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FVPLS National Conference Speech
Cairns October 28/10/2006

Firstly, I would like us all to take a moment to think of all the women who are locked away in prisons tonight across Australia – approximately 2,000 of them and most appallingly about 500 of these women are indigenous.

I want you to imagine what they have been doing today – what they are doing now. The majority would now be locked down in their concrete cells –
Alone –
Isolated –
Distressed –

If they have been ‘privileged’ today they may have had a family member or friend or their children visit them – they would have been able to touch their faces, stroke their hair, hug them tight, kiss them tenderly on the cheeks – having that special moment that we all here can have daily.

At what cost though – after their visit they would have been taken into an area where they would have been strip searched – let me clarify that – across Australian jurisdictions it is called a dignified strip search – what does that mean you may be thinking - top half of your clothes off, lift your breasts, flick your hair, hold your arms above your head and turn around, then put your bra back on, now remove the bottom half of your clothing, turn raise your feet, squat, spread your cheeks and cough, if you are menstruating remove your tampon or pad and hand it to the prison officer – this is what a dignified strip search is and how many women paid today for a visit from their children, family and friends.

For those whose behaviour was not favourable to prison staff today – the women who are not well and have mental health concerns, those who get distressed – they were probably left in isolation and who didn’t have a visit or attend a program or go to industry – they were probably hand cuffed and body belted and medically restrained – left in a suicide gown in isolation wondering what is happening to them, thinking of their children, family, and friends. Knowing that they cannot touch them, speak to them as we all have been able to today.

As we eat and drink and socialise as we choose tonight i ask you to remember all of these women now as I speak.

I am remembering Fyodo Dostoyevsky who in 1861 said –

“The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”

It is little wonder that his book was entitled *the house of the dead*.

This conference is being held in a place which wasn't always a tourist mecca of shops and hotels. It was once the true home of groups of indigenous people who lived rich lives in the extraordinary beauty of wild rainforest and mangrove, hills and rivers and ocean.

I would like to thank and acknowledge the traditional custodians of this beautiful land, to say how privileged i feel to be able to walk on land and beaches where indigenous people nurtured long ago, a place they still love and nurture today

And thank you to the attorney general's office for the invitation.

And I'd like to start this address by saying how honoured and pleased i am to be invited here, to spend time among you and to speak to you. I hope the last few days of your conference have been productive and most importantly allowing yourself time to share your stories of fantastic work practice and to continue to build relationships and strength within and between all your organisations.

You are here to address and talk about issues of grave importance to all aboriginal and islander women, men and children, and i feel humbled to be asked to contribute to the community of thought and effort that you bring.

Aboriginal women and children, family violence, legal services and organisations like yours that are managed and governed by indigenous women are such a, fundamental importance to ensure that family violence is challenged and stopped.

I stand here as a woman who walks with you not just through my deep convictions about humanity and equality and dignity and human rights, but through my work with sisters inside, and perhaps most importantly through my family. I am married to Joe who's country in south of here – bachelor - and i have 2 beautiful children – well they are adults now but they are still our children.

I have long and strong connections with your community, connections that are dear to me and this is where i come from, where my heart is, when i stand here to speak with you tonight.

Despite all that i am very aware that i stand here talking from a position of whiteness and privilege.

I know that i am not someone who has to deal with the racism and discrimination that all aboriginal and islander people deal with every day, and active and the covert discrimination you experience in just about every area of your lives.

So i thought i would share with you some of my journey, the journey of sisters inside and our experience of discrimination.

I spent a large part of my childhood in juvenile detention and then in my 20's, faced a mandatory life sentence in Boggo road prison in Brisbane. My father died when I was in youth prison and the management blamed me for his death. After being told I was so bad that it was my fault he died

This was devastating as you can imagine for a young child – to be told by those in authority that I killed my dad.

Then my last stint in prison my close friend was murdered as i sat beside her. Brutally stabbed - another trauma to deal with in a prison with no support.

A criminal record is probably enough to invite discrimination but i suppose i invited more through my actions after i left prison.

Because i didn't choose to leave the prison experience behind. I couldn't.

And i didn't choose to leave the women in there behind. I couldn't.

Few people willingly seek out knowledge of how prisons really work, and i became determined to take that knowledge to them, to the free world - and to anyone who would listen.

This is how sisters inside was born.

It began with women, it grew from within, and it is and always has been of, by and for women inside.

Apart from services delivered inside the prison, like sexual assault counselling, drug and alcohol counselling, indigenous women's support services, link-up programs for women with children, pre and post release support - sisters inside's management arm lobbies and advocates for women and for their human rights.

That management committee consists of women in the free world with skills and backgrounds in government, the law, human resources, education and media, but most importantly they are women who share my passion and the women's passion for a world without prisons.

But I'll come back to that later.

