WORKING WITH WOMEN (PEOPLE) FROM GANGS: COMPLEXITY AND CHALLENGE

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Mention the word 'gang' in New Zealand and controversy is never far away. Many people conjure up thoughts of gang retaliation, indiscriminate violence and fear. While gang members and their associates draw emotive responses from the public, the police struggle with budget and resource constraints to monitor gangs and limit gang-related crime. The latest developments have police and politicians raising concern about gang-related organised crime, particularly the manufacture and distribution of drugs. The police use gang issues when lobbying for funds and staff, and politicians shamelessly employ 'get tough on gangs and crime' themes to elicit votes or power.

These developments do little to solve the gang problems and, as will be shown, families, communities, and members of society need to take some responsibility for the existence of gangs[1] and 'gang problems' we face. The pathway to gang membership and association often weaves through a web of social disadvantage, family violence, and racism. Gangs temporarily meet some people's needs and provide a sense of belonging and security. In time people tend to move on. Disengaging from gang culture is not easy and gaining support for change can be difficult. Many social service workers feel challenged, with a degree of unease when faced with the complexity of working with people from gangs.

In this context, workers and clients must overcome huge barriers before positive change can be negotiated and achieved. Gang-related women present with or without particular vulnerabilities and, while some women shift from gangs easily with support from family and community connections, others do not. Some women come under threat and the process of change is complex and can be dangerous. Working with

female associates has specific considerations that must be understood and addressed to ensure that safety and individual needs are met. The basis of the information provided in this chapter comes from my own experience with gang culture, from discussions with those who work closely with gangs, from former and current members, and most importantly from the women interviewed during my thesis work on women's experiences in New Zealand gangs.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide information and a framework for the exploration of worker/agency practice when engaging with women from gangs. I offer basic information on gang culture, explore the barriers to positive engagement and offer suggestions for generating a collaborative working relationship with the gang-related client. While the focus here will remain on women, many of the issues are no less relevant to engagement with men from gangs. Before we proceed, some understanding of gang culture and the functions that gangs fulfil is required.

Gangs in New Zealand society

Gangs have been a part of our social landscape since the colonial period, but gangs as we know them today saw their genesis in the 1960s and 1970s. Motorcycle gangs such as Highway 61, Devil's Henchmen and Epitaph Riders were influenced by the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) of USA. The HAMC's fourth chapter and the first outside California was set up in Auckland 1961. Having formed as motorcycle clubs with strong leadership and formal structures, many of these gangs still exist today. The emergence of ethnic gangs at this time — Mongrel Mob, Black Power, Storm Troopers, King Cobras and so forth — arose out of social factors linked to urbanisation in the 1950s and 1960s. This led to the breakdown of traditional extended family/whānau support networks that Māori and Pacific peoples valued. Of these ethnic groups, Black Power and the Mongrel Mob have become national networks and are New Zealand's largest gangs in terms of membership. Gangs with a white supremacist base, while existing since the 1970s, have grown steadily in several countries since the 1980s. In America, the increase in these groups has been linked to workforce restructuring and the massive lay-offs and redundancies among the white working class (World News Tonight, TV3, 24 Feb 1999). In NZ, these groups have been described as society's "poor white people" (Ansley 1997:29) who feel angry, alienated and rejected by a society that ignores their position and struggle. These groups may also be a reaction to the renaissance of Māori identity that occurred since the

1970s. Nevertheless, gangs like the Fourth Reich and the Hammer Skins tend to remain small and close-knit networks.

The 1990s saw the emergence of adolescent street gangs, largely modelled on the Los Angeles style 'homeboy' gangs such as the Bloods and the Crips. Many of these groups, influenced by trends in music, videos and movies such as Boyz 'n the Hood (1991), remain relatively small with fluid structures and informal leadership. Today, 'boy racers' (youth with high-powered cars who gather in industrial areas for races and burnouts) have become problematic for some. Adolescent street gangs or cliques in various forms tend to wax and wane over time and will continue to be a part of youth culture in urban New Zealand. Some gangs, however, have become quasi-institutions with a degree of permanence, and their members' involvement in violence and organised crime attracts considerable police attention (Dennehy 2000; Dennehy & Newbold 2001).

