



A Black Woman and a Prison Cell

Working with Murri Women in Queensland Prisons

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For
Sisters Inside Inc.

“White workers have to be prepared to make mistakes. As a Migaloo you will inevitably say the wrong thing, or do the wrong thing, culturally speaking, at some point. What matters far more is your underlying attitude—whether you are “fair dinkum” about working with us or not. Murri women aren’t stupid. We can tell who’s onside, and who isn’t.”



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Introduction

This research paper is to provide information about the lives of Aboriginal women prisoners in Queensland for Migaloo people. (A related piece of research has been written for Aboriginal women prisoners themselves.) The paper has a focus on drug use, but also talks about other related issues like aboriginality, strip searches, community violence and poverty. Some strategies for workers are contained throughout the paper.

After reading this paper, we hope that you will have some understanding of what Murri women *feel* and *know* about the prison experience. We hope that you will know more about Aboriginal women's drug use in prison and upon release, and that you have some insights into helping Aboriginal women change their lives for the better.

Unless you are a Murri (Aboriginal) woman prisoner yourself, you will never completely understand the problems and experience of this group of citizens. For example, it is a simple thing to read in a report that most Murri women have experienced sexual abuse either as adults or as children. And it is easy to think that you understand the lives of women prisoners. But unless you—as a survivor of child rape—have had to choose between having your young daughters stripsearched by prison guards, and going without a visit from your much-missed family, you can never really say that you understand the black woman's prison experience.

What is possible is to educate yourself about your own cultural background, and about the ways that being female and a prisoner work to disempower people in Queensland. Knowledge is power. Armed with knowledge about prisoners, Murri (and Migaloo) culture, and gender issues, you can gain a better understanding of the issues of black women in our prisons.

With the information in this paper, we hope you can work more effectively and more humanely as a counsellor, educator, bureaucrat, or just as an ordinary community member. Armed with the right tools, you can avoid simple mistakes in working to assist Murri women prisoners.

Who is Aboriginal?

Aboriginal people (also called Murri people) are those people with an Aboriginal bloodline (however distant), who regard themselves as Aboriginal and who are accepted as Aboriginal by members of their local Aboriginal community.

The Australian stereotype of an Aboriginal person is a very black person with dark wavy hair and distinct facial features. This is true for some Murri people today, but not for the majority in Queensland.

Skin colour, appearance, language, level of education are all irrelevant in determining someone's Aboriginality. We come in all shapes, sizes, colours, religions and professions. Murries can be black, brown, yellow, or white in skin colour. We can have curly hair, straight hair, wavy hair, brown, blonde or red hair. It is not possible to judge if someone is a Murri without talking to them—you can't tell just by looking.

In Queensland most Aboriginal people call ourselves 'Murries'. Murri is not a tribe – it just means Queensland Aboriginal. You might also hear words like 'Bama' or 'Koori' for those from North Queensland or NSW/Victoria.

Whiteness

Aboriginal women are “different” in lots of ways – or are you different from us? What does our difference mean to women who are Thai, or German, or of Arabic background? Does it really matter? Can't we all just be treated equally? Why do we have to talk about people's colour at all? Isn't it just a form of racism to talk about our differences?

The answer to lots of these questions lies under the heading of “whiteness”. Many people—Migaloo people—find it uncomfortable or scary talking about issues of race, because they confuse discussing race with being racist. It's also an area that few white people have much information about, or expertise in.

Here's a couple of definitions before we start talking about whiteness:

Race is a myth, scientifically speaking. There is only one race—the human race. Talking in terms of genes, we are all so physically similar that ideas of the “black” race and the “white” race and the “yellow race” are really nonsense. This is why all human beings, regardless of their background, are able to have children together. But it is still useful to use the word race because it has been used so long in Australia to describe **a mix of culture and physical appearance**. (In talking about Murri people in Queensland, the definition is almost entirely cultural – remember that aboriginality does not depend on your colour, hair type or appearance).

Prejudice literally means “judging before”. It means deciding before you know someone whether or not you like them. In this context, it means judging brown, or white, or black people on the basis of their race, without really knowing them as people. Like it or not, we all have certain prejudices—against redheads perhaps, or against fat women, or hippies or bikers or Scottish electricians. These prejudices may do little harm to others until we have the power to put them into action.

Racism is unfortunately alive and well in modern Australia. Racism is when people's racial prejudices (against blacks, or Asians, or whites) are added to their power to harm others. So:

Racism is prejudice plus power.

Racism can be open or hidden. It can be expressed deliberately, or unconsciously. Many people hold racist ideas without even realising that they do so. Black, brown and yellow Australians can hold racist ideas about their own racial group – this is called “internalised racism”. Many white-run institutions like schools and hospitals are seen as racist and hostile environments by Aboriginal people, even though those institutions may be horrified at the idea that they are acting in racist ways.

White people who feel uncomfortable discussing racism will often talk of examples where Aboriginal or Asian people are prejudiced against whites. Its true – we are all capable of prejudices. But in thinking about racism, we also have to think about who holds **power**. An average Aboriginal woman has almost no power to harm or affect the lives of white people in Queensland. She is unlikely to be an employer, or a business owner, or to sit on the board of a company, or to be able to imprison or discriminate against anyone in a serious way. She doesn't have the ability to turn her prejudices into racism.

White people who are prejudiced can and do have many kinds of power in this society—and that's the reason white prejudice is more damaging than Aboriginal prejudice in most cases. Remember—racism is prejudice PLUS power.

The Privileges of Whiteness

Modern Queensland is a society shaped by ideas and institutions inherited from Europe, mainly from Britain. The overall Queensland population is mostly white, with a significant minority of Asian and Pacific Islander people, especially in coastal cities. The Murri population in Queensland varies from about 2—5% in the major cities, to up to 95% in some country towns or remote areas.

Despite having a diverse racial mix, Queensland is still a place where being a Migaloo gives automatic advantages to those from a particular background. This is because most people in positions of power are white, and regard their own (white) culture as “normal” and “natural”.

Suprising as it might be, the great majority of Migaloo people have power/privileges over most non-whites without realising it or ever having to think about it. Just by being born with pale skin into a European Australian culture, some Queenslanders have automatically been given an advantage over others from different racial backgrounds. This does not mean that these white people are deliberately racist on a personal level. But it does mean that they have forms of race-related power which privilege them over others. In other words, the system is racist even when white people are not.

