

Workshop 25:
**A cultural and linguistic needs assessment of women from
non-English speaking backgrounds under supervision of the
Department of Corrective Services in Queensland**

Pam Puusaari
Women's Services Unit
Department of Corrective Services, Queensland

Introduction

Female offenders currently make up approximately 7% of the adult Australian prison population.¹ Although there has been an increase in the general prison population over the past decade, the most substantial rises have been among female prisoners. National figures show that the number of women prisoners have increased by 40% since 1994.² The increase in the numbers of women in prison is not only a national trend but a pattern seen throughout the Western world.³

In 2000, the Women's Services Unit of the Department of Corrective Services in Queensland produced the document, *Profile of Female Offenders Under Community and Custodial Supervision in Queensland*. The report provided information about the general, demographic, sentencing, health and educational characteristics of women under community and custodial supervision in Queensland and highlighted the growth rate of the female prison population which had outstripped the growth of the male prison population over the previous five year period. While the document noted a small population of women from non-English speaking backgrounds under the department's supervision, it did not provide specific detail regarding the needs and profile of this group.

Similarly, a range of research reports and papers refer to migrant groups in correctional settings, however a detailed analysis of the needs of women from non-English speaking backgrounds in these settings is lacking.

The number of women imprisoned in secure and open custody has continued to grow in Queensland with 330 women in custody at 30 June 2003, a rise of 230% over the period from 1994 to 2003. The number of women from non-English speaking backgrounds in custody has risen with the overall increase of the numbers of women in prison. Of the 330 women in custody at 30 June 2003, the majority were white Australian, (58.18%). There were 25.75% Indigenous women, and 4.55% women from New Zealand. Women from Asian countries represented 4.85%, and there were small percentages of women from various other countries, both English and non-English speaking. These included Italy, Lebanon, Papua New Guinea, UK and Ireland, Eastern Europe, USA and Yugoslavia.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics *Prisoners in Australia 4517.0* 30 June 2003.

² Quinlan, T *Working with female Offenders forum: Throughcare Summary of Proceedings* Canberra 14 – 15 November 2001.

³ Department of Corrective Services (2000) *Profile of Female Offenders Under Community and Custodial Supervision in Queensland*.

Queensland has three correctional facilities for women in secure and open custody and there is one centre for women in community custody. Two of the secure and open custody facilities and the community custody centre are located in the south-east corner of the State, and one facility is located in Townsville in the north of the State. Of the women in custody in Townsville Correctional Centre, a high proportion are Indigenous women. The greatest percentage of women from non-English speaking backgrounds are located in custody in the south-east corner in Queensland.

In recognition of the special needs of this growing portion of women under the department's supervision in Queensland, a project has commenced to gather accurate data and information that has not previously been available about the needs of women from non-English speaking backgrounds under the supervision of the Department of Corrective Services in Queensland. When available this information will inform policy and program development, and service delivery to both this specific group of women and to others with cultural needs.

This paper is a preliminary report on the project which has commenced with the interview of women from non-English speaking backgrounds in secure, open and community custody. In a second stage, women under community supervision will be interviewed. The women have been asked to participate voluntarily in the study, and this has been well supported.

Target group

The study has been limited to the interview of women from non-English speaking backgrounds with a focus on their linguistic needs. This limitation has excluded some groups, for example:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. These women comprise a significant proportion of the overall female offender population and their linguistic needs form part of their discrete profile. It is acknowledged however, that there may be some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in custody for whom English is a second or other language.
- Migrant women from English-speaking backgrounds, and women who are the children of immigrant parents. These women may not experience the same language risks as women from non-English speaking backgrounds do, however, they too may have particular cultural and social needs.

The results of the study will benefit not only women in the target group, but others with diverse cultural needs.

Methodology

It was determined that the best quality of information would be gathered from one-on-one interviews with the women in the target group. Therefore a survey instrument designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative information has been designed. This is organised in three categories and contains:

- a demographic survey instrument
- a language needs assessment, including the simplified version of the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR)
- a social and cultural needs assessment.

Demographic information

The demographic survey instrument is patterned on the data sets contained in *Profile of Female Offenders Under Community and Custodial Supervision in Queensland 2000*. These data sets include for example, the numbers, age, and offending patterns of the women. This will enable where appropriate, comparisons to be made between the general female offender profile and the women from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Language needs assessment

As language is critical to communication, an important feature of this study is the assessment of English as a second or other language. There are a number of commercially available language tools designed for this purpose including, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR). After reviewing the nature, purpose, strengths and limitations of these instruments along with a selection of literacy screening tools, a simplified version of the ISLPR for self-assessment was chosen.⁴

The ISLPR is an assessment scale that describes second or foreign language proficiency in adolescent and adult learners. There are both specified and general proficiency models of the instrument, with a number of versions developed for specific purposes. For example, individual proficiency assessment of second language learners, research and policy-making, and curriculum development.