Gang members' involvement in criminal activity is well-known and warrants little discussion here other than to mention that there is a clear distinction between 'gang business' (activities that generate profit for the gang itself) and gang members' criminal activity that is undertaken personally or collectively for the benefit of the individuals concerned. As elsewhere in society, the more powerful gang members tend to exploit the less powerful, and profits from crime are not evenly distributed across the gang. Gang membership, nevertheless, provides a willing pool of criminal entrepreneurs well versed in the 'code of silence' who understand the consequences of narking on fellow members or associates. Threat plays a significant part in gang culture, and operates as an informal social control mechanism that increases group solidarity and cohesiveness (Decker & Van Winkle 1996). This facilitates co-operation where illegal dealings are concerned. Violence or the threat of violence, mythical or real, pervades gang life so much that a certain level of tension dominates in individuals' daily lives. The threat of violence not only controls those in the gang, it also supports in-group and out-group divisions, which are subsequently reinforced by police pressure and the wider public's denunciation of gang life. As gang violence is often exaggerated or excessive in its nature, gang members' wives or partners and other female associates quickly learn the expected codes of behaviour.

Although philosophy and ideology between gangs and across gang chapters can vary, gangs are predominantly male domains with a strong masculine ethos and cultural base. Most New Zealand gangs do not allow women to become members, to patch up (or wear colours), or to become

involved in club/gang business and decision making. Reports indicate that women are considered weak, pathetic and unreliable. Women tend to be regarded as easily frightened, unpredictable, likely to breakdown under pressure and prone to gossip. Putting it simply, they do not have what it takes, the 'guts' or the 'balls', to become a gang member and to withstand all that the role prescribes. Overall, women are kept in traditional female roles. As men have stated:

> Tāne: They [women] are like servants. It's like in the whole gang scene that I observed; it was like women didn't really play a role other than minding the kids, um, it's a life of servitude.

> (Cited in Dennehy 2000:117)

> Black Power: We don't allow women to be one of the brothers. They are women and we treat them as women, not men.

> Bikers: Women don't have any say in the running of our affairs. We are a total male chauvinist society.

> (Cited in Payne 1997:38-40)

Women from gangs have reported their position as precarious, contradictory and shifting. Their narratives portray gang culture as a site of conflicting states of power and powerlessness, of loyalty and betrayal, and of security and intense vulnerability. A particular woman's place is largely determined by the role or position of her man, whether he has power in the gang, whether he is a full member, prospect or an associate, or whether or not he has managed to maintain a 'rep' (become well-known for his ability to fight). A man is under pressure to keep his 'missus' in line, if not he will be held accountable and she will soon be brought into line by other men or their partners. One woman said:

> I got into trouble. Through my partner, I'd get the bash. If I pissed them [members] off, I'd get the bash from my partner.

> (Cited in Dennehy 2000:121)

Another woman, with some cynicism, described women's position in gang culture in the following way:

> Well yeah, they make you feel like a slave. … They have you running around and they want this and they want that and … yeah…. Um, I think that their women were their women and they just did what they were bloody well told, more or less. It's a good role! Um, just to be subservient to men, um, to be at their beck and call, to do their deeds,

and to not be able to think for yourself, and to be completely vulnerable to want they want.

<div align="right">(Cited in Dennehy 2000:121)</div>

Certainly, women who have spent time within gang culture have reported extremes of violence and abuse. Murder, gang rape, stabbings, shootings, grievous assaults, deadly threats and sickening forms of intimidation have been outlined in the book The Girls in the Gang (Dennehy & Newbold 2001:109). The violence reported included:

- Major bashings resulting in hospitalisation. In one case a woman was paralysed.
- Serious kickings, often with steel-capped boots. In one case a woman was kicked to death.
- Being attacked or threatened with knives, baseball bats, bottles, guns, an axe and a machete.
- Numerous reports of black eyes, blood noses, broken jaws, and broken teeth. In one instance, a woman's face was so badly bruised that her own mother was unable to recognise her.
- Being burned with cigarettes and hot fat.
- Being forcibly injected with an unknown drug.
- Having one's hair cut off.
- Having to clean up other women after they had been beaten or raped.
- Witnessing a gang member being shot.

The list, although not exhaustive, illustrates the tactics used to enhance fear and control women in gangs. It highlights the level of threat that women from gangs endure as an everyday fact of life. To an extent, high levels of violence become normalised. The women adopt rationalisations, justifications, and ways to minimise the violence and its impact, to be able to live with it for a period of time. This puts them in a very ambiguous position, wherein they unwittingly collude with and support violence and abuse on one level, while detesting and rejecting it on another. As gangs are generally known for their violence, many people fail to understand women's predicament. They ask, "Why do women (people) become involved anyway?"

