



Cell research

In September 2001 the first three Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellows started work within LSE's Social Policy department. All three had experiences working with women offenders and wanted to improve their treatment and care.

Judith Rumgay explains more.

Between 1999 and March 2002 there was a massive rise in the number of women prisoners in the UK, from 1,659 in custody to 4,226. The female prison population has been growing at an unprecedented rate, outstripping that for men. The UK has 19 prisons accommodating women. The surge in the women's population has necessitated re-designating three male establishments to accommodate women and the building of two new institutions to provide an additional 1,575 places. Yet the forecast for the female prison population in 2008 currently stands at 6,100 – and is rising. Britain now imprisons more of its population than any other European country except Turkey. Clearly, women offenders are bearing much of the brunt of this escalation in incarceration. ►

The Griffins Society is a voluntary organisation working for the care and resettlement of female offenders, including those with a history of mental illness and violent behaviour. The Society was set up in 1966. At that time there was little residential provision for women offenders and the Society concentrated its efforts on filling that gap by providing specialist hostel and move-on accommodation. Those residential projects were transferred to another voluntary organisation in 1997 and the Society decided to alter the focus of its activities. This change of emphasis included funding three, now increased to four, annual Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowships within the Department of Social Policy at LSE under my directorship.

From the outset, it was hoped that the Fellowship scheme would have wide appeal for a variety of practitioners in the criminal justice system and this was indeed the case. Fellows to date have included probation officers, a nurse tutor with special responsibility for liaison with a local prison, magistrates, a lawyer with special expertise in advocacy for women prisoners and a voluntary sector adviser to young prisoners. Their research topics have also reflected this diversity. The first three Fellows, whose projects are now completed, examined very different issues.

The first, Rachel Chapman, explored release planning for female life sentence prisoners, drawing on her legal perspectives as a solicitor. She said: 'My work involves taking instructions from any female prisoner who contacts the firm and offering legal advice and assistance. The main issues I assist with are tariff representations, parole, progress through the system, re-categorisation, transfer, adjudications, and judicial review.'

'I chose female lifers as a specific group because, although some of their resettlement needs are the same as non-lifers, they are a distinct group with particular issues. They are likely to have been in prison for a significant period of time and may be institutionalised. They will be supervised on life licence by probation for the rest of their life. Finally, the parole board has to be satisfied that the risk of their re-offending is sufficiently low before it recommends release.'

'I found that women's attempts to satisfy the parole board that they had accomplished their goals and were ready for release were often hampered by problems in the bureaucratic systems that they dealt with. For example, women spend their final years in an open prison, which – as there are only three such institutions in the country – means that most will be far from the communities to which they will return. Although, after an average of 12 to 14 years in prison, a lifer's links to resources in their home communities will be greatly reduced, women may find that they are unable to return to a family address, because it lies within an 'exclusion zone' established around the area in which their offence was committed. While women often work hard during their



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sentence to develop skills that will enhance their employment prospects, and are required to spend time in employment outside the prison prior to release, bureaucratic restrictions on job placements mean that relatively few are able to find work that reflects their achievement. In addition, women who lack a family address to return to are usually dependent on hostels or housing associations, which often refuse to guarantee accommodation prior to release, although a secure address is a parole board requirement.'

Rachel recommended several measures to improve women lifers' resettlement prospects. These included increasing the provision for temporary release from closed conditions to offset the problems associated with very long distances from open prisons and home communities; allowing greater flexibility in work experience prior to release; increasing the range of hostels and housing associations willing to assure accommodation for released lifers; a release information pack for all lifers giving information about services and helpful points of contact; and a mentoring scheme linking women to community volunteers offering positive role models and general support after release.

A second Fellow, Jane Sheen, considered the health care needs and treatment of women prisoners. As a magistrate, a nurse teacher (predominantly of community nurses) and a health visitor, she had observed an emerging culture of change and investment in prison health care during her visits to the wing of a local prison, which housed 300 plus female inmates.

She said: 'I wanted to look at to what extent the physical and psychological health of this group

impacted on their ability to resettlement, and find out how aware primary health care practitioners were of the needs of such women. I found out that NHS developments have for almost 50 years bypassed the prison service, in which health care has operated quite separately and according to different standards. Only since 2000 have the NHS and the Prison Department begun to work cooperatively to modernise services for the promotion of better health in the prison population.'

