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ACT Women and Prisons

Invisible Bars: The Stories behind the Stats

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About Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc.

The Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM) is a not for profit incorporated association that works with women in the ACT and surrounding region, with a focus on women who are at risk of social isolation. WCHM uses health promotion, community development, and capacity building to provide information and skills that empower women to enhance their own health and wellbeing. WCHM undertakes research and advocacy to influence systems' change with the aim to improve women's health and wellbeing outcomes. WCHM is funded by ACT Health.

About ACT Women and Prisons Group

The ACT Women and Prisons Group (WAP) is made up of women with lived experience of prison, including ex-prisoners and those currently detained in the criminal justice system, as well as ACT women's services and other interested women. WAP advocates for the human rights of all women involved in the criminal justice system and provides them with emotional and practical support both during and after incarceration.

Authors

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Deb's Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that this project was conducted on, and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and future.

My deepest admiration and sincere appreciation goes to the women who participated in this project by sharing their lived experiences. Thank you for your time and your trust in sharing your deepest adversities with me. I would also like to acknowledge the many other women whose stories have not been listened to, but who have suffered just the same. This paper is for you, your families and friends.

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Where it all Began...

Australia has a long history of institutionalising its inhabitants, beginning from the moment of colonisation. For the thousands of men, women and children who came to Australia as convicts, Australia itself was a prison.

Throughout the 20th century this practice of institutionalisation continued, with an estimated 500,000 children and young people sent to live in orphanages or out-of-home 'care'. These people came to be known as the Forgotten Australians and were the subject of a 2004 Senate Inquiry into the physical, emotional and sexual abuse that they experienced. Some of the Forgotten Australians came from the Stolen Generations, those Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families and communities and placed in institutional 'care', fostered out to white families, or made to work in white industry. Others were Child Migrants, who came to Australia as unaccompanied young people under the guise of employment opportunities. Many Forgotten Australians were young women who were found guilty, not of any crime, but of being 'exposed to moral danger'. This so called moral danger could result from virtually anything, including having a single parent, truancy from school, or hanging out with the 'wrong' people.

Australia's culture of institutionalisation remains today, in the form of prisons, remand centres, youth detention centres, mental health facilities and immigration detention centres to name a few. While this paper focuses mainly on women with lived experience of prison, it argues that prisons cannot be considered in isolation from other institutions and outside the greater context of Australia's history. The reality is that the majority of Australians in prison today have experienced some form of institutional or out-of-home 'care' as young people. There is significant evidence to suggest that institutionalisation has a profoundly negative impact on people's health and well-being, which continues long after they return to the community. Unsurprisingly, the status of Australian women with lived prison experience is frighteningly poor, with research showing that they are more likely to have mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems and to have experienced physical, emotional and sexual violence than women in the broader community.

This paper presents the stories of six ACT women with a variety of lived prison experiences. While these courageous women told their stories as part of this project, it is acknowledged that there are many more women, who for a variety of reasons have not yet had the opportunity to do so. Information was also gathered from eight ACT women's service providers who regularly support women with lived experience

of prison and institutionalisation. The experiences of all of these women were recorded, and the content analysed using a technique known as 'thematic analysis.' Through this analysis, 12 core themes and 10 sub-themes were identified in the women's conversations. These themes are discussed and a variety of literature is presented to support and validate the women's experiences. Following this discussion, a section is dedicated to understanding Australia's history of institutionalisation and the impacts it has had on women with lived prison experience. The paper concludes with a statement of commitment from the agencies involved, which details how they will work together to move forward in addressing the unmet needs of these women.

The information gathered in this paper provides significant insight into the impact that imprisonment and institutionalisation has had on these women's lives. The Women's Centre for Health Matters (WCHM) and the ACT Women and Prisons Group (WAP) hope that this information will assist counselors, social workers, case managers and other professionals who support women with lived prison experience to better meet their needs. The paper will also be a useful resource for community groups who want to undertake similar activities that allow other marginalised group to have their stories listened to.

Brief Facts

16.7%	of ACT women are at risk of social isolation.[a]
14,300	women in the ACT experience economic disadvantage.[b]
14.7%	of women in the ACT experience 'high' or 'very high' levels of psychological distress.[b]
1,907	women are in Australian prisons (at last count).[c]
1 in 4	women in Australian prisons are Aboriginal.[d]
82%	of women in Australian prisons are survivors of incest, rape or physical assault; this rate rises to 90% among Aboriginal women.[e]
38,000	Australian children experience parental incarceration each year.[f]
50%	50% of women in Australian prisons were placed in out-of-home 'care' as children and young people. Of these women, 25% were detained in a youth detention centre as young people.[g]
$336	is the daily cost of keeping a prisoner at the new ACT Prison.[h]
$9.6 billion	is the amount that Australia spent on criminal justice in 2006-07.[c]

Data sources: (a) Maslen 2008a, 8; **(b)** Maslen 2008b, 12, 16; **(c)** Australian Institute of Criminology 2009, 90; **(d)** Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004, 187; **(e)** Sisters Inside 2005, 9; **(f)** Quilty et al 2004, 339; **(g)** Kilroy 2001, 3; **(h)** Sherlock in Canberra Times, 2nd March, 2008.

Listening to Women's Stories...

About the women who participated

A total of 18 women from the ACT participated in this project. Six of these women shared their lived experiences of prison and other institutions, which included juvenile detention centres, mental health/psychiatric facilities and children's homes. The other 12 women represented eight ACT women's services, and shared their experiences of supporting women with lived experiences of prison and other institutions. One service provider supported refugee women in the ACT and spoke about imprisonment in the context of immigration detention centres. For the purposes of this paper it was felt that this was relevant information as the conditions and culture of prisons and mandatory detention centres are in many cases similar.

The type of sample used in project is known as a 'non-probability' sample, as the women were identified and chosen with knowledge of their lived experiences. It would not have been appropriate to use a random sample in this project because women with lived prison experience only make up a very small percentage of the ACT population. For this reason, this paper does not suggest that its findings will be representative of the whole population, although many women with similar lived experiences to those in the sample are likely to strongly identify with the issues raised.

How the women's stories were collected and analysed

Informal interviews were conducted with all of the women who participated; these interviews are referred to as 'conversations' throughout the paper. This method was chosen instead of more formal interviews so that the process could be flexible, open and allow many topics, perspectives and meanings to be explored. There was no time limit on the conversations and structured interview questions were only used sparingly, this encouraged the women to share as much or as little as they liked. The average length of the conversations was about 2 hours.

The women's conversations were recorded and transcribed using a 'thematic analysis'. Using this technique, the following core themes and sub-themes were identified.

- Inter-generational cycles
- Culture
- Childhood trauma (including sub-themes of sexual abuse and abandonment)
- Adulthood trauma (including sub-themes of sexual abuse and domestic violence)
- Self-worth (including sub-themes of guilt, shame and fear)
- Social isolation/Connectedness
- Skills
- Drug and alcohol issues
- Psychological health (including a sub-theme of self-harm/suicide)
- Rules, policies and procedures (including sub-themes of compliance and defiance)
- The 'merry-go-round'
- Cost

The content of each conversation was then analysed according to these themes. Each conversation was coded depending on whether the women:

- Confirmed the theme was relevant to their experiences;
- Confirmed the theme was *not* relevant to their experiences; or
- Did not discuss or confirm/deny the theme in their experiences.