Functions of gangs and benefits of gang association

For some people, gangs perform some functions that the family and community are unable to fulfil and people join gangs for a variety of

reasons. The motivations are similar for joining socially approved groups, such as Christian-based youth groups and sports clubs. An American study found the following factors linked to gang association:

- The search for love, structure, and discipline
- A place of acceptance, belonging and commitment
- The need for recognition and power
- Companionship, training, excitement, and activities
- A place that generates a sense of self-worth and status
- The need for physical safety and protection
- A family tradition

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(Walker, Schmidt, & Lunghofer 1993:504-552
in Lees & Parker 1994:1 of 5)

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These findings are replicated throughout the literature on gangs and New Zealand studies have found that gangs perform similar functions for vulnerable young women and men. Furthermore, gang members often talk of the gang as a family/whānau (see Committee on Gangs 1981; Dennehy & Newbold 2001; Marsh 1982; Payne 1997). Women have expressed similar views:

> Yeah, I think the thing is that my self-esteem was so bloody low. It was terrible actually. I hated myself. I thought, this guy, I'll hang around with him. Yeah, I think it was an escape really, from my family. As far as that goes it was part of an acceptance thing. I mean that's why people are involved with gangs anyway.

> I probably felt a bit of power too, just being with a gang member. … It's like, you know, nobody can touch me, you know, nobody can touch me. 'You touch me, watch out!' sort of thing and that's where, I think the security came in. Yeah, it was to do with that search for security from when I was young. … Yeah, I felt security and had protection … you were just one of them anyway. … I was just basically a part of them, accepted anyway. You just lived it. What they are, the relationship, the togetherness…. All gang people are like that. We're family, yeah.

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(Cited in Dennehy 2000:100-101)

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These women and others interviewed talked about extreme violence and abuse in their families of origin and how the gang provided an avenue of escape. For a time the gang became a surrogate family to them: a place of protection, acceptance, belonging and security. Family violence, sexual abuse, parents with drug and alcohol problems, brutal discipline, lax parenting, parental absence, parental criminality and gang involvement are

among strong risk factors that push people towards gang association and membership. Social, economic, and/or educational disadvantage, broken families and racism all add to these pressures. The lack of rewarding employment opportunities and easily accessible recreational activities for youth from lower socio-economic groupings leads to boredom, frustration and resentment that foster gang association or engagement in other anti-social activities that generate a sense of risk, challenge and excitement. In this sense the rewards of gang life pull people towards the gang. These push and pull factors have been well documented (see Decker & Van Winkle 1996:56-84, 230-260; Fergusson 1998:6-9; Fergusson & Lynskey 1997:624, 627-629; Rutter, Giller & Hagell 1998:169-214; Somer 1999:451-453).

Sooner or later, however, the benefits gained through gang member-ship and associations diminish. The haven that once provided belonging, excitement and security often turns into a cavern of despair; women can become totally alienated from family and friends. The sense of isolation increases when gang members and their associates are rejected and denounced by other members of society. The violence and abuse, or living with constant threat, take their toll and when this happens some women question their lives or consider the impact of gang life on their children. Moving away from gangs or leaving a gang member partner is not easy and barriers must be negotiated before positive change can occur. Understanding these barriers is important and works to foster a supportive relationship when gang-related women seek social service assistance.

Barriers to change

There are several reasons women tied up in gang culture seek to change their lives, just as women in violent relationships outside the gang context come to seek freedom from fear and abuse. Many factors merge and accumulate to render the violence intolerable. For example, some women begin to 'see death' — their own or their partner's — as inevitable, and this perception brings a sense of urgency to the desire for change. Sometimes a major bashing facilitates change through the arrest and imprisonment of the offender, or the woman is hospitalised and support becomes available. The impact of violence, abuse, crime and gang culture itself on the children becomes clear. This reality often hits home when the children use violence themselves or display attitudes that show their acceptance of violence and abuse. Sometimes a woman's partner rejects her, or he makes the decision to leave the gang.

Girish Lala (1996) found that gang members themselves begin to question gang life and seek change when they grow tired of confrontation, of looking over their shoulders, or of having the police constantly breathing down their necks. They too reflect on the negative impact of violence and abuse on their lives and their families. Many decide that they want something better for their children.

