

**THE WHITE WALL SYNDROME: AN INDIGENOUS
FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE
OPERATING WITHIN THE WOMEN'S PRISON**

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Sisters Inside is a community based organisation working with women in South East prisons. Our management committee is advised by women in prison - ex prisoners and women from the community who are interested in advocating for the human rights of women in prison. Sisters Inside has 7 years professional practice working with women in prison and the women involved have over 50 years experience of life in prison. Today I will look at how the “White Walls” of Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre create a boundary to all outsiders. How the “White Walls” create the culture of the silenced woman. The “White Wall Syndrome” feeds into the culture within these walls that women live in, day in day out. It is a multi faceted complex, dynamic system and is impossible to present a complete picture of the culture in a 20 minute paper. Therefore I will present a broad overview, as a starting point, as a basis for you to begin to understand the complexity.

Once entering the prison you are inducted into this culture, you are usually unaware of the process. Your crime and length of sentence will usually determine where you are placed within the culture. It will prescribe how you will survive or not survive your prison sentence. Whether you are accepted by the prison system or ostracised. The women and correctional officers, named screws in this culture and for the rest of this paper I will continue to use the terminology screw not as a derogatory term but to remain consistent with prison culture. Also the term Screw does not include professional staff and management, it refers only to custodial officers. Women prisoners and Screws are responsible for maintaining the life force of the prison. If anyone tries to change the culture they will be silenced or removed through a range of protective mechanisms.

This paper will continue to explore the culture of the women’s prison and explore how the Indigenous Women’s Transition Program breaks through the culture and supports Indigenous women through the integration process back into their families and communities.

Despite the diversity of ages and cultural backgrounds represented in the prisons in South East Queensland, Sisters Inside is of the belief that Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre constitutes a distinct community of its own. The women generally share common links in that they are from poorer socio economic backgrounds, have a low educational attainment, and usually have a history of abuse and sometimes of previous incarceration and institutionalisation. Whether as children they were adopted, fostered, or orphaned. Young people from these backgrounds find themselves in care, or detention typically they have experienced domestic violence, abuse and poverty. The Indigenous women also have an on going experience of racism.

The women in prison who do not come from a poorer socio economic background and who do not have a low educational attainment do share the history of abuse be it emotional, physical verbal and or sexual. Approximately 85% of women in South East Queensland prisons have experienced sexual violence and over 85% are victims of domestic violence and many return to the violent environment when released from jail. The other commonality that

women experience is motherhood, nearly 80% of women in South East Queensland prisons are mothers with at least 2 children. Abuse and motherhood are the links that enable women to connect on a very intimate level. However, the most significant link is that they are all in prison.

For the period of their incarceration the women are closer “neighbours” than any comparable in the outside community. They work, eat, sleep and spend what leisure time is available interacting with the same people everyday. The prison setting provides the women with their housing, work environment, social environment and all the material necessities of life. Though women are isolated from the external world, involuntarily, in some respects it could be argued that its characteristics parallel geographical isolation.

To explain where women and screws fit into the culture is very complex, however we will attempt to present an overview which will give you some sense of the culture and its impact. There are many overlaps and sub systems.

A woman’s sentence will usually determine how she will be treated within the culture. There are no clear boundaries about who is a long termer and who is a short termer. However, there are clear cultural norms that identify where a woman will be placed within this system. If you are a lifer (a woman sentenced to life - 16 years before you can apply for parole) you will usually be accepted into the long termers group. However, if you are actually sentenced to 16 years but not a life sentence this does not automatically mean you are accepted into this group. There is a clear delineation between the two sentences. Once the lifers ‘suss’ you out and they believe “your okay” you will be accepted and initiated into the long termers group. Some of the provisions to be accepted are that a woman would have to prove that she can stay in control of her feelings, not show anger outwardly unless controlled and directed to management on issues that are affecting other women, their crime is not against children, and she is not a “dog” (does not betray confidences and adheres to the code of silence).

If you are a woman in prison or a screw that tries to change the culture you will be isolated, eventually silenced and in some cases threatened with passive or overt violence. Women serving short-term sentences usually show grief once imprisoned however they learn quickly that this is not accepted within the culture.

The woman who shows her emotions through crying in prison will be labelled as a “sook” or weak and told to:

“snap out of it cause you only have a short sentence” -
“what are you whingeing about, how long you got?”