. These forms of automatic power held by most Migaloo Queenslanders include:

- having your first language, standard English, spoken in nearly all businesses, schools, police stations and government departments etc. This means you never have to struggle to be understood, or having to speak with an accent which marks you as an outsider.
- being regarded as a “normal, safe person” when dealing with police, government departments, banks, schools etc.
- the power to “blend in” and be invisible if you so choose (unless disabled etc)
- being fluent in a culture that treats writing as superior to the spoken word
- having people like yourself running most government bodies, police stations, schools, hospitals, and many businesses, sharing many of your cultural assumptions and understandings
- never having to deal with open racism directed at yourself
- never having to deal with hidden racism directed at yourself
- having people of your own or similar religious background running most government departments, police stations, banks, schools etc.
- not having to cope with having your skin/hair/facial features stared at every time you leave your home
- not having been born into dire poverty simply as a result of your race, (eg the descendents of mission Aborigines)
- having people like yourself making most important political decisions in the Queensland Parliament and the Australian parliament
- having people like yourself making most important decisions on the boards of major companies
- seeing people like yourself shown as ‘normal’ on television, and in other media and therefore never being trained to see yourself as different or an outsider
- having people like yourself making most decisions about arrests, sentencing and probation in criminal matters
- not having to constantly answer questions about where you are ‘from’, even if you were born in Queensland
- not being constantly followed by detectives or shop assistants in shops, and assumed to be a potential thief because of your appearance or colour
- not having to constantly educate white people about the basic facts of your culture
- not having to endure the constant stress of anticipating and heading off racist comments or attitudes
- not having to make decisions about when to interrupt racism, and when to be quiet and preserve emotional energy
- not having to be “twice as good” to prove that you are not lazy/dirty/stupid/uneducated.
- not having a family history which involves being murdered and stolen by white people, and the fear that goes along with that history
- not being regarded as “an exceptional white” or “a credit to the white race” if you achieve a normal level of education or success

- not being expected to be a spokesperson for the white race, or a representative of all white people at all times

These are just a few of the many forms of power that go hand in hand with being white.

Migaloo people don't have to think about their race in the same way that non-whites constantly have to in order to survive. So it often shocks white people to actually sit down and realise that first, they belong to a racial group, and second, this affects their life every day in many real and important ways.

This group of privileges which are held automatically by white people is called "Whiteness". Of course, some white people are more privileged than others—white Muslims or Jews, for example, can face discrimination on the basis of their religion. Many white people are very poor, and face class discrimination. White women generally hold less power in Queensland society than white men. Most white prisoners have very little power, except over other prisoners. This doesn't alter the fact that whiteness automatically equals a particular kind of power.

Think of the following powerful people in any given Queensland town or city—

- bank managers
- school headmasters and headmistresses
- local politicians
- State politicians
- Federal politicians
- senior police
- senior bureaucrats
- judges
- magistrates
- board members of major Australian businesses
- employers
- office managers
- foremen on work sites
- senior journalists
- senior media personalities
- senior prison officers

Of all these people, a few are women, but only a tiny minority will be non-white. Almost none of them will be Aboriginal. The ideas and assumptions that these powerful white people hold will "fit" best with those of other white people. The ideas and assumptions of non-whites, including Aborigines, will rarely be considered in their decisionmaking. Even when these people act with the best intentions, they often exclude or discriminate against Aboriginal people because they are ignorant of us, our cultures, and our beliefs.

In a white dominated society like Queensland, being white—even if you are poor, or a woman—means you automatically start the “Game of Life” holding better cards than non-white people.

Does it matter? Yes, it does matter, if you want to live in a fair society where people succeed or fail depending on their own efforts and skills. It also matters a great deal if you work with Aboriginal people, and want to work effectively. Whiteness—the automatic privileges given to people as a result of being white—can lead to a society where some yellow, brown and black people feel cynical, powerless and angry. Such a society is more prone to violence and crime. It is also unnecessary and unjust. We can recognise the unfairness of white privilege and work towards a society where all cultures and races are respected equally.

When you, as a Migaloo person, see for yourself the awful damage that white privilege does to non-white people, you can either shut your eyes to it, or work to change things. You have a choice.

What Can Workers Do?

Workers can make a good start by recognising that **they** have a race and culture too. They can identify this race and culture (eg fifth-generation Anglo Australian from a working-class culture; second generation Polish Australian from a middle-class background, etc), and think about what it means as a worker with Aboriginal people. They can ask themselves questions like “what would life be like if most places I went, I was the only white person?” “How have people from my background treated Murri people in the past, and what does that mean for me today? What assumptions am I making about Murri people? How can I work better with Murri people, given my cultural background—what difference does it make?”

Workers can commit themselves to working in non-racist ways, and to listening to Aboriginal people. They can also commit themselves to learning as much as possible about Aboriginal cultures, as an active part of being a more professional worker.

Another useful tool is knowledge about local history in your area. By knowing where the old missions were, and who was sent there and why, you will understand a lot more about the Murri people you work with today. Most Aboriginal women in jail in Queensland come from mission families, or from remote areas where Government reserves acted in much the same way as missions did.

Being Aboriginal in Queensland

When people commit criminal acts they are held responsible for those acts as individuals. But **why** are so many Aboriginal women in prison or on drugs? (And Aboriginal men for that matter.) What is it about Murries that makes us more likely to end up on the wrong end of the criminal justice system? Like the Native Americans in the USA, the Native Canadians in Canada, the Maori in New Zealand and many other Indigenous groups around the world, we are jailed at rates far higher than white people in the same country.

Unless Indigenous people around the world all have amazingly criminal genes, there is something going on which is related to being Indigenous.

We believe that a big part of the answer to why so many Aboriginal women in Queensland end up in prison or on drugs is **the racist system which privileges whiteness**, as discussed above. Another huge part of the answer is **poverty**. And another major part of the answer lies in **the culture of dispossession**.

Poverty

When the British first arrived in Australia in 1788, they took it. By force. When Aborigines protested and fought back, they were either killed, or put onto missions which resembled concentration camps. Aboriginal people have lived in poverty ever since.

Losing our land was the beginning of Aboriginal poverty and welfare dependence. But it got worse. For many decades, Murri people in Queensland were treated as slave labour by the pastoral industry and others. We worked hard but there was often no reward other than the food we needed to stay alive. Under the Migaloo law, we had no rights to vote, to buy land, to claim back our stolen land, to keep our own children with us, to marry as we wished, to live where we wanted, or to travel freely.

Until the late 1960s, we were forced to live on Queensland missions and reserves, and our labour was sold at the government's convenience. Aboriginal life was managed to the tiniest degree. The manager's written permission had to be sought to do things like marry, or move house, to leave the reserve for a trip to town, or even to wear a swimming costume!

If we protested about this unfair treatment, we were usually whipped, or jailed, or shipped to reserves like Palm Island off Townsville. Murri people believe that sometimes Aboriginal "troublemakers" were simply murdered. Aborigines had almost no rights in Queensland. We lost our land. We lost our freedom, and much of our culture, and often our children. **Many Murries lost any sense of ourselves as people with normal choices and the power to run our own lives.**

Generations of Aboriginal people have lived in poverty. White Queenslanders today usually inherit some wealth or real estate when their parents or grandparents die. But our

parents and grandparents have no wealth or real estate to leave us—it has been stolen from them by successive governments.

So instead of inheriting land and wealth as white people often do, Aborigines instead inherit generations worth of anger and pain. Our grandparents or great-grandparents were often killed. Our parents and grandparents were stolen, and missionised. We ourselves grew up in a racist society, and some of us were stolen and missionised. This is a history of overwhelming anger and pain for many Murri people. We often now use drugs and alcohol to cope with that anger and pain.

A few Aboriginal people have survived in better shape than others. Some of us now own our own homes, or have medium or high incomes. But the average income of a Queensland Murri is at least a hundred dollars a week less than white Queenslanders. Unemployment among Aboriginal people is around 20%, which is double the Mialoo rate (Kennedy, B. 2001). And that figure doesn't include all the Murries on CDEP—work for the dole—which is about 13% of the working Murri population. If you count those on CDEP together with the unemployed, around one third of adult Murries don't have real jobs. Then you have to add in the mums and dads in jail, on single parent benefit or sickness benefit—the real Aboriginal unemployment rate is probably closer to 50% or 60%, especially in remote areas. That means a lot more mouths depending on the Murries who do have jobs—and a lot less cash to go around.

