

# RESETTLEMENT OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

## Introduction

This practice guide is one of an ongoing series produced as part of the Beyond Youth Custody (BYC) programme, funded under the Big Lottery Fund's Youth in Focus initiative. BYC has been designed to challenge, advance, and promote better thinking in policy and practice for the effective resettlement of young people.

With females comprising less than 5% of young people in custody, most knowledge about effective resettlement and reducing reoffending comes from work with young men. Yet young women's pathways into offending, the impact of custody upon them, their resettlement needs and their reoffending patterns differ from those of young men. Even where gender issues are considered, female offenders tend to be considered as one homogenous group, with the age-specific needs of girls and young women overlooked. This practitioner briefing examines how our knowledge about young women's offending can begin to inform more effective, gender-sensitive resettlement practice with girls and young women leaving custody.

The full research report by Dr Tim Bateman and Professor Neal Hazel, upon which this briefing is based, is available at [www.beyondyouthcustody.net](http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net).

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## Why is it important to consider girls and young women specifically?

There are six key differences between girls and young women who offend and their male counterparts:

### 1 Young women have different pathways into offending than young men:

Female offending is often focused around personal relationships and is generally associated with experiences of loss, bereavement, abuse and intervention from children's services. Yet despite such difficult backgrounds, girls are often strongly attached to their family and friends, depending on peer relationships for support, status and identity. Unfortunately, this dependence often provides the context for violence as a response to victimisation, neglect, sexual exploitation and abuse.

### 2 Criminal justice responses compound young women's problematic behaviour:

It is girls' vulnerability rather than the severity of their offending that commonly brings them to the attention of the criminal justice system; reclassifying their welfare needs as 'criminogenic'. In some cases, social care interventions divert girls from criminal sanctions, although young women who commit stereotypically 'male offences' (such as violence or drug use) may face overly harsh sentencing. Once in the criminal justice system, assessment tools designed using primarily male reoffending data over-predict women's risk of reoffending and result in excessively intensive interventions. Such interventions ignore gender differences in offending and so have limited impact. Difficulties or expression of frustration in attending such intensive (and inappropriate) appointments are viewed as non-compliance, resulting in breach proceedings and possible custodial sentences.

### 3 Women's ability to maintain positive relationships is damaged by custody:

Custody impacts severely upon females because of their central role in family life: for mothers, imprisonment is particularly disruptive as 95% of their children are forced to leave the family home. As custodial numbers decline and the female estate shrinks, those sent to prison are held further away from home. Despite personal relationships being key to reducing reoffending, more than a third of children held in custody are over 50 miles from home and adult women in prison are on average 60 miles from home. This impairs resettlement planning, which requires local knowledge and networks to provide seamless support.

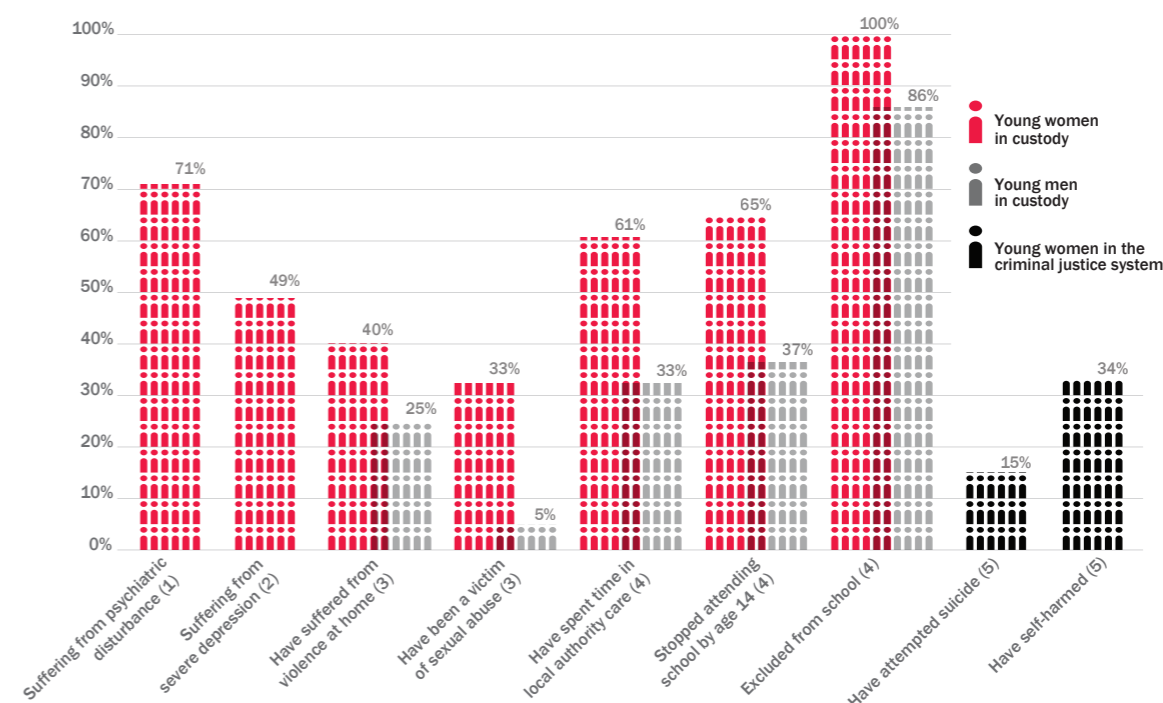
### 4 Vulnerability and mental health difficulties make prison life particularly arduous:

Mental health difficulties, self-harm and substance misuse are common among girls and women who offend. Over a third of girls in the youth justice system disclose having self-harmed and over two thirds of young women in custody have psychiatric problems. Whilst children in custody as a whole face severe disadvantage, girls tend to be even more vulnerable than their male counterparts, being:

- three times as likely to have been the victim of sexual abuse
- twice as likely to have spent time in local authority care prior to incarceration
- one and a half times more likely to report having suffered violence at home

Such experiences make it even more difficult for young women to adapt to the prison environment - particularly for those with prior mental ill-health, substance misuse and abusive relationships. This is worrying given that without any female young offenders' institutions (YOIs), girls who turn 18 within a Secure Children's Home or Secure Training Centre then go straight into an adult prison. In this environment, any expressive outbursts may be responded with punishments that restrict resettlement opportunities by denying 'privileges' such as Release on Temporary License (ROTL) or early release - both of which are essential to effective resettlement.

Figure 1: Rates of personal difficulties reported by young people within the criminal justice system



Based on data from:

- (1) Douglas and Plugge (2006) (2) Ofsted / HM Inspector of Prisons (2004) (3) Social Exclusion Unit (2002)  
 (4) Kennedy (2013) (5) Arnull and Eagle (2009)

For full references see the research report at [www.beyondyouthcustody.net](http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net).

### 5 Women need an interpersonal focus to their resettlement support:

Women in prison report higher levels of unmet support need than men. They often have a negative self-concept that persists after release and is intensified by their sensitivity to others' reactions to them. Young women's resettlement thus needs to provide emotional and social support as well as help with practical and welfare issues: empowering them to manage relationships and effect personal change in the social environment they will return to. Pre-release programmes that enable women to develop a pro-social identity, understand the dynamics of their relationships and forge positive support networks are particularly beneficial. With women released from custody being 36 times more likely to kill themselves than the general female population, it is imperative that they receive support. Given the difficulties in fulfilling parental responsibilities whilst organising housing, managing finances and rebuilding their lives, mothers may need specific help to reacquaint themselves with their children. Support from a mentor can improve feelings of social connection, enabling young women to feel embedded in their community and confident to participate in social life.

### 6 The barriers to desistance from offending are different for young women:

Returning to the community from custody can be particularly traumatic for all young people, but many women leaving custody experience debilitating feelings of isolation and loneliness which can undermine their determination to cease offending. Whereas young men often stop offending as they form a stable relationship or become a parent, for young women the opposite tends to be true - particularly if their partner is involved in offending or misusing drugs. As highlighted above, the maintenance of positive personal relationships is key to effective resettlement. Indeed, the risk of recidivism is 39% higher for prisoners who do not receive a visit in custody compared to those who do - a real concern for women prisoners as they become held further and further away from home.

## What should resettlement for girls and young women look like?

There are two factors for consideration: the age-related needs of girls and young women and the concept of gender responsiveness.