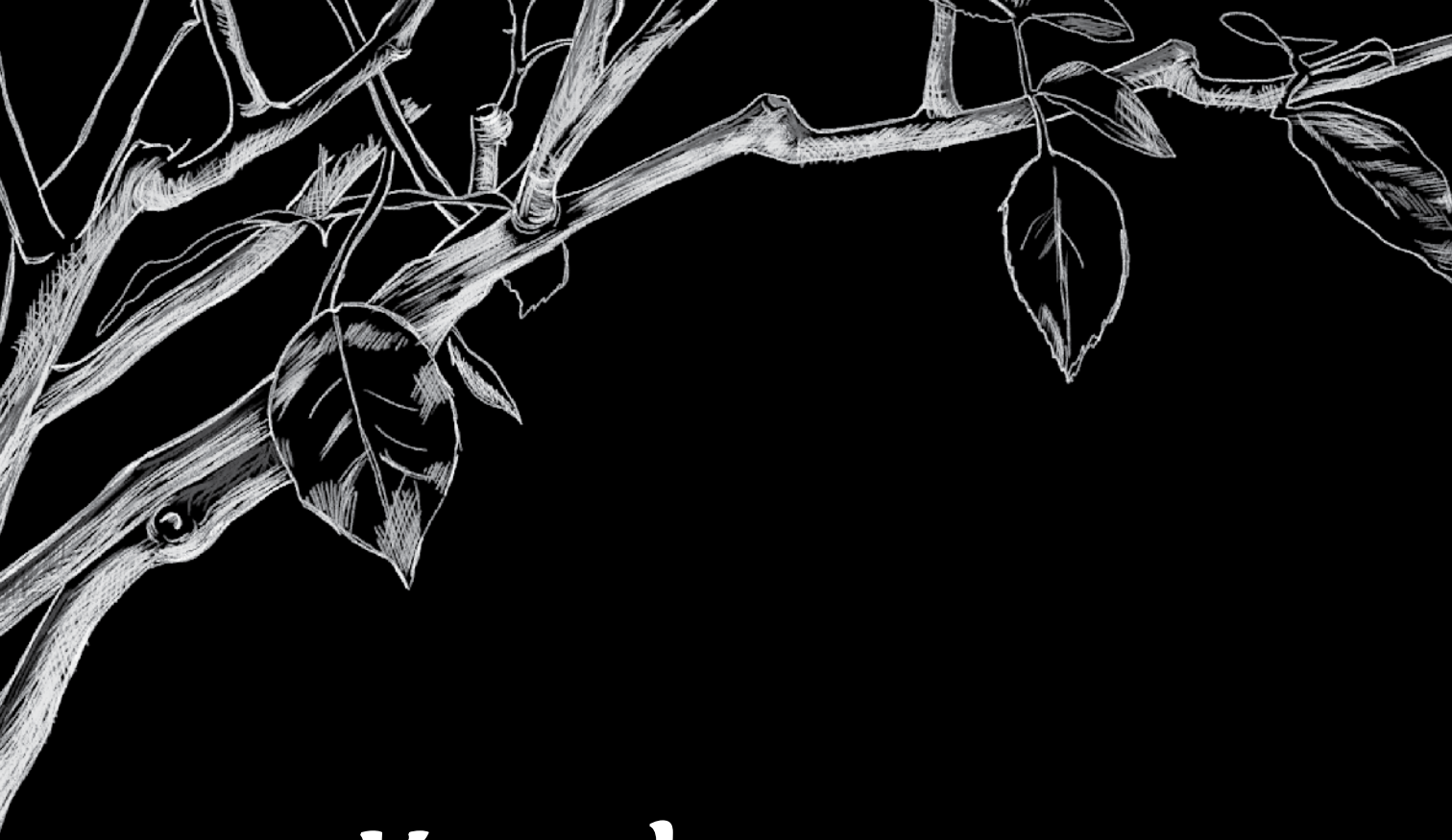
Finally, the themes raised by the women were supported through a review of relevant literature. The purpose of this literature review was to support the information provided by the women who participated and demonstrate where it was consistent with research about women in Australia more broadly.

How the women's privacy was protected

Ethical considerations were highly regarded throughout the entire process. These included maintaining the anonymity of the women, protecting the confidentiality of their information at all times, ensuring they were fully informed about how their information would be used, obtaining their informed consent to participate and allowing them to withdraw from project at any time. These standards were consistent for the WCHM Code of Conduct (2008), and the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (1999).

Acknowledging bias

Deb's own lived experience as a Forgotten Australian, moving on to a merry-go-round of prisons and other forms of institutionalisation has had a profound impact on her life. It is acknowledged that this lived experience will have resulted in a certain amount of bias throughout this project and in the development of this paper, including in the conducting the literature review, choosing the sample of women, and analysing the data. Rather than being a weakness of the report, Deb's own personal experiences provided a depth and richness to the research process that would not have otherwise been possible. An independent person also edited the report in an attempt to counter this bias.



Key themes...

The following themes were identified by the women who participated.

Inter-generational Cycles

"I see a lot of myself in her; the choices she makes, her feelings of less than, her total lack of self worth, it is the same as I was in my life."

– A woman talking about her eldest daughter.

The majority of the individual women who participated identified inter-generational cycles as a theme that was relevant in their lives. Some of the women spoke of these generational impacts in regards to their own childhood experiences and over half identified the impacts that their prison experience had had on their children. All of the women who were mothers acknowledged their desire for their children not to go through the same trauma they had. For example, one woman said "I had been exposed to alcoholism and drug abuse, domestic violence and sexual abuse from the time I was born and now I was exposing my own children." Another women stated "It is like watching a mirror image of my life through my daughter… she will not accept help or speak of the abuse." Of the ACT women's services who participated, three quarters stated that they frequently see inter-generational patterns in the work they do with institutionalised women. A woman from one of these services stated "We now see young women who were born in institutions; their parents were institutionalised and some of them are even staying in the same refuges as their parents."

The stories of inter-generational cycles told by the women are supported by a significant body of evidence which suggests that the children of prisoners are not only more likely to develop physical health, mental health and behavioural health problems (Gabel 1992a, Kingi, 1999), but often go on to become involved in the criminal justice system themselves (Gabel, 1992b; Maruna, 2001; Woodward 2003; VACRO, 2000).

The impact that parental incarceration has on children does not begin and end with each prison sentence. Instead, it has been suggested by Quilty et. al. that there is a 'chain of adversity' facing children whose parents spend time in prison:

> First, the child often undergoes the trauma of witnessing their parents' crime and arrest. These children, along with the offender's entire family, are then disrupted in many psycho-social aspects through the judicial and sentencing process. Children then face a host of social and demographic adversities while their parent is incarcerated. Finally, when their incarcerated parent is released, these children's lives are disrupted once again as the offender is reintegrated into the family and society as a whole (2004, 342).

It has been estimated that Australia wide, approximately 38,000 children experience parental incarceration each year (Quilty et. al., 2004). It should be noted that in the 5 years since this estimation was made, the number will have almost certainly increased. Like many aspects of the criminal justice system, Indigenous Australians are overrepresented in this area, with 20 percent of children experiencing parental incarceration being Indigenous (Quilty et. al., 2004). Considering the overrepresentation of Indigenous adults in Australia's prison system, and evidence which suggests that children of prisoners are more likely to go to prison themselves, the problem of Indigenous imprisonment appears self-perpetuating. Researchers in this area have suggested that the generational impacts of imprisonment must be addressed through more humane prisons that provide opportunities for inmates to maintain healthy contact with their families and children (Quilty et. al., 2004; Goulding, 2004).

Culture

I do not know where my behaviour or thinking comes from; I am missing something, a part of my identity.

– A black woman talking about being adopted into a white family.

Culture was mentioned by most of the individual women in a variety of contexts, including ethnicity, family heritage and traditional beliefs. Three quarters of the women's services who participated also acknowledged Culture as being an important issue and something that had ongoing impacts on the lives of the women they supported. One service provider said "there is so little understanding of cultural differences, and to be fully supportive this needs to be addressed. Especially around how different cultures perceive and practice parenting skills." Significant research has been conducted on the impact of women's Culture on their prison experience, which can be broken into two main themes: issues for Indigenous women, and issues for women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The culture of the prison environment, which affects women prisoners regardless of their ethnic background, is also acknowledged and is discussed further in the section on 'Rules, Policies and Procedures'.

