

The Five CORE Practice Areas of Gender Responsiveness

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Considerable research is available to assist criminal justice system professionals in their efforts to identify and address gaps in women's services and implement effective ways to reduce risks, build strengths, and enhance well-being and outcomes. Compared to males, a larger proportion of justice-involved women have experienced gender-based violence, develop substance use issues to cope with past and current trauma, and are more likely to report mental health challenges, which are frequently tied to their experiences of victimization. Justice-involved women also tend to come from under-resourced and marginalized communities with limited safety nets and are more likely to be the sole support and caregivers for their children. They are more likely to experience poverty, underemployment, and employment instability, more likely to experience homelessness, and are vulnerable to various forms of sexual or economic coercion to maintain housing.

By addressing the underlying factors that often compel women's involvement in systems, gender responsive approaches can interrupt women's pathways, reduce incarceration and recidivism, and increase health, safety, and well-being at the individual, family, and community levels.

Definition of Gender Responsive Approaches for Women

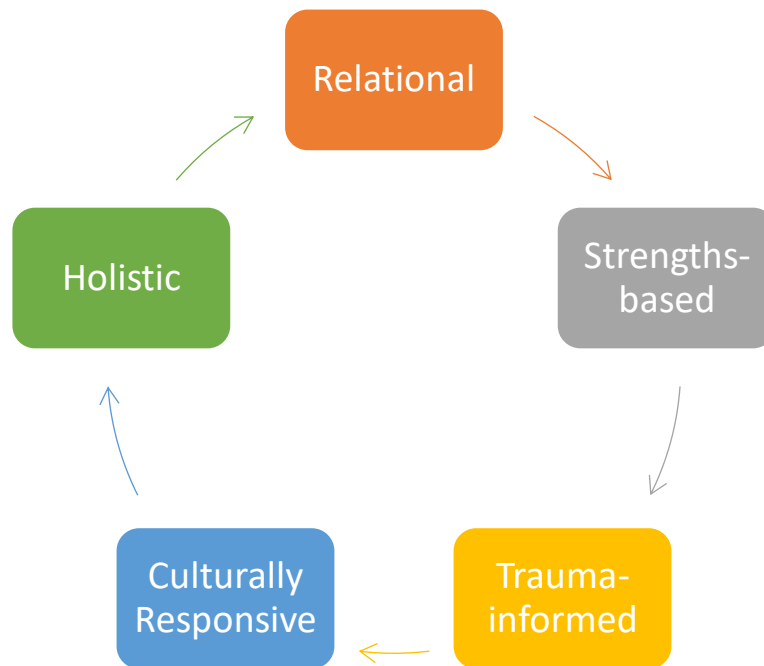
Broadly defined, gender responsive approaches for women are those that intentionally leverage the research on women to affect and guide policy and practice at all levels of engagement and intervention.

They incorporate an understanding of the social, political, and economic realities of women's lives, including women's socialization and psychological development, intersectional identities and experiences, and unique risk, strength, and need factors.

Gender responsive approaches for women intentionally incorporate cutting-edge evidence on what works to disrupt women's pathways into and entrenchment within the criminal justice system. Given the multitude and complexity of factors that influence women's entry into - or repeated cycling through - the criminal justice system, gender responsive approaches can and should be applied both at the macro level in terms of how criminal justice systems are designed and function, as well as at facility and community levels in terms of how they operate and deliver programs and services.

The Five CORE Practice Areas of Gender Responsiveness

Gender responsive approaches for women are further operationalized by the Five CORE Practice Areas of Gender Responsiveness, which advise that every program, service, and intervention be relational, strengths-based, trauma-informed, culturally responsive and holistic.



The Five CORE Practice Areas of Gender Responsiveness directly correspond to the defining developmental and ecological realities of women’s lives. They are part of a human dignity framework and can and should be applied at every level of engagement and intervention with justice-involved women.