Living in poverty is not just about your yearly income, though. Living in poverty means growing up and **never expecting** to have a reasonable job, or to own your own home, or to live without struggling and fighting to pay bills or buy food. It means believing that bad treatment is normal – that Murri people are somehow not allowed or expected to have decent lives.

“Did we know we were poor? Oh, yeah! We never had any luxuries, you know, never any birthday presents, or school lunches or that.”

Murri woman, 36, Townsville

When Aboriginal children grow up in poverty around chronically underemployed adults, they have few role models that encourage them to succeed at school, to develop an effective work ethic, or to believe that wealth can come from legal activities. For some Aboriginal children, school is seen as difficult, boring and irrelevant, as there are few jobs for them after school anyway.

“School...it's tough. If I didn't have the mates I've got I wouldn't have gotten through it....You'd just ditch it.

Koori teenager, 16

When you live in a culture of poverty, underemployment, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse, the temptation to turn to crime and drugs can be overwhelming. The sad truth is

that many Murries don't even realise that there is an alternative. They know no other way of life, or else regard having a paid job and a decent house as something only possible for white Queenslanders. Until a few short decades ago, this was in fact the truth.

“Things was real hard for a while when my kids were small. We was living under my sister's house for a while, but then things came good and we got some mattresses. It was a lot easier then.”

Koori woman fruitpicker, 54, Brisbane

“It's a pretty good place for Murries, hey?”

Proud Murri student, 22, on renting a basic flat.

Aboriginal people have always worked hard in the past as stockmen, domestic servants, factory workers and so on, but we usually didn't get paid for our labour. The 'normal' connection between hard work, and a decent standard of living, still isn't made by some Murri people.

High unemployment means a lot of Murri people are living on Centrelink benefits or off crime. It also often means boredom, and low self-esteem. All three factors feed into a drug using, criminal lifestyle. Violence is a very big problem in some Murri communities, with domestic violence and sexual abuse of adults and children very common. This is another important factor leading to drug abuse. When women and kids and men are raped, or bashed, or both—sometimes frequently—who can blame them for choosing to use drugs as a survival mechanism?

“Nothing. (pause)... I just got raped again last night.”
Murri woman, NQ, when asked what was wrong,
quoted in Atkinson, J., 1991

When there seems no alternative to living a life of poverty, violence and drug abuse, some young Aboriginal people can see turning to crime for income, survival and thrills as “normal”.

What can Workers Do?

Workers can make themselves aware of the poverty most Murri people live in. This will help them avoid wrong assumptions about things like women having a house to go to upon release from prison; having transport to get to a job or job interview; or having food to feed their children.

Importantly, workers can avoid “shaming” Murri women by being aware that the lifestyles of Murri women prisoners are vastly different from most white women in Queensland.

Workers can also avoid a “welfare” approach where they attempt to “fix” the problems of individual poverty. Murri women are used to poverty—we usually just want respect and a bit of courtesy, not handouts or useless advice on budgeting.

The Culture of Dispossession

All Murries know that previous Queensland governments were responsible for the theft of Aboriginal lands. All Murries know of, or are descendents of, people who were murdered by whites in earlier generations. Many Murries in their thirties and forties today were removed from their parents, just for being Indigenous. All Aboriginal people know that their relatives, or their friends’ relatives, were imprisoned on missions, and usually brutalised by police and pastoralists and others. Many living Murri people endured this treatment themselves.

“There’s a woman getting around in the Brisbane community today, a Murri woman and she’s got a scar on her cheek the size of a fifty cent piece. She got it when they sent her out from the mission to do domestic work. The white woman, she wasn’t happy with her cleaning, and so she got some steel wool and said ‘here, I’ll show you how to use it’. She scrubbed that girl’s face with steel wool and she’s got the scar to this day. Awful.”

Jackie Huggins, Indigenous Academic

“When you went to school and all the kids had to hold hands, I had to have a stick. The white kids would hold hands, but when they got to me they’d hold the stick instead, because they wouldn’t hold my ‘dirty’ black hand.”

Murri woman, 48

Murri culture is saturated with our knowledge of what has happened to us at the hands of white people. As a result, some of us live with a mixture of fear, dislike and mistrust of white society.

This means that when a young Queensland Aborigine stands in the dock accused of, for example, stealing, he or she knows she has broken the law of Migaloo Australia. He or she also knows, though, that Migaloo people have in the past stolen Aboriginal land, murdered Aboriginal people, and raped Aboriginal women and children at will. He or she knows that usually nobody paid for these white crimes against black humanity.

The young Murri in the dock more than likely has parents or grandparents who grew up hungry, brutalised and working for no pay on a mission or a reserve. He or she knows that nobody has paid for this white crime against their black family, or called it by its

proper name—slavery. The young Murri more than likely has had at least one mother, father or grandparent taken off their family by a government determined to wipe out Aboriginal people. He or she knows that nobody has paid for this attempt at genocide on the Aboriginal people.

The young Murri knows that for most of Australia's history, there has been one law for blacks, and another law for whites. For many young Aboriginal people, the white justice system is seen as a joke, but not a very funny one.

When the law is seen as favouring one group—whites—and constantly discriminating against another—blacks—the force of the law is weakened. Murries break the white man's law because of poverty, but also because we often regard it as a bad and hypocritical law. "Why should we keep laws that we know white people have broken and got away with?" young people ask. "Why shouldn't we steal off people who live on our stolen land?" some Aborigines say. It is difficult for Elders to convince these young people to turn the other cheek, and live law-abiding lives when they face injustice at every turn.

What Can Workers Do?

Workers can educate themselves about racism generally and Indigenous dispossession in particular. They can refrain from voicing their opinions about racism until they have good information, and they can recognise that **the experts on racism are the Murri people** who suffer it daily.

Prison Culture

Prison culture is one based on violence, fear, dominance and mistrust. The most dangerous thing a prisoner can do is trust another person. When you work with Murri women prisoners, it will take time before even a low level of trust is established. This is simply a fact of life. Murri women (as well as other prisoners) protect themselves by refusing to believe that you won't let them down or betray them. The potential costs of trust in a prison setting are just too high.

Mistrust can be expressed in joking behaviour, in disrespectful behaviour, or by simple avoidance. **As a prison worker your only asset is your integrity.** If the word gets around among Murri women that you have compromised your integrity, your name will be dirt. You won't be able to work effectively with prisoners again.

Never promise to do something that you can't achieve, no matter how tempting it is to offer hope.

Never go back on your word.

Never lie to a prisoner.

If you make a mistake, all you can do is be upfront. Admit your error, apologise sincerely, check that your client/s are willing to keep working with you, and then get on with your job.

Self-hatred and Shame

Murri women in Queensland are raised in a society where women are not valued much, and where Indigenous people are often despised. We live with sexism and racism on a daily basis. Many of us are trapped in poverty. On top of this, our families are often so saturated with violence and abuse, that sometimes our self-esteem barely exists at all.

Drug users of all cultural backgrounds commonly engage in negative self-talk. The Murri women you work with in prison will likely have an inner voice repeating to them the insults and put downs that they have heard from childhood onwards. This is not the same thing as mental illness. It is simply a normal outcome of being put down by many different people over a long period of time. Ongoing negative self-talk can poison prisoner's lives to the extent that change is very difficult.