Coming at a time of great transition in the responsibilities and arrangements for health provision in the British prison system, her study exposed the high levels of physical and mental health care needs among female prisoners and the challenges facing planners and practitioners in developing effective responses. Moreover, continuity of care poses significant problems for a population of women who are usually incarcerated far from the local communities to which they will return on release.

She recommended a number of mechanisms for improving health care for women prisoners. These included opening prisoners' access to health-related practitioners in the wider community (physiotherapists, chiropractors, occupational therapists); involving health visitors, community children's nurses and play therapists in both improving the interaction of mothers with their visiting children and the women's parenting skills, and in identifying child development concerns; developing a system of patient-held health records that could accompany women after release to enhance continuity of care; and enhanced interdisciplinary exchanges between prison and community based nursing staff.

The third Fellow, Liz Haines, works as a probation officer for Avon and Somerset Probation service based in Bristol. She studied rehabilitation programmes for women on probation in the community, using interviews with specialist practitioners, academics and probationers themselves to draw out both the frustrations and the rewards of developing rehabilitative projects designed with women's needs in mind, when most provision is adapted to the majority male clientele.

'Probation supervision has increasingly been directed towards the use of 'What Works' programmes in the last few years. A number of programmes have been accredited which have been developed for male offenders. However, no programmes have yet been accredited specifically for women in the UK. Two programmes designed for women have been turned down by the Home Office accreditation panel. This has left probation work with women in an uncertain and relatively unsupported predicament,' said Liz.

'My recommendations would be for programme accreditation processes to develop more flexible approaches for women offenders' needs; to allow time for proper evaluation of promising programmes; and to enable local probation areas to develop links with community resources that would facilitate the growth of female-specific projects.'

In the second year of the Fellowships, the current Fellows are continuing to represent a diversity of interests, studying resettlement issues facing Asian women after prison, older women in the criminal justice system and the problems that prevent women from completing programmes of rehabilitation in the community successfully.

But is it research for research's sake? Most definitely not. While it is often easy for academics to assert the need for comprehensive, and usually expensive, system change, these projects answer the needs of professionals for pointers to positive practice developments that are achievable within their existing policy and resource constraints. ■



Dr Judith Rumgay

is director of the Fellowship programme and senior lecturer in social policy at LSE, specialising in alcohol and drug-related crime, women offenders and rehabilitation of offenders. She is the author of *Crime, Punishment and the Drinking Offender* (Macmillan 1998) and *The Addicted Offender: developments in British policy and practice* (Palgrave 2000). © Dr Judith Rumgay, 2003

The Griffins Society

Angela Camber, chair of the Griffins Society, explained that the Fellowship programme was established with two main goals in mind.

'First, we wanted to create an opportunity for practitioners without an academic background to undertake research within a world class academic institution into areas related to female offenders and their resettlement.'

'The second goal was to ensure that the Fellows' research would be taken forward and not just left to gather dust on a library shelf. We know from talking to past and present Fellows that this characteristic of the Fellowship programme is very important to them. They, like the Griffins, want to see some practical changes resulting from their work. We have established an annual meeting with the Women's Estate Policy Unit at the Prison Service where the Fellows present their research findings and we all

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explore the ways in which recommendations can be implemented. The Griffins Society also intends to fund pilot projects based upon Fellows' work in the future.

'We are all very excited by the quality of the Fellows' research. They have produced truly valuable and impressive work, which we are proud to publish and promote. They have all thoroughly enjoyed the experience so far, which is what we want and which means a great deal to us.'

Angela Camber is delighted that the Griffins Society was able to increase the number of year-long Fellowships this year and hopes that the Society will be able to secure funding for a fifth Fellow next year. 'The Fellowship Programme at LSE is going from strength to strength.'

The School's former secretary and director of administration Dr Christine Challis was involved in the programme's initiation, together with Dr Rumgay. She said: 'LSE's reputation comes partly from our ability to turn ideas into action. The Griffins Fellowships exemplify this by bringing those involved in the front lines of provision for women offenders into contact with our academics. Thanks to the support of the Griffins Society, this should result in better understanding of the needs of women offenders and in more effective policies and practices to help them.'

The full text research papers are available to buy and summaries of the Fellows' research findings are available free on the Griffins Society website at www.thegriffinsociety.org or by request from the Griffins Society, PO Box 22791, London, N22 8WH, tel: +44 (0)20 8889 2080, email: admin@thegriffinsociety.org