The short termer women who shows emotion through crying will gain very limited support from other women in prison or screws. Within this culture there is very little respect given to a short termer whinger. A woman who shows emotion through anger will also be isolated. This will prove to the other women and the screws that you are not together, you are not in control. It is crucial that you stay in control in this culture, as the

consequences are severe. The consequences received if you are a woman that shows anger is by being breached (this is a disciplinary procedure where you are punished). Breaches are used as a behaviour modification technique, basically a woman is punished for her behaviour if not acceptable by the screws. If breached a woman can be locked away in isolation in the DU (detention unit for up to 7 days) if anger is outwardly expressed. Anger can be expressed in many ways that are detrimental to short termers for example through "blood letting" (self harm) so the anger can be released through the slices cut into the woman's arms. Total desensitisation of the whole body is another way of dealing with anger. Unlike in male prisons anger is rarely expressed in overt physical violence.

Desensitisation is the primary coping method that long termers use to prove that they are in control so they are accepted within the culture. Ironically long termers are allowed emotions of anger and sorrow whilst short termers are ostracised for it. However these emotions can only be controlled and not overtly shown to everyone in the prison. Individual anger can be shown within the long termers group and the group will offer support to the woman and attempt to problem solve the issue around the anger. Individual sorrow through crying is also allowed if it is pain and grief that is shared by most of the long termers - for example - one of their children is ill and the commonality of the loss of their role as mother is shared. This display of emotion is controlled and outsiders - short termers women or screws - are not privy to the discussion or allowed to share what their grief and pain is like for them as mothers. If an outsider tries to join the process desensitisation will take over and the long termers will shut down the emotion. Exclusion from the long termers group is once again enforced through protective mechanisms.

If a screw tries to make changes to the culture the protective mechanisms will also be used to isolate them or they will be threatened. The screw will choose to either resign or conform to the culture. In 1990 when a murder happened in Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre many staff who were affected emotionally by the murder were labelled "weak". They took stress leave for lengthy periods of time and because they knew they could not survive this harsh culture most of these staff resigned. There is very limited respect and support for the "weak" from other screws and the women in prison.

There are different sorts of power within the culture. There is official power which is attached to a person's position of employment and there is real power which is usually unofficial and held by the long termers and screws within this culture. A screw has more immediate power than a person does in a management position. A person in a middle management role stated recently "when I was a screw years ago, I had more power within the prison - now that I am in a management role I have hardly any real power. I have the power within my role but I am made accountable for everything I do and I can lose my job if I f...up. Years ago I knew who was doing what, where and when and we had the run of the show, we could breach women, lock them up when we choose and lose things like the mail and requests from the women as we choose. No one could do a thing to us because we had the 'real' power. Management would make their threats to us and say they were going to change the prison culture but they never could because we

knew we would be around a lot longer than them and we held the power”. As another screw said with regards to new managers coming into the prison and having changes planned that “it doesn’t matter they come and they go just like all the rest and we’ll still be here - nothing has changed in the 20 years I’ve been around”. When I continued to explain that the manager is determined to change the culture and asked if anything is changing he replied “look nothing changes it’s the same shit different depths”. There is a huge resistance from long term screws to change the culture.

Within the culture the screws also maintain the short term - long term separation of the women and between themselves. They play the women off against each other and this maintains the constant tension between the two groups of women. If you are a screw who has been part of the prison for many years and are accepted by the other screws your role is to ensure that constant harassment is inflicted on short term women. The long term screws’ role is to maintain pressure on the short term screws so they conform to the culture also. However, the screws (short termers and long termers) will not harass the long term women. They behave differently in all their interactions with them. The long term women will usually be shown respect and left to their own devices as long as what they do does not impinge on the screws. The principle being “you stay out of my way I’ll stay out of yours”.

The process screws use to play off long term women against short term women is to carry stories about who is whinging and who is being breached for anger related behaviours for example self harm, suicide attempts. One of the many other ways screws play each group off is by telling the long termers who is dogging on other women in prison whether it is true or not. The stories are made up to suit their power play in maintaining the culture through separation of the groups. This creates a strong bond between long term women and the long term screws.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are a part of this culture outlined above however a subsystem within this complex prison culture on a whole remains within their own culture. One of the major components of this culture is respect for the elders. Younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women respect and relate to the authority of the older women. Younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women also give this respect for elders who are not Indigenous women. Young women have been known to stand up for and defend older women, of any race if they are being disrespected or abused by women inside especially long termers. However this elder respect is not directed towards the screws.

The culture at Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre segregates all women and is maintained by “long term” and “short term” women and screws. Within this culture there is very limited support or opportunity for any individual woman to develop new strategies that have a lasting effect and that are relevant to her survival when she is released back into her community. They are rarely able to speak up for their own “best interests”. The term “best interests” meaning each individual woman identifying what she needs and how she wants to address her concerns and issues.

Unless the “white walls” are broken down it is impossible for a culture to evolve where women are not abused. Where they are seen as individuals. They are heard and the silence can be broken.

