

GIVING PRISONERS A VOICE

A British Development Partnership has been combating discrimination against women prisoners, aided by their direct involvement. The women have played a very significant role in determining the barriers that they face and have also established projects to overcome some of these hurdles. A peer methodology and the empowerment of (ex)-offenders have been at the heart of this partnership's approach and its successful outcomes.

Between 1993 and 2001, the average population of women in English prisons, which also cater for female offenders from Wales, rose by 140% compared to 46% for men. In 2001, 19% of all known offenders were women and the most common causes of their custodial sentences were drug offences (39%), theft and handling (16%) and violence against the person (15%).

Prison appears to have a different, and apparently more damaging, impact on women than on men. The Chief Inspector of Prison's Thematic Review (1997) reported that over 70% of women believe that prison had a negative effect on them making them *"more criminally sophisticated as well as more angry and depressed."*

Women can also face 'double discrimination' in the labour market, as in addition to the burden of a criminal record there are often problems around childcare and other family responsibilities. Clearly Employment, Training and Education (ETE) play a vital role in the prevention of re-offending and represent important steps towards social inclusion for women (ex)-offenders. However, there is a great deal of unmet need in relation to ETE opportunities in prison and those opportunities which do exist, do not necessarily equip women for life 'on the outside'.

It was in this context that the Women into Work (WiW) Development Partnership (DP) was created with the ultimate goal of ensuring that women who have been disadvantaged, and particularly those who had problems in resettling after their experiences of the criminal justice system, could work towards accessing and sustaining appropriate Employment, Training and Education.

The activities of the DP fitted closely with the Country Specific Recommendations addressed to the United Kingdom that are contained in the Council's Recommendations ([2004/741/EC](#)) on the implementation of Member States' employment policies. This document encourages the United Kingdom to *"invest more and more effectively in human capital and lifelong learning"* and to attract more people to the labour market and make work a real option for all *"by supporting the sustainable integration and progress in the labour market of inactive and unemployed people"* and *"by giving particular attention to lone parents and people living in deprived areas."*



"I had very low esteem, practically none, but look at me now!" urges Marcia, a women in the final year of her custodial sentence, *"From being a weak little mouse at the beginning I'm as strong as a lioness now."* Marcia had benefited from work of a grouping of very diverse partners that was brought together by [SOVA](#) - a charity with vast experience of running young justice and prisoner resettlement projects. The

partnership had a number of national-level players such as the [Department for Education and Skills \(Prisoner Learning and Skills Unit\)](#), [the Home Office \(Women's Policy Team\)](#), [Jobcentre Plus](#), [NACRO](#) (the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders), [the National Probation Directorate](#), [the Prince's Trust](#), [Stonham Housing Association](#), and [the Prison Service](#). Then, there were more local agencies such as the [London Probation Area](#), [Sheffield Hallam University](#), [Addaction](#) that deals with drug abuse and the Camden-based [CAST \(Creative and Supportive Trust\)](#). There were also an additional 40 agencies that were associated in some way with the DP and its activities. All partners brought with them their expertise and skills and many were also channels to the ultimate beneficiaries of the DP.

PUTTING PRISONERS FIRST

The DP adopted a phased approach to its activities. The initial step was to carry out peer research to identify barriers to employment from a female perspective and this process and its outcomes are described in detail in the next section. Building on the outcomes of this research, a series of pilot projects was then launched to explore and test innovative methods of surmounting these barriers. Finally, WiW disseminated its outcomes and worked with other DPs in England to create new methods and products based on a sharing of the knowledge and experience that had been acquired by each DP.

The Pilot Projects in Action

One objective of the peer research study was to provide a sound evidence base from which to commission pilot projects. This process was carried out by a 'Commissioning Group' of selected Development Partnership members and a beneficiary, one of the Peer Researchers who collaborated with the Trainees to ensure that their views about the pilot projects, particularly in terms of empowerment, were fed into the commissioning process. The Commissioning Group considered a number of initial Expressions of Interest from a wide variety of agencies and from these eight were invited to submit full tenders and five projects were finally selected.

Three of these projects were organised by partners within WiW:

- SOVA ran the **Peer Support and Resettlement Pilot** that had paid members of staff who were women from an offending background. These peer supporters started their work while offenders were still in prisons in the Yorkshire and Humberside area. Then, they were there to meet each woman as she came through the prison gates and they continued to offer her support and assistance in resettlement, particularly in terms of increasing her chances of finding a job;
- CAST had the **Network Club Pilot**, which offered a unique insight into both the complexities and the considerable potential of using peer group work to deliver personal development and job search services to women ex-offenders and those at risk of offending;
- The **Going Straight to Work Pilot** was managed by NACRO in conjunction with Send Prison and had two ex-offenders working with individual women prisoners to enhance their skills, knowledge and self-confidence in relation to job search. It also concentrated on engaging employers so that they might understand the particular needs of women ex-offenders.