"You're a useless little black bitch."

"You're a pissweak ****."

"I wish you'd never been born."

"You're not really black, you're just a whitefella in it for the money."

"It's your fault you get bashed."

"You deserved to be raped, you black slut."

“Life sucks and you can never trust anyone.”

“Why don’t you go and neck yourself?”

and so on.

Consciously, the Murri drug user may say that she is proud of her Aboriginal culture, and feels good about herself. Her subconscious though, is likely to have been tainted by the violence and racism she has grown up with. At some level, the prisoner actually believes the lies she has been attacked with. Part of the worker’s task is to help her slowly replace constant negative self-talk with more positive self-talk.

“I’m pretty deadly at doing my art.”

“I can learn—I’m not stupid!”

“I’m really strong not to have given up.”

“I’m a modern Murri, doesn’t matter about my light skin colour.”

“I deserve good things in life.”

“Nobody ever deserves to be raped—rape is a crime!”

“Life can get better. Some people can be trusted.”

“My mum did the best for me that she knew how to do.”

What can workers do?

Workers can come down hard on any instance of put downs or negative self-talk, whether by prisoners, other workers, or prison staff. Sometimes this has to be done subtly. Simply saying “I don’t agree with that” can be enough to interrupt racist and sexist talk. Don’t be afraid to call racism by its proper name. Remember the harm that racism and sexism does to all people. Everyone deserves respect. All people are important.

When Murri women voice their own negative self-talk, workers can respectfully interrupt it. “I don’t believe you’re stupid.” “Nobody ever deserves to be raped, Michelle.” “I think you have lots of good ideas, Linda.” “It sounds like your Mum had way too much on her plate, Dianne, but I think she probably loved you deep down.”

Be very careful not to put the person down in the process of disagreeing with her. Think creatively about appropriate ways to interrupt extreme negative thinking and negative self-talk.

Strip Searches

Most Murri women prisoners experience systematic humiliation in prison. We cop racism and sexism from the prison system, just as we do in the outside world. Other prisoners can also hold racist and sexist attitudes, and Murri prisoners can hurt us with internalised racism where they adopt racist attitudes in order to protect themselves. (Such Murri

people are sometimes known as “coconuts”—brown outside and white inside. *But* calling someone a coconut can often be an example of internalised racism in itself).

Systematic humiliation of Murri women is best shown in the use of strip searches as a tool of dominance and abuse. Governments and prison officials attempt to justify strip searches on the grounds that illegal drugs and other contraband is hidden on prisoner’s bodies.

The reality is, though, that strip searches only ever turn up tiny amounts of contraband. And given that most Murri (and white) women in prison have been sexually abused as children, and/or raped as adults, and/or bashed by usually male partners or relatives, strip searches are a terrifying and humiliating experience.

Murri women in prison believe that strip searches are used as a tool of dominance and oppression by a prison system which is indifferent at best, and sadistic at worst. Strip searches are not a rare, justifiable occurrence—they happen regularly, often to the same women, week in and week out.

In Murri culture, adult women and men spend very little time together. Physical contact between the sexes is far more limited than in mainstream society. Even being in a room with males is uncomfortable for most Murri women, especially those from remote areas. To be strip searched in the presence of men—particularly white men—is tantamount to torture. Many Murri women experience flashbacks to rape and sexual abuse during and after strip searches.

Being stripsearched is the ultimate power trip for the searcher. **It is a form of rape** for the already traumatised Murri women who experience it.

What can workers do?

Workers can listen respectfully and sympathetically to Murri women who have been traumatised by strip searches. Workers can also let others know that women in prison are regularly humiliated by strip searches, and agitate for change. In the case of Murri women, for cultural reasons this treatment amounts to torture.

Drug Use in Prison

Women in prison use drugs for a variety of reasons, just as women outside prison do. A prime reason for both groups is needing to “get out of it” to escape reality. Most prisoners know that drugs create problems as well as solve them, but reality is simply too painful for them to bear.

Violence, including sexual violence is a big problem in some Aboriginal communities. Most women in prison will have been bashed as children and/or as adults. Many women

in prison will have been raped as children and/or as adults. As a recent study on Aboriginal family violence in Queensland put it:

“many families are now trapped in environments where deviance and atrocities have become accepted as normal behaviour and as such, form an integral part of the children’s socialisation.”

ATSI Women’s Task Force on Violence, 2000

Another study said:

“the statistics paint a frightening picture of what could only be termed an ‘epidemic’ of family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities”

Gordon Inquiry, 2002

Aboriginal women in Queensland face the “double whammy” of having to cope with racism and sexism in the general society, as well as sometimes racism and sexism in their homes. “Safe” environments for Murri women need to be:

- as free from racism as possible
- as free from sexist behaviour and attitudes as possible
- free of violence, sexual violence and intimidation
- respectful of the fact that not all Murri women think, look, or act the same

Such environments are few and far between. Instead of safe environments like this, Murri women often live in overcrowded homes with violence, sexist attitudes, and sometimes racist attitudes of white partners or family members.

The **huge stress** of constantly being on guard for violence, racism and sexism, can make Murri women turn to drugs simply for relief from the burden of being black and female in this society.

Aboriginal women in prison are often mothers, and fears of what is happening to their kids while they are inside is a prime stress factor. Children are usually left with relatives such as grandmothers while women serve their sentences. Aboriginal women know that their children can easily be exposed to neglect, domestic violence and sexual abuse while they are in prison, unable to help, or even listen to their kids. For these women, the knowledge that they are in prison, powerless to stop their kids being raped or bashed is almost unbearable.

“When I found out my mum and my kids had gone back to live with X, I wanted to neck myself on the spot. I couldn’t even cry about it, eh. Cos he’s a paedophile, and he got into all my sisters and me. Now he’s living

under the same roof as my kids, he's got access to them 24/7, and there's nothing I can do about it."

Ex-prisoner, 2003

Boredom is another reason prisoners use drugs. There is little for women in prison to do other than watch daytime TV. Art classes, which have been very popular with Aboriginal prisoners, are now available rarely if ever.

What drugs are used by Queensland prisoners? Drugs are available to prisoners fairly easily, so long as they have the money or goods to pay for them.

"Oh, if they want them (drugs) they can get them."

Ex-prisoner, 2004

The drugs in heavy demand in prison are heroin, speed (amphetamines or goey) and to a lesser extent marijuana (ganja; pot; yandy). Party drugs like ecstasy or acid are far less popular. Drug use is less 'recreational' than 'survival' in intent.

Needles to inject heroin and speed are only available to prisoners illegally. There are not enough clean needles though. Some Murri women have contracted HIV/AIDS in Queensland prisons through sharing needles with others.

Drug Use Upon Release

When Murri women leave prison, they will usually return to the environment of poverty which led them to commit crime in the first place. Because of racism, lack of skills, and childcare and transport issues, most Murri women will have great difficulty finding or keeping jobs. Most Murri women prisoners are mothers and/or carers of young children. The majority exist either on Centrelink payments shared among a large extended family, or on the proceeds of crime.

