

Women Working in Corrections:

Where We Have Been and Where We Are Going

By Kelly Ann Cheeseman

Women play a vital role in the field of corrections. They serve and work at every level of correctional agencies and departments. According to the American Correctional Association's Sept. 30, 2007, report on Adult Correctional Personnel by Gender and Race, women represented 37 percent of adult correctional personnel (144,274, excluding federal prison personnel) and 51 percent of juvenile corrections personnel. This, however, is a more recent development as women made up only 12 percent of the correctional workforce in 1969.¹

The fate of women in correctional careers has been similar to that of their law enforcement sisters. Until the 1970s, women were hired as correctional officers only within women's facilities. Legal cases in the late 1970s finally permitted female entrance into jobs at men's correctional institutions.² In 1969, the Joint Commission on Correctional Manpower and Training made recommendations for the integration of women in the field of corrections. Three years later, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was amended prohibiting sex discrimination in local and state governments. In 1973, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals established a standard for correctional agencies to follow to recruit and hire women for all positions in corrections:

- Change in correctional agency policies to eliminate discrimination against women in correctional work;
- Provision for lateral entry to allow immediate placement of women in administrative positions;
- Development of better criteria for selection of staff for correctional work, removing obstacles to employment of women; and
- Assumption by the personnel system of aggressive leadership in giving women a full role in corrections.

ACA also adopted a policy in 1976 confirming a commitment to ensuring equal employment in corrections to minorities and women. It would appear that much of the barrier to women working in institutional corrections was the idea that they would be supervising male offenders. According to Zimmer, the greatest hindrance of women working within male correctional facilities was male correctional staff.³ Some of the objections noted by male officers included concerns about physical and mental toughness, violation of inmate privacy and the possibility of sexual vic-

timization or sexual misconduct.⁴ Breed also noted three major obstacles that women face in correctional employment which limit their work opportunities, reduce their promotional opportunities and create stressful and often intolerable work conditions:⁵

- Women are not big and strong enough;
- Women are seen as sexual objects; and
- Women do not have the key to the men's washroom.

Ethridge, Hale and Hambrick offered coping strategies for female staff embarking on a job in a male correctional setting. These suggestions made in the early 1980s still have relevance to women working the field of corrections today:⁶

- Interact with inmates in a straightforward, nonmanipulative manner and do so consistently;
- Develop a reputation for treating inmates fairly and impartially;
- Dress appropriately;
- Be prepared for initial negative reactions;
- Maintain a professional distance from inmates;
- Deal with conflict decisively and assertively;
- Build positive relationships with male co-workers;
- Develop a support network of other women in the organization;
- Keep an open mind;
- Be supportive of other women;
- Do your job;
- Prepare for the next job; and
- Keep your mental health in good repair.

The Impact of Women in Corrections

Regardless of the obstacles or challenges women have faced, they have found success working in corrections. What is particularly interesting is the effect that female correctional officers had and continue to have in male institutions and how female correctional staff perceive their role/job in corrections.

In 1980, Kissel and Katsampes found that the majority of male inmates felt that female correctional officers did not invade their privacy; the male inmates did not feel resentment toward taking orders from women and did not experience additional sexual frustration.⁷ Petersen found that

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male correctional staff viewed female correctional officers less favorably than male inmates viewed the same officers.⁸ A former warden at San Quentin stated that women had a positive effect on male prison environments and were more observant and more attentive.⁹ Cheeseman, Mullings and Marquart found that male inmates in a southern prison system felt female correctional officers were as competent as their male counterparts and that inmates were less likely to act violently around females.¹⁰

Additional research focused attention on how women fit into the correctional agency from an organizational standpoint. In studies of women and work, Acker alludes to the notion that organizations are structured by men for men, and that as women enter these establishments they are subject to gendered processing, which includes the production of gender divisions.¹¹ Gender divisions produce men at the top of the hierarchy with women being overrepresented at lower levels within an organization. These patterns are then recreated and perpetuated through history and organizational tradition.¹² Women in correctional careers may suffer from an organization that was not created for them and perpetuates negative attitudes toward women in traditionally male-dominated work. Gendering in organizations can also involve symbolism that continues the belief that good managers have male qualities (e.g., dominant, aggressive, decisive) and that women possess negative managerial qualities (e.g., emotional, weak, frail). Essentially, as noted by Britton, women are still facing barriers to promotion and supervisory positions.¹³ Tokenism, the practice of hiring or appointing a token number of females in order to deflect criticism or comply with affirmative action rules, may still be in effect as some agencies have large numbers of female correctional officers but far fewer female supervisors and wardens. Women also may be perceived by supervisors as individuals who cannot be trusted either due to their family obligations or a perception on the part of supervisors that they will be absent more than male officers, even if this is not the case.¹⁴ Cheeseman and Goodlin-Fahncke found that female correctional employees report higher levels of work stress than males who worked for the same prison system.¹⁵ It could be argued that women, while gaining more access to correctional employment, have not fully been integrated into the world of institutional corrections.

As noted by Farkas, men and women have unique styles of handling offender supervision.¹⁶ It would seem that correctional agencies could continue to address gender issues by providing training that embraces these different, but valuable approaches to handling the nature of correctional work. While both men and women can do an exceptional job in correctional facilities, strategies that help correctional staff alleviate stress and grow as employees may need to be gender-specific, or at a minimum address the unique

way that men and women experience work. This could include training on how to deal with cross-gender supervision, training on overall health and well-being and/or training from female officers and supervisors who have experience and offer positive coping strategies.

Women are an essential element in correctional agencies and will impact the way in which business is conducted in all areas of corrections. By continuing the commitment set out by ACA in 1976 to recruit minorities and women, agencies will find female employees who are well-suited for correctional work and who add value and strength to correctional organizations.

ENDNOTES

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³ Zimmer, L. 1986. *Women guarding men*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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⁴ Walters, S. 1993. Changing the guard. Male correctional officers' attitudes toward women as co-workers. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 20(1-2): 47-60.

⁵ Breed, A.F. 1981. Women in correctional employment. In B.H. Olsson (ed.) *Women in corrections*: 37-44. American Correctional Association: Alexandria, Va.

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⁷ Kissel, P. and P. Katsampes. 1980. The impact of women corrections officers on the functioning of institutions housing male inmates. *Journal of Offender Counseling, Services and Rehabilitation*, 4(3): 213-231.

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⁹ Hunter, S. 1986. On the line: Working hard with dignity. *Corrections Today*, 48 (4):12-13.

¹⁰ Cheeseman, K.A., J.L. Mullings and J.W. Marquart. 2001. Assessing inmate perceptions of custody staff across various custody levels. *Corrections Management Quarterly*, 5(2): 41-48.

¹¹ Acker, J. 1992. *Gendered organizational analysis*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

¹² Cohn, S. 1985. *The process of occupational sex-typing*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

¹³ Britton, D. 2003. *At work in the iron cage: The prison as a gendered organization*. New York: New York University Press.

¹⁴ Lambert, E. and N. Hogan. 2007. Absent correctional staff: An exploratory study of the correlates of correctional staff absenteeism views and absenteeism. *Corrections Compendium*, 32(4): 7-11, 26-28.

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¹⁵ Cheeseman, K.A. and W. Goodlin-Fahncke. 2011. Women Working within the walls: The effect of gender on correctional employee perceptions of work stress. *Corrections Compendium*, 35(2): 1-7, 18-19.

¹⁶ Farkas, M.A. 1999. Correctional officer attitudes toward inmates and working with inmates in a "get tough" era. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 27(6): 495-506.

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