The other two pilots involved:

- The **Norfolk Women into Employment and Training Initiative**, which created a voluntary peer mentoring service with women (ex)-offenders that encouraged them to achieve their potential; and to deal positively with disclosure of criminal records;
- The London College of Communication and East Sutton Park Prison that together developed a **Creative Business Pilot Course** which aimed to provide women prisoners with the opportunity to become self-employed on their release. This project broke new ground, as some of the businesses were developed in, and operated from, prisons. Also, one of these would-be entrepreneurs had the idea of making and marketing sausages made from the meat of a rare variety of pig. As a result of the marketing skills acquired on the course, she made contact with a number of high quality food shops and succeeded in convincing them to stock her products.

Of the 133 beneficiaries of these five projects, 78 were identified as white British and the other 55 came from various ethnic groups. Almost 50 women were recorded as having either a mental illness or impairment, reflecting the very high incidence of both problems within the prison population. Apart from former convictions, many of the women had had previous experiences of

homelessness, substance misuse and sex work and 31 also had caring responsibilities or were lone parents. Thus, the DP reached the disadvantaged groups that it had originally targeted.

Producing New Products

WiW has produced a wide variety of products most of which are available from the [DP's web site](#) and also the [EQUAL Works web site](#) which features the achievements of Development Partnerships in Great Britain. The two main outputs of WiW are "Moving Mountains" and a "Good Practice Toolkit." "Moving Mountains" is a report that details the findings and recommendations of the peer research. The executive summary of the experience of the DP and the full report can be downloaded from these web sites. The "Toolkit" is a very interesting summary of the experience of the WiW and while a lot of it is devoted to the working with offenders and peer methodology, it also contains tips and recommendations on partnerships and transnational cooperation. Individual components of the Toolkit can be downloaded from the DP's web site.



As part of the Round 1 mainstreaming activities that were structured through the Great Britain's EQUAL National Thematic Networks, WiW collaborated with other DPs in the creation of two more products. A CD Rom entitled "Apply Within" was produced to challenge existing recruitment practices and to encourage the recruitment of (ex)-offenders.

The CD Rom includes an interactive quiz and a well argued business case for employing (ex)-offenders together with resources to assist in safe recruitment. The CD Rom also contains video footage that includes a WiW beneficiary talking about her own experiences of work, the skills she had developed and why employers should give (ex)-offenders an opportunity to prove themselves at work. It was launched at the Local Government Authority Annual Conference and a copy was sent to HR departments in all Local Authorities¹.

Five Equal DPs worked together to deliver an awareness raising "Barriers to Employment" event for Jobcentre Plus staff. Workshops on the themes of disclosure, transferable skills and stereotyping/stigmatisation were led by the DPs. Members of the Jobcentre Plus staff were given material to take away and use in their workplace to continue their learning from the day. The event was evaluated very positively with almost 90% of delegates rating it as excellent or good. Amy Christian, the WiW Programme Manager, also felt that there were many benefits for the EQUAL DPs that had been involved as *"Collaborative working allows projects with a similar aim to join together, pool resources and skills and create a greater impact."*²

PEER RESEARCH AND EMPOWERMENT

In order to identify the barriers to employment that were faced by women prisoners, WiW decided to apply a new and innovative type of research. This peer research was a shift towards a 'bottom up' approach in which those individuals, who would be directly affected by the outcomes, played an active role in the process. Members of the target group, namely (ex)-offenders adopted the role of active researchers, interviewing members of their peer group about their experiences of Employment, Training and Education. Three full-time Peer Researchers were employed to design and deliver the research. In addition, they were also involved in the recruitment, training and co-ordination of 25 sessional workers called 'Trainees' who assisted with the research and represented their peer group at meetings. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews, both one to one and group, were chosen as the method of data collection for this study. In total, 243 prisoners were interviewed in eight of the nineteen women's prisons in England and 103 ex-offenders were interviewed in local community settings.

The Findings

One of the main findings of the research was that 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. The research revealed a need for:

- Support with those issues which take priority over ETE, such as housing and child care and other social problems. In fact, some of the women interviewed said that prison offers opportunities which they wouldn't have had 'on the outside' largely due to drug taking and/or childcare responsibilities;

- 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 interviews; Advice on disclosure of convictions; and Self presentation skills.

In addition, women expressed the need for a mentor or key worker who would be largely responsible for providing emotional support, reassurance and advocacy. The preferred option was a peer support service, offered by women who themselves have an offending background. This is reflected in the views of a beneficiary, who was allocated a peer mentor as part of the SOVA peer support pilot project. Kelly felt that *"having someone who understands me and what it's like coming out of prison has helped me more than anything in the past because I didn't feel silly asking for help"*.