The NSW AJAC Report "Speak Out, Speak Strong" found that seventy per cent of Indigenous women in prison relied on Centrelink payments to live (p.28). Twenty-six per cent lived off crime, and the remaining four per cent were paid for waitressing or barwork. In the NSW study:

"Some women felt that this crime was an opportunity or resort to providing basic needs to family members, and felt it was a substitute for social welfare payments."

Living in an environment of stress, violence, poverty and 'normalised' drug-use, it takes a miracle of will and strength for Murri women to resist using again. Nevertheless, some women do succeed in bucking the trend, and get off the merry-go-round of drugs and crime. One Queensland ex-inmate who is now clean said:

“They’ve gotta want to do it. Otherwise the workers are just wasting their time, if they don’t want to get off. For me, I just **had** to be at home. I couldn’t be in jail again. And also, the friends I came out to had all stopped using hard drugs. They just sit around and smoke cones all day now. It makes it easier for me cos they aren’t using.”

What can workers do?

Worker can be prepared to make mistakes. What matters is your underlying attitude—whether you are ‘fair dinkum’ about working with Murri women or not.

Workers can recognise the many social and economic factors that make up Aboriginal lifestyles. They can understand the histories which partly lead to criminal behaviour—histories of child removal, imprisonment on missions, domestic violence, and sexual abuse by both black and white adults.

Workers can educate themselves by reading on Aboriginal topics, watching TV shows such as Message Stick on the ABC, and by listening to the Murri women they work with.

Workers can recognise that although domestic violence and sexual assault are common now, they are not, and never were, acceptable parts of traditional Aboriginal culture.

Basic Strategies for Workers

Murri drug misuse in prison and out of it is linked to racism, poverty and the culture of dispossession. This means that many of the solutions are to be found in State-wide changes to jobs, housing, education and social attitudes. And until Australia takes serious steps to lower the level of racism experienced by Indigenous and other minority people, we as a nation will continue to suffer the negative consequences.

There are also steps, though, that can be taken at the local level, and by individuals. Workers cannot do everything—but everyone can do something to stem the tide of Aboriginal imprisonment and drug misuse. Some ex-prisoners say that making a real connection with one other person is what turned their lives around.

“I think its because X was there for me, and she understands. Without her, I think I’d wouldn’t have done it, couldn’t have got off...Oh, we did it together, but its down to her as much as me.”

Ex-prisoner, 2004

“In eleven years of drug counselling, I have found it matters very little what you actually *say*. It is what you do, and who you are, that counts. For most drug users, it is critically important to make a real connection with one other person. Many users have been very alone or vulnerable as children, they have never felt a close and strong connection to anyone, ever. If that can be given, there is hope for change.”

Drug worker, 2004

Never underestimate what one person can do. At times, all community workers face “burnout”. But if you skill yourself up, and are prepared to make mistakes, who knows what difference you might make? One positive comment from you, or one ten minute session of really listening to someone in crisis, might make all the difference in a Murri woman’s life. Some Murri woman prisoners may not have had anybody really listen to them for years, if ever.

Be Yourself

All of the suggestions in this report under “what can workers do?” are designed to help you think better and work more effectively in a prison setting. What matters most, though, is your **underlying attitude**. If you are afraid of Murri people, this will show. If you are hardened and don’t care that you hold racist attitudes, this will show. If you are

burnt out and past caring, this will show. If you are too depressed to work in an empowering way with us, this will show.

All our lives, Murri women have to make snap judgements about white people in order to survive. We are expert at “reading” people. Even young Murri kids usually have this ability to know when they are being patronised, or lied to. Our “bullshit meters” are highly tuned. Your character may be tested very quickly for integrity upon meeting a new Aboriginal client.

This means that as soon as you enter an Aboriginal environment you have no alternative but to **be yourself**. If you pretend (if you are “gammon” in Aboriginal English) this will be spotted straight away, and anything you say will be dismissed. We are used to dealing with white people’s fears, and misconceptions. People with good hearts, and who are making a real effort to step outside their comfort zones, will get a better reception than those who put on a false face. Its better to be yourself and make a few silly mistakes, than to pretend to be someone you aren’t. Apologise for your mistakes, swallow your ego, and keep on keeping on. That way you might eventually become an asset to our recovery, and raise your own level of professionalism.

Listen, Don’t Ask

When you meet Murri women, be prepared to listen. We know most things we need to about white society, while you, as a Migaloo worker, probably know bugger all about us. White people place great importance on talking a lot and asking lots of questions. This is how people in white society tend to learn. For Murri people, silence is okay. **Questions are often a form of rudeness**—our kids are expected to learn by watching and listening. Of course, there will sometimes be a need to ask questions, but try and limit your questions to the absolutely necessary ones. If in doubt, be silent, is a good rule of thumb. Just because we aren’t asking you questions about yourself or talking to you doesn’t mean we aren’t getting to know you.

When you do talk, try to talk a bit slower than you normally would. Murri women experience white people talking as a barrage of questions and information, with no thinking time allowed to let ideas digest and mellow. Migaloo people think that slow talking equals stupidity—this is just another cultural assumption. Migaloo people tend to think about things by talking aloud about them. But we tend to think first in silence, and then speak only when we have considered an issue carefully. In Murri culture, silence is okay.

Educate Yourself

You are a worker with Aboriginal people. Part of your job is knowing about and understanding Murri culture. Unless you know and understand well enough, you can’t do your job properly. Its your responsibility to learn. The best way to learn is by being

around Murri people in an alert, respectful way. You can also learn by reading books and newspapers on Aboriginal topics, by watching Aboriginal videos and TV shows, and by examining your own cultural background. Learning will never end—in traditional Aboriginal cultures there are sometimes seven levels of learning to be pursued as adults. Most Migaloos in modern Australia don't even get as far as kindergarten, in terms of understanding our people. But it doesn't have to be that way. If you are willing to listen, and willing to learn, there are Murri people willing to work help you learn. We can make a difference, together.

Policy Measures—what Governments Should Be Doing

Drug use does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs in a social setting where Murri women face racism in our daily lives, and poverty and violence in our homes. Nobody wakes up one morning and decides to become a drug-using criminal. Murri women in Queensland drift into—or drift back to—this lifestyle because it is easier than facing our lives without anything to take away the pain.

Drug workers operate on the principle of “**replace the drug**” with a positive activity. This can be sport, it can be art, it can be study or music or community work. Simply encouraging Murri women to “get off” the drugs is not going to work, unless the drug is replaced with some other fun, meaningful activity. Prisons should ensure that Murri women have access to activities that will interest, challenge, and reward them. **Art** has traditionally been a very popular activity with Murri prisoners. Art is well-recognised as a healing activity for traumatised people, and prisoners are no exception. Aboriginal art can also sometimes offer legal income for Murri people with few other work or literacy skills.

Other parts of the solution to drug misuse include the funding of **more adequate and culturally sensitive counselling services for Murri women** recovering from domestic violence; removal as children; the removal of their own children from their care; sexual assault and other “normal” traumas of Aboriginal life.

Strip searches are a form of legal torture to Murri women prisoners who are often survivors of child molestation and/or rape. Most Murri women are in any case shamed by, and fearful of, physical contact with strangers. Strip searches of Murri women prisoners should end immediately.

Employment is another key issue—jobs contribute heavily to self-worth, and provide non-drug activity to help the rehabilitation process. They also provide income, and help break the cycle of poverty, drug use, and imprisonment. Murri women need more and better jobs in order to fund decent lifestyles and break the poverty cycle. Governments should fund some of these jobs—it’s expensive, but its a lot cheaper than keeping people in prison.

