

# **WHEN WILL YOU SEE THE REAL US? WOMEN IN PRISON**

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For many years I have read research papers and listened at Conferences like this one to findings and conclusions in regards to women in prison and their lives. No doubt the researchers have presented the findings that were concluded from their context of understandings of women's prisons. However I have always found it difficult to understand these conclusions in relation to my own experience of prison and other women's experiences who are in prison, especially in relation to the intrinsic culture within women's prisons and the lack of understanding of our culture in the academic, political and bureaucratic world.

Today I will present the initial findings from an extensive research project that was undertaken early this year. 100 questionnaires were finalised by women in Southeast Queensland prisons. The women have shared their life experiences, both prior to prison and during their imprisonment, with me in relation to their sentence, their children, their family worries, their living arrangements before prison, educational experiences, employment status, financial survival prior to prison, circumstances that led to imprisonment, recidivism, what they believe that would support them to not offend again, aspects that prison has and hasn't changed, support received in prison, their experience of bullying in prison, drug and alcohol use prior to prison and whilst in prison, their relationship with staff in prison, experiences of abuse throughout their lives, suicide and self harm experiences, and finally their last words from the women to you.

The questionnaires that were completed by women in Southeast Queensland prisons convey the importance of the women's voices to tell you their stories, through their her story of their lives including the abuse they have lived through and continue to live through while in prison. Their voices state clearly that there is a significant link between their her story of abuse, their experiences and their incarcerated. For us to ignore these voices and their life experiences we ignore who women in prison really are and all aspects of abuse they have experienced these abuses are brought into the prison walls and the cycles of abuse are continued within prison through a number of practices.

The women participated in the research at their level of choice. The majority responded and completed the whole questionnaire however some chose not to respond to the questions they found difficult at that time. This is highly respected and as Amanda George said to me last night women without choices have to have voices.

There were 13% of Aboriginal women that participated in the research and 6 % of non English speaking women, 81% non Indigenous women – 23 on remand and 77 sentenced. 17% of the women were between 17 - 21 years of age, 39% between 22 - 30 years of age, 40% between 31 - 40 years of age and 4% between 41 - 50 years of age. Prior to prison 69% lived in the broader Brisbane area. The other 31% lived in areas that included North Queensland, Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast areas, Central Queensland, Perth, ACT, Newcastle, Melbourne, Sydney and Malaysia.

Of the women who participated in the research they were incarcerated from 3 months to 16 years and their average sentence being served in prison is 26 months. This is a significant average for women to serve in prison in contrast to where Department of

Corrective Services statistics state that women serve an average of 2.1 months. 82% of the women are primary care givers of their children totalling 252 children with an average of 2.5 children each. 125 of the children are between 1 - 10 years of age. 15 are under the age of 1 year. 36 are between the age of 11 and 15 years. And the rest are over the age of 16 years. 42% of the women's children usually stay in the care of the woman's mother and 44% are in foster care or have been adopted. Furthermore, 50% of the women had been in care of the Department as children themselves.

So what are the main family worries for the women whilst in prison? The biggest worry is homelessness on release, that they have let their children down, the worry of the effect of the sentence on their children, the lack of contact with their children and missing their children while in prison.

The women's educational experience was usually negative where 42% stated that they hated school and it basically sucked. Where 39% said it was okay. 6% said they never attended school and only 4% stated that they had an excellent experience at school.

Before imprisonment 20% of the women rented unspecified accommodation, 17% lived in housing commission properties, 15% were homeless and 14% lived with their mother.

76% of the women were unemployed before being incarcerated. 18% were employed and 6% were students. The women's financial method of survival prior to imprisonment was through the combination of Centrelink benefits, prostitution and crime. The average finances received was \$215.61 per week. With 53% of women still in debt today.

The majority of offences the women are in prison for are breaching an order, fines and drug possession. The women believe that the circumstances that led them to prison is due to the use of alcohol and drugs, the need for money, the debts they have incurred, abuse and domestic violence experiences.

