

Report on Campaign Meeting

Promoting Alternatives to Prison for Women who are mentally ill

Held on Wednesday the 28th March 2.30 – 4.30 pm

City and Hackney Mind, Daily-Hunt Room, 8-10 Tudor Road, London E9 7SN

Background

On 28 March City and Hackney Mind hosted a meeting of organisations who were engaged in the cause of women in prisons. The issue affects the mentally ill quite intimately and is therefore of great concern to City and Hackney Mind. And so the meeting was set up to organise a campaign for change in the way women offenders are treated. In the wake of Baroness Jean Corston's report on the matter, the political climate is ripe for change and we will exploit this opportunity.

Overall aim of the meeting

To call on the government to take urgent action to stop women with mental health problems being sent to prison and to invest in mental health provision, drug treatment and support and supervision in the community. To promote the development of a National Campaign to Advocate for Change: *Woman's organizations, mental health agencies and prison reform group need join together to launch a national campaign to highlight this issue and to advocate for change in national policies to tackle the issue of women in prisons who need help and not punishment.*

Specific Objectives

- Co-ordinate our campaign at local and national levels
- Lobby local MPs for a commitment to fair legislation
- To raise the issue in the media
- Plan our next campaigning moves here in the City and Hackney and in London.
- To develop and build the campaigning skills of a strong group of activists

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. Develop an innovative service at City and Hackney Mind to address the needs of Women in Prison

Participants suggested several innovative projects currently exist. *Providence Row's* "Snakes and Ladders" report at www.revolving-doors.co.uk can provide a starting point and a set of ideas.

2. Hold the next campaign meeting at the House of Commons with speakers to include Lady Jean Corston, Ann Overs (Chief of Prisons), Helen Edwards (Head of National Offender Management Service), and the Head of the Women's offending reduction program.

City and Hackney Mind will take the lead in coordinating this event. Participants agree to publicise and support the campaign meeting. The meeting to be organised by the end of June.

3. Organise a media campaign to highlight this issue using the local and national press

City and Hackney Mind to develop a press release to encourage the media to attend the House of Commons meeting.

4. Celebrity Endorsement: Recruit appropriate celebrities to raise the profile of this issue among the public.

Suggestions of appropriate celebrities included Jo Brand and Ruby Wax.

5. City and Hackney Mind is well placed to mobilise National Mind and the mental health sector in addressing the issue.

6. Liaise with the following All Party Parliamentary Interest Groups: -

- a. All Party Parliamentary Group on Penal Affairs
- b. All Party Parliamentary Group on Mental Health
- c. All Party Parliamentary Group on Prison Health
- d. All Party Parliamentary Group on Sex Equality
- e. All Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights Group

Overview of the issue of women in prison.-Krishna Maharaj, City and Hackney Mind

There are more than double the number of women in custody than there were in 1996, despite no equivalent increase in the nature or seriousness of their offending.

- The last ten years or so have seen a dramatic rise in the numbers of women in prison from an average of 1560 in 1993 to around 4248 in January 2006.
- Nearly 40% of women prisoners lose their homes as a result of imprisonment and 65% of women re-offend on release
- The majority of women prisoners are serving short sentences for non-violent crimes such as theft and handling stolen goods.
- A prison bed costs between £25,000 and £45,000 a year.

Many female prisoners have a history of impoverishment, neglect and abuse, have poor educational attainment and are deemed to have some degree of personality disorder, and in addition to any mental health problem may also abuse substances. A prison is an inadequate place to support people with severe mental health problems.

- Up to 80% of women in prison have diagnosable mental health problems. A 2002 Social Exclusion Unit report 'Reducing Re-Offending by Ex-Prisoners' found that 37% of women prisoners had attempted suicide.
- 50% of women in prison have at least one personality disorder and a high rate of severe mental illness such as schizophrenia or delusional disorders – 14% compared to less than 1% in the general population.
- There are high rates of self-injury among women in prison, who were responsible for half the incidents in 2003. 16% of women self-injure in prison, compared with 6% of young offenders, and 3% of men.
- More than 50% of women in prison report having experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse and 40% say they have attempted suicide at some time in their life.