Aboriginal housing is underfunded nation-wide. Overcrowding contributes to domestic violence; general stress levels; child abuse including sexual abuse due to inappropriate sharing of space; and puts further strain on women as care-givers and nurturers. There is an urgent need to provide more and better public housing for Aboriginal women, especially those caring for children. It is totally unacceptable that so many of our black kids are forced to live on the streets, in parks, or in houses shared with rapists and paedophiles, simply due to lack of decent affordable housing.

CASE STUDIES

Linda's Story

BEFORE

Linda is a light-skin Murri from Caboolture. She just turned twenty in prison. Linda grew up with her mum and step-dad. Linda's mum was a big drinker, and her stepfather was a mean Murri man who put shit on Linda. He said things to her like "you're just a useless white loser bitch" and "you should fuck off, no-one wants white **** around here."

Sometimes when Linda was a kid he would lock her in a cupboard all day because he said he couldn't stand the sight of her. Other times he would come into her bedroom at night and touch her private parts. Linda was scared of him all the time. She ran away a lot, but they always took her back home.

Linda's mum was too charged up and too weak to protect her from him. Her mum used to say that at least he didn't hit them, and Linda should just ignore him. Linda knew it was useless to tell her Mum about the sexual abuse, so she kept it to herself. All through her childhood, Linda felt really, really alone. She never learned to ask for help.

Then when Linda was fourteen, her Mum suddenly passed away from a stroke.

After her Mum died, Linda went and lived with her aunty in Logan. Aunty Kath was a foster mum for lots of other kids too. There wasn't much room at Aunty Kath's but at least Linda was glad to get away from her mongrel stepfather. Aunty Kath was really lovely and used to listen to her too. For a while, Linda's nerves got a bit better. To everyone's surprise, she finished grade ten and even started grade eleven at Woodridge High School.

Then when Linda was sixteen, she got pregnant, and she left Aunty Kath's to live with her Murri boyfriend Sam. Sam was the real jealous type. He used to flog her if she looked at other guys or sometimes for nothing at all. He talked Linda into leaving school because "she wasn't a kid anymore". Linda wondered if he was jealous of her getting an education. Aunty Kath didn't like Sam. Linda loved him though. She was especially pleased cos Sam was dark. The baby was going to be dark too. Then people couldn't say she wasn't a real Murri anymore.

After she left school, the violence got so bad that Linda was scared to even leave the flat. It was worst while she was pregnant. She thought she might lose the baby one time. The bad nerves came back. She often used to shake from fear even when nothing was wrong. Her local doctor prescribed her valium which helped a bit. He also suggested she learn how to meditate, but Linda couldn't get into it.

When their son Jai was born, Linda was real happy cos he looked like a Murri. Sam liked having a son, and he eased up a little bit. After a couple of weeks though, Linda ended up in Logan hospital again with a broken jaw and busted arm. The people at the hospital wanted her to press charges against Sam. Linda was too scared. If she charged him, she

thought Sam might kill her. His brother in Toowoomba had a shotgun. Once Sam said if Linda ever left him, he'd get the gun and blow her away. So she never even talked about leaving him, let alone charging him with assault. She worried all the time and the worries went around in her head except when she was drunk or yarndied up.

Sam always said he was sorry after bashing her. He used to promise it wouldn't happen again – but it always did. Linda worried that Jai would grow up like his father unless she could get away. But it seemed so hard to leave. The idea of living without Sam was terrifying, even though Linda knew her Aunty Kath would help her out.

Linda got a job as a checkout chick at K-mart. She thought Sam would stop bashing her if they had more money, but he didn't. Sometimes she had to miss work because she had black eyes and stuff. The stress of putting up with the violence made Linda turn more and more to grog and yarndy. The more out of it she got, the less she cared about Sam flogging her. And when she was pissed or yarndied up she didn't feel as nervous all the time.

Soon Linda was getting charged up early every morning, and missing more days of work. She forgot what it was like to wake up without a hangover. Aunty Kath ended up taking Jai fulltime because Linda wasn't looking after him properly. He was neglected, and when he cried for a bit of love and affection, sometimes Linda hit him instead. The sound of him crying sent her straight to the Jack Daniels bottle and the bong.

Her and Sam used to fight all the time about money. When they had fights, Sam said things like Linda was “a dirty old drunk” and “a frigid half-caste bitch” and a “fucking white loser ****”. These words went round and round in her head. She found herself hearing Sam say them over and over. She also remembered her stepfather saying the same kind of things to her. After a while, it was kind of like she was hypnotised into believing their abuse.

Linda finally missed too many days of work, and they sacked her. Sam blamed her, even though he was the one bashing her silly. Linda was too stoned and charged up to work out that it wasn't her fault. She thought if she had just done the right thing, Sam wouldn't have hit her. Really though, it didn't matter what she did. She was just a punching bag for his anger.

Because of the violence Linda ended up thinking that she was useless, and was a white loser. She felt like she wasn't a real Murri. She also didn't expect to be treated well. She thought she deserved to be bashed, and be put down all the time, and to lose her son. When Aunty Kath growled her for neglecting Jai, Linda totally stressed out. She thought “I'm a bad mother, and a bad girlfriend. It doesn't matter what I do. Nobody cares if I live or die. I'll just drink and smoke to forget all this shit.”

Linda is doing six months in Brisbane Women's for assault. (She bashed a girl who was flirting with Sam at a party). She has claustrophobia real bad from being locked in the cupboard as a kid.

When they shut the doors on her and turn the key, she has panic attacks bigtime. She is terrified that she'll be strip searched again like she was when she first got to the prison. Being strip searched felt just like when her stepfather molested her. Linda hates being locked up, but is also worried about Sam bashing her again when she gets out. Someone said he was running around with some other girl. That'd be a bloody relief, as far as Linda is concerned.

The only time Linda can relax a bit is when Auntie Kath brings Jai for visits. Auntie Kath says she should pray for guidance. (Yeah, right). To Linda, it feels like there is nothing she can do to fix her life up. Whenever she can score drugs, she'll take whatever is going. Just getting through each day inside is hard enough without trying to get clean on top of it.

AFTER

Linda is out of prison. She is living in Burpengary with Jai and a young teenage niece she is fostering. Sam is out of the picture now he has a new girlfriend. Linda saw the two of them at the Hypermarket once. The new girlfriend had dark sunnies on inside the shopping centre, so it looks like Sam hadn't changed much. He takes Jai off her hands once in a blue moon. Apart from that Linda never sees him, and she doesn't want to either. His loss.

Linda is studying part-time at TAFE. She likes it, and she wants to go on and do Aboriginal Studies when Jai starts school next year. One of the tutors in prison encouraged her that she was smart enough to do it. With the help of this tutor lady, Linda is getting more into the Aboriginal culture. She is learning about her tribe and she went to her elders. Once they got to know her, the elders took her in and claimed her as one of their mob. Now she even knows a few words of her own language. She's also learning about land rights and other political stuff. Never thought she'd be turning into a radical!!

Linda is seeing a lady counsellor through her local community health centre. This counsellor showed her how to stop listening to the "tape" of negative talk that always used to play in her head. Together, they are replacing the negative talk with more positive stuff. Linda never would have thought that touchy-feely crap like counselling was for her, but it is actually helping. Nowadays she can see when she's just putting shit on herself like other people always have. She can slam the brakes on the negative "tape" most times, and start remembering stuff she's okay at.

