

Acknowledge TO

Acknowledge the organisers for invitation to speak

Acknowledge the women in prison

Breaking gender barriers – a voice of experience

I'm the woman I am because of other women.

We're here today to talk about our experiences of getting ahead as women in a male dominated world.

But who I am isn't just my experience,

where I've gotten in life isn't just my story,

it's the experiences of thousands of women.

In order to break gender barriers, you have to be clear about what they are.

For many women in our community, these barriers are all too literal.

They are fences and cages and guards who have all the power over your life and over your decisions. Prisons are disempowering and frightening places, and women shouldn't be in them.

For these women there are other barriers which are harder to see, but they have an impact just as shattering on these women's lives.

I'm always a bit careful about using statistics to make a point,

women's lives are complicated and difficult,

and therefore hard to measure with numbers alone,

but the statistics regarding women in prison are genuinely terrifying.

- ✦ 73% have been admitted to psychiatric or mental health units
- ✦ 39% have attempted suicide
- ✦ Over a third of women in Queensland prisons are Indigenous - in North Qld 80% are Aboriginal women
- ✦ 85% of women prisoners are primary carers
- ✦ Over 50% of the women were themselves on child protection orders as children.
- ✦ More than 85% have experienced childhood sexual abuse.
- ✦ 98% have experienced violence as an adult.
- ✦ over 70% have a substance addiction.

These are not adversities in life that are the sole domain of women, but what these figures show is that many women in prison are in prison because they are women.

Because they are caught in poverty, because they lack education and training, they are responsible for raising children often on their own and they are trapped in violent and abusive relationships.

Often when you speak with women in prison or recently released, they have never not been in a violent relationship, from childhood to adulthood, they leave violent family homes and become trapped by violent boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands and wives.

I don't say this to be at all negative about the womens' chances of escaping the cycles of crime, mental illness, poverty, and violence, but to say that when women do escape these cycles they are absolutely breaking through the gender barrier, and as women, it's as important to us that

they do well as it is for a woman to become an equity partner at a top tier law firm or to establish her own practise.

That's not just because we are kind and compassionate as people and want others to do well.

It's because women do better when all women do better.

Very successful women breaks down gender stereotypes and break through the gender barrier just by the example they set to the community, and to our daughters.

That's why it doesn't really matter if that success is a rewarding corporate career, or if it is stable housing, being able to look after your kids, or living a life totally free of the criminal justice system, all women's successes should be celebrated, especially by women ourselves.

So that's what I think about success and about breaking through the gender barrier.

I'd like to spend some time talking about how I got to where I am today, a lawyer and CEO, and about what it is that Sisters Inside does to support women to create their own futures and to break through their own gender barriers.

When I established Sisters Inside in 1992 after leaving prison myself for the last time it was to give women in prison a voice, not to speak for them, but to help them to speak for themselves.

To express their needs, to speak up about their hopes and ambitions and to speak up about why they're sad, why their scared, and to tell people what is happening to them in prison.

You can't break gender barriers if you're silent, you can't break them if you're scared that you'll be punished for what you say.

Sisters Inside has grown and grown from where we started. We have an enormous range of programmes that support women get through every conceivable barrier that the world throws at them, and to tell them that they're worth it, they're good, and we love them.

We have programmes that include

- ✦ Supreme Court Bail
- ✦ housing support
- ✦ sexual and DV & FV counselling
- ✦ reunification of mothers and children
- ✦ mental health support and life skills
- ✦ youth work
- ✦ pre and post release support

Those people who know me will have heard me talk endlessly about sharing power with women, not power over them, and walking their journey together.

I talk about this for a reason because it is a journey for these women, and it has been an extraordinary journey for me personally and professionally.

When I was preparing for tonight I thought a lot about my own journey and what brought me here. My experience with the law isn't mine alone, it's the experience of many women.

One of the things I recognised early when founding Sisters Inside was that if the organisation was going to be an effective voice for women in prison, if we were going to turn our passion into a successful and viable

organisation, we would need to work with women whose experiences of life were different to my own.

This was for a number of reasons.

Professionally, an organisation like Sisters benefits from a management committee drawn from all walks of life with a huge diversity of experience with the law, politics, human resources and corporate governance.