### Balancing nurturing approaches with the staged development of responsibility

The criminal justice system (particularly the custodial environment) disempowers young people, undermining their agency and reinforcing perceptions that they are not in control of their own lives. Yet this 'infantilisation' fails to provide a sufficiently nurturing environment to meet young adults' support needs. Girls and young women need to be able to participate fully in the development and implementation of plans for their release because early involvement in resettlement planning positively impacts upon how they envisage their future. Their views need to be taken into account and they need to feel confident that their welfare is being prioritised. Thus, rules need to be transparent, justifiable, open to discussion and (where the constraints of custody allow) negotiated with young women. They need to be understood as existing to safeguard young women or address their welfare needs - rather than just to facilitate behaviour management or meet organisational demands. Punitive approaches that 'responsibilise' them for past mistakes and assume that they are self-sufficient enough to access support independently fail because without support, girls may lack confidence in their ability to give up offending on release.

### Developing gender responsive approaches

Like resettlement services for young men, interventions for girls and young women should aim to provide a comprehensive and holistic service that addresses the complexity and multiplicity of their support needs - including tailored emotional and practical support. However, this provision must also be explicitly gender responsive, which requires consideration of three aspects of women's lives, focused on relationships at three levels:



**1 Interpersonal relationships:** maintaining and promoting young women's relationships with family (particularly their children) and significant others - both during custody and throughout resettlement in the community - as these play a significant role in reducing reoffending.



**2 Relationships with agencies:** developing young women's relationships with a range of agencies (including housing, education, employment, criminal justice, social care, health, finance, etc.) facilitating development of positive and consistent agency relationships in custody that improve access, overcome barriers, reduce stereotyping and enhance young women's capacity to successfully engage.



**3 Relationships with wider society:** building young women's understanding of how society and culture (particularly the media and social interactions with others) impact upon their identities, influence their behaviour and can limit their potential.

## Delivering interventions with girls and young women

### The importance of developing supportive relationships

As much female offending is linked to family dynamics or peer associations, provision of long-term support for interpersonal relationships may be as important to young women's resettlement as interventions that directly address offending behaviour. Programmes helping women to forge positive relationships - both during custody and post-release - can be particularly beneficial. Young women may need help to understand how their behaviour is influenced by interactions with others and explore ways of developing and maintaining supportive and respectful relationships. Such insight should inform not only the content of any interventions, but also the way that they are delivered. Many girls and young women have experienced subordination, exploitation and abuse in their relationships. Resettlement interventions that mirror such power dynamics will make women fearful that they are at risk of further victimisation. Coercive, challenging or punitive approaches tend to be particularly counterproductive as young women's full engagement tends to be dependent upon them wanting to actively engage with a programme.

### Considerations for practice

Does your project seek to ensure smooth transitions to the community from custody by:

- undertaking early assessment for trauma and abuse and providing emotional wellbeing support to address trauma and past abuse?
- placing emphasis upon maintaining family and other positive relationships while in custody, including appropriate joint work with partners and families to build attachment?
- providing sessions on how relationships impact upon behaviour, enabling women to develop new ways to find and build positive relationships (and avoid negative ones)?
- providing women with options to access supported accommodation that is either near their support networks or located in another area away from abusive networks?

### Trauma-informed resettlement

Resettlement workers need to be aware that most service users have experienced some form of trauma. They need to be able to sensitively explore the impact of trauma and abuse with young women as a means of fostering empowerment, enhancing self-esteem and enabling them to take control of their lives. Traumatized young people are often mistrustful of adults and authority figures. Establishing positive, trusting relationships can allow young women to understand the benefits of replacing harmful relationships with positive ones. Practitioners can teach young women interpersonal skills and model how healthy relationships work. Family support work may also be an integral part of effective resettlement practice with young women - addressing the strain that incarceration places on such relationships. However, this needs to be undertaken with careful consideration of how family may be a source of abuse and harm rather than potential support.

### Developing resilience and self-efficacy

The development of personal agency and self-efficacy are important factors in determining whether young people reoffend. Matching resettlement provision to young women's self-identified needs reduces recidivism, so it is vital that practitioners find creative ways to explore their perceptions, listen to their ideas and involve them in resettlement planning in a real way. A strengths-based approach to working with young women can promote their self-worth, autonomy, resilience and self-sufficiency, and interventions should be designed to enhance the natural process of young women's maturation away from offending.