Being gender responsive in our work with women means uniting and applying The Five CORE Practice Areas of Gender Responsiveness at every level of engagement and intervention. Often discussed as separate areas of implementation, all these areas must be considered when working with women. For example, a program or service cannot be considered gender responsive for women if it is not also trauma-informed. Similarly, a program or service cannot be considered gender responsive if it is not also culturally responsive. Women’s past experiences, including any trauma they may have survived, as well as their diverse identities are very real parts of who they are.

Effective, gender responsive practice requires that we acknowledge the “whole person.” Attending to all Five Practice Areas fosters a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the breadth of gender responsiveness, facilitates successful engagements and interventions with women, and can guide policy and program improvements.

Gender responsive programs integrate all Five Practice Areas at every level of service delivery, from intake, to case planning to re-entry. Additionally, these Five Practice Areas are a useful and practical reference point when developing and evaluating any program, service or intervention. Each Practice Areas is briefly defined below.

Relational

Relational practices are rooted in relational-cultural theory and relational psychology. They acknowledge women’s relational abilities, the centrality of relationships in women’s lives, the influence connections and disconnections have on women’s pathways into the criminal justice system, and the critical role that connections play in women’s healing, growth and success. Relational practice includes:

- Treating women with dignity and respect
- Identifying relational strengths and abilities
- Showing empathy and building trust
- Exploring women’s relationships, relationship responsibilities and relationship safety
- Supporting healthy, mutual and empowering relationships with and among women
 - Anticipating the impact of caregiving
 - Collaborating with women and making agreements on how to work together effectively
 - Maintaining healthy and professional boundaries
 - Balancing support and accountability.
 - Using relational language and terminology

Strengths-based

Strengths-based practices involve an intentional movement away from a deficit-based approach, and the tendency to pathologize and criminalize women's survival behaviors. We take the time to collaborate with women to identify and develop their skills and resilience. Strengths-based practice includes:

- Focusing on women's fundamental value
- Paying attention to women's strengths, talents and assets
- Recasting "negative" behaviors as survival behaviors
- Identifying and leveraging existing skills and capacities and teaching relevant skills
- Ensuring opportunities for women to experience healthy power and control
- Ensuring opportunities for women to design and lead programs and interventions
- Connecting women with their community and working with them to identify opportunities to share their strengths and access supports
- Doing the work with women not to women
- Using strengths-based language and terminology

Trauma-informed

Trauma-informed practices incorporate knowledge about the impact of gender-based violence and other forms of abuse and victimization. Trauma-informed practice includes:

- Avoiding triggering trauma reactions and (re)traumatizing practices
- Implementing effective responses to disclosure
- Ensuring system requirements do not trap women in unsafe situations
- Creating safety plans
- Considering every interaction an opportunity to create safety and healing
- Connecting women to healing and advocacy opportunities in their community
- Doing our own work and practicing self-care
- Using trauma-informed language and terminology

Culturally Responsive

Culturally responsive practices involve making a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, adapting to the diversity and the cultural contexts of women, and taking time to reach out to and work alongside diverse stakeholders and communities. They require that we view cultural responsiveness as an ongoing process that begins with cultural humility, cultural awareness, and a commitment to understanding the role that culture plays in women's lives. Culturally responsive practice includes:

- Being aware of our own values and biases
- Valuing diversity and respecting the unique cultural experiences, traditions, and belief systems of the women we work with
- Understanding the concept of intersectionality and applying it to work with women
- Showing interest and being willing to learn
- Making needed adjustments to practices to ensure cultural alignment
- Orienting to social justice
- Using inclusive and culturally responsive language and terminology.

Holistic

Holistic practices involve acknowledging pathways theory and orienting to the larger context of women's lives, and, in turn, the larger context of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Holistic practice includes:

- Understanding women's pathways theory
- Acknowledging and addressing the unique barriers that women face before, during and after system involvement
- Orienting to empowerment, justice and advocacy

The Five CORE Practice Areas of Gender Responsiveness define and operationalize what it means to be gender responsive with women. They can guide policy and program improvements and transform our direct engagements and interventions with women.

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