



Responding to Women Offenders: Equitable Does Not Mean Identical

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From a corrections perspective, we should approach the management and treatment of women offenders differently. Why? Because if we use gender-responsive approaches, we will be more successful. That is a rather simplistic answer to the question, but it is, in the final analysis, the basic truth. This article addresses equity issues and the differences between identical treatment and equitable treatment.

In other articles in this publication, you will read about the increase in numbers of women offenders, both on probation and in our prisons. We have finally reached a critical mass of women offenders, which means that separate and unique treatment of them makes financial sense. You will read about many women offenders with histories of victimization and how healing the trauma of abuse is a critical step to help these offenders learn to take responsibility for their offending behavior. You will learn about women's unique pathways into crime and their implications for designing appropriate interventions to interrupt the ongoing cycles to crime.

In the late 19th century, criminologist Lambroso believed that criminals were born, and that women were less evolved than men. The woman offender was more cunning and deceitful, and she lacked a maternal instinct. This attitude spoke not only of Lambroso's world view, but also that of society as a whole at the time. In the early 20th century, women offenders were considered "fallen women." W. I. Thomas said in 1923 that the deviant female was not properly socialized. In Minnesota, in the early days of the Women's Reformatory at Shakopee, which opened in 1920, the largest percentage of women were incarcerated for "crimes against chastity" such as "adultery, bigamy and procuring females to enter a house of ill repute."

As we begin the 21st century, some of those assumptions and prejudices have been replaced by sound research about the psychosocial differences in gender. In 1982, Carol Gilligan's well researched book *In a Different Voice* validated gender differences and became widely accepted within the feminist community. Not surprisingly, however, it has taken almost two decades to apply her research and findings about women to women offenders. Gilligan states, "In women's lives, attachment, interdependence and connectedness to relationship are critical issues which form the foundation of female identity." Male identity is based on defining self in relation to his status in the world, with a focus on independence and autonomy. Female identity is based on defining self in relation to others, with a focus on connectedness and interdependence. The male way of resolving conflict relies on the rules, while the female way of resolving conflict relies on maintaining relationships. How then can we expect to have successful programs that meet the psychosocial