



## **'We hardly get any of those here' - working with girls and women**

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In this short article I reflect on whether changes to the perception, treatment and approaches to work with women and girls affected by the criminal justice system have occurred, to what extent and to what effect. I hope to offer some simple reflections and considerations towards a systemic understanding of services that might offer women and girls in crisis some agency, autonomy and genuine support for change.

### Background and context: 1992-2022

In the first youth club I worked in - in the early 1990s - the manager said there were no girls ('we hardly get any of those around here') because there was no lighting on the path to the hut behind the sports centre, so girls 'just didn't go there'. It was also not uncommon for (senior) staff in peripheral urban housing estates as well as in small villages, to say 'racism wasn't an issue' in their youth club because they didn't 'have many Black young people' in the area.

It would be unusual for any professional in any sector to say such a thing about racism today even if they thought it or did not believe in the reality of systemic racism. As a result of a consistent international campaign around civil and human rights, there is a growing understanding that racism is something to be named, challenged and opposed, regardless of how effective any of those challenges or that opposition might be.

When working with girls and women however, my own sense is there seems to have been no such shift.



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Indeed, I still sometimes hear phrases that remind me girls and women are often seen as 'troublesome... and intractable, malevolent and extremely difficult to work with' (Batchelor and Burman, 2004). Girls and women are still largely considered, described and understood in policy terms as outliers; 'mad, bad or sad' remains a framework within which female service users are often understood.

<sup>1</sup> From the title of the book *Mad, Bad and Sad* by Lisa Appignanesi, 2008 Virago. The origin of this phrase seems to come from a lover of Lord Byron who called him "Mad, bad and dangerous to know" in 1812

## Current conditions, historic patterns

In January 2022, the National Audit Office reported on government spending and impact on women's criminal justice, opening with the line: 'Concerns that the criminal justice system is not responsive to the specific needs of women are longstanding'. The same report acknowledges that women 'have worse outcomes than men' (NAO, 2022:7).

An historic perspective puts this into context. In 2009, Arnull and Eagle (YJB, 2009) conducted a significant overview of girls in the criminal justice system and found then that working with girls often went unacknowledged and unsupported, causing anxiety amongst juvenile justice and related workers.

Other literature reviews noted girls being conceptualised variously as 'hysterical', 'manipulative', 'verbally aggressive', and 'untrustworthy', whilst boys were depicted as 'honest', 'open', and 'less complex'. Girls were interchangeably 'deeply maladjusted misfits' and 'dangerous folk devils, symbolic of post-modern adolescent femininity'. Thus, girls' involvement in criminal justice is often related to activities that 'question stereotypes of feminine passivity, chastity and submissiveness' (Batchelor and Burman 2004). Gelsthorpe and Worrall (2009) noted a subtle shift in criminal justice responses: whilst previously girls had been dealt with under a 'welfare' formulation (a victim, in need of help and support), a move to a 'justice' formulation had happened and the idea of 'locking up' 'nasty little madams' had taken hold. Perhaps a side effect of 'women's liberation' is that 'justice' is applied 'equally'.

## In real life: practitioners and practice

In 2022, my own experience is that very little has changed for the better. Government is committed to expanding the number of prison places for women; self-harm, self-inflicted death and pregnancy/births in prison are prevalent and the government's own Female Offender Strategy relies on the age-old formulation of women as vulnerable to mental health difficulties (mad); a danger to themselves or others (bad) or victims of abuse, trauma and/or violence (sad) in order to qualify for attention.

Whilst much of the reality of women's lives does include violence, abuse, sexualised assault and particular health, social and cultural outcomes, those facts are related more to structural and systemic issues of economic and power distribution than to any genetic or sex-based capacity for coping with difficult circumstances (women are not essentially or 'naturally' more vulnerable to social, economic or cultural impediments). Men are also often vulnerable to grooming, manipulation, coercion and exploitation but this manifests differently and is often expressed differently (Chaplin, 2015). Again, though, this is more often down to social and cultural norms than anything inherent to men or women. What appears to be a gender based understanding of male and female criminogenic tendencies is rather a set of stereotypical, poorly-informed and poorly analysed tropes which often promote double standards and result in unintended consequences. Women and girls' sex-based oppression is no better understood or recognised by social policy today than at any other time and cultural norms are no less oppressive for women in a context where pornographic material is normalised, rape remains too difficult to prevent or prosecute and prostitution is defined as 'work like any other'.

## Working with what we've got

Safe Ground is an arts education organisation with a well-evidenced specialism in therapeutic group work with a focus on relationships. In 2021 we were commissioned by a regional justice organisation to support practitioners' development and reflection. This piece of work arose from practitioners' own sense that 'girls are more difficult to work with', feelings of 'not being sure of how best to engage with girls' and, more simply, a lack of training and support for male (and female) staff who might feel less confident when working with girls as opposed to boys. During the same year we were invited to participate in reflective supervision space for probation staff in a local court. Many people we spoke to in this setting expressed concern and discomfort at working with women. They said they felt less confident working with women, despite often many years professional experience in complex case work.

It appears that since I designed the only sex-specific arts-based development programme for girls in UK prisons in 2009 and heard staff talk about the girls I worked with as 'difficult, emotional, aggressive, unpredictable and attention-seeking', professional and practitioner attitudes have barely changed. They are - it seems - as likely to be 'chivalrous' as they might be 'antagonistic'. Either way, women and girls are severely disadvantaged, particularly during crisis. My suggestion is that this is an institutional attitude, founded in and supported by a wider social belief in women as 'saint' or 'sinner' regarding what Weare calls 'appropriate femininity' (2013; 2017).

A mad/bad/sad woman is often an 'ideal victim' (Weare, 2013), heavily promoted by both liberal feminist and Conservative campaigners alike - she is in need of education, help and guidance, willing to comply with new rules and sensible protocols in order to 'improve' and better her lot, be it alongside the Church, the charity, the prison, police or probation officer supporting her to change her life. Moreover, this woman is grateful for, and dependent upon outside help. Women who are the subject of sexualised, violent or criminalised activities are punished for a) 'looking for' something, b) 'finding it', c) being 'caught' doing it or having it done to them and d) failing to appreciate the 'help' they are offered on condition of compliance and 'correction'. Victim blaming renders women 'invisible and powerless through domestic physical or psychological violence' (Goldhill 2019).

There is a huge library of research available on how women engage with services and support, and particular sex-based needs or entry points to criminal behaviour (Phoenix, Gelsthorpe, Carlen, Goldhill, Player, Worrall, to name a few). All of this clearly establishes that women 'react adversely to gender and racial stereotypes' (Goldhill, 2019) and both want and need sex-specific environments.

Perhaps traditional gender norms socialise women into distancing themselves from their own needs in preference for those of others - after all, if 'seeking attention' is the 'worst thing' you can do, and women who want attention on their own terms are somehow 'problematic', the current situation makes sense.

Within this normalised dynamic, women cannot win until or unless workers of both sexes are supported by institutions that can tolerate complexity, nuance, agency and high expectations of both staff and service users. Otherwise, women will continue to be perceived as more difficult and ironically, dealt a more punishing and less 'helping' hand.

Practitioners are gifted with huge privilege and access to people's lives, experience and expression. Taking all this into account we can:

- Expect and engage in regular reflective practice to examine our own prejudices, valences and values
- Expect our organisations, institutions and services to have clear, explicit policies for working with girls and women
- Continue to develop anti-oppressive frameworks for the design and delivery of high-quality work that builds and supports agency, authority and articulacy in staff and service users.

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