

Women in Voice – Women with Voice

James Cook University Speech

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I would firstly like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land – the Aboriginal people of Australia. I would like to also show my deepest respect to the Elders here tonight.

A week or so ago when I was thinking about what to say to you today I noticed that **Women in Voice** had recently been on again in Brisbane. Most of you would know about this terrific show and some of you may have been to one. The cast changes every year but it's always a bunch of beautiful women with beautiful voices singing their hearts out. Apart from the voices though I think the thing about being in the audience for **Women in Voice** is the feeling that they're singing for us, that the songs are giving **us** a voice too, that somehow these women are speaking for us. Not just in what they're singing about, but just in being up there on stage, putting themselves out there, it's almost as though they're singing us into being.

The thought brought me right up against what I wanted to talk about today. That is, a whole population of women who not only can't sing, but can't even speak for themselves. You know already that I'm referring to women in prison, women who have no voice. Women who in fact who for the most part have never had a voice, in prison or out of it. The terrible circumstances of their backgrounds have made sure of that – but being in prison silences them in a profound and shocking way, in a way that ensures many of them will never ever want to raise their voices again.

I am the director of an organisation called Sisters Inside that aims to give these women their voices back. I'd like to tell you a bit about Sisters Inside, and why I think it works. Sisters Inside was born from a unique combination of circumstances and personalities over ten years ago. It grew directly out of my own prison experience, which in turn was affected profoundly by an experiment in leadership from the newly elected Goss Government in 1989.

That government initiated the kind of reform in Queensland prisons that has never been tried again. Faced with a disintegrating system, and then a murder inside the women's prison, that government made changes that enabled women prisoners to take control of their lives. Limited control, for sure, but many women took advantage of the opportunities offered: to get an education, to get work experience, to spend more time outside prison with their families, to have a say in how the prison operated.

This was the kind of change that directly affected outcomes for women. They grabbed the opportunity to have some say over their own lives, in a way most had never experienced before, inside or outside prison. Many, like me, got an education, saw how life could be different, got out and didn't ever go back to prison.

The extraordinary people who initiated these changes were not motivated by ego or individualism. Most took huge risks to ensure the changes happened. It worked because their leadership was based on the progress of others, not themselves. In fact,

some would say that it was a gamble that might have worked to their detriment. But we all know real leadership is not about safety.

Still, even after the reforms, conditions inside needed much improvement, and I had always told the women I left behind that I would be back, to help bring about those improvements. But that brave experiment in reform had proved that change cannot be imposed on people. I knew any organisation we formed to continue that change would have to be in the hands of the women themselves.

So Sisters Inside was conceived as an organisation run for women in prison, by women in prison. It has two roles: to provide vital services to women in prison, like sexual assault counselling, health and drug counselling, and help with keeping families intact and in touch. These services are carried out by paid and unpaid staff. Its other role is advocacy and law reform, which is carried out by the management committee, which in turn is directed by a steering committee of women inside prison.

The steering committee is the beating heart of Sisters Inside. It informs everything we do and how we do it. As such Sisters Inside is unique throughout the world, and held up as a best practice model by people like Angela Davis, herself an iconic leader for decades in the fight for justice in the United States. This is the real power of Sisters Inside: that it is truly in the hands of those it serves. This is the way it stays true to its vision. It is authentic: it reflects the real experiences of women, and is true to them. I believe this is its abiding strength.

Why is it so important that Sisters Inside exists? Let me tell you a little about women inside prison. The shocking figures are actually these: that 98 percent of women in prison have experienced physical violence or abuse, and 89 percent have experienced sexual assault or sexual abuse. Most have grown up in families in which they are not valued, and have entered abusive relationships which continue that on.

The effects of all this mean most have a low level of education and few skills. The attempts that many make to self-medicate, to deal with the pain of life, mean a great proportion have addictions to drugs or alcohol. Their health is characteristically poor – even corrective services concede that – and many have mental health issues which have often not been addressed.

A too-high proportion of course are Indigenous. For these women, take all the above and double it. Some are from culturally diverse backgrounds, and for them, take all the above and double it as well.

Sisters Inside advocates for the human rights of these women. When I say that it sometimes sounds like a contradiction in terms: the human rights of women in prison. The human rights of these women have been compromised well before they even hit the criminal injustice system – they don't know what it means. For them, human rights are things other people have. Life – and the experience of being a prisoner – does that to you. Prison is just another experience on the continuum of struggle and despair that typifies many of their lives.