The over-representation of Indigenous people in the Australian prison system is well evidenced. In 2006, the Indigenous imprisonment rate was nearly 16 times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous people (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2007). Aboriginal women are also overrepresented, with 1 in 4 women prisoners identifying as Aboriginal (ABS, 2004). In some geographical areas, the overrepresentation of Aboriginal women is nothing short of extreme; for example, in Western Australia, an Indigenous women is 40 times more likely to be in prison than a non-Indigenous woman (Goulding, 2007). Given their unique spiritual connection with their country and kin, it would be reasonable to suggest that Indigenous women are uniquely affected by the displacement and forced removal from family and community that occurs while they are in prison. This is particularly relevant in the ACT where, until very recently, there has not been a women's prison. This has meant that ACT women who were sent to prison were forced to move

away from their communities, exacerbating their social exclusion. Unfortunately, forced removal from their families and communities is not new to Indigenous Australians, and for many is a blatant reminder of the policies, which until the late 1900's, saw countless Aboriginal children taken from their families (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). Some suggest that the incarceration of Aboriginal women in prisons is culturally inappropriate as the confinement of these women replicates the control and suppression of Aboriginal people by white colonisers from the time of first contact (Sisters Inside, 2004).

Women from CALD backgrounds also face systemic discrimination within the Australian prison system. It should also be noted that, while not covered fully by this paper, 'prison' for many asylum seeking women can be experienced both in an immigration detention centre as a well as a conventional prison. For many women from non-English speaking backgrounds, the prison experience is one of 'desperate isolation' (Estreal, 1992). A study of CALD women prisoners in QLD found that 84.6 per cent saw 'language and cultural barriers' as their worst experience in prison (Kilroy, 2003). The isolation faced by CALD women was further exacerbated by the fact that 100 per cent of the women in the study said that their prison induction was the first and last time they had access to an interpreter (Kilroy, 2003). The isolation faced by CALD women in prison is often ingrained in prison policies; for example, the induction process for non-English speaking women in QLD prisons is often lengthy and complicated because prison officers rely on telephone interpreters rather than face-to-face interpreters (Kilroy, 2003). Other factors which negatively impact on CALD women in prison include lack of access to culturally appropriate food, religious services and cultural celebrations (Kilroy, 2003).

Childhood Trauma

"My uncle was my first abuser when I was ten; there ended up being so many. My mother, Aunty and Uncle were sexually abused in their childhoods. One of my mother's abusers came to live with us and became one of my abusers. All of my sisters have also been abused..."

— An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Childhood trauma was identified as a theme throughout the conversations with the individual women who participated. Within this, two clear sub-themes emerged: childhood sexual abuse and abandonment. All of the women identified as having a lived experience of childhood trauma, stemming from a range of sources including domestic violence, substance abuse, family separation, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. In many cases, the source of childhood trauma came from the home environment, however some women identified institutions as a source of significant childhood trauma.

For example, one woman who was placed in an ACT psychiatric unit at the age of twelve said "in some ways I have been traumatised more in the institutions than on the outside." In addition to the evidence provided by the individual women, three quarters of the service providers that participated identified childhood trauma as an issue for the women they supported.

Abandonment

"I did not cry much in jail but on one occasion the boy's father got re-married and I was gutted as I felt like I was being replaced."

— An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

All of the individual women shared experiences of abandonment in their childhood. One woman recounted that when she was young "mum needed a break and put us all into a home for a few months." Another woman talking about her childhood remembered that she "felt on the outer, it was all about mum and whoever she had in the house at the time." The women's stories were supported by the women's service providers, three quarters of whom acknowledged abandonment to be an issue for the women they supported. Some conceptualised abandonment as something occurring within individual relationships, while others talked about it in a more systemic way. For example, one women's service provider noted that "women can feel abandoned by their community as a whole, as they have been judged to be different from [it]."

Evidence has shown that women in prison often have a history of parental separation and are more likely to have been involved in the child protection system than women in the broader community. While these situations don't account for all feelings of abandonment, they are arguably a significant source. For example, Pollard and Baker (2000) surveyed 70 women in the Metropolitan Women's Correctional Centre (Victoria) and found that 41 percent of the women's parents separated during their childhood or adolescence, with 21 percent being placed in foster care as children and 12 percent in foster care as adolescents. Another study showed that over 50 percent of women in prison were placed 'in care' as children and approximately one quarter had previously been detained in a juvenile detention centre (Kilroy, 2001), further demonstrating that many women in prison have already experienced a lifetime of institutionalisation before they even arrive there.

Sexual Abuse

My dad said 'take her, she is uncontrollable,' so they did.
But no-one asked me why I had changed so much.
Being gang raped was something I did not know how to deal with.

— A woman participant recalling the day that 'welfare came around'.

Over half of individual women who participated declared that they had been victims of childhood sexual abuse. It should also be noted that while some of the individual women did not identify childhood sexual abuse as an issue relevant to them, these women did report experiences that fit within a broader definition of sexual abuse, suggesting that for some of these women, sexual abuse and exploitation was a 'normal' part of their childhood. For example, one woman said "I was thirteen when I started getting into alcohol and drugs and I became a sex worker at the same time," yet she did not recognise this as being sexual abuse. These findings were supported by three quarters of women's service providers who stated that the women they supported had divulged experiences of childhood sexual abuse.

It is unsurprising that so many of the women who participated reported experiences of childhood sexual abuse, as research has found that women in prison are much more likely to have a history of childhood sexual abuse than women in the general community. For example, 60 percent of women in the *1997 NSW Inmate Health Survey*, and 42 percent of women in the *Queensland Women Prisoners Health Survey* reported experiences of childhood sexual abuse (Butler, 1997; Hocking et. al., 2002). It has been shown that experiences of abuse in childhood disrupt the development of coping skills and promote the development of avoidance strategies such as drug use (Briere, 1996). Mullen (1993) also states that abuse inflicted during childhood can "lead to a cycle of trauma and loss, perpetuating self-destructive behaviour," suggesting that for many women, childhood sexual abuse is a catalyst for a lifetime of a trauma.

Adulthood Trauma

"The pain of that experience was what I know today as being my rock bottom.

– A woman talking about her father dying while she was in prison.

Trauma in adulthood was also identified as a theme throughout the conversations with the individual women. Within this, two clear sub-themes emerged: sexual abuse and domestic violence. Every one of the individual women identified as having experienced trauma in their adult lives, describing experiences that occurred both inside and outside of prison. In addition to this, all of the women's service providers acknowledged that the women they support have experienced significant trauma in their lives. When talking about trauma, one service provider said "it is difficult to disentangle the institutionally experienced trauma with people coming out of prison to their previous traumatic experiences."

The stories of the women in this paper, and other research of women in prison should be enough to satisfy most people that imprisonment is a traumatic experience. However, these stories of trauma are further supported by research that has proven that women prisoners are more likely to suffer symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) than male prisoners (O'Brien et. al., 2001) as well as women in the general community (Pollard & Baker, 2000). In their study of 70 women in the Metropolitan Women's Correctional Centre, Pollard and Baker found that:

> ...women prisoners are generally anxious and depressed, have intrusive thoughts, have an impaired sense of self and are likely to externalise their distress by acting out. A significant proportion of the women are likely to have a chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (2000, 12).

Sexual Abuse

"I have been raped a few times; I never reported it as I always blamed myself for being so out of it or in the places I was. I knew the police would do nothing, so it was easier to blame myself than to be treated badly again.

– An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Of the individual women who participated, more than half reported a lived experience of sexual abuse in their adulthood. It should also be noted, as with childhood trauma, that many women shared experiences which could fit the definition of sexual abuse, even though they didn't acknowledge them as such. The individual women's experiences of sexual abuse were supported by the women's service providers, three quarters of whom identified a history of sexual abuse among the women they supported.

Literature demonstrating a correlation between sexual abuse and imprisonment among women is exhaustive. In fact, some research has shown that as many as 89 percent of women in prison have experienced sexual abuse at some point in their lifetime (Sisters Inside, 2005). For many women in prison, the trauma experienced as a result of sexual abuse is exacerbated by prison culture and policies. Of particular concern is the policy of compulsory strip searching among female prisoners, which one advocacy group labelled the "sexual assault of women by the state" and a "degrading and dehumanising practice" (Sisters Inside, 2005, pg. 5).

One woman who participated in this paper spoke of the trauma of being strip-searched in prison:

> It is systemic torture…you're doing this for my safety and to protect me but it really all stems down to sexual abuse…Even though this has happened they will do it again and again they will tell me to strip naked and all these men are at the door watching to make sure I comply and take my clothes off.

