Risk-Needs Assessments Appropriate for Women Offenders

How relevant are available risk-need assessment instruments for women? Massachusetts administrators and policymakers are asking these questions because they understand that these assessments are used to make key decisions in criminal justice agencies and that women's circumstances must be reflected in these instruments. Further, the national emphasis on applying evidence-based criminal justice tools to policy and practice requires the use of gender-responsive assessment instruments.

Purpose of Risk-Need Assessment (RNA)

RNAs are now used throughout criminal justice and corrections: from sentencing, to community-supervision, to prison and reentry. They are used to measure the severity of addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and threat of suicide; and to decide on treatment, programs, and resource allocation. They are usually constructed of several 'sub-scales' measuring a variety of static factors (age, gender, previous criminal history); and dynamic factors (education, skills, health, relationships) and summarized in a total score.

- *Classification and Security (Risk-focus)*

Classification systems are most commonly thought of as tools used to predict offenders' risk to others, and are used primarily in decisions on bail (e.g., domestic violence cases), sentencing, and prisoners' custody status (maximum, medium or minimum). The decision-making criteria include severity of offense, criminal history and likely institutional conduct.

- *Resources Needed (Need-focus)*

Most instruments now include a needs assessment component to allow offenders' medical, mental health, educational and other needs to be measured objectively. These tools assist in decision-making involving staff training, making referrals, and purchasing resources.

- *Predictive (recidivism-focus)*

The movement to reduce the size and cost of prison populations has resulted in a focus on collecting data on offenders based on evidence-based practices that are linked with successful outcomes and lower recidivism rates. These factors are now built in to some RNA instruments.

Validity, Reliability, and Relevance of RNA for Women

The very rapid growth of women entering all phases of the criminal justice system, and their high recidivism rates (over 40% being re-imprisoned within three years) had led many scholars and practitioners to carefully examine the RNA instruments being used with women. There is a growing recognition that many instruments do not reflect women's offenses (85% non-violent), circumstances (75% are mothers), and experiences (extremely high rates of abuse, trauma, and mental illness).

- G*ender-neutral* instruments are those most frequently in use; and their relevance for women lies in the fact that they are based on the static factors that apply to most offenders (see Figure 1, non-shaded items). Although their validity in predicting outcomes for men may be high, it is unlikely they are predictive of women's outcomes. They skew women's risk scores because they are inflated by women's substance abuse and trauma histories. The scores more likely indicate women's high need for services and the possibility of self-harm rather than that of being a danger to others.
- *Gender-responsive* instruments are those that have made some accommodations to *factors that particularly affect women, e.g.,* how many children they have and their custody status; experience of sexual abuse; as a child, adolescent, and adult (see Figure 1, grey-shaded areas).
- *Women -centered instruments are those that are grounded in women's lives and circumstances rather than adjusted or adapted to them. They are informed by the prevalence of poverty, trauma, poor health, education and skill levels; and relationship difficulties. A few such instruments are available (See Figure 1, blue shaded areas); and many are located in the areas of substance abuse, mental health, and other "vulnerable" women.*

Thus, while several of the best-known RNAs are "normed" on male and female offenders (e.g. LSIR-R), they omit factors critically important to women. Thus, women often receive high risk scores that are more reflective of their high need (based on addictions) rather than being a danger to others; i.e., they tend to be over-classified, and under-treated.

Figure 1 Characteristics of Selected RNA Instruments Used in Criminal Justice & Other Settings

Instrument	Area of Use	Gender Focus	Validity/access
LSIR-R Level of Service Inventory Revised	CJ: Community- Prison	Gender neutral (based on Canadian and US offender pops)	High Proprietary
COMPAS & COMPAS-WOMEN Northpointe	CJ: Pre-trial, Community, Prison, Reentry	Gender-responsive Women-specific variables	High Proprietary
ORAS Ohio Risk Assessment tool	CJ: Community, Prison, Reentry	Gender-responsive Score cutoffs differ for men and women	High No cost; mandatory training
WRNA Women's Risk Need Assessment	CJ: Pretrial, Community, Prison, Reentry	Women-centered	trial in development No cost: mandatory training
Addiction Severity Index	Substance Abuse, Medical	Gender neutral	High
ASAM PPC-2r American Society of Addiction Medicine	Substance Abuse, Medical	Gender neutral	High
BSAS Bureau of Substance Abuse Services	Substance Abuse, Medical;	Culturally Responsive Women-centered	High
GAIN (SAMSHA) GAIN-SS (short screening); Global Appraisal of Individual Needs	CJ, Substance abuse, multiple settings	Gender-responsive	High SAMSHA developed
PTSD Post Traumatic Stress Disorder	CJ, Mental Health Illinois Prisons	Women-centered	
Contemplation Ladders (Motivation)	Substance abuse, welfare, multiple settings	Women-centered , Worker and Client Self-rated	Proprietary
Outcomes STAR (Goal-setting and motivation) **Triangle Consulting**, UK	Women's Centers UK	Women-centered, Worker and self-rated	High, tested in women's programs Proprietary

Summary and Policy Implications

It is important that the nature of the classifying instrument provide an authentic tool for prescribing treatment and family support for women in an environment that feels safe and does not trigger PTSD symptoms. These ingredients are the keys to successful outcomes. Some instruments are proprietary and costly, while others are readily available. In all cases some training in their use is essential. Useful questions policy makers could ask about RNA for women are:

1. What instruments are currently being used by criminal justice agencies, and supporting sectors?
2. How gender-responsive or women-centered are they?
3. What are their goals? And do they address those goals? How costly are they to implement?
4. How do the instrument scores inform resource referrals?
5. Are there adequate levels of resources to meet women's defined needs?
6. Are women's services offered in a safe and trustworthy environment?
7. Are monitoring and evaluation efforts in place to document implementation and outcomes?
8. Who or what entity is in place to collect and analyze this information?