What makes sisters inside truly unique is that women on the inside make up the senior members of that management committee. They are the driving force.

This committee is the beating heart of sisters inside. We are led and guided by women inside. It is their organisation.

This crucial fact informs everything we do and how we do it. It makes us unique throughout the world.

This is the real power of the organisation: that it is truly in the hands of those it serves. This is the way it stays true to its vision.

It is authentic: it reflects the real experience of women, and is true to them. This is its abiding strength.

Of course to be true to women in prison we have to reflect them in every way.

You here are no strangers to the numbers of indigenous women in the criminal injustice system.

To reflect that and to ensure sisters inside is a culturally safe organisation for indigenous women and children and their families, and of course our staff a third of our employees are indigenous.

We also have a senior indigenous practitioner in a position of authority, someone our non-indigenous workers can consult for guidance and to ensure that the non indigenous staff are supporting indigenous women and children within the boundaries of such direction. This is a crucial part of our work with indigenous women and their children.

It's about walking our talk. If we didn't operate as a culturally safe organisation then indigenous women wouldn't come to our door. It is about those other connections we have with indigenous organisations and how we walk and work together. To name one and acknowledge them because they are here is the AFVPLS in Melbourne.

Sisters inside has worked closely over the last few years with Antoinette Braybrook and Aunty Marion to support and build from the ground a committee that is directed and driven by indigenous women in prison in Victoria with the vision of their own organisation.

There are plenty of non indigenous organisations around the country where this doesn't happen. Where networks and relationships aren't built and services are not being accessed by indigenous people.

I hear non indigenous people question - why don't you access our organisation – the door is always open – you all know why indigenous women, men and children do not access the majority of non indigenous organisations.

However we as non indigenous people have to address this. And this question should never be asked of indigenous people as to why indigenous women, men and children do not access our services. We as non indigenous people have to address our own whiteness and privilege and respond to our own that ask such questions.

At sisters inside we know that if we can't connect with indigenous women and their children and have relationships with them and the wider indigenous community, we will fail. We should close our doors and walk away – because it is a clear indication that we are not walking our talk.

This is why your organisations that are present at this conference are crucial to indigenous women, men and children – to have specific indigenous services to address family violence, prevention and access to legal services and most importantly that they are governed by indigenous people in your communities – whether they be in capital cities, out in the bush or in remote areas – your services in all of these areas are fundamentally important because we know there are indigenous women and children living in all these places across the country who are experiencing horrific

violence and they access your organisations without hesitation. Your organisations are truly in the hands of those you serve.

I am sure the department that provides funding for your organisations understands this as well and i would think that part of their role is to speak out and support your organisations no matter what location. And of course challenge discrimination in that support for you all.

This support is incredibly important because it seems to me that things are getting worse, not better for us all in the community sector.

We here in Queensland are living in a place where it has always been dangerous to speak out.

It still is.

I think for a while we got complacent about that.

The bad old days of conservative rule when the special branch recorded every voice of dissent, when police bashings were commonplace at every protest rally – those days seemed to disappear when we got a labour government in 1989 after more than 30 years.

For a while it seemed you could speak out without punishment.

But as the electorate became more volatile and left wing governments became nervous the fear campaigns began again.

Suddenly we were getting the tough on drugs and tough on crime campaigns and the marginalisation of anyone who dared to disagree.

At sisters inside we've been making a lot of noise about the criminalisation of women and about disadvantage and the links between them for a long time.

We've spoken out loudly against any government or institution we saw was inciting fear, whether that was through lock 'em up and throw away the key policies, tough on crime campaigns or the increased criminalisation of people with backgrounds of poverty, abuse, mental illness and indigenous people.

In that sense the organisation has always been beyond politics, beyond factionalism. Its heart is the people it works for – the women and their children. We truly believe it is the only way to achieve change.

But it is also what intimidates and terrifies governments and what has exercised the minds of politicians recently.

Despite operating on this basis for 14 years, with success – i was personally awarded an order of Australia medal several years ago, awarded the national human rights medal and sisters inside was named best community organisation in Australia.

Despite that, the current minister of police and prisons in Queensland believes that our management structure is unsuitable. Women who are living the experience should have no voice

That it cannot in fact be allowed to operate – silence them.

Despite the fact this model is lauded as the best in the world by people like Professor Angela Davis, herself an iconic leader for decades in the fight for justice, and an ardent supporter of sisters inside.

Despite the fact that organisations like sisters inside keep women out of prison, by supporting them, helping them rebuild their lives when they emerge, to find homes, get their children back, get training and employment, and find a home.

This is the same minister, mind you; who recently boasted about how well policed we are, particularly how well policed indigenous people are:

One police officer to 440 people in the broader community and one to 120 people in indigenous communities.

Four times more. And she was boasting about that. To me this it is nothing more than structural racism.

These days, when we reply to such statements, or object to certain government actions or inactions, it doesn't go unnoticed.