Sisters Inside’s Indigenous Women’s Transition Program attempts to break down the White Wall Syndrome by working with both long termers and short termers as individuals not subgroups within the culture.

The aim of the Indigenous Women’s Transition Program is “ **to provide intense support to Indigenous women as they reintegrate into community after a period of incarceration.**” The objectives are to

- (a) Reduce recidivism and**
- (b) Reduce the hardships faced by Indigenous women, their children and families during this time.**

To do this successfully it is necessary to work with the Indigenous women during every transitional stage of their incarceration experience. We have identified the following significant stages:

1. Entry To Prison
2. Remand
3. Sentencing
4. Appeal
5. Movement between blocks
6. Movement within blocks
7. Relocation to another prison
8. Work Release
9. Home Detention
10. Immediate Pre-release
11. Release
12. Post Release (this is the most challenging stage an Indigenous woman will face)

As well as the above there are other significant events which require adjustments like sickness or death within the woman’s family or suicide or self harming in a prison block. There is no set path for movement through the system and no set responses to the events that occur at different stages. Each Indigenous woman’s experience of prison is different and unique to her alone. The prison culture and the Indigenous women’s place in the culture impacts on her experience, as does her personal coping mechanisms, her life before prison and her outside support system during incarceration.

It is not only incorrect to make generalisations about the impact of defined stages on Indigenous women it is unjust and detrimental to the women’s development and dangerous for her and other women. For example there are many within the prison system and society who would claim that entry to prison to begin a sentence is more traumatic for first offenders than for Indigenous women who have been incarcerated

before either as an adult or juvenile. This rationale is as unfounded and as inaccurate as the myth that a nun would be more traumatised by being raped than a prostitute is. The depth of trauma cannot be measured by the event alone. Stereotyping and judging an Indigenous woman's response to an event by nature of her occupation or past, constitutes abuse.

As previously illustrated the culture of the women's prison is dynamic and complex. It is not culture that exists only in Brisbane Women's prison. While more intense there, it is also live and well in each of the other prisons. There are still only two types of women, long termers and short termers. What is different is most of the women who are long termers at Numinbah and the other centres would not necessarily be accepted as long termers inside BWCC. However, most Aboriginal women serve their time in BWCC and do not move through the system. There are a number of reasons for this for example the distance from family, women often choose not to go to Numinbah as it, is over 100 kilometres away from Brisbane. There seems to be a level of institutional racism in the system. Prison authorities bemoan the fact that Aboriginal women do not like to be moved as individuals therefore it is hard to move Aboriginal women through to less secure centres. The prison authorities misunderstand the issue; perhaps if they moved a number of Aboriginal women together the process may work. Recently women were sent letters saying if they did not move to other centres they would be sent back to secure detention within BWCC. The women responded by arranging for their own return to secure.

We believe it is important to understand the culture and the power dynamics of each prison as much as possible so that we can work with the Indigenous women for positive transition and not get 'sucked in' to the power plays and abusive processes. It is negligent to work within the system in any capacity be it programs, transitional support, counselling, chaplaincy or prison personnel and not pay attention to the culture or to use it for negative impact or power over the Indigenous women.

It is nonsense to suggest, as some do, that prison is a therapeutic community that creates change. If Indigenous women do use their prison experience to make changes in their lives through education or working through personal issues it is in spite of the system not because of it. Ironically those in power talk about rehabilitation and reducing recidivism when presently the systems that they administer make it very difficult for this to occur.

Indigenous women in prison are constantly told that they are incapable of making decisions because in jail all decisions are made for them. It is true that they are not able to make some of the routine daily decisions that those outside make, like what to wear or where to go for the day, it is not true that they are incapable of making decisions. However institutionalisation makes them lose confidence in their ability to make decisions. The situation is very similar to that of a woman in a domestic violence situation. Given that at least 85% of women in prison have / still are experiencing domestic violence in their lives, the message they get in prison reinforces their negative self concept and further lowers their self esteem.

In our work with Indigenous women we challenge the notion that they do not make decisions. The enormity of the decisions that Indigenous women make daily are difficult to comprehend in the outside world. However they are crucial to their survival. For example since moving to the new prison the Indigenous women in Brisbane Women's Prison are subjected to a full strip search including cough and squat after every visit (family - legal). If the Indigenous woman is menstruating she is required to remove her tampon or pad and hand it to the screw for disposal. This is an enormous decision for Indigenous women to make. They have to decide to be subjected to this indignity and sexual abuse in order to see their family or have legal counsel. One long termer had not been strip searched for four years prior to the new prison opening. Given the sexual abuse statistics constant strip-searching can be life shattering for some women. They relive their previous sexual assault and become re-traumatised. Some decide not to see their families because of this. The long termer mentioned previously is one of them. Most people make a decision of this magnitude once in their lifetime, many Indigenous women in prison do it weekly. Strip-searching is an abusive process for the women screws, as well, they too are women who think, feel and menstruate. They tend to become desensitised and abusive, stressed or leave, remember the culture allows "no weakness".