In time the women begin to make sense of their victimisation, find that coping strategies no longer work, or recognise the reality of their world. They then face the challenge of seeking change, but this is no easy task. Women in violent relationships, whether gang-related or not, face many barriers when they attempt to leave. These include:

- Fear, based on experience or repetitive threats of more or worse violence
- Low self-esteem, depression, shame, guilt and self-blame
- Being afraid of being alone
- Feeling isolated with little or no support
- Having to go through the courts and doubts about the usefulness of getting protection orders
- Police inaction or fear that police help will make the situation worse
- His promises of reform or his attempts to change through counselling, attending violence prevention programmes, giving up or limiting drug or alcohol usage
- His threats, direct or implicit, of suicide or his announced vulnerability
- The woman's own use of drugs or alcohol
- Having nowhere to go, not knowing how to access support and information, and lack of understanding from family, friends, employers and so on
- Religious, spiritual, cultural beliefs and wanting to make the marriage/relationship work and to keep the family together
- Not wanting to give up financial security
- Costs of moving, and new accommodation (bonds, high rents, connecting utilities, etc)
- The prospect of managing on a limited income and not wanting to be dependent on others or the State, and the stigma associated with becoming a beneficiary
- Negative stereotypes relating to single parenthood and solo mums

- Others' disbelief or negative and blaming attitudes
- Being afraid the abuser will get custody of the children, or concerns about taking them away from their father
- Wrong time (waiting for the children to get older, etc) and facing the prospect of raising children alone

(Douglas 1998:89-94, 175-192)

Gang-related women face further burdens when leaving dangerous relationships as the gang culture itself can bring additional issues to work through. For example, women interviewed for my thesis (Dennehy 2000:188) and The Girls in the Gang (Dennehy & Newbold 2001:134), said that:

- They were afraid of gang retaliation, violence and intimidation
- The gang's network systems made it feel like there was nowhere to hide
- Suspicion and not knowing who to trust, or who might have gang connections, hindered change
- They were concerned about other gang members and associates who would support the abusive offender
- They were afraid/terrified of being stalked, harassed or found by partner or other gang members
- Outsiders, including social service workers, had refused to provide help when asked on previous occasions or did not want to get involved with people connected to gangs
- Outsiders lacked understanding of gang life
- Isolation from family and friends limited options
- Gang members and associates were not afraid of the police or the law
- Gang women had little or no confidence in the police, or police protection initiatives
- Women had internalised gang cultural beliefs and attitudes which made it difficult to imagine life, let alone live life, away from the gang
- Obtaining court orders or getting others involved could increase the risk of more harm or bring harm to family members
- Getting police involved was considered narking, and getting court orders felt like narking.

Many gang-related women are reluctant to approach social service agencies for support. Obviously, some who do have positive experiences and are

grateful for the assistance they receive but many report that social service workers' negative responses are blocks which make leaving an abusive gang member partner, or the gang scene, difficult. Understanding the women's perceptions about social service responses will provide a basis from which we can consider whether worker responses hinder the forming of a positive working relationship with women from gangs.

When women from gangs reach out for assistance they find the experience both daunting and challenging. In the first instance they are aware of public perception of those involved with gangs and feel stigmatised and rejected because of this. Feelings of shame, guilt and confusion emerge along with frustration over not knowing where to go to get support. Having decided to ask for help, many women prepare themselves for rejection, ridicule or a barrage of humiliating questions. Gang-related women are well informed about the times their peers have been turned away from social services because of their gang association and some report being told that they cannot be supported because they are gang affiliated. They know that women's refuges and other social service agencies have to keep other women and children safe and that their presence represents a threat. They also know that some social service workers fear the consequences of working with them. It is important to bear in mind that these women do not necessarily intend to put others at risk, but they may have nowhere else to turn.

Gang-related women report that some, but not all, social service workers have a limited understanding of how gang culture operates, and how it impacts on the women's lives. They also report general mis-understanding about why women become involved with gangs, and that the excessive nature of violence and the role of threat tend to be dismissed. This lack of understanding may be conveyed explicitly, through body language, or suggestions and advice that may actually increase the risk. Sometimes the worker does not take into account that the women may have internalised the cultural values of the gang — their ability to follow the advice given is limited. This often occurs when off-the-cuff recommend-ations are made which suggest that the women involve the police to lay a complaint or to take out protection orders. The women tend to feel that their fears and understandings of the situation have been cast off, which reinforces their sense of powerlessness when seeking change.

Women have talked about disbelief from social service workers when they relate their experiences with gangs. Gang women sense scepticism and negativity when they attempt to convey their narrative. This not only

silences them but also invalidates their reality. Some workers have been known to impose their own theories of such events over those that the women have gained themselves. Clearly, any theory becomes problematic if the women themselves cannot relate to it and, rather than becoming a source of empowerment, the theory becomes another inhibiting factor.