In my time inside prison I saw daily and unforgettably how the words 'human rights' can seem ludicrous to someone who barely feels human any more. If life on the

outside made you feel worthless, prison convinced you it was true. in prison, you are someone so bad, so suspect, that your every move is dictated, scrutinised, criticised; so bad that anything you might have been good at – being a wife, a mother, a daughter, an employee – is taken from you; so bad you need to become someone else.

I believe that about myself for a while too. I believed deeply in my own badness. I was told at 13, after being locked up for wagging school and arguing with my mother, that I had killed my father. That I was so bad that the heart attack that he suffered at 37 was my fault. I carried that with me for the next 20 years, acting out that badness as hard as I could. Just as many other women do, convinced they are not as good or as valuable as other people. Convinced that, being bad, you don't deserve the same rights as other people. It took many years and lots of pain to convince myself otherwise...

Part of the reason I was able to let go was being part of that reform in Queensland prisons in the late 80s and early 90s. The key to that reform was that women were actually treated as human beings, with all the rights and dignities afforded all other human beings. We were given some control over our own lives.

But since that miraculous time, we have lost all the gains we made. Since then we have had the phoney war on drugs and the phoney fear campaign about personal safety which forces people to make their homes into fortresses, to not trust anyone, and to retreat to individualism. Look at the rise of the so-called 'gated communities' which are intent on keeping out those who don't belong there, keeping out 'the other', meaning people like me. Because despite what you might want to see, despite labels like 'director' and recognition in the form of 'Order of Australia', and last year, the National Human Rights Medal, I am what many of those people fear – I am one of the 'others'. I have been to prison.

And it is women like me who make up the preposterous numbers of women in prison. Our political system and campaign of fear has seen the numbers of women in prison skyrocket over the past 10 years. You could be excused for not knowing that, because the bumper numbers of prisons built to house these prisoners are built of course on the outskirts of towns, where they are conveniently invisible.

Where the things that happen to prisoners cannot be scrutinised. This is another reason the work of Sisters Inside is so crucial: our presence inside the women's prison almost every day, our support of women exiting prison and their children, means we see, we observe, and we can act. Or used to be able to. Because last year, for the first time in the history of Sisters Inside, we have been locked out of the prison by the state government for an open-ended period of time.

Let me give you some history: in jaune last year, Sisters Inside launched a complaint against the State government about the abuse of human rights inside women's prisons. We contend women experience discrimination on the basis of sex, as well as on the basis of race and disability inside prison. We also contend that mandatory strip searching, and the crisis support unit, is used in a discriminatory way against women.

You will no doubt be aware of the case of Cornelia Rau, a woman who has been diagnosed with a mental disability who has been locked up unlawfully in an

immigration detention unit, but who also spent time in our own Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre. Cornelia is just one of many women whose mental health is used to punish and humiliate them, who are incarcerated under conditions you could only describe as detrimental to their mental state. Our prisons have in fact become de facto mental health institutions since the failure of deinstitutionalisation in the 70s which saw many people left with nowhere to go. Cornelia ended up in prison because no one knew what to do with her. Inside she suffered terribly. All women suffer inside prison but if you throw in a severe mental disability you can only imagine the horrors that are perpetrated in the name of justice. But Cornelia's story is many women's story. It's a shocking case but it is not an isolated one. Think of Vivian Young more recently – an Australian woman being deported to the Philippines

Cornelia's case symbolises in many ways why we launched the human rights complaint against the Queensland government last year. There are many other reasons for it, which time won't allow me to go into, but I'll mention two more: **strip searching and the classification system**. It is mandatory in Queensland after any contact visit. It sounds straightforward but let's unpack it a bit. Let's take one of the women who has been previously sexually assaulted or abused, and who has a couple of small children on the outside. Don't forget, 89 % have been sexually abused, and 85 % are the primary care givers - mothers).

If that woman's children come to visit her, and she wants to touch them, to cuddle them or stroke their hair, touch their faces, she knows that the payback is taking off her clothes in front of a bunch of prison officers. Holding up her breasts for inspection. Squatting and coughing, in case she has secreted something in her genitals.

Think about that for a moment: think about that happening to you, or your sister, or your best friend, or your own mother, the humiliation, the exposure, the vulnerability of any woman already stripped of her dignity, and now stripped of her clothes. Add to that the trauma she might feel as each strip search re-activates the horror of sexual abuse, of that terrible powerlessness she felt then, the vulnerability. In Queensland we do that more than 10,000 times a year to the 230 women in just one of our prisons.

And for what: in three years there was only 2 unspecified drugs found in over 40,000 strip searches.