It has been demonstrated that strip-searching is an ineffective way of stopping drugs being bought into prisons. For example, between 1999 and 2002 there were 41,728 strip searches performed at the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre, yet only two of these searches discovered any significant contraband (Sisters Inside, 2005). Despite this, drugs continue to be a significant problem within Australian prisons with one survey of women prisoners revealing that 51 percent were still using drugs while in prison (Kilroy, 2001).

Domestic Violence

"At seventeen I believed the domestic violence would stop when I gave birth to our child. It did not and I thought I would never get out of that relationship other than being dead."

— A women talking about domestic violence.

Almost all of the individual women who participated reported having experienced domestic violence as an adult. While sharing her story, one woman said "all my childhood and young adult life I had been exposed to and involved in domestic violence. After seven years of a domestic violence relationship I was really at the point of hating the way I was living." Another woman said "I knew I could not handle being locked up again and I knew what he would do to me if I went home empty handed. So I just got on a train, I did not know anyone to go to but it did not matter, I could not go back". Of the women's services who participated, three quarters acknowledged that the women they supported were affected by domestic violence.

Research demonstrates that women in prison are much more likely to have experienced domestic violence than women in the broader community (Goulding, 2004; Kilroy, 2001; Kilroy, 2003). For example, a 2004 study of women prisoners in WA showed that 81 percent had acknowledged histories of family and/or domestic violence (including both physical and sexual abuse), however the number may have been much higher as many women did not consider 'general slapping or the occasional punch or pushing around' as physical abuse (Goulding, 2004). Similar statistics were reported among a sample of CALD women in a Brisbane prison, with 76.9 percent reporting that they had been subjected to domestic violence (Kilroy, 2003). A study of women prisoners in Victoria showed that in the 12 months prior to imprisonment alone, over 30 percent of all young women and 17 percent of older women had been physically hurt by their partner (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2004).

Self-Worth

"I felt like I was scum of the earth and felt like I wasn't worthy of much, but I truly believed my children were worthy."

— An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Self-worth was a clear theme throughout the women's conversations, with every single one of the individual women who participated sharing feelings of low self-worth, not only in their past but also in the present. Within this core theme, the sub-themes of guilt, shame, and fear were identified. This was supported by the women's service providers, all of whom also reported feelings of low self-worth as being prevalent among the women they supported. One service provider highlighted that "institutions are where a woman depends on everything to be provided by someone else…where is the dignity of a human being in all that? Where can they get a real sense of self-worth?"

In Lucashenko and Kilroy's *A Black Woman and a Prison Cell* it was stated that:

> Murri women in Queensland are raised in a society where women are not valued much…and are often despised. We live with sexism and racism on a daily basis. Many of us are trapped in poverty. On top of this, our families are often so saturated with violence and abuse that sometimes our self-esteem barely exists at all (2005, 15).

Guilt

My mother would not ring very often but when she did she was drunk. She would tell me I was better when I was drunk and how dare I go and change my life. She would try to get me to go back and accuse me of abandoning them.

– An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Feelings of guilt were mentioned by almost all of the women sharing their lived experiences. One woman said, "the only way I could cope with leaving my sons and the guilt and shame was being 'out of it'." Another woman shared her feelings of guilt and remorse during her pregnancy. She said, "they were telling me I was harming my baby with my drinking and drugging but I just couldn't stop."

Shame

I could never take anyone home as it was always too embarrassing… the state I would find mum in. I never felt that I was as good a person as others and always felt ashamed of who I was.

– An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Again, almost all of the individual women reported feelings of shame in their past and present. For example, when talking about her criminal record, despite it being many years ago, one woman said "still today I can walk through the shopping centre and feel as though I have a neon sign on my head."

Many of the service providers interviewed also talked about the shame that the women they support feel. One pointed out that "it is hard for the women…as to receive priority housing they have to re-tell their stories. This is shaming for them and some choose not to."

Fear

"I didn't speak to anyone about what was going on, as I was so scared that my children would be taken away from me. If my husband ever found out I spoke to anyone that would be it, we would all be dead."

– An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Every single one of the women with lived experiences of institutionalisation spoke of their fear, both in the past and present. Talking about her release from prison, one woman said "I totally lost myself, I would sit on the couch with my knees up to my chest every day, I didn't know what to do, and I was so scared." The women's stories were supported by the women's service providers, all of whom spoke of fear as being a primary issue among the women they supported.

One service provider stated "there can be issues around self worth; shame and fear which preclude inclusion into social settings." Another service highlighted how fear can have a profound effect on the way women live their lives when she said "women can fear being alone and can also seek safety in a small area, like a small bedroom." These comments demonstrate the way that fear can have a dramatic impact on the way women live, both inside and outside prison.

Social Isolation/ Connectedness

"It was just so overwhelming to walk out the prison gate…you come out and it is so loud and everyone is doing their own thing. New coins had come out and it was like 'wow'; it felt like I had been on another planet.

– A women talking about being released from prison.

Social isolation and connectedness was discussed by all of the individual women and all of the service providers who shared their stories. Women spoke about prison as both enhancing and destroying their feelings of social connectedness, with many talking about feeling like a part of the prison 'community' while on the inside, which only increased their feelings of isolation when they were released. These feelings were supported by the service providers, with one stating that "some women find it enormously difficult to connect with others socially, particularly if they do not share their experiences of institutionalisation." Another service provider said "it is difficult for women to re-adjust to a much less structured life, which can lead the woman to wishing or actively seeking to return to the institution." Sisters Inside (2004) have pointed out that despite the constant underlying threat of violence in the prison, the women inside do form friendships and communities, which are characterised by strong feelings of loyalty. They also go on the state that certain prison practices, particularly that of compulsory strip-searches, contributed to destroying women's social connections on the outside as many women would rather refuse visits rather than to succumb to being strip searched (Sisters Inside, 2004).

Skills

"I would like to achieve tertiary education; I am quite high functioning when I'm managing, but when I'm not managing it is quite debilitating."

— An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Every one of the individual women and service providers talked about skills, in a variety of different contexts, whether it was something they have never had or something they desired to gain. One woman talked about the skills she had gained in prison, she said "I learnt responsibility in jail and routine…I learnt all about my rights and articulated it well to achieve the goals I had set myself. Other women need to be taught how to do this stuff." On the other hand, one of the service providers talked about the negative effects of prison of women's skills when she said "post-institutionalisation can leave women struggling to make decisions and there can be an unlearning of life skills, such as cooking, house cleaning, paying bills etc." Another service provider stated that "the longer a person is in an institutional setting the harder it is to reinvigorate those brain cells that are about making decisions and choices."

Prison education was mandated by the United Nations in 1957 as a basic human right for inmate rehabilitation and re-entry into society, however research indicates that the educational opportunities in women's prisons are still of a poor quantity, quality, variety and relevance than those offered in men's prisons (VCOSS, 2005). Furthermore, women prisoners are less likely to have completed secondary studies (Cox & Carlin, 1998; Farrell, 1998; WA Department of Justice, 2002) and more likely to be unemployed prior to their sentence (Farrell, 1998). A 2002 study of women prisoners in Western Australia found that 40 percent had not received a year 10 education, the level compulsory for all young people in the state (WA Department of Justice, 2002). It goes without saying that the low skill levels of women prisoners severely compromise their ability to find meaningful employment upon release.

Drug & Alcohol Issues

"I met this guy who was into drugs and credit card fraud and I ended up involved in all of it too. I fell pregnant to him though my daughter was still born. It was all over heroin, and I was seventeen at the time."

– An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Drug and alcohol issues were consistent throughout the women's stories, with all of them sharing their experiences of drug and alcohol misuse in the past and present. Some also spoke about the frustration of not being able to access drug and alcohol services in the ACT. For example, one woman said "I don't feel well at the moment, to the point I know I need to go to detox, but I cannot get into a detox in the ACT. One won't take me as they believe I am too high needs and the other won't take me because I use ice and it is a non-medicated withdrawal."
The prevalence of drug and alcohol issues among women with a prison experience was also demonstrated in conversations with the women's service providers. Almost all these services identified drugs and alcohol as having an impact on the wellbeing of the women they supported. One service provider said "in the Koori community a lot of my people have drug and alcohol issues and a lot of that stems back to institutionalisation…A way of coping there is certainly drug and alcohol misuse."