On the other hand, gang-related women tend to be resilient, and when they have a chance to explore their lives in a safe and non-judgemental environment they can be supported to find solutions for themselves. Through their experiences they have often developed astute intuition that can guide them to find solutions that meet their needs and provide maximum safety. Social service workers can provide a safe environment for this exploration so that possible solutions can be discussed and reflected on. Social service workers need to reflect on their assumptions, attitudes and practices, as well as agency policy and protocol, to ensure they do not collude in limiting productive processes that foster change. They need to remember that change is a process, a journey that involves discovery, learning and the taking of risks. Often it becomes a passage into uncharted territory that is merely guided or supported through communication, rather than shared by the social service worker involved. At the end of the day gang-related women know they must make the journey alone.

Blocks to effective engagement/practice (worker/agency perspective)

When reflecting on practice processes, social service workers need to consider their beliefs and attitudes towards gangs, women in gangs, gang members and their associates. Personal assumptions may be the largest barrier to fostering a productive working relationship. Many questions arise and need thorough reflection if any real support is to be offered. For example:

- Do we have any blocks/restraints that stop us from hearing the narratives and experiences of our gang-related clients?
- What are our assumptions about gang life and the people involved and do they hinder positive engagement?
- Do we have concerns about the consequences for us if we help a woman leave an abusive gang member partner, testify in court, negotiate change, or find an alternative support network?
- Do we have fears about supporting gang members or their associates in a similar vein?
- How does our fear or lack of understanding manifest itself when facing

our client and does our response create mistrust or uncertainty?

- Can we be true to ourselves and work in a collaborative way that offers the maximum benefit for our client while minimising risk of harm to ourselves, our client or others?
- Can we stay present, accepting the client's anger, fears and processes as part of a reflective journey that needs to be worked through?
- Can we work collaboratively to set clear boundaries and negotiate a way of working that is productive for all?
- Can we make the hard calls and challenge without fear of reprisal when negotiated agreements have been violated?
- Can we accept feedback when our way of working becomes a struggle for the client?
- When mandated clients are gang-related, how do we navigate the contradictory care and control positions that we encounter?
- Does our agency protocol and policy limit our involvement and the way we work with people from gangs?

Answers to these questions and other reflections about practice will help build working relationships with people from gangs. Obviously some ways of working facilitate the relationship better than others. The following tips may be useful when working with women/people from gangs; there is no doubt that they help develop collaborative partnerships between social service workers and their clients generally.

Negotiating effective engagement & practice

That there is no right way of working with women from gangs. Each worker needs to reflect on his/her practice, ability and style in appropriate supervision forums. There are various suggestions, however, put forward by those who have worked with gang members or who have had experience in the gang context. These suggestions may facilitate positive outcomes. First, as in many situations, it is important to be aware of personal limitations. If a client demonstrates some type of mental illness or pathology s/he needs to be referred to appropriate services where a team approach is established to cater for client needs, which vary greatly. Secondly, social service workers need to accept a client's understandings of their world and their position in it. This takes empathy and requires the worker to have a genuine interest in the client's reality. Refer the client on to another worker if personal values limit working in this way.

An understanding of gang culture helps workers to frame questions

and reflections in a way that connects with the women. This also makes it easier for clients to relay their experiences. Workers need to have some understanding of the safety issues involved, or at least be willing to accept how the client sees them to ensure that no harm is done. A social service worker should not invalidate a client's fears. The time for challenging problematic beliefs comes later, when trust and understanding have been established.

When attempting to build rapport, it is better to be real, to be straight up, for many people from gangs have developed an ability to 'read' other people. Often this skill has enabled them to survive the journey that they have travelled, and incongruence between the worker's words and body language will be picked up quickly. Genuine, honest and heartfelt reflection or feedback will be more readily accepted than less sincere, politically correct or careful responses. A word of caution, however —gang members and associates are opportunists who come from a world where weakness is preyed upon. Assertiveness is required so workers are not manipulated or intimidated into unsafe practice. Be clear about processes, boundaries and the extent of your involvement in their life. Some argue that the establishment of a collaborative professional relationship is the most crucial and essential element when working with gang-related clients. For that reason, it is important to be sure that the client understands confidentiality issues, the limits of confidentiality and agency protocols when disclosure of information is likely to occur. Remember that respect, honesty, and loyalty are highly valued by women from gangs and gang members, as they are by most people, so do not jeopardise the working relationship by being unclear about boundaries and limits.

