

Introduction

Clinks, the Women's Resource Centre and Women in Prison held a round table with about 20 organisations that provide services to women offenders. The aim was to explore the support needs of these groups, and how these might be met.

A wide range of issues was identified. One of these was a need for generic providers to be supported in their work with minority women (foreign nationals, BME, lesbian, disabled etc.).

This guidance has targeted foreign national women as a particularly vulnerable group which is over represented within the Criminal Justice System. It is based on the experience of organisations working with foreign national women and aims to provide some background information and guidance to those generic services that include foreign nationals within their client group, to increase the confidence of service providers, and help to ensure clients are treated appropriately.

We would welcome feedback on its usefulness, and suggestions for additions from you own experiences with this client group. Contact kate.aldous@clinks.org

Defining foreign nationals

Originally the term 'foreign national' within the Criminal Justice System referred mainly to African and African Caribbean women who had been arrested or convicted of offences. The category is widening as more European Union nationals now come under the umbrella. From a UK Border Agency's perspective, anyone without a British passport who has overstayed their allowed period of entry is classified as a foreign national.

Any foreign national offender receiving one or more sentences which collectively add up to one year or more is eligible for deportation. Not all of these are deported, however, and the policies adopted by the UK Border Agency do not appear to be clear or consistent.

Statistics

According to a recent Fawcett Society briefing on minority women and the Criminal Justice System:

- One in three women in prison is from an ethnic minority group
- Mental health problems exist disproportionately for this group
- In 2009, 19% of female prisoners were foreign nationals
- In an HMIP survey on drug smuggling, 73% of foreign national women stated that this was their first time in prison compared to 43% of British nationals
- Of those women imprisoned for drugs offences, 35% are foreign nationals, 19% are white and 81% are from ethnic minority groups
- Sustaining communication while in prison can be difficult for foreign nationals – international calls are expensive
- Resettlement is a particularly difficult area for foreign national women. It can be challenging due to uncertainty concerning their immigration status which in turn impacts on the services they are entitled to access. Immigration red tape can lead to women being held longer in custody

The specialist foreign national organisation Hibiscus describes two groups, the members of which are supported differently:

Group 1: In-between status women

These women have no British passport and have lived here for years but are awaiting deportation due to the offence committed.

They are in a difficult position as they have no access to benefits and are not entitled to work. Support given is mainly financial, around housing and supporting children.

Recently Romanian women have become an increasingly significant group. They are ineligible for UK state benefits and often find great difficulty accessing employment.

Group 2: Those facing definite deportation on release from prison

Work is done with them in prison mainly around maintaining contact with their children back home. They liaise with partners abroad in an attempt to keep the children in school and looked after. These women tend to be the main provider at home so while they are incarcerated in the UK, their families struggle in their home country.

The women in prison are encouraged to work and save their earnings. For every £20 per month saved, Hibiscus matches it and sends it home.

Building trust takes time. Work is undertaken in groups and many referrals are self-referrals or word of mouth though Service Level Agreements are in place with 6 women's prisons. There are two workers in Holloway who run alternate weekly sessions for European Union and West African women. They identify the women's needs and work out what they can do to help whilst they are in prison.

Government support and repatriation

Two schemes exist to support foreign nationals to return to their country of origin voluntarily.

Both have funds attached to facilitate this:

1. Facilitated Removal Scheme (FRS) is jointly run by the UK Border Agency and the International Organisation for Migration. Up to £5000 is available per case. This scheme requires the individual to waive all rights to appeal.
2. Assisted Voluntary Return Schemes (AVRs) exist in the UK for those who wish to return to their country of origin. These Home Office (Immigration and Nationality Directorate) funded programmes offer £2000 for a family and £1500 for an individual to return, though they are not available to prisoners.

Government policy denying people with undetermined immigration status the ability to work, access housing or benefits has been described as a way of 'starving them out of the country'.

Some women might agree to go back voluntarily but are unlikely to do so without support. If they have been here for several years they may be frightened about returning to the unknown or afraid that the situation at home will be as it was, or worse.

These women often report feeling suspicious of any help perceived to be from statutory services. Working with them to explain the repatriation options can be very helpful but is support intensive.

The following information has been collated from interviews conducted with a number of organisations working with foreign national women offenders and ex-offenders. It is presented as lessons learned and tips for engaging more effectively with this group:

Do what you can

Offer 'in-between status' women, who do not have recourse to public funds, anything you can to support their needs. This might be in-house training, education or health advice which they cannot access via statutory routes.

If specialist services exist in your area, e.g. for Somali, Bengali, Chinese, Vietnamese people, do refer women on. It is important not to be overly concerned by the foreign national, ex-offender or immigration status. Use whatever is around if it's culturally appropriate.