Working with our management committee over many many years has built Sisters into an organisation that has turned our passion for justice into a long term strategic vision.

Sisters Inside gets an enormous number of things right. We've supported thousands of women, kept families together, and reduced criminal behaviour.

We've assisted the most vulnerable women in Queensland to access Government support programs, stable housing, and to navigate the maze of the child protection program. Our advocacy has lead to radical improvements in the Government's policy response to womens imprisonment, and better treatment of all Queensland prisoners.

We offer a huge array of services to our clients, but I want to just take a moment to talk about our self funded supreme court bail program because I think it is a great illustration of what we do and an example of the practical steps our workers take every day to support Queensland women.

TALK ABOUT BAIL PROGRAM

Sisters is also deeply connected to the legal industry and we work with the next generation of Queensland lawyers to assist women in the criminal justice system with excellent legal advice and reputation.

#### TALK ABOUT STUDENT PROGRAM

Until recently we also offered support to Townsville's women in prison and women recently from prison. The loss of this funding was devastating, and we will work tirelessly to get it back.

#### TALK ABOUT TOWNSVILLE discuss the loss of funding

And Sisters Inside has saved Queensland taxpayers millions and millions of dollars. Keeping a woman in prison is hugely expensive, \$70,000 a year, just for the cost of keeping her behind bars. Once child protection costs, and other services are factored in, the final figure for keeping a woman in prison is astronomical.

#### MAKE THE ECONOMIC ARGUMENT

These are all great programs, and they are an extension of our passionately held beliefs regarding the rights of women who have been exposed to the criminal justice system.

But what makes them possible is that Sisters Inside has over the years, made very considered choices about the sort of organisation we will become.

That has included choices about significant investments to make ourselves financially sustainable, best practise in people management so that we attract the best staff and have clear expectations of performance and clearly defined roles and excellence in financial administration.

None of this has been accidental, our management committee absolutely shares our values and believes in our mission, but what they bring is their own experiences.

These are women who have lead their own legal practises, women who have made significant achievements in the public sector and in the corporate world. They are women who know what it means to work, and what it means to build and maintain significant organisations. They are women who have made tough decisions in their careers, and owned big responsibilities. They are women who have smashed the gender barrier themselves countless times.

These women's experience means that when we suffer a setback like the loss of our funding in Townsville, we respond in a strategic way that leverages our organisational strengths to adapt to the changing Queensland landscape.

Professionally, learning from the experiences of these women has fundamentally changed how I approach my career and the choices I've made about my work and balancing the competing demands of legal practise, running a large organisation, and managing my personal life.

The professional support I've received from these women is more than just having a group of people to talk to when I'm stressed. It's receiving guidance and excellent advice from women who have been there and done that time and time again.

Personally, it is harder to talk about what the support of these women has meant to me.

It's not hard to talk about it because it's complicated; it's hard to talk about because it has meant so much that I'm never sure where to start.

You've no doubt heard that my life was not always as good as it is today.

## TALK ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND

When I decided to change my life, I really didn't know where to start. Deciding you want to do something different is not the same as knowing how to or how it's going to turn out.

The women who would eventually become the Sisters Inside management committee terrified me at first. They were phenomenally successful, self assured, and made very sensible decisions in their lives. They were very different to me and they were the sort of women I wanted to become.

As years of working together became extremely close friendships, their example and their confidence inspired me every day to take charge of my own life, to study the law, and to work hard to achieve my ambitions. They inspired me and supported me to find my own niche in the world and to learn to lead others.

They taught me that when you need support you ask for it. If you want something in life you have to go after it and that being a successful woman also means sharing your success with others.

Working with other women to raise themselves up is a reward in itself.

And that's what I'm really getting at in this speech.

Breaking the gender barrier isn't a single woman's experience,

it's not just my experience, it's the experience of so many women in our lives.

When women lead you by example, when you can look at them and say 'yes, that's who I want to be too,' it's important to be conscious of it, it's important to ask them how they did it and ask them if they will support you too.

That's how you break the gender barrier, you support other women's success and you ask women to support yours too. When women support women, the world is a better place for all women.