### Considerations for practice

Does your project involve young women in resettlement planning by:

- involving young women from the start in sentence planning: finding creative ways to explore young women's perceptions and self-identified needs, listening to their ideas and involving them in resettlement planning in a real way?
- matching resettlement provision to women's self-identified needs; ensuring that appropriate plans for resettlement are established early on and that relevant community agencies develop assertive in-reach into custody to work with the young women?
- delivering direct work to young women in custody to help build trust, self-esteem, agency and resilience early on?
- ensuring that formal / informal support networks are sustainable beyond the licence period?

### Working with diversity

It is important to remember that young females are not a homogenous group. To be effective resettlement services need to be responsive to the individual. This will include their cultural and religious needs, which may provide additional opportunities for developing personal narratives and positive identities. Given the centrality of relationships in resettlement for girls and young women, services must be inclusive of, and appropriate for, lesbian and bisexual women. Services also need to respond to the very high prevalence of learning disabilities, communication difficulties and mental ill-health within the offender population.

## Developing gender-sensitive provision

### Creating safe, empowering spaces

Organisations need to develop a physical space in which girls and young women will feel safe and secure - despite any previous experiences of abuse, bullying and violence - in premises that are not readily accessible to external, potentially threatening outsiders. This may be provided within single-sex facilities, or at least through regular single-sex sessions, because female-only environments foster a sense of safety and community (whilst also allowing staff to develop their expertise). Single-sex provision also provides girls with an opportunity to reflect and share insight upon their personal relationships and the impacts these have on their behaviour. Provision should be delivered at appropriate times, with readily available childcare. Women may want to start with one-to-one support, only progressing to groups when ready. Group numbers should be kept small enough that participants feel confident in staff ability to deal with any potential conflict. Sessions should acknowledge the prevalence and impact of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence for many women. It is also important that the environment conveys the message that girls and women should be valued - with books, posters and displays that recognise them as independent and autonomous, celebrating their achievements and contributions to society.

### Sustainable community-based support

Tapering support and exit strategies are also crucial considerations for resettlement practice with girls and young women. Reoffending rates typically rise as support is withdrawn at the end of a statutory licence period. This may be a particular risk for female offenders whose low levels of self-esteem and confidence may leave them less equipped to cope or access alternative support. Moreover, the importance of relationships may lead to dependency on supervision staff (or even on other young people met in groups). So resettlement practitioners need to help to build community-based support networks for young women that will continue beyond the licence period.



### POSITIVE PRACTICE TWP SALFORD: DEVELOPING A WOMAN-ONLY SPACE

The Together Women Project (TWP) was initially set up in five pilot areas in response to recommendations in the 2007 Corston Report. In Salford, the project has four key aims: to reduce reoffending, avoid family breakdown, increase access for women to community-based services and divert them from custody. The women-only centre provides a safe and relaxing environment where a broad range of services can be accessed, including crèche facilities, drug and alcohol support, counselling, parenting skills, employment and training and gender-specific support services.

Most importantly, TWP acknowledges that women face a completely different set of challenges to men when they are released from custody. Support needs to address the fact that their offending is often linked to being in destructive and manipulative relationships. Younger women in particular seem to usually be dealing with difficult emotions and multiple negative influences.

**"Sometimes, the younger ones are less mature and more entrenched in negative cycles of behaviour. They have less support and a lack of role models and guidance to fall back on – so are more 'needy'."**

Consequently, TWP Salford places great emphasis on providing a safe, welcoming, women-only environment where the women feel respected, listened to and supported. Some of the women are clear that they could not be open about their experiences of abuse and would not want to attend sessions if a man was running them. But there is acknowledgment that other women's centres have found the introduction of a positive male role model to be beneficial - so some way of including supportive male input may be explored in the future.

Working closely with a range of criminal justice agencies, TWP Salford delivers services across the nine criminal justice pathways and has two seconded probation officers on-site. It works with each woman to create a tailor-made plan to address individual resettlement needs. Taking a holistic, community-based response, TWP combines one-to-one and group work for as long as women are open to a community order. There is a weekly timetable of courses and activities and each woman can get involved as much as they want. In 2013, 86% of the women on probation took up an additional course or service voluntarily and participated for an average of two hours a week more than their probation order required. The project monitors women's progress every four to six weeks until they end their engagement and their reoffending rates have significantly reduced.

