



QUEENSLAND WOMEN'S HEALTH NETWORK NEWS

AUGUST 2008

'Aims to strengthen links between women by providing access to information and support'

WOMEN & PRISON

The Health of Women In Prison

Melissa Lucas of Sisters Inside reveals the 'human face' of the mainly young Australian women who live behind walls

Our good health depends on so many factors coming together: nutrition, exercise, genetics, education levels, income levels, access to medical services, and not least, our connections with family and community.

The four hundred women who live behind walls in Queensland's prisons also face other, particular challenges in becoming or staying healthy. Most women and girls in prison come from very poor families, where poverty has meant a lifetime of inadequate nutrition, underemployment and probably homelessness as well. Many of the women incarcerated in Queensland come from rural and remote areas, with all the health challenges that remoteness presents. And Indigenous

women are very over-represented in prison — about 40% of all women in prison are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, when these women make up only 3% of the general population.

For most women prisoners, being locked up is the last step in a long series of systemic failures on the part of both community and state. One

"... being locked up is the last step in a long series of systemic failures on the part of both community and state ..."

typical white inmate might be a (fictional) twenty year old girl from Bundaberg — let's call her Alice. Alice was raised in state care by a variety of foster

parents after her natural mother died when she was eight. Some of these foster parents were good and caring, but several were abusive, and at one home, Alice was raped twice by her foster "father". At fourteen, Alice ran away to Brisbane. She lived on the streets, doing sex work to survive, and became addicted to alcohol, speed, heroin, ice, marijuana or some combination of these. The only times Alice ever felt happy was when she was "out of it". She hated having sex for money but didn't know any other way to survive. Alice spent time in juvenile detention and had two or more abortions by the time she was seventeen, when she was legally able to be sent to an adult prison. By then she was regularly being arrested for

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Due to the interest shown in our last newsletter and the broad scope of the topic itself, our **Next Newsletter** will again examine aspects of:

WOMEN&DISABILITY

Does your organisation have expertise in this area?

Or are you a woman with knowledge / experience on this topic?

Share your insights with over 400 organizations, professionals, and other women in Queensland and beyond...

We welcome your articles, news items, or other submissions. If you have an idea, or would like more information please get in touch with us today!

Deadline: 17 October

QWHNEWS



This edition has been both informative and disturbing for me to put together, as no doubt it will be for you to read. It would seem that the growing number of women in prison often share a background of social and economic disadvantage that finds them in very poor mental and physical health even before they enter prison. The high incidence of drug use which often precipitates their incarceration, also exposes women to serious long-term harm, in the form of mental disorders, and chronic infectious diseases, with "...45% test[ing] positive to exposure to Hepatitis C in [a] Queensland survey..." (ABS 2004). Also, the imprisonment of a loved one often takes a huge emotional toll on the parents and families of prisoners. Clearly the factors influencing women's health prior to, during, and after a prison term, require our special attention, and I thank the contributors to this edition for giving them that special attention.

Maree Hawken
Coordinator

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, Australian Social Trends, Cat. No. 4102.0, viewed May 2008, <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs>

the health of

soliciting, petty theft, and drug possession.

Three weeks after her seventeenth birthday Alice was picked up by police in a stolen car driven by an acquaintance. She had a small amount of speed on her and was imprisoned for six months. Alice has never known her biological parents. She has no family networks in Brisbane other than the girls she has met inside juvenile detention (her 'sisters' in crime) and has completed less than Year Nine schooling. She is barely literate, drug-dependent, has hepatitis B, and is frequently suicidal. *Newsflash!* Prison is not an environment where Alice is about to become healthier.

In prison Alice (being young and serving a short sentence) is low in the pecking order — both prison officers and other prisoners can easily dominate her. She is expected to show a 'tough face' to the world even though she has still to deal with the impact of losing her mother, the abusive foster parents, two rapes and a serious drug habit. Her self-esteem is low, and she has little understanding of how poverty has led her to the place she finds herself in. When she can access drugs inside the prison she will use them if she has any means to pay for them; when she can't, she suffers withdrawals, and feels hopeless and suicidal. At any time, the prison officers can decide to strip search Alice or any of the other prisoners. When this happens — often daily — Alice experiences terrifying flashbacks to when she was raped. If she

protests, she is likely to be sent to isolation — where she will be locked up alone, except for her demons. Like most of the women in prison alongside her, she rarely sleeps more than three or four hours in a row. Seventeen year old Alice has little idea that there is another way to live.