- 30% of the female estate is from ethnic minorities in comparison to around 24% of the male estate.
- Just over 19% of the women in prison are foreign nationals compared to about 12% in the male estate.
- Women are normally the Primary Carers for elderly relatives and children. Around 55% of women in prison have a child under 16, 33% a child under 5 and 20% are lone parents.
- Women tend to have a different type of drug use from men with higher levels of hard drug use.
- One in four women in prison has spent time in local authority care as a child.
- Use International Women's Day to highlight the issue
- Central aim of this meeting is to implement the fourth recommendation of the Advocacy Briefing:

Krishna highlighted the need for a national campaign to advocate for change: Woman's organizations, mental health agencies and prison reform groups needed to join together to launch a national campaign to highlight this issue and to advocate for change in national policies to tackle the issue of women in prisons who need help and not punishment.

Alternatives to prison for women who are mentally ill – Dr Edgar Kimmet, Prison Reform Trust

The mentally ill make up a heavily disproportionate number of women in prison. Not only is this an ineffective way to treat mental illness, it often exacerbates the problem. In a report from the Prison Reform Trust, the Governor of a women's prison told the story of a woman who was mentally disabled. All the prison officials who had encountered her case agreed she should be sectioned. But according to the governor, she probably won't be.

She is one of the many who "slip through the cracks in the net".

However, it's not enough to identify a problem and say it must be fixed. Solutions must be offered. To that end, Dr. Edgar Kimmet, a specialist on prisoners, from the Prison Reform Trust spoke on alternatives to prison for women. He made several key points

1. Women need to be near their homes and communities - This would keep them from losing touch with family and social bonds and would then subsequently help them to cope with any mental health issues and avoid recidivism.
2. Women should be engaged in discussions of their treatment - An important measure, he suggested that would give women a sense of empowerment and help to establish a more suitable method of treatment.
3. Minimise Coercion – Coercive attitudes towards women offenders carry costs. While it is often assumed that the women in question will be safer in prisons, this is far from the truth.
4. Encourage Holistic treatment – treat the whole person, and you can address the root problems, rather than the symptoms

5. Multi-agency Collaboration – a cross section of institutions with expertise in women, prisoners, mental health issues, etc. al can provide better treatment than a single institution with knowledge in only one of said issues
6. Remember the differences between men and women – Often times in the search for equality people forget that equal does not mean the same. In order to treat men and women equally it is not necessary, nor even desirable to ignore the fundamental psychological, physiological, and sociological differences between them. Furthermore, differences should be treated as a priority, not an afterthought.
7. Provide local solutions – Such as:
The Asha Women’s Centre in Worcester – Which creates vital links for women. All staff and users there are women and no distinction is made between offenders and non-offenders.

Holloway Prison – Shows how women can help each other.

Calderdale – Provides support groups

Teviot House

The Stan Project in Manchester – works from a harm reduction perspective

the Sandy Croft Centre

the 218 centre - deals with people coming out of prison

By being small, each of these organisations can provide an innovative approach and flexible approach. By being local, they can target their approach to local conditions.

8. Assertive outreach – The Criminal Justice system tends to co-opt treatments; treatments that it is not best suited to providing. Assertive outreach by voluntary sector organisations can help to counteract this, and can provide more comprehensive treatment.
9. Educating judges – this was, perhaps, one of Dr. Kimmett’s most important comments. He stated that judges were not professionally equipped to deal with the issues that women offenders face. Furthermore they do not consider mental illness to be a mitigating factor, but rather a flaw to be punished and are remarkably cynical when the issue is raised at all. However, it’s not just judges who have this problem, police and solicitors exhibit a similar mindset. That being said, there are signs of hope. A link worker scheme in Tower Hamlets, where judges and police are actively informed of these issues, could serve as a prototype.
10. Diversion (away from the criminal justice system, into other types of care) should be presented as a true alternative – It lessens the chance of reoffending

and improves mental health. While there is currently a framework for diversion it is difficult to navigate and underused.

Changing Public Opinion: SMART Justice for Women Campaign – Lucie Russell SMART Justice

After Dr. Kimmitt’s speech, the meeting moved on to another important facet of the campaign; changing public opinion. Even if we come up with a better way to deal with women offenders, without public support, our ideas will never be enacted. And without public support, things will continue to be difficult for women in and out of prisons.

There are both opportunities and threats in the field of public opinion what we must exploit and challenge in order to get our views across. Threats like the “Daily Mail Test” and the move towards an American style criminal justice system. There are entrenched interests that oppose what we are trying to do and at first glance it would seem that they have the public on their side. However the first glance can be misleading. Recent polls have suggested public attitudes may be shifting in our favour. Firstly, most people now agree that prison doesn’t work, but they have difficulty conceptualising alternatives. To that end, we must offer solutions to causes and responses to effects, rather than just one or the other. We have to make sure that people see alternatives as viable, and working. If we can, we can counteract tabloid fear-mongering and rough justice.