**"We work with the women by looking at their issues with them, using a 'person-centred model'. The work is tailored to the person's needs and is holistic in its outlook.**

**We usually see a massive transformation in attitudes and behaviour as we progress our work with them."**

### Considerations for practice

Does your project provide holistic support in a safe and relaxing environment, including:

- empowering, tailored, voluntary interventions, with at least some single-sex delivery?
- through-the-gate interventions, with intensive support during the first few weeks of release?
- crèche facilities and parenting support?
- support delivered through both one-to-one and small group work?
- the option of a female support worker, with the chance to work with male staff at a later date?
- support for women to redevelop their family roles and 'reacquaint' themselves with their children?
- tapered support and exit strategies that include building community-based support networks?

## Staff issues

Staff characteristics and working style are critical in effective practice with young women, as are skills in addressing emotional and psychological abuse and in promoting women's health. Such expertise is known to reduce recidivism rates and probation staff who specialise in working with women have better rates of licence completion. Practitioners need to act and speak with understanding of clients' potential traumatising backgrounds and be confident in challenging insensitive professional cultures - both within and outside the criminal justice system.

Having empathy, a flexible approach and realistic expectations about patterns of desistance are important practitioner characteristics for engaging young people of both genders. However, the development of trust is fundamental to resettlement with girls and young women who describe that the most supportive practitioners are those who:

- focus on the issues that are of concern to them and provide useful and timely advice and information (rather than reflecting agency priorities or a standardised form of intervention)
- show that they care by visiting them regularly, delivering on promises and actively pursuing opportunities that match women's self-identified needs and interests
- understand their perspective, have realistic expectations, are optimistic that they can change and will not give up on them – despite any setbacks
- have good listening skills that demonstrate concern for their feelings and wellbeing whilst also providing practical support and engaging them in a participatory manner

This latter point is particularly important as girls and young women often feel that their views and interests are overlooked in traditional youth justice practice. Yet, fully engaging young women, tailoring programmes to their priorities and undertaking individualised planning are essential not only for relationship building, but also because incorporating young women's own insights into interventions with them is a prerequisite for influencing their behaviour. Building trusting, mutually respectful relationships also provides an alternative to women's previous negative experiences. Such relationships, particularly if delivered in a single-sex setting, can counteract the adverse effects of gender-neutral programmes.

### Considerations for practice

**Does your project prioritise staff development of trusting relationships with young women by:**

- recruiting, training and supporting staff to be empathetic and caring with young women?
- training practitioners in female needs and vulnerabilities?
- enabling staff to develop strong, consistent working relationships with young women to build trust and provide long-term support?
- empowering young women rather than challenging or confronting their behaviour?
- providing clear explanations for decisions and managing expectations (negotiated where possible)?
- providing female mentors to build trust, be non-judgmental and offer relational support?
- basing desistance work on relationships and the fostering of positive long-term support?



**POSITIVE PRACTICE  
CREATING POSITIVE FUTURES  
NEW HORIZON YOUTH CENTRE**

Creating Positive Futures provides resettlement support for 18-25 year old girls and young women within a mixed service. The key elements of their gender-informed practice are as follows.

- 1** Service users being seen as a young woman first – not a perpetrator or a victim
- 2** Ensuring seamless transition from custody to community
- 3** A consistent person acting as case worker, with other relationships with staff encouraged
- 4** Holistic services available on site, along with a number of specialist support services
- 5** A staff team that benefits from strong support mechanisms and daily debriefs
- 6** Good relationships with external providers (e.g. accommodation, education, mental health)
- 7** Non-prescriptive interventions – staff have realistic expectations which are flexible, individualised and informed by the challenges of resettlement for young women
- 8** Being able to offer long-term support, with all aspects of service delivery gender-proofed

**In custody:** Two female outreach workers attend Holloway every Friday to work with young women at any point in their sentence. Creating Positive Futures starts corresponding with each young woman, using handwritten, personalised letters tailored to each woman's individual needs to explain how the project can support them.