If Alice decides that life behind bars is too much, and makes a failed suicide attempt, she will be punished for this with time in an isolation cell. In prison, Alice has food three times a day, and a roof over her head. She pays for this food and roof though, by having to surrender any of the minimal control she has over her life on the outside. On release, Alice will be returning to a world where she has few skills, no support network, hepatitis, and only illegal drugs to help her cope with a lifetime of abuse and neglect. Alice has never had a pap smear — she has only a vague idea what a pap smear is, and is unaware that she is developing cervical cancer. The last time she saw a dentist was in Grade One.

If Alice was an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander woman, she would face similar but even greater health challenges. Like Alice, she would likely have spent much of her life in State care, and have been neglected and abused from a young age. Her parents and other elders are even less likely to be alive, or in a position to help her. She might (depending on her background) find a supportive community of other Indigenous women in prison. However, both inside and outside



women in prison (cont)

of prison she would have to face the daily grind of racism, and her Indigenous family would likely be one with myriad problems of their own. If an Indigenous woman has kids, it's likely that nobody can

"... The safety of their kids is a constant source of major stress to women in prison, and a big factor in mental health issues facing them ..."

afford the petrol or train fares to bring those kids to visit her on the inside. And like white prisoner's kids, her children are likely to be living in environments of violence, sexual abuse and neglect themselves. The safety of their kids is a constant source of major stress to women in prison, and a big factor in mental health issues facing them.

Where some white prisoners may have a relative with secure housing to go to upon release, Indigenous

prisoners are even more likely to be forced onto the streets, and often go back into unsafe environments riddled with drugs, poverty, violence and sexual abuse. Aboriginal and Islander women are frequently re-arrested within hours or days of their release, simply because they have nowhere to live — except parks — and no means of support other than stealing or sex work. Making healthy life choices is difficult, to say the least, when you don't know where your next meal is coming from, or if you will be raped again tonight.

Sisters Inside is a Brisbane-based organisation that works with women in prison and upon their release. Sisters Inside has programs to link women with their children on the outside while they are serving their sentences; provides sexual abuse counselling, and attempts to help women address addiction issues, and gain job skills and stable employment upon release. We also try to show

the wider community the 'human face' of the mainly young Australian women who live behind walls, usually as a result of sex-work, drug issues, or other non-violent crimes of poverty.

SISTERS INSIDE is located in West End, Brisbane.

Our phone number is

(07) 3844 5066

and all services we offer are free to women or girls who are, or have been, in prison or youth detention.

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Simply complete & mail the form on the back page of this newsletter or visit www.qwhn.asn.au for more information

HAVE YOUR SAY...



We are interested in obtaining feedback on the quality of the newsletter and issues and topics you would like to see in future editions.

If you have something to say please contact Maree on (07) 4789 0665 or email us at qwhn@bigpond.com.au



Women's Business in the Murri Court —

Lyn Roughan introduces the Mount Isa Murri Court

It is well documented that Indigenous women make up a disproportionate number of women in prison. Queensland Corrective Services 2006/2007 Annual Report states that of the 409 women in prison in Queensland (both on remand and sentenced) 111 women were Indigenous. This number is high compared to the percentage of the total population of Queensland that Indigenous women make up.

Women prisoners in general and Indigenous women more particularly, are commonly affected by a number of social disadvantages including poor education, inadequate housing and income and limited employment skills. Many have never worked. Many come from backgrounds of abuse — domestic and sexual — and sometimes both.

Mount Isa has a high resident Indigenous population along with a transient number of people visiting kin in the city from remote regions of Queensland and across the Northern Territory border. This migration can occur because of cultural and family reasons such as funerals and other family business. There is also anecdotal talk amongst service delivery agencies that factors such as the Northern Territory Intervention and Alcohol Management Plans in regional towns may factor into extended visits to Mount Isa by non residents.

This influx can result in overcrowding of public housing and the growth of the 'river bed'

population — people living 'rough' in the dry Leichhardt River bed. The consumption of alcohol that accompanies these transient residents often leads to contact with the Justice system and indeed other government agencies such as the Department of Child Safety when there are children involved.

“... the Murri Court brings defendants before Elders and respected persons who can provide advice to the Magistrate about cultural issues...”

Murri Courts operate within the framework of the Queensland Magistrates Court and incorporate additional Indigenous cultural input into the sentencing of Indigenous offenders.

In addition to appearing before a Magistrate, the Murri Court brings defendants before Elders and respected persons who can:

- provide advice to the Magistrate about cultural issues;
- assist the offender in understanding court processes; and
- provide advice to the Magistrate on the types of sentence that they consider appropriate for the offender.

