

## Speech to Minter Ellison

August 2008

Thanks to tradition owners and to Minter Ellison for the invitation.

### Overview of SIS

2 arms of org

Law reform

programs

I want to start by telling you a story. It's the story of a child. Growing up in those spreading suburbs south-west of Brisbane, the ones that keep turning up in the lists of most disadvantaged. Of fewest jobs. Of highest crime. Of lowest level of school completion.

This child, like many others there, is not homeless, but has known abuse and deprivation from a young age. She and her four siblings share one bedroom in a two-bedroom house. Without a job or much education, her mother has relied on a series of

abusive boyfriends to help her out financially, but she is helpless before her addiction to drugs and alcohol. She likes school, especially art, but all the kids wag it a lot.

Before this little girl is 10, her mother goes to prison on a serious trafficking charge. The kids are split up between grandmother and aunties, who try to keep them in touch with their mother. Over the next year or so, they get so used to prison visits that prison loses any sense of menace to them. It's as familiar as home.

Despite that, the little girl is angry. She misses her mother and hates living with auntie, who is old-fashioned in her discipline. At school, she gets taunted about her mother. She gets into trouble for hitting a girl who called her mother a scum.

When she's picked up shoplifting it's all over with auntie. She's made a ward of the state, sent off to a foster home where she feels like an outsider, and where her anger deepens. She has no idea how to express these feelings of rage and shame. She runs away a lot.

During one of these episodes, she's with a group of girls when one of them glasses another girl. A week later, she's in youth detention.

What happens to her after this is as predictable as her life so far: in and out of detention centres, a drug habit, all the wrong friends. At 18 she finds herself pregnant, homeless, and facing five years imprisonment for fraud.

What our system keeps failing to recognise is that, when a woman goes to prison, so does her whole family, in a sense. They all feel the stigma, the isolation, the rage, the fragmentation. Most women who go to prison are the primary carers of children (85%) . The little girl I speak of today is real and she is typical. The prison experience is cyclical. And deadly.

Some of you may know I have personal experience of this. I don't want to go into any of that here today but I can tell you this scenario is very real. You'd be forgiven for thinking it was part of a wider plan: for the imprisonment of whole sections of the community, whole swathes of people we find too hard to deal with – the poor, the homeless, the youth, the mentally ill. After experiencing abuse and deprivation as a young child, our little girl here stands to represent all these groups. They are the disposable in our society, the ones we can collectively blame for all our ills, and collectively punish.

But each grown woman behind bars at Wacol, deprived of everything she ever was and ever had, including her freedom and her dignity and any shred of human rights she had left, each of those women was that little girl once. A child with huge potential for good in the world. A child like yours, and mine, a child like the one you once were.

At Sisters Inside we are trying to intervene in the terrible inevitability of this process with several projects –

Circus Program

Mothers & Children

Reunification camps

Prison Visits

Special circumstances court Bridging program

Representation before and during court and incarceration