Where possible, negotiate a working process so mutual outcomes can be striven for. This may take more time with mandated clients who may be sceptical about the working process and your role in it. In this case, it may be appropriate to explore expectations and possible outcomes, offering sessions as an avenue for exploring options and change. As the American gang researcher, expert witness and professional counsellor Lisa Taylor-Austin (2002:1 of 3) explains, it is not the counsellor's or social worker's job to tell gang-related women, members or associates how to live or what is wrong with their way of life. They can, however, "lead them in examining different aspects of their life so they may come to a decision about whether or not this way of life is 'working for them'."

People who work with gang-related clients successfully tend to employ

an eclectic approach, combining different therapies or models depending on the situation or problems being addressed. Some advocate becoming the 'naive enquirer' to draw on times when the client has made decisions and choices that have led to positive outcomes. This method conveys confidence in the client, no matter what their history or circumstance, and uses their ability, strengths and skills to surmount adversity and work for positive change. Other approaches referred to by those experienced in this area include:

• Narrative Therapy and counselling techniques
• Motivational interviewing
• Cognitive-behavioural techniques
• Albert Ellis's rational-emotive therapy
• Gestalt counselling
• Solution-focused counselling
• The Strengths perspective

The American Bureau of Justice Assistance (1999) advocates using the SARA model of problem-solving when working with community gang problems. This model is applicable to individuals from gangs as well. It can be broken into four stages: scanning, analysis, response and assessment. In the scanning period social service workers can assist clients to look for and identify problems, and their hopes and goals can be accessed. The analysis phase provides time for a thorough exploration of the issues involved. Safety factors need to be thoroughly examined and noted at this point. Concerns may need to be broken down to manageable components before suitable interventions can be found. The response stage has three parts: explore options, select and implement an appropriate solution. The information gathered in the analysis phase facilitates the adoption of strategies that take into account safety concerns and the reality, understandings and values of the gang-related client. In the assessment period, the client and the worker establish whether the intervention strategies have been beneficial or not. Clearly, the practice models referred to earlier provide suitable processes for working through the SARA model. Furthermore, it is easier and more beneficial to work with the client, acknowledging his/her self-identity, motivations and goals in life, and to foster a sense of hope, for without hope and co-operation, facilitating change becomes difficult if not impossible.

Another suggestion is to read as much as possible about gang culture, norms and values. This basic knowledge will assist when attempting to

engage with gang-related clients. These understandings will work to ensure gang-related women's safety issues are not dismissed or placed in the too-hard basket. Knowledge related to national and international relocations and the processes that determine suitability are important as well. Social service workers will need to liaise with the police, the National Collective of Women's Refuges and Work & Income NZ on suitability for international relocation, as strict criteria exist. Relocations can only be achieved in certain circumstances and the woman concerned must have exhausted all avenues of safety available in this country before she will be considered for international relocation.

Networking with those who have worked effectively with women from gangs, gang members and their associates can be a way to increase knowledge. Workers may consider discussions with former or current gang members and associates, police liaison officers and detached social workers who sometimes work with gangs. Knowledge of appropriate referral sources for gang-related clients should be developed and networking facilitates the referral process.

Conclusion

Although the gang world can be complex, contradictory and frightening, gang life is likely to be a transitional experience. In time, members and associates often reduce their involvement or move away and very few remain affiliated for their entire lives. Many gang-related individuals have reported securing positive and fulfilling lives, with minimal or no gang connections after disengagement. The process of moving on, however, is often difficult.

Working with women or men from gangs is especially challenging when their lives have been dominated by threat and excessive violence. Establishing trust and negotiating collaborative working relationships with people from gangs is important, if not vital, if positive outcomes are to ensue. Developing an understanding of gang culture based on members' and associates' experience will help build positive working relationships. Therapeutic models that validate the client's reality and understanding of the world, which draw on the client's strengths, resilience, skills and resources, and foster a sense of hope, will facilitate positive outcomes. Every individual, family or group, not excluding gangs, has strengths that can be drawn on to encourage and support clients through change.

1   The term *gang* has been the subject of much debate, and definitions vary. Definitions can be positioned on a continuum representing the law-abiding legitimate groups at one end, through to the illegitimate organised crime networks at the other, with a vast range of groups in between. The term as used here denotes a range of gangs well-known and established in NZ society such as Black Power, Highway 61, the Mothers, the Mongrel Mob, the Devil's Henchmen, Road Knights, the Fourth Reich etc.