The classification system - firstly, Sisters Inside disputes whether women should be assigned a security classification at all and second, the validity of the measurement of risk: in Queensland, the classification system - through the offenders risk needs inventory (ORNI) converts disadvantage or 'needs' to 'risk'. Women are penalised for their social disadvantage (as if they haven't been already), attracting a higher security classification if they have a high level of social disadvantage.

In this white, middle-class, male-based approach, this is how it works:

An Aboriginal woman living in Woodridge (or a low socio economic suburb of Adelaide). Who has been a victim of domestic violence or family violence will be

classified as high security. If she has a mental disability, she will be classified as high.

These are some of the reasons we launched the human rights complaint, and why that complaint has been picked up in most Australian states and overseas. You can see that when we speak about the human rights of women in prison that we are speaking about a very delicate thing – a notion that some people reject out of hand, a notion that the women themselves have almost given up on. Human rights, they feel, like decent houses, a decent job, food in the fridge – these are things other people have. The very dangerous thing is that these women have come to see their total lack of human rights as normal. This is how the system works and what it wants – and women are already so accustomed to being undervalued, to feeling less than others, not as good as others, that they accept this too. This is why the work of Sisters Inside is so important.

That complaint is now with the Queensland anti-discrimination commissioner who will make her findings shortly.

Extraordinarily, however, just days after the complaint was received last June, the State government took its revenge and notified Sisters Inside that we would no longer be permitted to provide all our services to women inside prison. Those queues of women relying on regular sexual assault counselling for instance would just have to wait. We were also informed that our monthly management committee meetings inside Brisbane women's prison would also be banned.

We have been given no logical reason for this lock-out. In its absence we have had to draw our own conclusions: that in this State – indeed in this country – raising your voice to protect the powerless, to point out and to try to correct injustice, brings the wrath of the powerful down upon your head. Criticism attracts punishment.

Those in leadership in this state are threatened by any person or group who dares to stray from the line – that this is the smart state where the government knows best. So threatened that they will try to silence that criticism by denying this group its functions. And further silence the voices of women behind bars.

Sisters Inside wants to draw attention to the facts of women's imprisonment through this challenge – but ultimately we want to expose the over-riding fact that **prisons don't work**. From this stand-point, although we continue to provide services to women, we are abolitionists. We believe that, not only do prisons fail women and families, they work actively to deepen the disadvantage felt by women and to lock them into a cycle of trauma and deprivation.

How can we say prisons 'work' when more than 60 percent of women who go to prison return to prison? That's an astounding failure rate. If we applied it to any major organisation funded by government, heads would roll.

The prison experience is built on the twin lies of 'community safety' and 'rehabilitation'. That first lie, community safety, seems laughable when the numbers of women imprisoned for violent crime is very low; when the majority are serving less than two years, and when we look at the effects of drug offences and of long histories of continued sexual and physical abuse.

And the second, rehabilitation? Without programs, without education, with the re-traumatising effects of strip searching and detention in isolation? What do we expect?

Do we really expect a woman whose life has been scarred by poverty and abuse and addiction, who is then locked up, separated from her family, her children, any support she may have had, denied her human rights, denied the chance to gain any skills or training, humiliated constantly – do we really expect that when she is finally let out of prison that she will be a **better** person? No money, no home, no job, no kids, and no self esteem, but still a more effective member of the community? A better mother to the children she has been kept away from?

This is not what prisons do, and I don't think it's what governments really want them to do: it suits all our present social constructs that certain groups will stay on the merry-go-round of imprisonment and loss, imprisonment and loss. It reinforces all our stereotypes, it keeps our view of the world intact, and it keeps the rest of us in our safe places.

It was only in some of the more brutal authoritarian regimes of the past that people were imprisoned for writing or singing about certain issues, the way the members of women in voice do. But we've got something almost as frightening happening here: the silencing of groups who speak out against this government. Sisters Inside is not the only organisation in this state being actively punished for criticising government actions. Ask around: groups are being threatened with loss of funding in the next funding round if they don't shut up.

But Sisters Inside will not be silenced, we will not shut up. We may not be able to sing, but we can speak and we can shout, and we intend to continue doing just that. The great and tragic irony for us is of course that our voices have for the moment cut off the individual voices of women prisoners. Because we have spoken they are now denied access to us. Whenever I have talked about this situation lately people ask me: what can we do? You can do a lot, actually. You can speak up, too: you can let this government know that women's voices won't be silenced.

What would the world look like if all of us women and men supported each other? If you here in the free world actually did stand up, and speak out for your sisters in prison? We would, I think, achieve a great deal. We would be living the spirit of what freedom is all about. Your voices could sing this issue into being. What a sweet sound that would be.