Up until two years ago the worst we suffered for that was a backlash in the media, or a summons to a high level meeting.

That all changed two years ago after sisters inside lodged a formal complaint against the QLD government about the abuse of human rights and discrimination of women in QLD prisons.

The report back from the anti-discrimination commission vindicated, we believe, everything we stand for as an organisation.

It urges the state government to address such issues as mandatory strip-searching, the shocking effects on the children of incarcerated mothers, the terrible plight of women with mental illness and the systemic discrimination indigenous women experience in Queensland prisons daily.

And the ludicrous claims made on behalf of prisons by those who build and run them.

That is, that they work.

That women who commit crimes need to be locked up, de-humanised, degraded, further deprived; that they will be made into better people inside prison, that they will emerge better equipped with training and work experience and rehabilitated.

The statements we, as an organisation, have made following that report have seen us locked out of Queensland prisons – myself personally, and the management committee – and the curtailing of many of our services.

This has been devastating for us and for me personally.

And for the women inside who are now largely without any voice at all.

And you know as well as I do that these are women who have been silenced and marginalised by life before prison.

The truth is that prison repeats all the experience of violence, abuse and deprivation and humiliation that most women who go inside have experienced their whole lives.

In fact, to the great majority of women in prison, the term human right is a contradiction.

Their human rights have been compromised well before they hit the criminal injustice system.

Prior to going to prison, 98% of women have experienced physical abuse.

89% have experienced sexual abuse or assault.

A great many of them have experienced poverty, in families that are abusive, in which they are not valued.

The effects of poverty and abuse mean most have a low level of education, low levels of self esteem and few skills.

The attempts that many make to self-medicate, to deal with the pain of life, mean a great proportion have addictions to drugs and/or alcohol.

Their health is characteristically poor, and many have mental health issues which have not been addressed.

In the past two years we have seen abundant and heart-breaking evidence of that.

Prisons have become the defacto psychiatric institutions of our communities, where behaviours are not treated but punished, where people are not just chemically restrained but physically restrained and abused. Prisons are where we hide the homeless.

A high proportion of incarcerated women are of course indigenous. In this state alone indigenous women make up 30% of the women's prison population.

And for them, all of those things are multiplied.

Multiplied, exacerbated, and getting worse all the time.

Some are from culturally diverse backgrounds, and for them those things are also multiplied.

So when we at sisters inside talk about the human rights of women in prison, we are talking about a very delicate thing.

It's a notion most of these women have given up on.

Human rights are things other people have.

Life – and the experience of being a prisoner – does that to you.

That is why I find it interesting that in the media recently the minister and director general here in QLD - among others in other jurisdictions - have been busy trying to tell us that prisons in our society are akin to 5-star hotels.

Hotels where prisoners get it easy in air-conditioned comfort, spend their days lazing around the tennis court, in gyms and libraries, their hours taken up by carefree hobbies and comforting therapies.

They're so successful that they're planning more of these so called resort-style complexes – one here in north Queensland, in Townsville, one in the act, the new recently opened prison for women in Tasmania and lets not forget the 4,000 cell prison to be build in outer Brisbane.

No prizes for guessing the people who will be filling them up.

Given that there has always been one rule for aboriginal people and another rule for the police, as we've seen so graphically recently on Palm Island.

The despair of the community over the tragedy of Murindji, killed in custody 2 years ago while the police officer responsible has still not been charged and removed himself from duty by community outrage. Still on full pay i must add and lets not forget that the minister did not remove him from duties.

That up against the case of a young woman recently whose young child slipped in the shower – the mother was charged with not providing the necessities of life because she didn't call an ambulance or seek medical advice – then 24 hours later charged with manslaughter of her little baby girl.

Again, one rule for aboriginal people, another for the cops.

And unless we address the fundamental racism and discrimination inherent in our society this will not change and we will continue to see the overt and covert criminalisation of aboriginal women, men and children.

This is our problem, the problem of non-indigenous Australia.

Ours is a society that has always been uneasy with its colonial past and the decimation it caused among the first peoples of this land

Yet it is also a society that claims to champion the underdog.

It is an extraordinary irony that, while we claim to be on the side of the battler, we are also busy keeping the battler, the under-dog, the under-class, in their place.

Because if those people are allowed to move out of that place of disadvantage and deprivation – what becomes of the rest of us? The white privilege

What happens to our place, the rung on the ladder we've fought so hard for? The white ladder

Prisons fit neatly into this scheme of thinking.

Prisons underscore the social, political, economic and judicial system that we have all created to keep our own white advantaged heads above water.

They ensure there is always someone to blame.

They ensure there is always someone punished – on behalf of us all. I believe that we, the advantaged, the privileged, are kept in our safe places by the very fact that others are carrying our collective blame for the ills of society and of the whole world.