High rates of drug and alcohol misuse among women with a lived prison experience is clearly documented (Commonwealth Office for the Status of Women, 2003; WA Department of Justice, 2002). There is also evidence which suggests that trauma, particularly in childhood and adolescence, often results in drug and alcohol misuse in adulthood (Briere, 1996; Mullen, 1993). A survey of women prisoners in Queensland found that 88 percent had misused drugs and alcohol prior to imprisonment, and 51 percent continued to use while in prison (Kilroy, 2001). Most worryingly, 84 percent of these women reported that they were not receiving any help in relation to their drug and alcohol within the prison.

Psychological Health

"I ended up in the high dependency ward, which is a locked unit. They don't have a youth psych ward, so I was the youngest to ever be placed in this unit. I was thirteen, though I was in another unit at twelve years old. I was more traumatised coming out than going in."

– An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Poor psychological health was a reoccurring theme in conversations with the women who shared their stories. This theme encompassed a wide range of psychological health issues, including depression and anxiety. Sub-themes of self-harm and suicidal thoughts or attempts also emerged as sub-themes within the women's conversations. All of the individual women and women's services identified psychological health as a serious issue impacting on themselves or the women they supported. Many women also spoke about a link between their psychological health and drug and alcohol use. For example, one woman said "I was diagnosed with dissociative disorder which explained some behaviour…Being clean and sober I could not hide so well anymore and all sorts of things surfaced. The abuse was horrific, re-living it with no numbing stuff, nowhere to run to. I was in so much pain; I wanted to fill in the black holes…" A service provider also spoke of the need for services to recognise that many of the issues faced by women are interrelated. They explained that "ACT Departments need to link [services], there cannot be mental health, drug and alcohol, domestic violence, as these issues are interrelated. If silos come down we will see fewer women placed in prison as a direct result of these underpinning issues."

There is no national data available on the mental health status of Australian prisoners, however surveys by individual states and territories provide some insight into the poor mental health of women in prison. For example, the 1997 *NSW Inmate Health Survey* found that women in custody were twice as likely as male inmates to have been diagnosed with psychiatric problems and nearly three times as likely to be on psychiatric medication at the time of their reception into custody (Butler, 1997). In case we may have been fooled into thinking things were getting better for women in prison, five years later the Queensland Women's Prisoners Health Survey found that 57 percent of women in QLD prisons had been diagnosed with a specific mental illness (Hocking et. al., 2002), compared to 5.8 percent of women nationally (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare AIHW, 2002). Furthermore, 69 percent of women in the same study demonstrated symptoms of depression, which was dramatically higher than the national average of 6.8 percent.

Self-harm/Suicide

"I booked myself into a hotel and overdosed, though the cleaners found me and took me to hospital. They pumped my stomach and put me in the psych ward, where I was told now I'm stitched up, they will fix up my head."

— An excerpt from a woman's conversation

All of women who shared their stories told of their experiences of self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts or attempts. One woman said "my life was just one big self harming existence, just trying to numb the pain." Another woman said "I had a few suicide attempts and twice was put involuntarily into psychiatric units by the hospital. They would assess me and let me go, so I could not understand why they kept putting me in there." This information was supported by conversations with women's service providers, almost all of whom had seen self-harm and suicidal behaviours among the women they worked with. One service stated that "the pain of past and present abuse can get so overwhelming for some women they will self harm just to escape the memories, or the present violence."

The rate of suicide in prison is estimated to be around four times higher than that in the general community and has continued to rise over the last decade (Dalton, 1999). In fact, suicide continues to be the leading cause of death in Australian prisons (Collins & Mouzos, 2001). Both suicide and self-harming rates in prisons are higher for women than men (Easteal, 2001). For example, a 2000 survey of women at the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre found that on entry, 28 percent had reported previous self-harming behaviours.

Self-harm among female prisoners has been linked to poor self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness and despair, and trauma resulting from previous experiences of abuse. It is also a common response by women to the stress of imprisonment itself (Schrader, 2005). Despite this, prison policies can play a significant role in fostering feelings of powerlessness. For example, women in prison who are deemed to be 'at risk' of suicide or self-harm are often segregated from other prisoners and monitored in suicide observation cells. The ACT Human Rights Commission recently stated that these cells "are generally stark, sterile environments which can in themselves engender in detainees feelings of depression and a desire to self harm" (2007, 42). In her article on the mental health of women in prison, Schrader said she believed that:

> the use of these cells contravenes accepted management for people at risk of suicide and self harm and the use in prisons contravenes the United Nations charter stating that prisoners are entitled to the same standard of health care are those in the community (2005, 4).

Rules, Policies & Procedures

You have more rights in jail than in a psych ward. If they want to search you in a psych ward the male nurses can legally do it, 'cause they're nurses. In jail I have found it is the females that search you, if you conform that is. In jail you get a private shower but you can't in the psych ward.

— An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Every one of the individual women and the women's service providers who participated acknowledged that the rules, policies and procedures of prisons had a significant impact on themselves or the women they supported. Within this theme, two sub-themes of compliance and defiance emerged. One service provider stated "many institutional settings require meals to be at the same time; dress to the rules of that setting and mix with those you're told to and even go to the toilet when you're told." Another service stated, "There is a lot of research out there that shows how to work with people in a way that allows them to be supported without being controlled." There is significant literature which makes reference to the impact of prison 'culture' on women. Some have even stated that for many, the prison environment is very similar to that in which they were raised as children (Easteal, 2001; Kilroy, 2001). For example in prison, the officer-inmate relationship, like the relationship between a parent and their child, emphasises the officer's control and the inmate's powerlessness. Hampton (1993) points out that the rules of prison are often unspoken and new inmates are not always aware of them. Also, different prison officers often enforce different rules, which is frustrating for women and perpetuates a feeling of powerlessness (Sisters Inside, 2004). Another key aspect of the prison culture is the power that women accrue based on their sentence length, crime and behaviour. This culture is visible among prisoners as well as prison staff, with long-term guards maintaining pressure on short-term guards so that they conform to the prison culture (Sisters Inside, 2004).

Compliance

"I just done what everyone was telling me to do and acting like I thought everyone wanted me to. That I would be OK if I was compliant, but I did not feel ok on the inside and knew I was not. It was a real battle, one part of me thought I should be able to do this stuff and the other felt it was all too hard."

— A woman talking about her time in prison.

Many of the individual women and women's service providers agreed that compliance often ended up being the only option for women in prison. For example, a woman speaking about her prison sentence said, "I was compliant, I just went about my own business as much as I could. I had to just throw my hands up [and say] 'you got me'." Another woman speaking of her institutional experience said, "I just kept to myself, but not knowing the way things went, or what the rules were, it was hard. They did make it slightly easier by telling you all the time what to do." One service provider spoke about the expectation of women in institutions to be compliant and the continuing impact that this has on their lives post-release. "Women on exiting an institutional setting normally will for the first little while be very compliant. I would assume this is as they are in the mindset of seeing most others in a position of power and they need to be conforming."

Another women's service spoke about compliance in a broader societal sense, explaining that "society that puts a lot of pressure on women to conform and the minute you fall outside of that you're suddenly at risk of isolation and/or institutionalisation." Easteal (2001) states that in prisons, the staff's authoritarian role and the inmate's subordination are emphasised and the prisoners quickly learn to respond appropriately.

Defiance

"I did not understand why I had to strip in front of a male screw, so I refused. That was the last time I ever defied them, as I was so humiliated at being told to do it. Though the consequences were and still are the most humiliating experience ever."

– An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

All of the individual women who participated stated they went through times of defiance when confronted with the rules or procedures of an institution. One woman stated, "I broke the norm of what was expected from you leaving rehab to 'half-way'. I paid for my defiance as they really dropped any support to me saying if I did not conform they could not help me." The service providers who participated also talked about the impact on women if they chose to be non-conformant to rules, policies or procedures, even if they didn't know or understand them. One service said, "housing is very institutional, no conformance – no house. This happens at inspection times, judgments are placed on the way you choose to live within your so called own space."