Murri Court Elders also act as a connection between the court and local Indigenous communities.

One of the primary aims of Murri Court is to reduce the over-representation of Indigenous offenders in prison by using other appropriate alternative penalties to imprisonment by applying restorative justice principles in the sentencing process. Indigenous defendants referred to Murri Court must be in jeopardy of serving actual imprisonment and plead guilty to their offences. The offences must also be able to be dealt with in the Magistrates Court jurisdiction.

The Mount Isa Murri Court is unique in that it incorporates a lengthy pre-sentence bail program aimed at addressing personal and cultural issues that affect the client and contribute to their offending activities. In other words, the program offers rehabilitation options before sentence rather than after the sentencing process. This practice aims to prepare the client for possible sentences such as imprisonment with immediate parole release, probation or community service. This pre-sentence bail period establishes the credibility of defendant's commitment to comply with rehabilitation focused orders of the Court, and can assist in overcoming any past history of breaching normal community based orders. The aim of the Murri Court bail program is to divert Indigenous clients from prison and break the offending cycle.

The bail program can run for three to six months with bail



An Initiative Aiming to Address the Over-representation of Indigenous Women in Prison

program stakeholders reporting back to the Murri Court on attendance and progress.

The unique practice that has seen the majority of female Murri Court defendants make tangible and lasting changes in their lives is

"... the majority of female Murri Court defendants make tangible and lasting changes in their lives ..."

their attendance at the Murri Court Women's Support Group. Murri Women's Support Group attendance forms part of an Indigenous woman's bail undertaking in the Murri Court process. The customary practice of "Men's and Women's Business" applied in the jurisdiction of the Murri Court, enables female Elders and Respected Persons to talk separately with a female defendant or defendant's wife about the effects of the offences, while the male Elders and Respected Persons are conferring with male stakeholders, allowing for free discussion in a safe environment. The counselling of both parties is a cornerstone of the family healing process.

Local Elders anecdotally say that the breakdown of the cultural practice of Elders and Respected Persons taking younger tribal members to sacred "Men's" or

"Women's" places to share the rites and wisdom which only that sex is privy to, is a major cause of the breakdown of family structure and the rise of offending.

The Murri Women's Support Groups are the modern day manifestation of this cultural practice. The purpose and focus of the Murri Women's Support Groups are to reconnect the defendant with their cultural beliefs. These groups allow women who are going through Murri Court to get together to talk about issues such as drinking, violence and pressures from family and learn about cultural practices from the female Elders and Respected Persons who attend to lend support. The group may also include the partners of male Murri Court defendants. Each woman takes her turn to relate her life experiences to the group. This allows open discussion in a culturally appropriate environment – to talk "Women's Business" in a nurturing, non-judgmental environment.

Developed on a local level, the role and participation of the Elders and offender's partners in the Murri Women's Support Group and integration of Men's and Women's Business in the sentencing processes of the Murri Court, has seen the diversion of Murri women from almost certain prison sentences to become productive citizens and strong family members. Although outcomes from research into this program are unavailable as yet, the value to the community of this program is recognized in the breaking of the offending cycle and the absence of these women's names returning to Court appearance lists.

Lyn Roughan

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For information contact: Debbie Austen, Organ and Tissue Coordinator for **QUEENSLANDERS DONATE**, Rockhampton Hospital Intensive Care Unit.
Ph: 4920 6728 or 4920 6313 or email Debbie_Austen@health.qld.gov.au



WHAT'S ON...

*Important Events, Conferences
and Workshops around the State & beyond*

AUGUST OSTEOPOROSIS QLD 'HEALTHY BONES WEEK' PUBLIC SEMINARS — BRISBANE.
15 August: Manly West; 19 August: Chermside; 20 August: Robina. Special Guest Speakers.
Cost: \$10 per person. Bookings essential: 1800 011 041.
For more information visit http://www.osteoporosis.org.au/events_state.php#qld

29 AUGUST RURAL WOMEN'S SYMPOSIUM: 'Liveability - A Woman's View' — ROMA, QLD.
The purpose of the symposium is to develop ideas and create solutions to improve the 'liveability' of rural communities for women. In the lead up to the symposium, the Queensland Government is inviting women to have their say about life in rural and remote communities.
For more information visit <http://www.localgovernment.qld.gov.au/?id=7468>
or contact the Office of Rural and Regional Communities on 1800 136 851.

