

Report for Regional Meeting December 2013.

I attended a Forum, entitled 'Women: Victims, offenders or survivors' at Manchester Metropolitan University on November 20th. There were two speakers followed by a Q/A session. Both speakers insisted that for some women who were a risk to the public prison was necessary but for the majority of female prisoners a different and distinct approach is needed. They both felt too that although some of the recommendations of the Corston Report 2007 had been successfully implemented the provision of smaller units closer to prisoners' homes was patchy.

The first speaker was Katie Fraser the Service Manager across Manchester and Trafford for an organisation called 'Women in Prison'. She explained that WIP supports and campaigns for women within the Criminal Justice System. It was founded by Chris Tchaikovsky a former inmate of Holloway Prison who wrote that 'taking the most hurt people out of society and punishing them in order to teach them how to live in society is, at best, futile. Whatever else a prisoner knows she knows everything there is to know about punishment because that is exactly what she has grown up with. Whether it is childhood sexual abuse, indifference, neglect; punishment is most familiar'.

Katie said that WIP assist women offenders in 12 prisons with advice on housing, education, mental health issues, their legal rights, work, benefits, domestic violence and much more. They also produce a magazine packed full of thoughtful advice for prisoners. She outlined that the basic reasoning of WIP is:-

- Prison causes damage and disruption to the lives of vulnerable women most of whom pose no risk to the public. Women whose sexuality is defined by men, those who have been abused, violated or suffered domestic violence, those with drug/alcohol dependency or have mental health issues are marginalised within a CJS (Criminal Justice System) designed by men for men
- Prison is often a very expensive way of making vulnerable women's life situations much worse – once on remand they can lose their homes, their relationships with their children and their mental health in the process
- Better outcomes for women mean a reduced use of prison sentences and increased use of community alternatives such as community service and tagging. Prison does not work for most women and the best way to cut women's offending is to deal with its root causes.

- Female offenders should receive more support to break the cycle of crime and abuse in an attempt to reduce the female prison population and keep families together.

The next speaker was Clive Chatterton a former Governor at Styal Prison. He had worked in 14 male prisons for 36 years. He quickly realised that working in Styal would demand a radically different approach to the prisoners in his care. He found that women ironically exist in a prison service designed by men for men but they present different challenges. He said that throughout his career he had never come across so many damaged people many of whom self harmed or had serious mental health problems. He had always thought the main aims of custodial sentencing were to punish, to rehabilitate, to educate and deter people from reoffending. These aims, however, can only be achieved if sentences are longer than 6 months.

He explained that in 2010 33 women were given sentences of 8 days or less which means pathways such as drug/alcohol rehabilitation or improving literacy designed to help or stop reoffending were ineffective. Moreover as soon as a woman was placed on remand she could lose benefits, accommodation and her children. He spoke of one woman who had stolen a £3 sandwich from a garage forecourt and had received a custodial sentence of 5 days and another whose cries for help had gone unanswered so she had gone to a park and set fire to herself. Unfortunately she had also set fire to a tree so had been charged with criminal damage.

He felt that prisons should not be run as a National Organisation out of Whitehall but by Local Authorities. He also wanted Police Commissioners to assume more of the prison budget for their area and to work more with their partners to provide smaller, localised custodial centres.

After Clive had spoken there followed a lively question and answer session. Topics were raised such as the privatisation of the Probation Service, private contracts for prisons, speeding up the Appeals' system, the role of Magistrates, women's centres and the aftermath of prison for women.

Finally a few figures for us all to consider:-

In 2012 4,991 women received sentences of less than 6 months, 3631 women entered prison on remand for 4-6 weeks but less than half were then given prison sentences and 18,000 children were separated from their mothers.

As a Soroptimist perhaps the key message I brought away from this Forum was that tackling women's offending is not just a matter for the Justice System but for society as a whole to address.