**Upon release:** Creating Positive Futures can meet young women at the prison gate upon release (if no one else is offering service). If not, they make contact within a week and attempt to meet within two weeks post-release. They recognise the stressful nature of release and so do not want to increase immediate pressure by adding another appointment. Staff acknowledge that there may be a need to meet away from the centre - recognising that some young women will not feel comfortable in a group environment due to previous experiences or because other participants might also be perpetrators.

**At New Horizon:** The project is open seven days a week. Young women leaving custody are treated as any other young people. They receive a one-to-one induction from the team and a tour to meet everyone. As young people settle in, staff observe how they engage in groups and with other staff members, and consider whether to allocate a case worker. A dedicated girls and young women's worker is available everyday to provide practical support and two counsellors can be accessed straight away. The centre offers dedicated women's space on Thursdays and frequently provides women-only activities off-site. The project is keen to build community support and encourages young women to engage with a number of staff to avoid dependency (and ensure support if their case worker is ever unavailable).

Creating Positive Futures offers long-term support at the young woman's individual pace. Staff have realistic expectations for goal-setting - knowing that it can be up to three years before change can happen. They are aware that when young women are settled in stable accommodation with the space to reflect, the impact of past trauma and abuse can come to the forefront. For most young women, their early lives have been extremely distressing and damaging, and acknowledging this allows staff to work with young women through the challenges of resettlement.

**“We tolerate attempts at manipulation/poor behaviour and know that they have been completely traumatised – go with them on the roller coaster – it's part of their journey”.**

## A model for gender-responsive resettlement

**“Gender responsiveness? – Think about it everywhere from leaflets, correspondence, assessment, who they feel comfortable with, where they meet, when they meet etc. The whole way you work is different really.”**

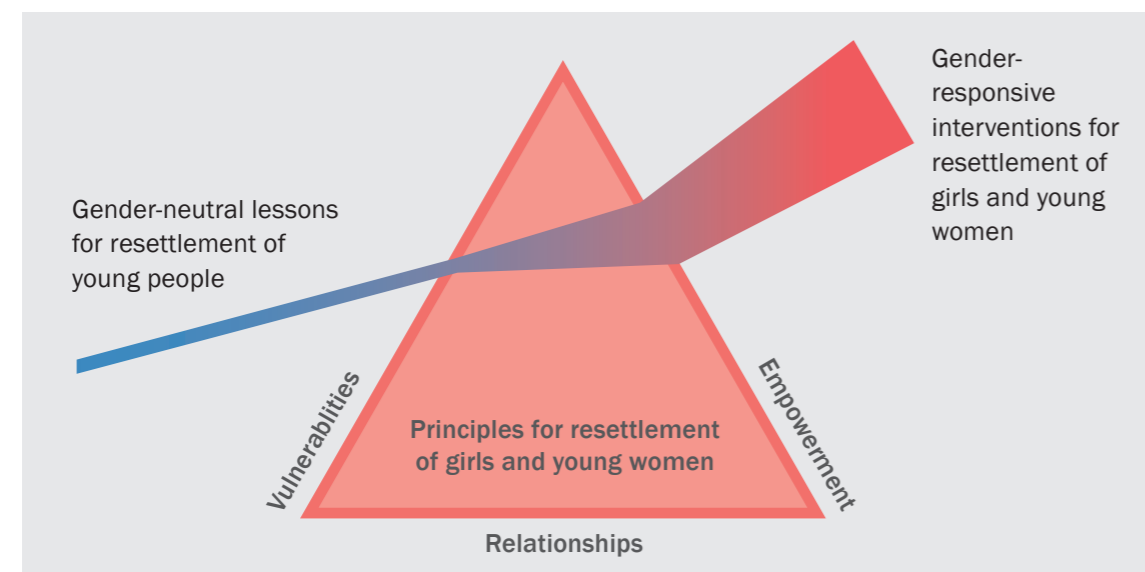
Gender-neutral principles for the effective resettlement of young people provide the basis for gender-responsive support. The lessons of ‘what works’ in resettlement with young people (gender-neutral) are still valid for girls and young women. As such, agencies should still ensure a smooth transition from custody to community, preparing the individual and the outside for release from the beginning of the sentence; coordinate multiple agencies to address multiple needs in wraparound support; and engage to promote positive shifts to non-criminal identities.