2-5 SEPT BRISBANE INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST CONFERENCE — BRISBANE, QLD.
Aims to further feminist dialogues about the status of women, and the continued violence against women and children as human rights violations. Conference organisers believe that the status of women globally has been on the decline in the last decade. Bringing together feminist thinkers, researchers, academics, service providers and community women, to share information. Visit <http://www.brisfeministconference08.org.au/> for details.

10 SEPT QCOSS REGIONAL CONFERENCE: 'PEOPLE, PLACE AND COUNTRY' — TOWNSVILLE.
Rural, Regional and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Working for Social Justice.
For more information visit www.qcoss.org.au or call 1800 651 255.

10-12 SEPT 5TH WORLD CONFERENCE ON THE PROMOTION OF MENTAL HEALTH AND THE PREVENTION OF MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS — MELBOURNE, VIC.
The conference aims to generate worldwide support and knowledge exchange for mental health promotion and prevention, and stimulate state, national and international collaborations to advance research, policy and practice endeavours. For more information visit the Multicultural Mental Health Australia website at www.mmha.org.au

31 OCTOBER RECLAIM THE NIGHT — TOWNSVILLE, QLD.
Centrestage Flinders Mall, Townsville.
For more information email amanda@thewomenscentre.org.au



WOMEN'S HEALTH ON THE NET

Hot Spots on the Internet for Women

SMART JUSTICE

www.smartjustice.org.au

The Smart Justice campaign (2006) involved a wide range of Victorian community agencies, peak bodies and community networks, and aimed at widening the debate about the justice system. It called for investment in prevention, alternatives to

custody and initiatives that tackle the causes of crime. While the site is now archived, it still contains useful information on many aspects of prison, and includes a dedicated section on Women in Prison, which discusses topics such as the growing rate of incarceration of women, drug dependency, education and employment, and the impact of

separation from dependants. The site also notes the over-representation of Aboriginal people in prison, primarily due to inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in terms of health, education, employment and housing. Downloadable fact sheets are available including: 'Mental Illness Is Not A Crime'; and 'Sentencing—The Real Story'.





Escaping... into Prison

Heather Bond examines the links between sexual abuse, drug use and imprisonment

While research shows that only 1% of perpetrators of sexual abuse are convicted for their crimes¹ some 89% of female prisoners have been sexually abused prior to their imprisonment². It would appear there is a direct correlation between these women having been sexually abused and later becoming prisoners.

One in three women will experience violent behaviour by their partners and the same proportion will experience sexual abuse, many before they are 15. The consequences of sexual abuse can manifest themselves into a variety of debilitating mental and physical disorders, with 70% of people with a psychiatric disorder having been sexually abused³.

It is common for survivors of sexual abuse, and other violent crimes such as domestic and family violence, to use illicit drugs to numb the pain and blot out the nightmares and flashbacks of the traumas they have been subjected to. The consequence of this use is often imprisonment. Illicit drug use is currently the most common reason for imprisonment of women in Australia⁴.

The 1,440 women imprisoned as at 30 June 2007 comprised 7% of the prison population. The five years between 1994 and 1999 saw the female prison population in general grow by 173%, with a further increase between 1997 and 2007 of 57%. This figure is more than twice the increase for men for the same period⁵.

Although Indigenous people comprise only 2.5% of the Australian population Indigenous prisoners comprise 24% of all prisoners. This figure is consistent across genders. Indigenous persons are thirteen times more likely than non-Indigenous persons to be in prison⁶.

Research shows that before incarceration 89% of Indigenous



Banner created by female prisoners for Reclaim the Night march

women in Queensland prisons have been sexually abused, 98% have experienced physical violence, and 88% have used alcohol or other drugs⁷. The Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland's (ADCQ) *Women in Prison Report* noted that:

"Whilst Indigenous women are more likely to have committed a violent crime, these are often related to long term domestic violence. ...[W]hen removed from those situations of domestic violence, they pose an extremely low risk of escaping or re-offending."⁸

In addition to the individual level of violence that these women have been subjected to, discrimination based on gender, race and class appears to fuel institutional levels of violence in the form of unfavourable, prejudicial treatment with regards to restricted access to education, health care and employment, resulting in a lifetime of poverty, homelessness and despair.

Unfortunately many of these marginalised and disadvantaged people come to the attention of the police. Sometimes swearing at a police officer might lead to a charge of 'resisting arrest', followed by a charge for 'assaulting a police officer'; the use of illicit drugs is identified and before they know it they are

facing a string of offences which usually began as a misunderstanding, but results in their incarceration, sometimes for years.