Discussion on the key issues

However to build a successful campaign, we need more still. Good ideas and public support are not quite enough. A campaign has to be managed and targeted. City and Hackney Mind has a unique perspective to bring to the campaign. We can focus on the mental health issues of women in prisons; how they can and should be addressed. We can also attempt local initiatives that help women in our area. If successful, these initiatives could become a prototype for similar efforts nationwide. Our appropriate adults service could be a framework for this effort. Our relationships with local MP’s such as Meg Hillier can also be a plus. We can state the case using raw data, like the cost of prison vs. supported housing, real life stories, like those of some are service users, and even celebrity endorsements, such as Jo Brand.

We have a lot of things in our favour at the moment. Baroness Corston’s report has shown the government’s desire for change. Public opinion polls also show a willingness to look for new ways to deal with the issue. The Home Secretary, John Reid, has even admitted that mentally ill and vulnerable women should not be sent to prison. If we strike while the iron is hot, we can affect a real and lasting change.

List of Participants

Linda Bryant
Co-ordinator
Together FMHP Service
12 Old Street
London EC1V 9BE
Tel: 07808 654122
Email: linda-bryant@together-uk.org

Edgar Kimmett
Head of Research
Prison Reform Trust
15 Northburgh Street
London EC1V 0JR
Tel: 0207 251 5070
Email:
kimmett.edgar@prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Teresa Elwes
The Bromley Trust
5 Cressy House
Hannibal Road
London E1 3JE
Email teresaelwes@thebromleytrust.org.uk

Angelina Feroes
Asian Women's Advisory Service
161 Mare Street
London E8 3RH
Tel: 0208 533 5796
Email: mhawas@tiscali.co.uk

Nathaniel Oyinfoye
Hospital and Prison Action Network
20 Salem House
Morning Lane
London E9 6LD
Tel: 0798 552 3960
Email: nathmatics@aol.com

Julia Pengelly
Supported Housing Worker
Peter Bedford Housing Association
Stamford Works, Gillet Street
London N16 8JH
Tel: 0207 923 9255
Email: julia.pengelly@peterbedford.org.uk

Stavey Primus
Women's Criminal Justice Worker, Hackney
15 Tudor Grove
London E9

Lucy Smith
Senior Research and Information Officer
Mental Health Unit, Nacro
169 Clapham Rd,
London SW9 0PU
Tel: 020 7840 6718
Email: lucy.smith@nacro.org.uk

Lucie Russell
SmartJustice
15 Northburgh St
London EC1V 0LR
Tel: 0207 689 7734
Email: lucie.russell@smartjustice.org

Martin Pick
Chair of Trustees
City and Hackney Mind
8-10 Tudor Road
London E9 7SN
Tel: 0208 985 4239
Email: martin.pick@bopenworld.com

Rahiem Strayhorn
Assistant to the Director
City and Hackney Mind
8-10 Tudor Road
London E9 7SN
Tel: 0208 985 4239
Email:
rahieh.strayhorn@cityandhackneymind.org.uk

Krishna Maharaj
Director
City and Hackney Mind
8-10 Tudor Road
London E9 7SN
Tel: 0208 985 4239
Email:
krishna.maharaj@cityandhackneymind.org.uk

Bose Dania
City and Hackney Mind
8-10 Tudor Road
London E9 7SN
Tel: 0208 985 4239
Email: bose.dania@cityandhackneymind.org.uk

Cheryl
Service User and Former Inmate at Holloway Prison

List of other interested parties

Howard League for Penal Reform
1 Ardleigh Road
London N1 4HS

Cathy Stancer
Director
Women in Prisons
1a Aberdeen Studios
22 Highbury Grove
London, N5 2EA
Tel: 020 7226 5879
Email: Cathy@womeninprison.org.uk

Juliet Lyon
Prison Reform Trust
15 Northburgh St

Joyce Kellerik
WISH

Julian Lousada
Adult Department
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
NW3 5BA

Hazel McKenzie
London Liason Officer
National Mind
Email: h.mckenzie@mind.org.uk

Marion Willicome Lang
Senior Social Worker
Adult Social Care
15 Half Moon Court
Bartholomew Close
London EC1Y 7HF
Tel: 0207 601 2669
Email: marion.willicomelang@cityoflondon.gov.uk

Chelsea McKinney
Project Manager
Greater London Domestic Violence Project
1st Floor, Downstream Building
1 London Bridge
London SE1 9BG
Tel: 020 7785 3860
Email: Chelsea.mckinney@gldvp.org.uk