



The cost of empathy: women who supervise women on probation

Kerry Ellis Devitt, Senior Researcher, KSS CRC, Research and Policy Unit, summarises a new research report.

The Corston Report (2007) highlighted the failings of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in meeting the specific and unique needs of female offenders. Calling for a more holistic, woman-centred approach, the report underlined the need for a system which would help women develop the resilience, life skills and emotional literacy to successfully move on with their lives. Since then, there has been a relative wealth of research looking at the female experience when it comes to the CJS, and a fair amount of policy too. However, what has had substantially less attention is the experiences of those who supervise these women. Reflecting Goldhill's (2016) thoughts around the challenges of working with vulnerable women, working within a system predominantly set up with men in mind produces particular challenges. And as one participant in Coley's (2016) study into reflective practice in probation work notes, when it comes to thinking of staff's psychological wellbeing, "gender [isn't] really on the agenda" (p.30). Drawing from the findings of a soon-to-be-released study, the following discussion considers the demands involved in delivering a women-lead probation service, focusing specifically on women who supervise women.

About the research

The research described in this article emerged in response to the implementation of the *Women's Strategy* for Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company. In evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy, priority was given to exploring the realities of the Women's Lead role. Widely understood as demanding and multifaceted, and producing a proportionally higher turnover of staff than other frontline probation roles, there was a commitment to finding out what being a Women's Lead *really* asked of staff with the ultimate goal being to identify what could or should be done to better support them in future. This mixed-methods project comprised interviews with 8 Women's

Leads and 4 managers (3 Senior Probation Officers, and 1 Through The Gate Manager), with an online survey involving 13 Women's Leads (resulting in a 45% participation rate).

The context: Women's cases are complex cases

Women's cases were explained as complex and challenging. Women on probation were likely to be struggling with multiple issues (e.g. homelessness, mental health, substance misuse problems, and relationship difficulties), and often all of these things together. They were also likely to present with severe trauma in their past, due to varying levels of abuse. More often than not, they were still living through that abuse, *and* dealing with a number of other issues directly resulting from it. As an unsurprising result of this, the Women's Lead role was explained as one that expected a lot *of*, and took a lot *from*, the women who did it.

The cost of empathy

Such complexities of women's cases saw huge demands placed on staff - particularly in relation to the provision of empathy. Though the importance of being empathetic was stated as fundamental to the role, and there was (importantly) no resentment or regret when it came to such emotional investments, staff reflected on what the cost of that empathy was.

"The worst experience for me was sitting on a women's group, I think there were six women in the group, and they started to compare their self-harming scars and disclosed the last time that they'd written their suicide notes... to provide someone support when they've got emotional issues like that does require empathy, and empathy, for me, empathy takes from me".

One participant described the particular emotional impact of seeing a service user with her child – a visceral reminder of the woman in her dual role as ‘offender’ and ‘mother’.

“It really has affected me seeing them as mothers. I have seen women breastfeeding their children as we are talking about theft and other crimes, and it really gets me – whilst their child is touching them, whilst they are holding them.”

Dealing with daily trauma also saw staff navigate the difficult terrain of vicarious trauma. Domestic abuse, sexual assaults and safeguarding issues were part and parcel of women service users’ experiences, and again took their emotional toll on the female staff who supervised them. This was often compounded for staff who had histories of abuse themselves, and who additionally saw the risks of “over empathising” due to shared experiences.

The role of emotional labour

Working with women also saw significant need for emotional labour. Emotional labour, a term characterised by Hochschild (1983), explains the process of managing one’s emotions at the requirement of certain professions. It exists where emotional work, which involves regulating or suppressing emotions, is exchanged for something else, e.g. wages or some other type of valued compensation (Jeung, Kim & Chang, 2018). Emotional labour has seen a recent focus in the field of criminal justice, and in particular within probation practice (Westaby, Fowler & Phillips, 2020). Indeed, in a recent piece for HMI Probation’s *Academic Insights*, Phillips, Westaby & Fowler (2020, p.5) discuss ‘display rules’, which denote what is and is not appropriate in a given circumstance e.g. how learnt cultural norms govern the regulation of emotions in certain social contexts. This was considered integral for frontline staff, who were required to use,

manage and display emotions, as part of effective probation practice (p.4). This performance of labour was observable in this research; for example, in the expectations of empathy, as explored earlier, but also in the regulation of emotions. As this participant notes:

“I had this woman come in on Monday and cried to me and I had to stop myself from crying... you just wanna give her a hug, but you can’t because you’ve got to maintain that professional boundary”.

Emotional labour was also seen in the ways in which staff had to absorb and neutralise the often intense feelings of their women. Though it was understood why that happened, such incidents still took their toll.

“I’ve had another case that, she was on the phone telling me that she’s going to jump off a bridge and kill herself. So I obviously did everything that I needed to do, I rung the police, did a welfare check, got the police to go out and see her, and then the next day she’s ringing me saying I’ve ruined her life and that I shouldn’t have told the police and that she doesn’t want the police involved and you can’t, there’s a no win situation. And I think they take it out on you because you’re there and they haven’t got anybody else”.

Stress, strain and anxiety: The mental health costs of caring

Exhaustion and stress were also common experiences. Women’s Leads often had incredibly high expectations of themselves when it came to caring for the women, and lingering feelings of responsibility for their wellbeing saw staff constantly question themselves. 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.

"...we're just actively seeing people's really deep and painful grief, and trauma, and upset around what's happening to them, and violation of themselves, on such a regular basis. It completely wears you down emotionally, and there's no way you can't bring that home".

"I mean I've gone home and I've had like knots in my stomach thinking, have I covered this, have I done that properly, have I missed something? It all goes through your mind, and sometimes you feel like you don't get a break from it."

Due to all of this, the impact on wellbeing was sometimes profound. The sheer complexities of women's cases, and lack of time available to deal with them, lead to a number of staff questioning how long they would continue in post. Though it was recognised that *all* frontline probation work came with a degree of stress and anxiety, it was thought to be magnified within the Women's Lead role. In trying to do and be everything, the Women's Leads sometimes felt mired with the pressure of it all.

Support structures

Given the many emotional demands that working with complex and traumatised women presented, support was paramount. And it came in a number of forms. Reflected in both interviews and survey responses, colleagues came out as the frontrunner when it came to job-related support. Being able to "offload" about difficult or complex cases, seek reassurance, and simply just seeing a friendly face were ways in which support was

explained. Managers were also named, with staff seeing them as approachable, committed, and understanding of the demands of the job. However, busy as they all were, finding time to meet with them was sometimes thought difficult. Friends and family formed the external support structures. However, there were said to be limitations as to what they could offer. Though loved ones might *listen and sympathise*, by not being in the job themselves, they were unable to *understand and empathise*. Finally, support came through clinical supervision, giving staff space to air concerns, relate to others experiencing similar job-related issues, and process difficult feelings. Clinical supervision was not always staff's first port of call for support, however where it occurred, it was felt to offer a lot.

A tough role but a rewarding one

Though there were undeniable costs of working with traumatised women, the Women's Lead role was equally highly valued. Indeed, despite such challenges, what typically kept staff in post was in remembering what rewards such work brings.

"I love it, you know I do love it. I love seeing, you know when you see a woman get on and do well and just see the look in her face and you know, she's head up and she's smashing it. And it's so cool, it really is."

The full report, Resilience, wellbeing and sustainability in women-lead probation service delivery: Reviewing the 'Women's Lead' role is out in October 2020. For a copy, please contact research@kssrcr.probatonservices.co.uk

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