It has been said that one of the first rules that women learn after arriving in prison is that "whatever one sees or experiences must be not revealed to the authorities or reprisals will take place" (Estreal, 2001, 96). Furthermore, women quickly learn that if anyone tries to change this culture, they will be silenced in a range of ways, either through physical of verbal abuse or by being ostracised by the prison community (Easteal, 2001). Women in prison are constantly threatened with being 'breached' (a word to describe punishment for breaking prison rules), which can occur for serious offences, but also for minor infringements such as sitting on the grass, hanging towels in the 'wrong' place or buying soft drink from the 'wrong' vending machine (Sisters Inside, 2004).

Mistreatment

In PSU they put me in 'A' suite, which is one of the cells where a Doctor reviews you every twenty-four hours. You can spend weeks and weeks in there; you can't smoke or can't get out and exercise. There is no toilet just a bedpan and they put in a couple of plastic cups of water at the beginning of the day.

— A woman's experience of a psychiatric facility.

All of the individual women spoke of their experiences of being mistreated by the very institutions that were supposed to 'help' them. One woman spoke about her first experience in a rehabilitation centre; "I needed to do counselling after rehab for some things that happened while I was in there, [like] doing psychodrama and regression work with people who were not trained or qualified." The women's experiences of mistreatment in institutions were supported by the women's service providers, all of whom mentioned this theme in their conversations. For example, one service, speaking of a women's experience of a particular mental health facility in the ACT, said "how anyone can get lost in this system for that period of time is mind blowing, this clearly has to be a lack of duty of care." Another service stated "all the women we see have experiences of traumatisation through institutions, which have basically tried to 'fix', 'cure' or 'correct' them and not dealt with their underpinning issues."

The 'Merry-go-round'

"I have been in and out of psychiatric units since I was twelve and I am now twenty three. I was in and out of Quamby [detention centre] between the ages of twelve and seventeen, and the BRC after that. I wonder if it is ever going to stop; if there will ever be any real help for me, not just locking me up."

— An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

The 'merry-go-round' is a term that has been used to describe the feeling of going around in circles, moving from one institution to another and not being able to move forward with one's life. All of the women spoke of their experiences of the merry-go-round, with one woman stating "they knew my life history of abuse and yet they locked me up for being uncontrollable, I was eleven, how was I suppose to have that control? It just never stopped from there and after coming out of prison more than five years ago I still cannot move forward." All of the service providers recognised the 'merry-go-round' as an issue that was particularly relevant for women with a lived experience of prison. One acknowledged this, saying "there is a whole range [of issues], a combination of childhood abuse, mental health, alcohol and drug issues and domestic violence; it is a vicious cycle". Another service gave an example of the merry-go-round experience continuing for women, even when they are receiving support, stating that "those escaping domestic violence that have been living in the community already can fall back into the institutional state even by attending the safety of a refuge. Even though this place is aiding them, they fall back into the institutional state of mind." As one researcher put it "the best of ex-inmates' intentions tend to wither when confronted by a post-release world that is largely uninterested and disbelieving" (Hampton, 1993, 159).

Cost

"I can accept that I cannot get my childhood back but I cannot find acceptance around what remand or prison took from me. Such a small amount of money I took and they lock me up at an enormous cost just to take any dignity I had left away."

— An excerpt from a woman's conversation.

Cost, expressed as both material cost and a sense of emotional loss, was a theme identified by all of the individual women. One woman expressed her loss, saying "they took away the only thing that meant something to me and made my life worth living, my daughter." Many of the service providers also made reference to the cost of imprisonment in a financial sense, especially compared to alternatives to prison that were seen to be cheaper and more effective. For example, one service provider said "the cost of detention centres makes no economic sense at all; it is a very expensive option. If they stopped building these places we would have the money to implement humane alternatives." Another service provider agreed, and added that "the change process is what requires a lot of resources, though the costs to society down the track are much less [when implementing alternatives to conventional prison]."

While the personal costs of imprisonment vary between women, the financial costs, both to the women themselves and the general community are undeniable. When a woman is sent to prison they often do not have time to make financial arrangements. This means that bank fees, bills or things as simple as overdue DVD fees continue to mount while they are inside. The cost of imprisonment to the taxpayer is also staggering. For example, it has been reported that the cost of keeping each prisoner in the new ACT prison will be $336 per day (Sherlock in Canberra Times, 2008) which amounts to a staggering cost of $122,640 per year, per prisoner. In fact, Australia spent $2.6 billion on keeping people in prison in 2007-08, compared to $0.3 billion on community corrections (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2009).

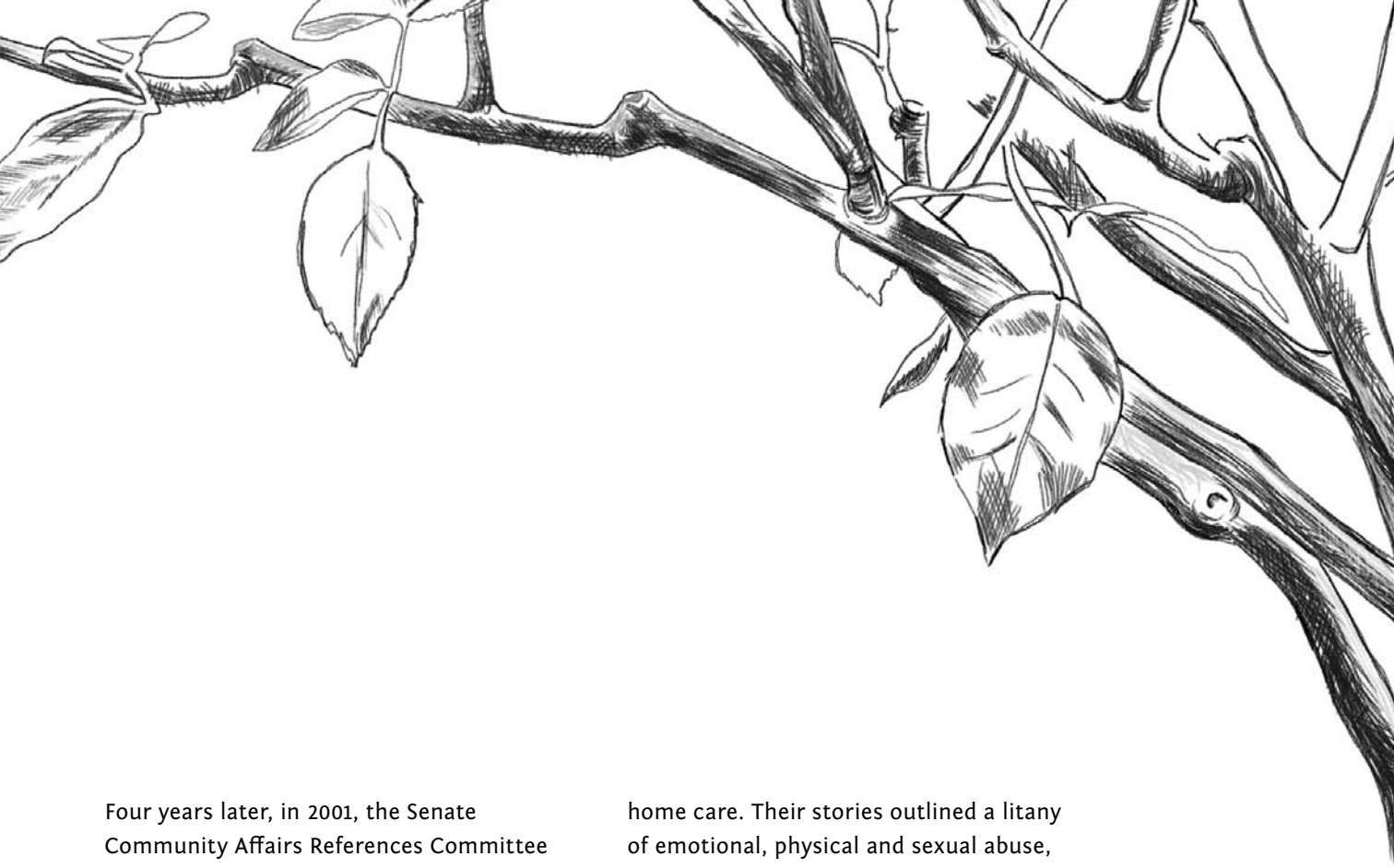
Understanding Institutionalisation

In addition to the specific themes raised by the women who participated in this project, many of them also spoke about the way that prison had affected their ability to live a 'normal' life on the 'outside'.