Some desperately homeless women actually break the law in order to go to gaol, in the hope of having a bed that they do not have to share with anyone, and do not have to perform sexual favours for.

In so doing these women forfeit their right to freedom: their freedom to choose with whom they will associate; their freedom of speech, to be able to communicate with loved ones without someone else listening to their conversation, their phone call, or reading and censoring their letters; and, the freedom to have contact with their children/partner without having to be strip-searched afterwards.

We are told that routine mandatory strip-searching of prisoners is done to keep contraband out of prison; but, it hasn't worked. Sisters Inside revealed that of 41,728 strip-searches conducted over a three year period, only two discovered significant contraband. Sisters Inside research also showed that 51% of women in prison continue to use drugs⁹.

The ADCQ concluded in their *Women in Prison 2006* report:

"It is apparent that drugs are entering and being used in prisons



in spite of the rigorous strip-searching regime currently imposed by prison authorities. If there is any evidence that drugs are entering the prison through means other than prisoners and their visitors, prison authorities must consider the need for more frequent and vigorous searches of staff and other persons entering prison."¹⁰

STOP STRIP-SEARCHING

The ADCQ agreed with Sisters Inside that in many instances strip-searching "...can re-traumatise women who have already been greatly traumatized by childhood or adult sexual abuse". Women prisoners said "...strip-searching diminished their self-esteem as human beings and greatly emphasised feelings of vulnerability and worthlessness"¹¹.

How can strip searching be carried out in a manner that is respectful or dignified? Some of these women are only 17. It is believed that women do decrease or stop contact visits with their family to avoid having to endure mandatory strip-searching. The children of prisoners have also been subjected to strip-searching¹².

Maintaining regular contact with children appears to be a major

issue for many women in prison. Many women were primary carers for their children prior to incarceration. Usually it is in the best interests of both women and their children to maintain regular and meaningful contact. Some of the major obstacles to this contact are the mandatory strip-searching of prisoners; the geographical distances involved; and the lack of facilitation by some government departments.

The enormity of issues faced by women in prison are too immense to do justice to within this brief article. I refer readers to the Sisters Inside website www.sistersinside.com.au for a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of the many forms of discrimination and human rights abuses women face.

Women in prison need strong, passionate activists to advocate on their behalf. I would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of Debbie Kilroy and her staff at Sisters Inside and their contributions towards identifying, challenging, and healing the abuses that many women encounter on either side of the walls.

Heather Bond
hbond@bigpond.net.au

Heather Bond, feminist extraordinaire, and experienced sexual assault counsellor, has facilitated activism with regards to Reclaim the Night and International Women's Day events, and provided counselling and advocacy services to women in a correctional centre.

¹Mann, S (2007) 'Somewhere to help heal and fight back' *The Age* July 14

²Kilroy, D., "When will You See the Real Us? Women in Prison", *Women in Prison Journal*, October 2001

³Children's Commission of Queensland Paedophilia in Qld Report 1997

⁴⁵⁶<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4517.0Main%20Features22007?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4517.0&issue=2007&num=&view=>

⁷Kilroy, D. & Finn, J. (2001) *Are Indigenous Women in Queensland Prisons Any Better Off?* <http://www.sistersinside.com.au/media/AreIndigenousWomeninQueenslandPrisonsAnyBetterOff.pdf> P. 1

⁸The Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland's Women in Prison Report cited in Kilroy, D. (2006) *Understanding the Queensland Women in Prison Report* <http://www.sistersinside.com.au/media/understandingwomeninreport.pdf> Page

⁹Kilroy, D. (2006) *Understanding the Queensland Women in Prison Report* <http://www.sistersinside.com.au/media/understandingwomeninreport.pdf> Page 25

¹⁰ADCQ 2006:71-72 cited in Kilroy, D. (2006) *Understanding the Queensland Women in Prison Report* <http://www.sistersinside.com.au/media/understandingwomeninreport.pdf> Page 25

¹¹ADCQ 2006:72-73 cited in Kilroy, D. (2006) *Understanding the Women in Prison Report* <http://www.sistersinside.com.au/media/understandingwomeninreport.pdf> Page 25

¹²http://www.justice.sa.gov.au/publications/pdf/Children_of_Prisoners_Report.pdf

MEMBERSHIP

To join or renew your membership with QWHN, simply fill in this form and send to QWHN at PO Box 1855, THURINGOWA BC, QLD 4817

Membership of the Network is open to women's organisations & individual women who are in agreement with the Network's purpose and objectives.

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