
PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

IMPLEMENTING GENDER-RESPONSIVE PRACTICES TO REHABILITATE AND SUPPORT COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION OF WOMEN OFFENDERS IN SINGAPORE

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This paper outlines Singapore's efforts to implement gender-responsive practices to rehabilitate and support community reintegration for women offenders.

I. BACKGROUND

Singapore is an island city-state in Southeast Asia. We have almost 5.7 million residents from various races, cultures and religions. Singapore values its women citizens and views women's contributions as an integral part of the Singapore story.¹

Singapore's robust criminal justice system consists of tough laws against crime, highly professional and prosecutorial agencies such as the police force, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau and the Attorney-General Chambers as well as our independent, efficient and effective judiciary. Singapore's unwavering commitment to the rule of law has allowed us to foster a peaceful and harmonious society.

In addition to efforts to prevent and fight crime, Singapore also focused and invested resources in the rehabilitation of offenders, including for women offenders. To help offenders desist from crime, the Singapore Prison Service, or SPS, adopts evidence-informed rehabilitation and reintegration practices. Our rehabilitation efforts have led to positive outcomes, including, for our women offenders.

II. SINGAPORE'S EVIDENCE-INFORMED REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

In Singapore, we believe every offender has the potential to live a crime-free life and to be a contributing member of society. This first part of the paper will discuss Singapore's rehabilitation approach and the factors necessary to make it work.

Firstly, Singapore's rehabilitation system is evidence informed, based on both international and locally conducted research to validate and contextualize evidence. Specific to women offenders, for example, in recent years, SPS's local research findings have corroborated international research showing that women have different initiation pathways to the criminal justice system than men.

Secondly, SPS designs psychology-based correctional programmes (or PCPs),² drawing from evidence-

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¹ 2021 was declared as the Year of Celebrating SG Women to celebrate women's progress, women's multi-faceted roles and women's potential across all facets of Singapore society. Singapore's commitment to continuously advance and protect the rights of women and girls in Singapore is provided legislatively by its Women's Charter which was passed in 1961 and which has since, ensured for greater legal equality for women in legally sanctioned relationships.

² PCPs play an important role in the rehabilitation of offenders, stimulating readiness to change in offenders and helping them understand the factors which contributed to their offending behaviours. These interventions provide structured learning and application of prosocial skills to aid the offenders in developing a reintegration plan that addresses their unique life situations.

informed practices in the corrections literature such as from the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, the Good Lives Model (GLM) and Desistance Theory. In addition to these, PCPs for women offenders are also designed based on gender-informed theories such as the relational theory and overseas and local research on women's offending pathways to understand women's offending.

Thirdly, Singapore applies the principles of implementation science, which is the scientific study of methods to promote the integration of research findings and evidence-informed interventions into policy and practice. As part of implementation science, we evaluate our programmes on both process and outcome.³

III. DEFINING “GENDER RESPONSIVE”

In this paper, the term “gender responsive”, or GR, will be frequently used as an adjective to refer to the risks and needs factors that are unique for women offenders such as abuse and trauma, economic marginalization, parental issues and relationship dysfunction – pertinent features in the lives of women offenders as compared to their male counterparts. The use of the term GR in this paper may also refer to rehabilitation interventions and services that have been designed and implemented with women's issues in mind.

IV. WORKING WITH WOMEN OFFENDERS

Like many correctional systems in other jurisdictions, most programmes, policies and services tend to focus on the needs of the male offender population, which forms the majority of the prison population. Notwithstanding this, Singapore recognizes that a woman's pathway to offending, and her journey of rehabilitation and reintegration, is gendered and a context-dependending processes that is shaped by her life realities and experiences.

A study conducted locally to understand women's offending pathways showed four key findings. Firstly, it found that women offenders in Singapore have similar gender-responsive needs as identified in literature. Secondly, local women offenders tend to follow four pathways to criminal offending, which include (i) a relational sense of self that sees them prioritizing unhealthy relationships or staying in dysfunctional relationships; (ii) suffered abuse and/or victimization that affects the way they form relationships and manage emotions; (iii) greater incidence of mental health problems closely linked to substance abuse; and (iv) social and economic disadvantages such as low socio-economic status, low education levels and limited skill sets, facing adverse life conditions and lack of coping skills. In particular, these four pathways to women's criminal offending may sometimes overlap and manifest in complex ways that reinforce criminal offending.

The third finding showed that women offenders presented with poor anger management and the lack of engagement in constructive activities as risk/needs factors. And finally, the fourth finding was that familial relationships deterred drug use in women offenders with children.