This state of mind is often referred to as *institutionalisation*, a term that describes the adverse psychological effects on individuals who have spent long periods living in institutions. These effects include, but are not limited to, dependency, passivity and lethargy (Dictionary of Sociology, 2000). Prison is just one of many institutions that can cause these effects; others include remand centres, juvenile detention centres, aged care/nursing home facilities, homes for people with disabilities, psychiatric units, detoxification/ rehabilitation centres, children's homes and refugee detention centres.

Australia has a long history of institutionalising its people, particularly it's women and children. One of the best examples of this is the Parramatta Female Factory precinct, the name given to the site, which in 1804 was built as a workhouse and jail for newly arrived female convicts and their children. Since that time the site has been known as the Industrial School for Girls, the Girls Training School, the Parramatta Girls Home and now the Norma Parker Detention Centre for Women. This site has such a profound place in Australian history that it has been estimated that 20 percent of Australians are descended from women who were housed, incarcerated or institutionalised in the various facilities that have occupied it over the past 200 years (Owens, 2008).

There have been three key national inquiries in the past decade which have addressed Australia's historical policies of institutionalisation. One of the most well known is the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's (HREOC) *Bringing them Home* report on the Stolen Generations. This is the name given to those Aboriginal children who, throughout most of the 1900s, were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the name of 'care and protection'. These children were taken from their families and fostered out to white homes, placed institutional care or forced to work in white industries. Members of the Stolen Generations experienced unimaginable feelings of loss, abandonment and isolation that continue to have a profound effect on their lives and the lives of their families and communities.



Four years later, in 2001, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee conducted an Inquiry into Australia's Child Migrants, those children usually between the ages of 5-16, who were bought to Australia from Britain and Malta in the twentieth century. These children came to Australia under the 'care' of the Australian Government, who then transferred this duty of care to the State Governments. The responsibility for these children was then given to various children's homes or employers, often factories where these young children were sent to work.

In 2004, the Senate announced an Inquiry into the Forgotten Australians, the estimated 500,000 people who experienced institutional or out-of-home 'care' as children. Some of these children also identified as Child Migrants or as part of the Stolen Generations. For many, this Inquiry was the first time they had had the opportunity to share their horrific stories of loss, abandonment and abuse. The Senate Committee reported that they had received hundreds of graphic and disturbing accounts about the treatment and care experienced by children in out-of-home care. Their stories outlined a litany of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and often criminal physical and sexual assault, neglect, humiliation and deprivation of food, education and healthcare (Forgotten Australians, 2004, xv). Despite the 2004 Inquiry and the creation of advocacy group the Alliance of Forgotten Australians, these people are still awaiting a formal apology from the Australian Government.

So, what does Australia's history of institutionalising children have to do with women in prison today? We believe that to fully understand the experiences of these women and the issues they face, we must first understand their own prior experiences of institutions as well as our country's past practices of sorting out the 'bad' from the 'good' and locking them away. The reality is, for many women in prison, their experience of institutions began in childhood and adolescence, in girl's homes, juvenile detention centres or psychiatric facilities. While not regarded as prisons, the conditions of these facilities, and the 'mindset' they imposed, were often dramatically similar.

The Forgotten Australians report highlights the relationship between institutionalised care, criminal behaviour and prison:

> The legacy of their childhood experiences for far too many has been low self-esteem, lack of confidence, depression, fear and distrust, anger, shame, guilt, obsessiveness, social anxieties, phobias, and recurring nightmares. Many [of these Forgotten Australians] have tried to block the pain of their past by resorting to substance abuse through life long alcohol and drug addictions. Many turned to illegal practices such as prostitution, or more serious law-breaking offences which have resulted in a large percentage of the prison population [having experienced institutional or out of home 'care' as children] (2004, xvi).

The relationship between prison and institutionalisation is also discussed by Sisters Inside, who have said that:

> Words like 'institution' are used to normalise and sanitise the experience of imprisonment, which is clearly not 'normal' at all. Tragically, many prisoners internalise this false normalcy and become totally manageable and 'institutionalised'. After years inside, many are completely programmed and debilitated, they are unable to apply critical thinking, and have no understanding of the 'real world'. When released, many 'good' prisoners fail at re-integration, returning to prison over and over again (2004, 2).

If Australia's history and culture of institutionalisation is least partly to blame for this current state of affairs, then perhaps the real answer is in *de-institutionalisation*. De-institutionalisation has been described by Lamb and Bachrach (2001) as a three-stage process: the release of people residing in institutions to the community; the diversion of potential new admissions to alternative facilities, and the development of special services for the care of a non-institutionalised population. They go on to say that the last of these stages is particularly important because a non-institutionalised population will have vastly different service needs and a better quality of life than an institutionalised population.

While policies of de-institutionalisation have been implemented in Australia over the past few decades, there is no centralised source of information on these policies in each State and Territory, making it difficult, if not impossible, to fully assess their effectiveness (Bostock et. al., 2001). In studies where the effectiveness of de-institutionalisation of mental health systems has been examined, findings have consistently shown that in order for such policies to be successful, they must involve not only the closure of institutional facilities, but the re-direction of these funds into effective community-based alternatives (Ravelli, 2006; Gerrand, 2005).

It is based on these findings that Australia's efforts at de-institutionalisation have been criticised. For example, it has been suggested that the closure of psychiatric institutions in Australia, combined with an "overtaxed and under-resourced" community-based care system, has resulted in an increase of women with complex psychiatric health needs entering the prison system (Speed in Fergus and Keel, 2005, 7). While it is beyond the scope of this report to thoroughly review Australia's policies of de-institutionalisation and their effects, a basic knowledge of these concepts is essential in understanding women's experience of prison.

Moving Forward...

Women who are released from prison regularly have to tell their stories to get their basic needs met, whether that be receiving the correct Centrelink payment, going on the waiting list for public housing, and every time they seek support for the multitude of personal issues they acquired over their lifetime.

As any of the women who participated in this project will tell you, this process can be embarrassing, demoralising and can erode any dignity they may have held on to throughout their prison sentence. Rarely, though, are these women given the opportunity to tell their whole story, without judgement or fear of being denied services, to someone who truly understands what they have experienced. It is these stories, not just of the complex and painful issues that these women have encountered, but of their hope for the future and for finally getting off the merry-go-round, that this paper aims to capture.

The release of this paper occurs at a pivotal time in the ACT, with the Alexander Maconochie Centre, the first prison in the ACT to accommodate women, having recently opened. What's more, this prison claims to be 'human rights compliant' according to the ACT Human Rights Act (2004). While this is a great step forward in the way Australia operates its prisons, this report should remind us that, human rights compliant or not, prison still has a profoundly negative impact on the health and wellbeing of women. As Debbie Kilroy of Sisters Inside once said:

> If all prison officers acted with the human rights of prisoners in mind, prison would still not be a pleasant environment, but it would be less inhumane and there would be some chance that women would emerge from prison with an improved capacity to integrate with society (2004, 4).

The stories in this paper are not isolated experiences, rather, they exist in the broader context of Australia's long history of institutionalisation. Only through acknowledging and understanding where prison 'fits' within this history can we begin to pursue real justice for these women. We hope that the information shared in this report will be read and remembered by anyone who is responsible for making decisions, however small, which affect the lives of women with lived prison experience.

A Commitment to Positive Change...

Having listened to the stories of the women who participated in this project, the question must be asked "Where to from here?"

