Good practice in meeting the needs of ethnic minority women offenders and those at risk of offending

Introduction
Ethnic minority women at risk of offending or those involved in criminal activities face various barriers that prevent them from accessing services to help them alter their lives.

This paper, which has been edited for the Fawcett website, provides practical information on how services can improve their engagement with these women. It highlights examples of good practice in meeting the needs of ethnic minority women based on research and interviews with organisations, including the Gender and Justice Policy Network (GJPN) members.

The paper also explores gaps that need to be addressed.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE
The following key areas will help develop and implement initiatives that are responsive to ethnic minority women’s needs:

- Auditing issues at a local level;
- Publicising services;
- Ensuring retention of service users;
- Partnership working;
- Developing staff and promoting diversity;
- Keeping services under review.

Auditing of issues at a local level
To successfully identify problems and develop appropriate interventions, organisations have found the following to be useful:

- Consulting and involving local stakeholders, such as local community leaders, religious leaders and specialist ethnic minority organisations.

- Listening to the views of ethnic minority women themselves, through focus groups, surveys and involving them in management committees or steering groups.
• Using local data and the expertise of key agencies and organisations in the area.

• Supporting Others through Volunteer Action (SOVA)’s Women into Work programme, which works towards combating discrimination and inequality experienced by women who have been disadvantaged, particularly by the experiences of the criminal justice system.

Publicising services
Publicising services to targeted ethnic minority women helps increase their take-up of programmes and services. By using appropriate communication tools, including local ethnic minority media, community networks and outreach work, organisations have made ethnic minority women more aware of what is on offer.

Services must be clear and consistent in their messages to these women and avoid inflating expectations.

They must use outreach work to engage with ethnic minority women offenders or those at risk of offending, conduct home visits and work with criminal justice agencies, such as the police and courts.

Outreach services should also be provided in languages other than English.

Women Connect First (WCF), a Home Office-funded project in Cardiff, provides a wide range of free education, training and personal support services for disadvantaged ethnic minority women. Its main target group are women fleeing domestic violence and forced marriages. WCF have an outreach worker who recruits ethnic minority women for their programmes through visits to women’s centres, community groups, faith groups and home visits.

Ensuring retention of service users
To prevent ethnic minority women from dropping out of support programmes, services strive to be meaningful and appropriate to the multiple needs of these women. They also aim to create supportive environments in which users do not feel isolated or marginalised.
The following are examples of effective strategies:

- One-stop shops have proved effective in offering women a range of services in one place – counselling, legal advice, information and training, and a social atmosphere where they can meet other ethnic minority women. Positive examples include the Calderdale Women’s Centre in Halifax and the Minority Ethnic Community Support Service in Fenham, Newcastle, an area with the largest ethnic minority concentration in the city.

- Linking women from different services is beneficial. For instance, Women in Prison and Hibiscus have caseworkers who help ethnic minority women in prison to access other services, including housing, benefits and educational programmes.

- Culturally sensitive provision is a positive step. Services consult ethnic minority resources in the communities, such as families or religious groupings, to ensure they are suitable for different cultures or religions. For example, Hibiscus employs staff from similar backgrounds as their client group, while the Asha Centre has provided its staff with training about race issues generally, and about the local Asian communities in Worcester in particular.

- The use of interpreters and employing staff that speak the languages of ethnic minority women has been a useful approach.

- Many find women-only services beneficial. According to research by the Fawcett Society, women with backgrounds of male abuse or violence find it more appropriate to work through women-only programmes. The ‘all women’ environment is particularly attractive for Muslim women who may not have had access to mixed-gender groups. The experience of the Asha Centre shows that combining different groups of disadvantaged women reduces the risk of stigmatisation and isolation.
• Creating inclusive environments is beneficial. Southall Black Sisters (SBS) provides support services for Asian, African and Caribbean women victims of violence. It has been acclaimed for being successful in reaching otherwise inaccessible ethnic minority women, including asylum seekers and immigrants. Organisations such as Women In Prison (WIP) provide services to women from all ethnic groups. It operates in all UK women’s prisons, supporting and campaigning for female prisoners, including ethnic minority women. WIP also runs a resettlement and education project that provides advice and guidance, funding for distance learning course fees, and other related support for women in prison and on release.

**Partnership working**
Partnerships with other service providers, particularly NME women’s organisations and experts, have been valuable in addressing the complex needs of ethnic minority women involved in crime or those at risk of offending.

SOVA’s Women into Work: Building Futures is an exciting and innovative programme that aims to promote opportunities for disadvantaged women in traditionally male-dominated roles and sectors. The programme is developing local and regional multi-agency partnerships between the voluntary, public and private sector.

**Promoting diversity and developing staff**
Policies and practice guidelines are essential to promote inclusion of ethnic minority women in services.