Most people who suspect this do what they can to forget they know it.

They do this by various methods: we make these others invisible – and prisons are just one way of doing this.

And we do it with words, by labelling them. We call them 'bad', 'mad' we call them 'lazy', 'weak' or 'violent'.

In this way we make them less than human. In this way we can all get out of bed in the mornings and face our days without weeping.

Well, some of us.

Inside prisons this is taken a step further. A woman inside prison is no longer someone's daughter, wife, mother, nan, girlfriend, employee or boss.

She has no particular history except a prison or criminal history.

There is no such classification as bag-snatcher but good mother; or drug dealer but fantastic businesswoman/chef/storyteller; or prostitute but loyal carer of disabled son or grandmother.

To concede qualities other than the bad ones would be to risk treating such women as human beings with human rights.

In prison you are your crime. They make a shape for you and mould you to it.

And that's just the informal classification system.

What about the formal classification system – lets talk about the orni -r

These issues form just a part of the discrimination and human rights complaint sisters inside took to the anti-discrimination commission 2 years ago, and for which we are now being punished.

The real reason we are being punished is that prisons don't work, and we keep pointing that out.

We will keep pointing that out. Just as you all will keep pointing out how important it is to stop family violence and how important your work is for indigenous women and children and families in the communities you live and work.

We must have the courage and tenacity to challenge the continued creation of laws and policies that effectively criminalise poverty, mental disabilities and aboriginality.

We must challenge the classification, assessment and correctional tools that pretend that the individual members of those very groups of people who are grabbed, sucked or thrown into the criminal and correctional systems are there because of their planned, voluntary and criminally intended actions.

What do we do instead?

In the United Kingdom noted policy leaders are calling for decarceration and social reinvestment.

In the United States, some have been calling for the abolition of juvenile prison for a long time, and those same voices are now calling for penal abolition.

In Canada, cafes continue its advocacy and legal challenges for decarceration of indigenous women and abolition.

In the United States too, Angela Davis continues to influence debate with her argument and writing, most recently her book, are prisons obsolete?

Angela has characterised the push to criminalise the most dispossessed as akin to the system of slavery that dehumanised America for so long.

When people began to talk about the abolition of slavery, they were met with cries of horror and fears of anarchy and violence.

Similarly with notions of the abolition of prisons.

We have to de-mystify this debate.

Let's look at the reality of prisons: we imprison women and girls for the behaviours they have adopted to survive poverty, abuse, colonisation, racism and disabilities...

We tell them they must stop this.

We lock them up and repeat the abuse they have suffered all their lives.

We tell them what bad women they are, and that despite their lack of options – no income, no housing, no medical, educational or often family support – that they must reform themselves.

Then we release them to the street with little or no support, drug rehab, no skills to rebuild their lives, no money to even pay a bond, fill a fridge with food – let alone survive until they can get a job, get their kids back...

We tell them they are in charge of their destinies.

What a joke.

But what if we took a different tack? What if we provided everyone with enough resources, economic and social, so that every child truly had an equal chance of prospering?

If we provided a good base-level of care for everyone and a safety net that truly did stop people, particularly children, from falling through the cracks.

What if every child had access to high quality education and was supported to access it and to access employment opportunities and a decent standard of living.

What if every instance of child abuse or potential abuse was caught and stopped before it flowered into that child's nightmare throughout their lives?

What if there was a sudden and national acknowledgement of inherent racism in this country and its terrible effects and a true and real effort to make amends? What if white Australia could walk their talk when they say 'sorry' to indigenous peoples in this country and match the word 'sorry' with real action.

It's easy for governments to wax lyrical about these issues. The reality is that the human beings who are the real end result of racism and child abuse and family violence in our communities are the human beings filling up our prisons.

Despite claims to the contrary, the great majority of women in our prisons are in there for non-violent offences.

They do not need to be there and we as a community do not need them to be there.

Their children do not need them to be there.

There are many options – long term ones as I've already mentioned – a more equitable society.

One in which every new baby truly has an equal chance and equal opportunities.

Your organisations are part of this process to stop women being criminalised and imprisoned – your support and commitment to indigenous women and their children and families show you walk with them and this will ensure that less indigenous women are criminalised.

None of these options is impossible. None of them are dreams.

But they will remain so while we insist on the current system of selective retribution and blame

While we insist that some will have and some will not have.

In the meantime i will, and sisters inside will, and i am sure you will, continue to speak out, to raise, to provoke, to invite people to consider a world in which not only prisons but poverty and prejudice and racism and deprivation and violence are abolished.

A world in which all people experience freedom from discrimination and want as basic human rights.

A world, in fact, in which those two words mean something to everyone.

In closing i would like to leave you with the words of a beautiful aboriginal woman from Brisbane: Lilla Watson

"If you have come here to help me,

You are wasting your time...

But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,

Then let us work together."