag of seven tides
I am a griffon on a cliff
I am a tear of the sun

Latasha Lee Young, Christchurch Women's Prison
4 February 2005

This dream of a just service for women is dedicated to all those women who suffer for lack of timely support and resources in the prison systems of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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