Committed leadership with long-term strategic commitment to promote ethnic minority women’s issues is an inspiration for successful provision. Renowned services such as Hibiscus and the Asha centre have visible champions promoting equality and diversity.

As good practice, services also train and develop staff to ensure they have the confidence to deal with equality and ethnicity issues. Staff also have a good understanding of cultural issues that are important to ethnic minority women.
Services strive to employ staff who reflect their client population in terms of gender and ethnicity. However, there is evidence to show that the solution is more complex than this.

**Keeping services under review**

It is important for organisations to regularly monitor and evaluate their services by using methods such as user evaluation forms, exit questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews with key stakeholders. Evaluations can be internal or externally commissioned.

**BARRIERS AND GAPS IN PROVISION**

The following are potential problems that need to be recognised when planning services for ethnic minority women.

One of the critical barriers is the lack of data on these women. Most services have inadequate monitoring and evaluation to provide valuable evidence on the impact of interventions on ethnic minority women. This makes it difficult to assess the value of different approaches.

There is also limited information on the characteristics and needs of these women. More needs to be known about unacknowledged problems, such as domestic violence. Evidence is also needed to understand emerging issues due to factors such as immigration. Culturally specific crime, such as ritual killings, is another area that needs further investigation.

Shame and fear of stigma within ethnic minority communities might prevent women with complex social problems from accessing services. For example, women offenders might not seek help for fear of being stigmatised as offenders, drug users or mental health patients. According to a study by the NHS (2003), the sense of shame in accessing drug services is a concern, especially for Asian women.

Problems of confidentiality within the community could also lead to a lack of confidence in services (Fawcett 2004). This becomes even more challenging when including people from the local ethnic minority communities in staff teams. An ethnic minority woman at risk of offending or an offender might not approach a support service for fear of being identified by the staff from her community.
A study commissioned by Women’s Aid (1997), which explored the needs of black women and children in refuge services, illustrated that large numbers of black women are not aware of specialist support services, which leads them to endure violence for longer periods.

Negative perceptions about refuges and inadequate help from agencies further heighten anxieties about refuges. Most women prefer to go to a refuge away from their home town for reasons of safety, and they want to be housed in areas with large minority ethnic populations. The research also highlighted that having their cultural and religious needs met was an important factor that shaped the quality of the experience black women had in mixed and specialist refuges.

According to the experience of WIP, the sparse distribution of women’s prisons compounded by the concentration of ethnic minority communities in cities makes ethnic minority women in prisons more likely to be isolated from their families and to receive fewer family visits than white prisoners.

WIP also finds it hard support the resettlement of women prisoners who are scattered around the country and often far from home.

Although multi-agency interventions are widely recognised as an effective way of responding to ethnic minority women’s offending, these partnerships can be very cumbersome and unproductive if not managed carefully.

Barriers to effective partnerships include: strong resistance from powerful and traditional interests, poor communication and inadequate institutional capacities. Due to the way they are organised, agencies may be preoccupied with achieving their own objectives and targets without considering the wider picture of ethnic minority women’s needs.

**CONCLUSION**

In order to design effective community interventions that match the needs of ethnic minority women at risk of offending and offenders, it is important to consider the economic and social status of this population, as well as how various life factors impact on their offending patterns. However, limited information is available on their characteristics and needs. More also needs to be known about approaches that lead to effective programmes and promote successful outcomes for these women.
Further research is required to build on the good practice examples highlighted in this paper and to get services thinking about how to effectively assist ethnic minority women at risk of offending and those involved in crime.

References


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Yeandle, S., Booth, C. and Burns, D. (2003) *Thinking Gender First: Gender Mainstreaming in Thurrock*: South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre

Youth and Crime Unit London
http://www.youthcrimelondon.gov.uk/home/index.php

**ATTACHMENT**

**Questions**

What do you do that works really well for BME women?
What problems does that solve?
What doesn’t work well?
Do you have partnerships with other organisations? How do you go about establishing and maintaining them?
What internal policies do you have to minimise racism or discrimination against BME women?
What are your key priorities for BME women for the future?

**Many thanks to the following organisations for their invaluable input:**

African Women’s Welfare Association - London
Asha Centre - Worcester
Calderdale Women’s Centre - Halifax
Commission for Race Equality - National
Criminology in the New Millennium - London
Hibiscus - London and National
London Black Women’s Health Action Project - London
Minority Ethnic Community Support Service - Newcastle
Shantona Women’s Centre - Leeds
Southall Black Sisters - London
SOVA – Women into Work Programme - London and Sheffield
Women Connect First - Cardiff
Women In Prison - London and national
Women In Secure Hospitals - London
Umuada - Nottingham

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