Until she met this counsellor, Auntie Kath was basically the only person Linda knew who didn't put her down or abuse her. Only she never realised people were putting her down. She was that used to it, she thought it was normal to talk to people like they were dogs (which is an insult to dogs).

Linda always used to remember Sam or her stepfather telling her she was a "useless piece of shit" or other stuff. Those words went round and round in her head. Now though,

Linda can remember the good things about herself instead. The counsellor made Linda say positive stuff about herself out loud, so she had some good things to remember. It felt real gammon at first, but it got easier after a while. Linda wrote some positive stuff out and put it up in her bedroom to reinforce the messages.

“I can be a good mum to Jai.”

“Being a Murri is about what’s inside, not about my skin colour.”

“I never deserved to be bashed, not ever!”

“Getting molested was his fault, not mine – I was a little kid who deserved protection, not abuse.”

“My mum was hopeless, but she did the best she knew how to do.”

Linda is also learning to avoid negative people, and try and not gossip. She read in a self-help book that:

Small minds talk about other people.

Medium minds talk about events.

Large minds talk about ideas.

She has learnt that people who gossip and backbite are just going to drag her down. Now she notices a lot whether people are discussing other people, or events, or ideas. She tries to hang around positive people whenever she finds them.

Linda likes doing the study, and since she started at TAFE she hardly smokes much ganja at all. She still gets charged up on the weekends, but even that is way less than before. Too much homework to do!! And when she hears her fostered niece say stuff like being a dumb ****, or how she can’t do stuff, Linda tells her that she can. She is teaching her foster niece about the power of positive thinking. Sometimes Linda and her niece go for short bushwalks with Jai. She calls it her “Murri meditation”. It calms them all down.

One big problem is her foster niece seems to be going down the same track she went down herself. The niece’s partner, Jane, controls her money and threatens her a lot. Linda stresses out about this. But the counsellor explained to her that people have to live their own lives. It’s not in Linda’s power to change her foster niece’s life at the moment. What is in Linda’s power to do, is to be a model of better choices. Then, one day when her foster niece wakes up to herself, she can look around and see ‘Oh, Linda got through it, and so I can too.’

Linda is thinking about charging her stepfather with the childhood sexual abuse. She isn’t sure yet whether she’s ready to go to court, and talk about that stuff. It would be good to stand up to the mongrel at last though. Maybe it would stop other kids getting molested, too. Poor little buggers are probably out there blaming themselves for what he’s done to them.

Linda is slowly learning to like herself. Getting off the yarndy and drinking less is part of choosing a different life. Her nerves are way better since she got rid of Sam and started

studying at TAFE. And by learning some words of her Murri language, Linda feels like she is more in touch with her culture. These days Linda stops herself from calling herself bad names. She knows that it is just mental poison left over from Sam and her stepfather.

The counsellor reckoned you have to replace the drug you're hooked on with something more positive. For Linda, it looks like learning her culture and studying it is what she needed. Study is hard work, but she feels like she's going somewhere with her life at long last. And Aunty Kath says she has found Linda a cute guy at the Logan Central church, so you never know, maybe miracles do happen!

Leah's Story

BEFORE

Leah is a dark Murri from up North Queensland way. She is thirty five years old. Leah grew up on a remote community. By the time she was twelve she was running around and getting into trouble. Plus two of her uncles were child molesters. They always hung around her family home. Leah's mum sent her away to Townsville to live with her older sister Tammy. Leah's mum thought she would be safer there.

When she was thirteen, Leah left school because of bullying and racism from other students. She thought she might be able to get a job. She soon found out she was too young or too black for most jobs. The only work she could have got was sex work, and she didn't want to do that. Tammy had warned her how dangerous it was. Tammy said to go see the TAFE people about doing a course instead. But Leah was real slack at reading and writing. Anyway she was too shame to go in to TAFE.

After a few weeks of hanging around doing nothing, Leah got real bored and started drinking in the park. Tammy growled her about it, so Leah stayed away from home more and more. Sometimes she smoked bong with her new friends in the park. She loved the feeling of being 'out of it'. One night at a party, three men gave her yarndy and then held her down and raped her.

The next day Leah attempted suicide, and went into a coma. She ended up in hospital in Brisbane. When they released her, Leah had no money and no friends in Brisbane, so she ended up living on the street. The following week she was raped again in Musgrave Park.

After that Leah started doing the sex work. She was lonely and broke and homesick. Plus she figured if she was going to be raped anyway, she may as well get paid for having sex. To cope with the rapes and the loneliness, Leah smoked lots more dope and took heroin and speed whenever she could get it. Her main mission in life was to get 'out of it'. Reality was not her friend.

Leah started going in and out of prison regularly for petty crime. Once she got two years for a knife attack on a client who tried to strangle her. From when she was fifteen to when she was nineteen Leah spent as much time in prison as outside. Eventually she felt like she was just a piece of shit. It didn't matter much to Leah how people treated her. If someone was nice to her, it confused her. She wondered what they were after.

From time to time, Leah met someone who might have helped her. But she never trusted anyone, ever. Life had taught her to be fully suspicious. Even in real small things, she never took help from no-one. She didn't know how to ask for help, or accept help. It felt way safer to rely on herself.

When she was nineteen, Leah met Colin at a footy game. They got together and because Colin was working as a chef they got into a decent house. They stayed together in

Brisbane for twelve years, and had three kids. With Colin beside her, Leah began to feel good about herself. She even psyched herself up and went to see a Murri counsellor at the local Aboriginal Medical Service. With the help of the Murri counsellor, she got off the smack and speed. She started doing Aboriginal paintings. Leah liked being a mum, and an artist. She started feeling like maybe her life was getting back on track a bit. She made some friends at bingo who were nice people.

Colin always said he loved her. Leah still smoked a bit of dope but she stayed out of serious trouble while she was with Col. Then after the third baby was born he began to put Leah down in front of other people. At times he called her a dumb nigger slut or a black mole. When she talked up he threatened to hit her, so she stayed quiet. The insults got worse and worse.

Leah had been thinking about maybe going to TAFE to study art or something that didn't need too much reading and writing. Her bingo friends encouraged her. But Col said she was too stupid to go to TAFE. Leah was confused by this. Was she really stupid? Why would Col say it if it wasn't true? Leah didn't know what to think, but she wondered if Col was right. Maybe she was too dumb to do anything positive with her life?

Time passed, and Leah's oldest kid started high school. Her boy was in the footy team and looked like he was going to be a real deadly athlete too. The girls were pretty good at netball and art, and none of them were getting into much trouble. Except for Col smacking her around a bit when he was charged, her life was okay. There was no bungoo of course, but they managed, sort of.

Then one night, Colin and Leah had a big fight. Colin went and drunk drove and killed a guy by accident. He got five years in prison for manslaughter. Leah ended up doing the sex work again to pay the rent. She was pretty unhappy about it, but after all, she knew what she was doing. She'd been there before. And she knew how to 'switch off' from stuff, so it didn't affect her.