Try to develop an awareness of the wider political and social issues, i.e. poverty in developing countries, trafficking and the exploitation of women.

Get to know something about immigration and particularly the specialist organisations that can help such as the [International Organization for Migration](#), [Refugee Council](#), [Citizens Advice Bureau](#), and [Asylum Aid](#)

Language

The common perception is that language differences and difficulties are insurmountable barriers to engagement. The assumption is often made that women have no English. This is often not the case.

Because interpreting services, for which there are usually no dedicated resources, are considered necessary women may receive less support or even none.

'Together Women' described its approach as: 'providing a warm, friendly, safe and comfortable environment in which women can relax. This is often the key to engagement and allows enough English to come through to begin the process of support.'

Lack of English mainly poses a problem when engaging with offenders from groups which frequently lack links or integration within the wider community. This may be the case with some Chinese, Vietnamese, Romani and Bangladeshi offenders for example.

Organisations which have managed to recruit some staff that reflects the communities within which they work report most success in terms of sustained engagement with clients.

Flexible and personalised approaches

The service provided to this group needs to be completely flexible and personalised. Women may have their status in common (i.e. imminent deportation or in-between status) but beyond that, their needs and situations will be completely different.

In very male dominated communities for example, women are discouraged from discussing any issues outside of the immediate family. An informal approach is therefore important and structured, standard assessment tools may not be appropriate.

Peer support

Peer support, particularly for interpreting, can be a useful tool to employ. It can facilitate engagement, enrich culturally specific aspects of the relationship, engender trust and provide credibility for the client and service provider alike.

However, it is important to be aware that in certain communities it is not deemed appropriate to share one's business with members of one's own community, particularly when the potentially taboo areas of mental health and criminal justice are involved.

Employing staff and/or volunteers who are able to interpret is obviously beneficial.

Recruiting the right staff

A creative, holistic approach to service provision is key, and recruiting staff that can get on with the job, think creatively and engage well is far more important than any particular professional background.

Staff need to be patient, diligent about researching all potential support options, creative, able to think outside the box and able to rise above the apparent hopelessness of some of the situations with which they are presented.

Volunteers

Volunteers can play a key role within organisations. If a volunteer scheme exists it is worth targeting recruitment towards individuals well equipped to work with foreign nationals.

Adequate training and support for them must be a priority, however.

Cultural awareness and responsive provision

Certain communities have very traditional cultures and routines. It is important to understand the routines and responsibilities of women from these groups in order to best offer provision. For example, in Kidderminster where there is a very traditional Bangladeshi community, not only must services fit around school hours but also around the preparation and serving of the midday meal which is a key part of the day.

The Asha Centre explained how successful and essential the provision of a crèche facility has been in successfully engaging with women from the local Bangladeshi community. Without providing somewhere for their children to be, women from this community are not free to access services. This group of women tends to be isolated from the wider community, with no means of engagement with other groups. The cultural aspect of shared childcare provision has led to better integration between groups within the community.

Partnership working

Building solid relationships with other partner organisations is key.

Anawim explained 'It is important not to refer on unless you are sure the service can help, otherwise women end up back at your door and the trusting relationship you've established can be damaged.'

The Asha Centre described recent success in joint working with Trading Standards to identify gang masters trafficking migrant workers into the area:

'This is not a partnership we would normally consider forming, but in this situation it has been invaluable and by working together we are tackling a problem that neither party could easily solve alone.'

Training

Financial constraints do not usually allow for the provision of specialist training around working with foreign national clients, though the organisation Hibiscus, which delivers a lot of training, considers some to be essential.

It may be possible to share training with other organisations working with similar client groups or to train one member of staff who is then able to pass on knowledge.

Resources available for the training of volunteers might also be usefully employed in this area.

Shared problem solving

Several organisations described a team approach as helpful when dealing with the most complex cases involving women with entrenched needs and complicated circumstances.

Whole team meetings which create the space for such cases to be discussed and for difficulties to be collectively considered are thought particularly effective.

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supporting voluntary organisations that
work with offenders and their families

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About Clinks

Clinks supports the Voluntary and Community Sector working with offenders in England and Wales. Clinks aims to ensure the Sector and all those with whom it works, are informed and engaged in order to transform the lives of offenders.

It does this through:

- Providing representation and voice
- Promoting the Sector
- Influencing policy and campaigning
- Providing information and publications
- Running training and events
- Providing services and support
- Undertaking research and development.

Clinks is a membership charity with a network of over 4,500 people working to support the rehabilitation of offenders.

To become a member or find out more about Clinks visit www.clinks.org