

ACJRD Conference Report “Women in the Criminal Justice System”

I am delighted to have been asked to launch this Report of the 13th Annual Conference of the ACJRD, particularly as the Conference dealt with the subject of *Women in the Criminal Justice System*, an area of research and policy formation that does not receive a great deal of attention in this country. The Conference last October, which I attended, covered a broad range of relevant issues both in the formal contributions and in the workshops. It is excellent to have both aspects of the Conference contained in this timely Report. The number of women offenders is comparatively small in the overall context of criminal offending and the vast majority of women’s offences are minor. Such offences are thus dealt with in the context of the District Court. Practically the only female offences that attract widespread media, and therefore public, attention, are murders committed by women.

The speakers that contributed to the Conference included Chief Inspector Kathleen O’Toole of the Garda Síochána Inspectorate, Professor Loraine Gelsthorpe of Cambridge University and Eimear Fisher, the Executive Director of Cosc – Working together against domestic and sexual violence.

On an understandably personal level I had a particular interest in the contribution by Dr. Azrini Wahidin of Queen’s University Belfast on the subject of Older Women in Prison. Dr. Wahidin pointed out that this was a group of prisoners whose special situation had suffered neglect from gerontologists and criminologists alike. She quoted one older prisoner as saying:

“No specific thought is given to people who are in our age category. Thought is given to young offenders. It is given to lifers. It is given to sort of other categories, it is not really - they don’t really think about people of our age group and our families.”

Another prisoner pointed out that the older prisoners were considered by everyone to be “old and quiet” and that therefore they could safely be ignored.

Another major subject studied during the Conference was the necessity for development and creative thinking on alternative sentencing policies in the context of female offenders. There are still far too many women sentenced to six months or less of imprisonment for minor offences. Short prison sentences achieved nothing and were counterproductive as far as the women’s lives and families were concerned. Professor Gelsthorpe criticised the lack of inclusion of women in community service orders. “*Can women paint fences too?*” she asked. In England it had been shown that women did well in community service. There was a need to provide suitable types of community service and in developing this it should be possible to include people from the voluntary sector who have experience with working with disordered women. In this context also the Workshop on *Community Based Interventions for Women Offenders in Northern Ireland* illustrated just such a collaboration between statutory and voluntary groups.

Among the workshops was one dealing with the media coverage of offending women in four newspapers. Coverage was mainly of murders and there was a great deal of reliance on official sources such as police sources or court proceedings. Often the use of language was sensationalist, using names such as “*Death Angel*” and this could lead to female offenders becoming celebrities in their own right.

ACJRD are to be congratulated on the publication of the valuable Report on the proceedings of their 13th Annual Conference. It admirably serves the declared aim of ACJRD to work for the reform, development and effective operation of the criminal justice system.