V. GENDER-RESPONSIVE, PSYCHOLOGY-BASED CORRECTIONAL PROGRAMMES

Based on research showing women offenders' unique pathways to offending, SPS designed gender-responsive, psychology-based correctional programmes (or PCPs), “Catch it, Check it, Change it, Cast it” (or 4C, in short).

challenges, and goals.

³ Our evaluation studies have shown that high-risk offenders who underwent evidence-informed interventions in a holistic intervention environment with structured aftercare had significantly lower reoffending rates by 10 percentage points compared to offenders who did not receive the same interventions.

4C seeks to reduce the risk of reoffending among women offenders by providing holistic gender-responsive intervention and increasing the self-efficacy of women offenders to manage cognitions, affect and behaviour that lead to their drug and criminal offending. Specifically, 4C targets the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of addiction and offending. On a cognitive level, misperceptions and distortions are corrected. On an affective level, women offenders learn how to manage their emotions within the safety of the group, using self-soothing techniques. On a behavioural level, substance use and offending behaviours are targeted. Given that one of the key pathways to women's offending is through their relationships, 4C places a heavy focus on the different types of relationships women offenders experience and how their substance abuse and offending behaviours are situated in these relationships.

4C was designed based on both offender rehabilitation and substance abuse intervention theories, as well as gender specific approaches which are appropriate for Singapore's women offenders. Rehabilitation theories are those which are widely used and effective in correctional programmes and settings such as RNR principles and the GLM and Desistance approaches, complemented by evidence-informed theories for substance-abuse intervention, which include Cognitive Behavioural approaches and the Transtheoretical Model. Gender-informed theories like relational theory and women's offending pathways are referenced to understand women's offending.

VI. GR ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN OFFENDERS

In SPS, the environment that women offenders are housed in is run by an all-women team who are trained in trauma-informed practices and GR principles. The facility itself is shaped by values derived from GR principles. "EMARI", also known as Empathy, Mutuality, Affirmation, Respect, and Independence, values are derived from four key gender-responsive principles, which are: the need to be strength-based, trauma-informed, culturally sensitive and relational in our interventions. The EMARI serves as an anchor in creating an environment that is safe, respectful and empowering for women offenders to experience rehabilitative change during their incarceration.

VII. GR SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION

SPS recognises that good family support during incarceration is essential to an offender's rehabilitation journey. Family programmes seek to increase offenders' knowledge, skills and confidence in maintaining ties and rebuilding stronger relationships with their loved ones. Through these programmes, offenders learn about responsibilities towards their families and take meaningful actions to change for the sake of their families.⁴

VIII. GR COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION SUPPORT

To maintain the positive changes women offenders experienced during the in-care phase, they are supported through casework interventions during their community reintegration period that seeks to reinforce skills and concepts they learned through in-care programmes such as 4C and the Family Reintegration Programme. In this regard, casework interventions support women supervisees' applications of those skills and knowledge to their everyday lives.

As part of GR practice – and acknowledging the central role that "empathy" plays in the concept of

⁴ As part of SPS's continuous review of programmes, two programmes – Social Skills Training Programme (SSTP) and Family Reintegration Programme (FRP), were developed and implemented across all prison institutions from January 2019. Attended by all newly admitted offenders, SSTP seeks to raise their awareness of the impact crime and incarceration have on family relationships. It also equips them with basic skills in managing and enhancing family and social relationships, such as communication skills, conflict resolution skills and emotion regulation techniques.

women's relational experiences and consequently their development of self-concept and sense of empowerment – women supervisees who are housed in a community facility under community-based programmes, such as the Work Release Scheme, are allowed to bring in special items such as skin care products and make-up. Such provisions are unique to women supervisees, as part of efforts to improve their self-confidence and build up their pro-social identity.

IX. CLOSING

Over the past decade, SPS has incorporated and implemented gender-responsive practices that attend to women's pathways to offending. The GR practices include: (1) developing evidence-based gender-responsive programmes and processes in the women's environment, which addresses relationships, trauma, mental health and substance abuse issues; (2) implementing staff training and encouraging collaborations between operations and rehabilitation staff to equip staff with skills to de-escalate conflict and deal with offenders' negative emotions; (3) family and parenting programmes that address the relational needs and parenting roles of women offenders, and (4) conducting community interventions that support women offenders during incarceration and when they are out in the community to facilitate successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

All in all, our approach is underpinned by the belief that every person in Singapore, including our women, has the right to live in an environment free of crime, and that women offenders should be provided with the necessary help to rehabilitate and successfully reintegrate into our society as contributing citizens.