A simplified self-assessment version of the ISLPR was chosen to give an overview of the English proficiency of the women, rather than an in-depth assessment of individual competencies. It is important however, to note that self-assessment has limitations and that asking participants to assess their own language ability may impact on accuracy.

In addition, in the assessment of English proficiency of the group of women some additional questions have been designed to attempt to understand difficulties the women may experience with language within the correctional context. For example, difficulties with 'jail language'.

Communicative competence, in a second or other language requires a range of skills to be mastered. Some of these include, for example:

- Knowing the appropriate forms for performing functions such as complimenting, requesting, and apologising.
- Knowledge of language varieties and of the correct forms of formal and informal address; and
- Knowledge of body language.⁵

⁴ The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the co-author of the ISLPR, Ms Elaine Wylie from the Centre of applied Linguistics and Languages (CALL) of Griffith University in Queensland. Ms Wylie has granted her permission to administer the instrument to women from non-English speaking backgrounds in custody.

⁵ Queensland Government *Customer Service in a Culturally Diverse Community* Department of Premier and Cabinet Multicultural Affairs Queensland.

The additional questions are designed to capture information about any difficulties the women may experience with language, but in particular about significant experiences. These are: entry to custody, engagement in programs and services; and understanding prison rules.

Cultural and social needs assessment

In section three, a number of questions have been posed to gather information about the women's social and cultural needs. This includes information about their family, social, welfare, spiritual, and dietary needs and is important to inform service delivery needs.

Qualitative research methodology in the form of a structured questionnaire will be used to collect the information on the additional language needs and the assessment of cultural needs. A case study approach (although not in-depth) will be used to study the issues raised, and to understand situations in context.

Reporting the results

The information gathered in the demographic section will be collated, analysed, and organised into tables and charts that will provide a demographic profile of the group of women. Results of the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings will be reported individually due to the small number of non-English speaking women in the study. No attempt will be made to aggregate the data however, it may be appropriate to report some generalisations.

The qualitative information collected will be analysed, and themes reported. At no time will individuals be identified.

Interpreter services

Some of the women will need interpreter services to participate in the project. Accordingly, working with interpreters training has been undertaken by staff of the Women's Services Unit, and the professional input of Multicultural Affairs Queensland is gratefully acknowledged in providing advice regarding cultural awareness and working with interpreters training. Information has been provided about the use of interpreters, professional interpreters, their code of ethics, including the important issues of accuracy, impartiality, confidentiality and professional conduct.

Participants

All of the women from non-English speaking backgrounds in custody are invited to participate in the first stage of the study. This is approximately twelve women representing approximately 4.69% of women in secure and open custody in the south-east corner of Queensland in October 2003.⁶ In stage two of the project, the interview of women under community supervision, a larger number of women will be interviewed proportionate to the greater number of women under community supervision.

⁶ The study is restricted to women from non-English speaking backgrounds under the department's supervision in the south-east corner of Queensland. In October, 2003 there were no women from non-English speaking backgrounds in custody in Townsville Correctional Centre in the north of the State.

The women have initially been identified from information contained in the department's Correctional Information System. Liaison has also occurred with staff at the correctional centre's ensuring all possible candidates are identified.

Consent

The women have been asked to participate voluntarily in the project. A simple consent form has been constructed, and the candidates are asked to sign this prior to the commencement of the interviews. Issues of confidentiality and how the data will be managed and reported are also explained.

Some indicative comments

Language issues are complex for women from non-English speaking backgrounds in custody. Communication not only depends upon learning English as a second or other language, but also involves understanding prison talk and prison culture. Additionally, various cultural protocols may inhibit the expression of important needs and issues of the women.

For the women who do have a level of English proficiency, their ability to communicate is often challenged in stressful circumstances, and again their needs are not articulated well.

As a sub-group of the overall female offender population, women from non-English speaking backgrounds are often convicted of crimes that carry custodial sentences of five years and above. This often differs from the general profile of female offenders which noted that a high proportion of women prisoners on average serve relatively short sentences as they are generally convicted of crimes that carry less penalties.

Conclusion

When completed this project will detail the demographic, cultural and linguistic needs of women from non-English speaking backgrounds under the department's supervision in Queensland. It is intended that the information will create an awareness of their needs, and provide a basis to inform educational program development and the delivery of services. It is also hoped that the study will inform wider policy issues, including the development of language policy for women in correctional settings.