At an organisational level, the research demonstrated the need for more work to be done to ensure that ETE environments are conducive to engaging with (ex)-offenders and this could include:

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

The Benefits

The peer research was widely described as having a range of beneficial outcomes for the women involved. They took part in nine different training and development opportunities including presentation skills, report writing and peer research. This equipped them with the skills needed to feel confident and to be prepared to make a pro-active contribution to meetings and speak in front of large audiences at conferences. Whilst the peer research was being conducted, the trainees were encouraged to attend DP meetings as part of their learning and development - an innovation in itself. In WiW, beneficiaries were then involved at all levels in the DP and were represented on all groups and committees including the DP steering group and the Commissioning & Review group. Sometimes, problems were encountered in ensuring full participation but these were usually overcome. For example, a parole licence with reporting restrictions proved no barrier for the Women into Work team who liaised with the Probation Service to ensure that a valued team member who was on licence could participate in a transnational event. In the words of Sandra, an ex-offender who helped with the DP's activities, *"WiW really empowered me at a time when most women would feel disempowered ... I felt like an equal working with SOVA and they gave me the encouragement to succeed."*

Trainees who had been involved in the peer research also identified that it had some empowering effect for the women they interviewed, who were made to feel that their experience and views were valued. The employment of women (ex)-offenders in professional full time jobs, proved useful for the employees and also for the beneficiaries they were supporting. The employees gained work experience, a salary, a reference, and new-found self-confidence. In addition, they provided a role model and raised the aspirations of the beneficiaries. The response of many women when told of a staff member's background was often *"If they can do something like this, maybe I can."*

The DP was the Secretary of the [MIKIRI](#) Transnational Partnership and freely admits that it learnt a lot from the Swedish partner [Better Release](#), which was already operating a Peer Support Service, but the learning was not one way. A representative from a Swedish statutory agency who attended the WiW national conference in October 2003 was so inspired by the empowerment of the DP's pilot project participants and the way that they could explain it, that she vowed to involve women in similar activities on her return to Sweden.

The Future

For most DP members, the peer research was seen as the most innovative aspect of WiW and the part most likely to have a lasting effect through the Moving Mountains report and the precedents set by having women prisoners being able to have given access to other prisons.



The research findings were launched at WiW's national conference and have been cited in the Home Office Offending Reduction Programme, Prison Service Women's Team Business Plan, Prison Service Plus bidding guidance and Fawcett Society Gender and Justice Commission on Women. The peer research methodology was also developed into a training course accredited by the Open College Network and delivered nationally to 33 organisations.

The peer group approach has been taken on by a number of the partners in WiW including NACRO which is the largest organisation in the UK dealing with the resettlement of offenders. The approach has also been reflected in two Round 2 EQUAL DPs that are managed by SOVA. [Women into Work: Building Futures](#) is an exciting initiative working to promote opportunities for disadvantaged women in traditionally male dominated roles and sectors. Whereas, [Women into Work: Moving On](#) aims to get women, who are struggling to obtain a job, into employment and one of this DP's projects has taken the concept of "Giving Prisoners a Voice" even further by training inmates to meet the information needs of other offenders in prisons through radio, TV, video and print.

Julie Otter, WiW Programme Director attributes the success of the DP to *"having a committed and enthusiastic staff team and partners who believed in the beneficiaries and ensured that their needs and wishes were at the heart of all the work undertaken and also, of course, the involvement of capable and dedicated beneficiaries at all levels of the DP to drive the work forward."*

The Three Most Important Lessons from Women into Work

1. The DP believes that empowerment **is** possible but for this to work, it needs to be the underlying ethos of everything that is done. Beneficiaries from the target group should be involved at all levels, even to the extent of being members of the board or group responsible for the overall management of the DP.
2. The DP has proved that Peer Research, Peer Mentoring and Peer Support are very effective approaches when working with women (ex)-offenders. Many of these women describe themselves as feeling "powerless" or of feeling "different" or "inferior" to non-offending people. The enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem that they gain from being taken seriously and having their views valued makes them more able to take control of their own futures.
3. The DP has found that collaborating with other DPs is a very effective form of mainstreaming and dissemination, as new products or approaches can be built on a wider range of experiences. This, in turn, makes a stronger and more convincing case for change and also increases both the potential target audience and the impact.

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→ Link to Web site for all three DPs: <http://www.wiw.org.uk>

→ Links to EQUAL database descriptions: [Women into Work](#); [Women on the Move](#); [Women Building Futures](#)

→ Link to WiW [Transnational Partnership](#)