54% had not served prior prison sentences. Whereas 46% have served a prison sentence before. 17% had been to prison once before, 14% twice before, 4% 3 times, 2% 4 times, 2% 5 times and 6% more than 5 times before.

87 women believed that they would not re-offend if they had a home to go to after release, 68 women said they would not re-offend if they could get employed after release, 54 believed by getting their children back they would not re-offend, 67 women said if they had stability and 50 if they received support and counselling. Post release issues are significant for the survival of women after prison and in regards to recidivism. Sandy Cook and Sue Davis research proves that women shortly after being released from prison is a high risk period for their survival within the community. Their research states that between 1987 and 1997, at least 97 women died shortly after leaving prison in Victoria. Whereas in Queensland 19 women have died shortly after release within the last 28 month period.

Women believe that there are some aspects that prison has changed for them. For 46 of the women naivety and over caution has changed in relation to their outlook on life, naivety being lost due to prison experience and more caution taken in regards to the relationships they engage in. 26 of the women feel a lot stronger in themselves and 23 now have the ability to switch off and walk away from experiences that they find stressful.

However the aspects that have not changed in their lives is alcohol and drug issues (30), depression (28), concerns with their family life (27), boredom (24), anger (21), feeling of degradation (19), loneliness (17) and hardness (17),

The help received by the women predominantly comes from other women in prison (66) and from Sisters Inside (65) a community organisation.

A high majority of the women said they do not feel safe from bullying or injury from other women in prison. 79% have come into contact with bullying and 54% have experienced being bullied where 23% involved themselves as being the bullies.

88% of the women used drugs and / or alcohol prior to imprisonment. The majority using alcohol (60), speed (44), pot (47) and heroin (46). 51% stated that they have continued to use drugs in prison and the majorities are using heroin and 84% of the women are receiving no help in relation to their drug and alcohol abuse within the prison.

92% believe that the relationship with correctional officers is very poor to average. 35% of the women said they do not get on with their personal allocated officer - case worker.

95% of the women have experienced abuse prior to imprisonment. 98% have experienced physical abuse, 89% have experienced sexual abuse, 70% emotional abuse and 16% ritual abuse. The majority of the women experienced this abuse during childhood 37% before the age of 5. The abuse was at the hands of family members both immediate and extended.

42% of the women have attempted suicide with 150 attempts. 41% have self-harmed with 331 self-harm experiences. 40% received no support. 23% believe the self-harm and attempted suicides were due to the abuse they have experienced, 9% state that it is to let the pain out and to feel again, known as blood letting.

73% of the women have had no help or contact with Sentence Management in the prison and their experiences of sentence management is abusive, racist, they have received threats, and experienced cruelty.

It is clear that women in prison have experienced extensive abuses throughout their lives beginning at a very young age, they are the primary care givers for many children who are at risk of being taken into foster care or being adopted. Many have had poor experiences with education and employment and currently face after release financial debts that they have no way of financially resolving.

The women's experiences in prison are quite negative and they continue to self-medicate their previous abuse experiences and the present abuses in prison through continued drug use and self-harm. The women continue to share needles that expose them to serious medical conditions that are detrimental to their health.

The women's experience with prison staff is highly negative, which I feel is quite contrary to what has been presented over the last two days of this conference. Women feel powerless within prison processes and decision-making experiences especially in relation to sentence management practices. They feel highly vulnerable when they have a personal officer allocated to their cases. There is limited support offered to the women whilst incarcerated although they are requesting support services for what they feel will address the underlying issues that they fear in relation to recidivism. However, this is never heard by the prison system. The prison system believes they know what is best in relation to the women they incarcerate in their prisons.

When will we as a society understand the connection of experiences of abuse and women in prison and most importantly stop the cycles of abuse and the incarceration of women. The abuse suffered since childhood through to becoming an adult has a clear link to their imprisonment. When will society begin to address such connections and links of abuse for women instead of believing the resolution is through imprisonment.