In addition, however, practice with young women needs to be shaped by three related gender-sensitive dimensions:

- 1 Vulnerabilities resulting from experiences of trauma and abuse should be addressed
- 2 Relationships are a critical focus, including abuse in past relationships, developing trust with professionals now, and promoting positive future relationships
- 3 Empowerment to make positive choices will counterbalance vulnerabilities and experiences of subordination

So, as figure 2 shows, to become suitable for girls and young women, interventions following gender-neutral lessons for resettlement need to be transformed by passing through a ‘gender prism’ that comprises these three considerations:

**Figure 2: The gender prism to ensure appropriate resettlement for girls and young women**



Bateman T and Hazel N (2014)

## Applying lessons for young people’s resettlement through the gender prism

The three dimensions of the gender prism can be explored in more detail:

### 1 Resettlement interventions must address the vulnerabilities of girls and young women

The experience of trauma or abuse impacts hugely upon girls and young women in the criminal justice system and is often linked to their offending. This has widespread implications for practice:

- 1 practitioners needing to build trusting relationships
- 2 providing safe environments and preventing confrontation
- 3 addressing relationship issues in order to support desistance
- 4 being more aware of health issues that may impede future wellbeing
- 5 addressing early traumatic experiences
- 6 providing intensive support on release. Such needs may be missed or under-resourced in gender-neutral resettlement priorities, so gender-responsive wraparound support is crucial.

### 2 Relationships are a critical focus in resettlement for girls and young women

Relationships play a particularly important role for this group: past family discord and trauma are likely to need addressing. In addition, past or present relationships with partners may be abusive - and both these and peer relationships are often directly linked with offences. In the present, establishing trusting relationships is crucial for engagement, the provision of effective support and helping young women to develop a non-offending identity. For the future, empowering girls and young women to be more resilient through the development of positive relationships is central to ongoing desistance from offending.

### 3 Empowerment to make positive choices should run through all resettlement practice

Given that vulnerability and subordination are common precursors to offending for women, empowerment is crucial to working with them as a means of fostering more positive, crime-free identities. Part of this empowerment might be structural (e.g. job opportunities to avoid financial reliance on abusive partners) and part would be focused on agency - building personal strength to counter negative social influences. Clear resettlement arrangements, planned well in advance of release from custody, enable young women to feel positive about their potential to avoid reoffending. Without such support, young women may be overwhelmed by the enormity of the resettlement challenges that they face. Ensuring that arrangements for release are orientated by young women’s self-defined goals increases their optimism in being able to overcome difficulties and can enable young women to develop the determination necessary to take their lives in a different course. Interventions are most effective when they help to change the way that young women think about themselves or others - especially if they enable young women to find a gender-identity that allows them to be assertive (rather than passive and vulnerable to current/past abuse).

So, each aspect of resettlement practice should be assessed in relation to these three principles in order to develop effective, gender-responsive practice. Where specific needs are not met by existing practice, policy makers and practitioners should consider ways to develop new interventions that are informed by these criteria.

## Summary

Like resettlement for young men, interventions for girls and young women should provide comprehensive, holistic services with tailored emotional and practical support. Provision for girls and young women must also be explicitly gender responsive however, because their pathways into offending, the impact of custody upon them, their resettlement needs and the factors facilitating desistance from offending differ from those of young men. Making minor adaptations to male-based resettlement provision is unlikely to work for females, and approaches that rely on punishment and deterrence - rather than the provision of interpersonal support - will be particularly ineffective.

Gender-responsive resettlement practice can improve reoffending rates for girls and young women by addressing their vulnerability, the importance of relationships to them and their need for empowerment. By doing so, young women can be supported to both manage their personal relationships and exercise personal change within their home environment. Resettlement staff thus need to be empathetic, flexible and understanding about women's lives and experiences - seeing through the 'veneer' of assertiveness and aggression that some young women present with, and relating to their vulnerabilities and anxieties.

The Beyond Youth Custody team hopes that this practice guide is useful to you and would be interested to hear about your experiences of the issues raised here. Please feel free to contact the programme manager at: [beyondyouthcustody@nacro.org.uk](mailto:beyondyouthcustody@nacro.org.uk) to share your insights or discuss these issues.

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