

Moving Mountains Executive Summary

Identifying and addressing barriers
to Employment, Training and Education
from the voices of women (ex) offenders

by Caroline O'Keeffe

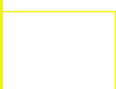
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The Women into Work programme was commissioned by the **Equal** Fund to work towards combating discrimination and inequality experienced by women who have been disadvantaged, particularly by their experiences of the criminal justice system. The programme which is managed by SOVA in partnership with 12 agencies, focuses specifically upon Employment, Training and Education issues. This document reports on Phase One of the programme which involved conducting peer research.

What is 'Peer Research'?

- New and innovative type of research
- Shift away from 'top down' research towards 'bottom up' approaches where those individuals, who would be directly affected by the outcomes, play an active role in the research process
- Members of the target group, (primarily (ex) offenders) adopted the role of active researchers, interviewing their peer group about their experiences of Employment, Training and Education
- The **aim** of the study was to identify: -
 - The importance/centrality of ETE for female (ex) offenders in overcoming disadvantage
 - The barriers which prevent women from accessing ETE
 - The support needed to help women to access ETE and integrate successfully into their communities
- The **objective** was to provide:
 - A sound evidence base from which to commission pilot projects
- **Additional aims and objectives** arose from the **process** of conducting the research as follows: -
 - To encourage empowerment of researchers through influencing the research process, decision making and ultimately policy
 - To increase skills, self esteem, and confidence of researchers to enhance their personal development and employability
- **Peer Involvement**
 - Three full time 'Peer Researchers' were employed to design and deliver the peer research. In addition they assisted in the recruitment, training and co-ordination of 25 sessional workers 'Trainees' who assisted in conducting the research and represented their peer group at meetings
- **Methodology**
 - Semi structured in depth interviews (both one to one and group interviews) were chosen as the method of data collection for this study
 - 346 women interviewed in total - 70% in custody, 30% in community

<i>Benefits of peer involvement in conducting the research</i>	<i>Disbenefits of peer involvement in conducting the research</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Trainee' presence in Prisons greatly assisted with recruitment and reduced the amount of 'gate keeping' • Facilitated interview situations, which were relaxed and informal and generated high quality data • Enabled interviews to have multiple functions, which have been empowering for women • Training and work opportunities made available for Peer Researchers and Trainees • Women have developed new skills and knowledge to improve self concept, confidence and assertiveness • Trainees have been able to earn a wage (although problems with benefits for some - see disbenefits) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At times, problematic and time consuming to negotiate licences for women in prison to attend training courses and meetings etc. • Through geographical dispersion, communication often occurred via letter or telephone rather than face to face • Trainees in the community have been able to earn very little money without their benefits being affected • Some women have found it to be a rather daunting experience to go back into prisons where they once resided • Peers are more likely to have own agenda and therefore ask more leading questions



FINDINGS OF RESEARCH

IMPORTANCE/CENTRALITY OF ETE

- Escape from previous lifestyle
- Achieving normality
- Improving self concept
- Assisting with social integration

Women also report that prison offers opportunities which they wouldn't have had 'on the out' largely due to drug taking and/or childcare responsibilities.

BARRIERS TO ETE

Disclosure of Convictions

- Disclosure as disincentive to applying for jobs
- Confusion around what obliged to disclose
- Preferable to disclose in an interview situation rather than at the application stage

Limitations of ETE in prison environment:-

- Over-emphasis on basic skills level education
- Lack of available staff and equipment
- Lack of continuity between prisons
- Lack of work placements and opportunities to gain skills and knowledge relevant to 'the outside'
- Lack of information about opportunities
- Women serving short sentences particularly disadvantaged

Perceived Employers Attitudes

- Attitudes characterised by:- lack of trust, undesirability and inability to change
- Identity bound up with criminality
- Viewed as a homogeneous group sharing same negative characteristics

Managing Transition from prison to the community

The following issues take priority over accessing ETE for many women:-

- Overcoming institutionalisation
- Securing appropriate accommodation
- Rebuilding relationships with children/families

SUPPORT NEEDED

Women require *practical and emotional* support particularly during the 'transition phase' between prison and the community as they feel as though they are '*fighting a losing battle*' and that they are powerless to change their lives. This research reveals a need for:-

- Support with those issues which take priority over ETE
- Support in 'preparing for ETE'. This stage is likely to incorporate equipping women with relevant skills and experience and could include: Confidence building; CV writing; Form completion; Job search; Preparation for interview; Advice on disclosure of convictions; Self presentation skills and advice on promoting transferable skills

On an *organisational level*, it is also vital for work to be done to ensure that ETE environments are conducive to engaging with (ex) offenders this may include:

- educating employers; challenging negative perceptions of (ex)offenders
- encouraging employers to offer work trials
- encouraging pro-active information giving by agencies, particularly in areas of disclosure, ETE opportunities available and housing

In addition, women expressed the need for a mentor or key worker who would be largely responsible for providing emotional support, reassurance and advocacy. This would preferably be a peer support service, offered by women who themselves have an offending background.

RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM FINDINGS OF PEER RESEARCH

- ETE advice and information should form a key part of any resettlement package
- Women's aspirations need to be validated; they enjoy and benefit from being listened to.
- ETE opportunities should be actively marketed to prisoners. 'Outside' agencies should be encouraged into prisons and prisons should take an active role in building working relationships with local communities
- ETE providers need to be made aware of the benefits of engaging with women in prison/ex-offenders.
- Women need to be educated and informed about those ETE providers who are willing to engage with (ex)offenders and may also benefit from hearing about/from women who have had positive experiences of ETE providers
- Women's education and training should be complemented by work experience where possible
- ETE records should accompany women from one establishment to another
- Pro active information giving by agencies may help to empower women to make decisions for themselves
- Strategies to reduce institutionalisation should be implemented in prisons. Women should be encouraged to think about their life 'outside' and wherever possible should have 'town visits' and be encouraged to maintain contact with their children by whatever means are available to them
- Prisons and community organisations should consider adopting 'peer led' approaches in service delivery.

Copies of the full report and further copies of this Executive Summary may be obtained from

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or electronically from www.cjp.org.uk

Women into Work is managed by SOVA in partnership with the following agencies

Addaction, CAST (Creative and Supportive Trust), Department for Education and Skills (Offender Learning and Skills Unit), Home Office (Women's Policy Team), Job Centre Plus, London Probation Area, NACRO, National Probation Directorate, Prince's Trust, Prison Service, Sheffield Hallam University, Stonham Housing Association.



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Research Centre for Community Justice