Leah had never had a pap test on her private parts. Then one day the lady from the STD clinic came to the massage parlour. She talked all the girls into having pap smear tests. It was the biggest shamejob, and Leah hated having it done. But it was just as well she did. Leah had some bad cells on her inside. She needed an operation or else she was going to get cervical cancer. She freaked right out when they told her. She didn't care that much if she died. Only what would happen to her kids?

Leah wondered if she had the bad cells from doing sex work. Or from the times she got raped as a thirteen year old. The doctors at the hospital said Murri women needed pap tests more than other women. Murries got the cervical cancer more often than migaloos. But they told her that most times you got better if they caught it early. They could cut the bad cells away. And it was important to try and give up smoking cigarettes. Smoking made the bad pre-cancer cells worse apparently.

Leah had the operation on her junoo in the PA hospital and it was successful. The trouble was, she ended up back on the heroin from the stress. Soon she was back to shooting up every day. She was that desperate to score, she took stupid risks. She'd go with anyone in a car. She also did crime so she could score. Soon she was hanging around with people who lived off crime fulltime. Her bingo friends drifted away. Leah's life revolved around the needle again. The kids came way down the list.

When she was arrested for possession, the Department took the kids off her and put them with her sister Tammy up North. Leah couldn't believe her kids got taken away from her. Tammy kept telling her to 'sort her shit out' and "get clean" and she'd get the kids back. Leah felt like this was impossible. She felt like she'd have to kill herself if she didn't get stoned every day. Leah started thinking more about the times she was raped, and she somehow couldn't put it out of her mind. It got harder and harder to 'switch off'.

Now Leah's halfway through doing eighteen months in prison. She knows that living with Tammy, the kids'll get fed and go to school regularly. But they're so far away she never gets to see them. And Tammy's partner Neville has done a prison sentence for sexual assault in the past. Tammy says he didn't do it and he's not like that, but Leah worries a real lot about her kids being in the same house as him. The AMS counsellor once told her that rapists were likely to be child molesters too. At night, Leah lies awake terrified of what is happening to her kids.

Leah hates being in prison but its nothing new. Plenty of old friends inside! So long as she can score enough heroin or speed to keep her habit under control, being in prison again is just "same shit, different day". Some days she thinks maybe she could get off the gear if she had some help, or something to take her mind off things. Other days, like when she gets strip searched, she gets so depressed that she slashes up. She knows that unless she gets clean she will just keep going in and out of prison, and she'll probably never get her kids back. She misses them real bad. She even misses Col.

Leah likes painting and once years ago she sold a painting for \$200 so she must be alright at it. Everyone says her paintings are real deadly. When she's painting, Leah sort of loses track of time and it calms her down a lot. The Murri counsellor she saw before said she had to replace the heroin and speed with "something else" that was less harmful.

When she got off the gear before, she was doing heaps of painting. Maybe art is the 'something else' she needs to turn her life around? She is going to go along to the art class next time they hold it. You never know.

AFTER

Leah got out of prison a month ago. She is living in a caravan park in Townsville. The kids are still with Tammy and Neville but Leah sees them every day. She picks the younger two up from school and walks them home to Tammy's. They all have tea together.

Because they were living up North, Leah only saw the kids once during her sentence. She got to go up to The Outlook at Boonah and do the Mums course with them. It was pretty special getting to hang out with the kids. And it helped her stop worrying so much about whether they were getting molested.

The first thing Leah did when she saw the kids again, was ask them if Uncle Nev touches them in their 'private places'. The kids say he doesn't. Leah was careful not to make out like it was the kids fault if he had done anything. She calmly told all her kids to tell if anyone ever touches them there, because its wrong. She said to them they had to tell and keep telling until someone listens.

In prison, Leah managed to get off the drugs by going to counselling and doing her art again. But she knew she'd get back on the heroin for sure on the outside if she wasn't real careful. So she organised for Tammy to get her straight into an art class at TAFE when she got out. She walked out of Brisbane Women's one week, and caught the bus up North. She was enrolled at TAFE the next Monday morning. Too deadly!

The TAFE course is a beginner's course in art and design. Only, Leah who is a beginner, already sells her art to tourists. She makes big money some days! It didn't take her long to use her old sex work skills to sell the art. She knows all about how to sell stuff to people. Because the tourists don't just want the art. They want an "Aboriginal experience". Leah knows the right stories to tell them to get them in. (And for the first time in her life, her dark skin works for her, not against her). She knows now she's isn't stupid, not by half!

At the moment Leah just sells pictures to tourists at the markets and around town. One day though, she knows she can do paintings good enough to go in the galleries. Her TAFE teacher is encouraging her to try different stuff like screen printing. Leah has a dream of having her own shop one day, selling Aboriginal art and craft. All that time she was in Brisbane locked up, and she never once got to go to the art gallery in town. If she ever goes South again, Leah plans on going to South Bank and checking out the big gallery with all the famous artists. She wants to learn everything she can about Murri art.

Funny thing, but her daughter's teacher found out Leah couldn't read or write too good. She is a real nice lady, and offered to help Leah out with some free lessons. Leah was that shame, but Tammy encouraged her to say yes. The teacher kept offering, and in the end Leah agreed. Now Leah does her "homework" together with the kids. Together they are learning to read and write better. She feels real deadly when she can read articles in the Koori Mail and that.

Col is still in prison in Brisbane. He has the shits because he never sees her, but Leah knows her kids are more important. Leah was determined to make a fresh start in a 'new' town when she got out. It turns out there's plenty of the wrong crowd in Townsville of course. But Leah just paints or goes to bingo with Tammy when she feels lonely.

Some of the caravan park people are nice and some are scary. Leah just keeps her head down and keeps on keeping on. She stays well away from the smackies. It would be so easy to slip and get back on the gear. Watching the way the smackies live helps her stay off. The coppers are always around the caravan park, chasing them. Plus there are bashings and stabbings nearly every week.

Before she went inside the last time, Leah thought all Murries lived like that. With some help from the Murri counsellor at the Medical Centre, Leah realised you can choose not to. She can see a time when her and Col and the kids might have a decent home. And she realises that with smart choices, she might not have to do sex work ever again. That'd make a big difference.

One big change is that Leah can see how she started doing sex work because of the rapes. And she can see how she always blamed herself for being raped. They called her a black slut, and she believed them. Now she knows it was never her fault – it was theirs. No-one ever deserves to be raped, ever. She was just a thirteen year old kid! She needed to be protected, not abused. Leah doesn't let her kids use the word slut anymore. She knows it's just a word used by rapists to put down women.

It's a struggle living at the caravan park, surrounded by junkies. But Leah just keeps on painting and going to TAFE. Straight life is boring compared to doing crime – and boring is just fine by Leah. She's had enough excitement for a few lifetimes. She knows that to get her kids back, she has to have a place to live and a straight job. Her goal is to have them back by Xmas.

By seeing the counsellor, Leah has finally learnt to take help from people that offer real help. The counsellor is helping her, and so is the teacher. Tammy does what she can for her little sister. Now when people are nice to her, Leah isn't always so suspicious straight away. She lets her instincts tell her what to do. She is learning that some people (even mialoos) are good people that will do the right thing by you. Not everyone is an arsehole. And nobody is strong enough to just rely on themselves all the time.

Leah's clean, and doing her Murri painting, and she sees her kids every day. She's protecting them the best way she can. And she listens to her kids problems without **ever** blaming them. She wants to get her kids back living with her, and she's on track to do it, too. She's pretty solid, Leah.

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