### **Women's Voices**

- The prison does not work
- Getting a home and getting of the gear is the most important issue to me
- I thank Sisters Inside for their support. I despise DOCS for being as dumb as they look and no idea what we go through here. This place is a joke and I am so embarrassed to say I live here. If it was good I'd be proud but I don't think so.
- Prison doesn't help us women in here it makes it worse.
- My punishment was too harsh. It was my first time for anything. No one ever heard of me until now (cunts).
- Yes this place is a joke.
- Please try to get rid of the troublemakers in this block.
- Try keeping the young ones out. There must be another way.
- Jail is a complete waste of time. We learn nothing.
- Sisters Inside is the best they help me out a lot
- I am so sorry for what I've done and miss my children and de-facto desperately. And they are missing me, as I have never been away from them. I would also like to see my own doctor to whom I have enough confidence to talk to and confide in.
- Prison sucks
- The system sucks
- We are treated like animals not human beings. And we are treated different from the white prisoners.
- We need more support services from outside the jail.

- ➤ Need more support. I see Sisters Inside for SA counselling and they help me a lot.
- ➤ In new prison, arseholes need more professionalism; officers need to learn manners and treat

us like adults not kindy children and not to yell at us. I work in the kitchen – TI's ride us hard, made to serve screws, hate it. Put in jail for punishment not to serve screws.

- Sisters Inside is great. I need support when I get released – accommodation
- Sisters Inside understands and supports us
- Do they want you to be bad or good? It seems to me, if you do the right thing you get nothing. There are certainly a lot of false promises in this place.
- Prison doesn't stop crime, you get no help so nothing changes, makes it worse and more helpless.
- Women over here don't see legal Reps often enough. It's boring and frustrating waiting for something to happen with my case. I only used once in here and I'm afraid I might do it again.
- Hurts me when my son hurts. He has people in jail all around him. I'm in jail then his father goes to jail and now he has a baby sister who is also in jail with me.

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- Stop locking us up – we need help what about the ones who raped me they didn't get put in prison
- No one seems to no what they are doing over here. On the grass, off the grass, yes you can no you can't. Bunch of Hitler's. Mary is a Hitler.
- We need more sporting activities between other blocks – we are bored.
- Sisters Inside need more support for women in prison – women need housing somewhere to go when released.
- I need support when I leave jail – housing and get my kids back
- Sentence management doesn't work its subjective and controlling
- Sisters Inside needs more support and workers – they understand
- Women in here need more support from Sisters Inside. We trust them and only them

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need more workers please

- I'm sick of the centre taking away everything you enjoy – them trying to break our spirit.
- Need more ongoing support – housing
- We need more support for us in here and our children and families not from the prison though
- The Board take to long
- Most people in here are racist this makes me angry and hurt
- New prison sucks
- I need more support and counselling when I leave jail. I'm scared what will happen when I leave.
- Jail is fucked doesn't help anybody, we need support.
- This place makes it worse

- Women should get the same rights as the men's prison.
- I have only received help from Sisters Inside we need more of them
- Need more Aboriginal workers for Sisters Inside
- We need more support for our children and families
- I never had PMT until I came to prison
- I greatly commend the work of Sisters Inside
- Prison doesn't help us Murri's its just bad in here
- We need more support from outside agencies like Sisters Inside
- Inmates ought to be able to have bad reports removed from files in management find officers reports are not true about inmates. Management in BWCC already have done incident report on me and they know it's not true. Yet they still nothing done about officer's attitude and lies. Got a uniform and this gives them power. Take off uniform they are the same as us.

I ask you all here today When will you see the real us? Women in prison - from our perspective. As I imagine that you would all agree with me that you know the answers for your own questions and dilemmas in your own lives as only you have experienced them and understand them. So why is it that many of the people attending this conference continue to decide what is best for women in prison in relation to their own lives. I wonder is it because you see us/me – women in prison as separate/different from yourself?