Sisters Inside does not believe that set responses to issues the Indigenous women encounter during the transitional stages are useful. Instead we work within a set of principles that are appropriate for all women to develop a response plan, with the woman, which takes into account her individual needs and circumstances. The most common issues Indigenous women approach us with are in relation to family and accommodation. We have identified that many Indigenous women need to resolve these before being able to focus on herself.

When Indigenous women do focus on themselves we work with issues like fitting into prison, relationships, the violence in her life, education / work prospects, sexual abuse, self esteem and self concept, goal setting, substance misuse etc.

We work with the children and "family" of the women only if they wish us to. Issues in relation to "family" include:

- Custody, access (visits), health of family members, support systems for the care
- providers, changing roles, grief and loss.
- Children- grief and loss issues, anger, trouble at school, offending, secrecy
- (people/friends not knowing where mum is), relocation, and different rules in changed
- care provision.
- Accommodation issues are around where women are going to live upon release.
- Women have to have suitable accommodation arrangements to secure Home
- Detention, Sponsored Leave Of Absence, and Parole and in many cases to regain
- custody of their children. It is particularly difficult for Indigenous women because of

- the racism that is rife within the rental market.
- We do not give legal advice but we do talk with women about their options, services
- available and make appropriate referrals.
- We advocate on behalf of women and their families with government and non government departments and other officials. We also advocate and lobby widely regarding the human rights of Indigenous women in prison.

The Principles that guide our work are:

- **Indigenous Women's Interaction with us is voluntary** - this means that when we
- first see an Indigenous woman we tell her seeing us is always her choice and she can
- change her mind about this when ever she wishes.
- **Do not make assumptions about what the issues are and work at the woman's pace** -
- we state this at first meeting and reinforce constantly. We start at where the woman is at
- and move on when she is ready. A woman might be referred to us for sexual assault
- counselling but we might work with a dozen other issues before that.
- **Confidentiality is assured-** we have a policy that we will not disclose content of our
- interaction with women to anyone unless the women ask us to. When they do ask us,
- we negotiate around what information might be disclosed. We write reports to support
- Parole Board Hearings and other applications. We show all reports to the women first
- and discuss the content and negotiate changes. The woman has final say on whether the
- report is submitted and to whom.
- **Indigenous Women are the experts in their own lives** - we constantly reinforce this
- notion with the women through both word and actions. We do this through hearing
- and believing their stories, assisting them to identify their needs and exploring how
- she wants to address her concerns and issues.
- **Honesty in Interactions** - We believe that it is important to "walk our talk", make our
- actions fit our words. This means naming things for what they are. We endeavour to
- give the women all the information we have so that they can make informed choices.

- For example if a woman decides to work on some personal issues we let her know that
- beginning this work can leave her vulnerable in the prison culture. We discuss how
- she will keep herself safe during this time. We know our own abilities and gaps and
- say what we are not able to do.
- **Establish clear boundaries** - We believe it is essential to have clear boundaries and
- state what these boundaries are. This creates consistency in our responses and helps
- build trusting relationships. When we run groups we develop a working agreement
- with the women/children at the beginning of the group to establish the group norms
- and set boundaries. When working with individuals we negotiate the parameters of
- interaction and clarify our roles.

Our approach to working with women in prison is based on valuing the Indigenous women as human beings who do think and feel and have skills. It is about treating them with respect and dignity. In 1998 Garcia Coll et ell researched the needs of women in prison in America and the implications for service delivery. They found women prisoners identified “ being respected as people with dignity was one of the most important components for survival in prison” (Coll et al !998:21).

The prison system reflects and reinforces society’s view, value and treatment of Indigenous women. It is too easy to lock Indigenous women away and forget about them. It is too easy to label Indigenous women who offend as personality disordered, mad or bad. It is too easy to build big new prisons and fill them. It is much easier than acknowledging that Indigenous women in prison are thinking, feeling human beings who have committed an act that society has defined as a crime. That they are entitled to dignified humane treatment while paying their penalty.

It is much easier then accepting that we; academics and workers in the Criminal Justice sector contribute to the ongoing abuse of Indigenous women by portraying or treating Indigenous women in prisons as criminals who can be researched, boxed, labelled, treated and abused by those with power and influence. At this time in Australia we are in a position to break down the walls and change the culture, our prisons have not got as huge and totalitarian as in America. What it will take is for all of us to critique our own practices and ask if what we are doing challenges the existing culture or supports and justifies desensitised practices?