We believe that it is not enough to simply highlight the issues faced by women with lived prison experience; we must also make practical and realistic commitments to begin addressing them in our own communities. Instead of making recommendations to others, which may or may not be acted on, the Women's Centre for Health Matters (WCHM) and the ACT Women and Prisons Group (WAP) have chosen to make the following commitments as to how both organisations will work together with key stakeholders to move forward.

- WCHM, in partnership with other key stakeholders, will continue to provide practical and capacity building support to WAP. WCHM will work towards the future goal of WAP becoming a self-sufficient and thriving community organisation in its own right.
- WCHM will support WAP to continue to advocate for the human rights of women in ACT prisons, remand centres and juvenile detention centres. Wherever possible, WCHM is committed to performing this work in collaboration with other women's organisations in the ACT.
- WCHM will support WAP to work with both community and Government agencies in the ACT to promote understanding about the issues faced by women with lived prison experience. WCHM and WAP agree that those who have the power to make decisions affecting the lives of these women should have a thorough understanding of the issues they face.
- WCHM will consider conducting further research into the unmet health and wellbeing needs of institutionalised women. Where possible, WCHM will conduct this research in collaboration with other ACT community organisations. WCHM recognises that prisons are only one of many institutions that have a profoundly negative impact on the health and well-being of women.

I don't fit anywhere...

A story shared by one of the women participants

"I was put up for adoption when I was born and brought to Australia by my adopted parents. I was brought up in a private boarding school and by twelve I was constantly self-harming, which ended me up in the hands of Family Services. Things got worse and I did not know where it was all coming from. I was put in Calvary psych ward. I was let out and back at boarding school but in a very short time I was put in the high dependency ward at PSU, which is a locked unit. I was thirteen but they didn't have youth psych wards in the ACT, I was the youngest to ever be placed in there.

I got involved in drugs and they helped me cope for a while but then I became addicted and I got involved in the sex industry. I was still only thirteen. I have been in and out of the psych ward up till now and I am 23 years old. In between the psych admissions they put me in over night lock ups and the remand centre. I would rather be in jail than the psych ward, even though many in jail have psych problems too. If I had not been so constantly institutionalised I probably would not still be alive, though they [the institutions] have escalated the trauma in my life. In some ways I have been more traumatised in institutions than on the outside. No one has ever assisted me to get over my pain of being abused or taught me how to live as a part of the whole society. I don't fit anywhere."

Confronting the trauma...

A story shared by one of the women participants

"Physically and emotionally abused by dad and then gang raped at twelve by five guys. My pain was enormous and was rotting me away, I stopped caring about anything and I ran from the situation I was in. I was caught and locked up as uncontrollable, I couldn't believe they could lock me up when I was the victim, but no one would listen. Locked up in a youth detention centre and more abused and feeling more abandoned than what I had already gone through.

I ended up sentenced to a reform home, as they called it, but I actually fitted in. There were like minded girls who all were abused and abandoned. When I got out I hung with these people and got right into drugs and alcohol, it helped with the pain of my past and I was accepted in this crowd that helped me not to feel so alone.

I fell pregnant and had a forced abortion, I didn't think my pain could get worse but it did. I got into harder drugs, was raped again by the time I was fifteen and decided to run again. I came to Canberra and got things together for a little while by just hiding within myself and trying to push away the past. I ended up blaming myself for my abuse and would look at other families and think I would have been safe if I had a family like that.

Ten years later I fell pregnant again and had a baby daughter, but about four and a half years later I ended up in a car accident with my girlfriend in the car, we had both been drinking and I was driving. The accident killed my best friend. It took me five months to get out of a wheelchair and twelve months to recover from my physical injuries. I kept wishing it was me that died, mentally and emotionally I was destroyed. I got sentenced on my daughters fifth birthday and was sent for five years. I did not even get to hug my daughter and I was taken away.

When I was finally released I was totally numb, the bars were still there and it was even harder now I had to do things like care for my daughter and keep a home. I had to remember I could turn the light on and off. I could walk outside, but I was too scared. I felt more separated from the world than when I was in prison.

Finally after finding the women and prisons group I have started addressing my trauma. I still have mental health issues and still can't get a decent job, but I can help spread the message that support is available and no woman needs to walk alone. I keep waiting for the day that I do not feel like I still have bars around me, we all still have the invisible bars with us daily. Until mainstream society sees that we are not better off being locked up, but to show us real rehabilitation, with support and understanding then we can not connect and become valued members of our communities."

Breaking the vicious cycle...

A story shared by one of the women participants

"I grew up without my dad from nine and my mum was out till late every night. I would wake up to a different man in the house nearly every morning. My mum smoked pot and I tried it by thirteen, it numbed the pain and I was hooked. I hardly went to school anymore and hung out with the same like-minded kids. I was getting into lots of trouble, mainly over shoplifting. I got caught doing credit card fraud and ordered to a rehab by the courts. It was hard at first till I learnt to withdraw and just complied, but I was so detached from what was going on.

When released I went straight back to the same crowd. Where else would I go? I had no choice. I fell pregnant and my baby was still born, they said it was all my fault as I was a heroin addict. I took off and ended up in a new town, in a refuge. Of course all the people in the refuge were like me; drug addicts with no one to care about them. We had a roof over our heads but still felt abandoned and full of pain. I was being threatened to pull my weight and do more credit card fraud, which I did, even though I knew I was in way over my head. I got caught. I ended up in Mulawa Women's Prison at nineteen, nearly twenty. I felt like a bomb had been dropped on me and when the others had visitors and I had none it was devastating. I could not show anyone my pain, I had learnt that long ago. This was different to rehab, over night lock ups, refuges and the street; I was totally controlled.

When I got out I met a guy and fell pregnant, I really wanted to give this child all the love and support I felt I never had, but how could I give a child what I didn't know? My boyfriend stuck by me and I pushed through the shame and guilt and accessed a women's service in Canberra and they put me onto a women's group that supported prisoners and ex-prisoners.

I have been a member of this group for a few years now and it has changed my life. I have a second child, still with the same partner and I am breaking the cycle for myself and my children, so they never have to be abused, neglected or feel abandoned. It was hard to stop the drugs; it was hard to talk to people about how I really felt, it was even harder to walk among mainstream society and not feel like I had my life tattooed across my forehead. I am one of the rare lucky ones that has been able to break through such a vicious cycle and I look forward to the day that I can just walk normally among society. I am not there yet. I still am excluded from so many jobs as I am still looked still looked at as a criminal; I have been branded for life."

The Criminal Injustice System...

A story shared by Deb Wybron.

"I first experienced the Criminal *Injustice* system since a young child: in Glebe Detention Centre and Parramatta Girls Homes. How anyone could believe a place like that could turn a child's behaviour around still amazes me today. Our behaviour did not need to be of a criminal nature, though the way we were treated was nothing short of criminal. The well-known fact to those locked up, was true for me too; the continuing merry-go-round was to be my plight.

I was to do more time in these detention centres and then move into the prison systems. Looking back, I have spent 29 years of my life in and out of some sort of institution. I had the neon sign on my head. It didn't matter where I was, the police always managed to spot me, and already having a criminal record gave me easy entry back into the system.

While I don't want anyone to experience this for themselves or anyone close to them, I do want people to take the time to really listen to the stories of the women who have. It is my belief that if anyone who takes the time to listen to the story of a woman who has experienced prison, they will only have compassion for the injustices they have incurred.

I call in the Criminal Injustice System because it is not the justified system that those on the outside are made to believe it is. The facts are: the system is a breeding ground for re-traumatisation, inhumane and degrading treatment. Its existence is justified using the concept of 'rehabilitation' (a remedy; a cure) by authoritarian control, when in reality it places people further away from recovery (hope; healing) than they were when they entered.

Today I have been free of this unjust system for six years. For the last four years I have been strongly involved in advocating for the basic human rights of other women still involved in this system through the ACT Women and Prisons Group (WAP). I still have contact with women prisoners, prison's and the Criminal Justice system, though I now do this from the 'outside'. I am one of the lucky ones, but I could not have done it without the support of some truly amazing women who assisted me to work through an array of personal adversities that have moved me to where I am today.

My experiences have allowed me to face my own adversities and channel my pain into advocating for women whose voices are not heard, or whose voices are heard but not truly listened to."

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