



Prison is a Feminist Issue: Reimagining Justice Concurrent Session

Women Deliver 2026 | Wednesday 29 April | 14:00–15:30 | Room 219

Session overview

This concurrent session was co-hosted by **Women Beyond Walls** and **Sisters Inside**, with the following partner organisations:

- Australian Sex Workers Association
- International Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women (INFIW)
- Legal Empowerment Fund
- National Network of Incarcerated & Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls
- Scarlet Alliance
- Sex Worker Outreach Program NT (SWOP NT)
- Sex Worker Reference Group (SWRG)
- Women and Harm Reduction International Network (WHRIN)

The session drew approximately 180 participants, significantly larger than anticipated, reflecting the appetite for this conversation at Women Deliver 2026.

Guiding Question: *"What needs to change — locally, nationally, globally — so that poverty and status are not pathways to criminalisation for women and girls?"*

How the session ran

The session broadly followed the planned concurrent session format, with some adaptations made to accommodate the larger-than-expected group. The circle format was maintained, and participants were invited throughout to see themselves not as audience members but as contributors with expertise.

The session opened with a Welcome to Country delivered by a First Nations participant (Tracey), acknowledging the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong Boon Wurrung Peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation.

Laura Cook (Women Beyond Walls) opened the session, firstly by saving two seats for Elders past, present and future not in the room, and then additionally a chair for criminalised women unable to attend. Laura then set shared language around what it means for poverty and status (e.g. homelessness, sex work, migration status, drug use) to function as drivers of criminalisation. She provided global context on women's incarceration, its scale, and its disproportionate impact on certain communities. She also situated the session within the Women Deliver Blueprint for Feminist Action and the CSW70 Agreed Conclusions, which for the first time named women in detention — a significant, if partial and long-overdue, step forward.

Debbie Kilroy OAM (Sisters Inside) provided the national context for Australia and also gave a stirring provocation on what has historically been problematic within 'feminism', noting the violence caused by carceral feminism. Debbie also spoke to the need for women with lived-experience to be in all forums that discuss the issues impacting them, and spoke to

the need for the complete dismantling of the prison industrial complex. She then asked another participant to read out a statement on behalf of Dawn Harrington (USA) of Free Hearts and the International Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women (INFIW), who was unable to travel to Australia as she had been unable to obtain a visa.

Provocations

Four provocateurs responded to the guiding question from the perspective of their own work and experience — not to cover everything, but to open doors and name what the room needed to hear:

Maria Alesi (Legal Empowerment Fund) spoke to the global dimensions of legal empowerment for criminalised women, and issued challenges to funders.

Dr Elena Jeffreys (Scarlet Alliance / Australian Sex Workers Association) drew on decades of sex worker-led advocacy to name the harms of criminalisation models, the importance of decriminalisation, and what it means for movements to centre the expertise of those with lived experience. She gave the example of the decriminalisation of sex work in Queensland.

Cameron Billie (SWOP NT / SWRG) gave voice to communities rarely heard in global forums, reading out statements from Sister Girls of the Northern Territory — transgender and gender diverse Aboriginal women who live at the intersection of multiple criminalised identities and experience particular harm from policing and incarceration.

Ruth Birgin (WHRIN) spoke to the intersection of drug use, harm reduction, and criminalisation, and the disproportionate burden carried by women who use drugs.

To read the full transcripts of provocations given see *Appendix 1*

Small group discussions

Participants moved into small groups to work on the guiding question across three levels using post-it notes. Groups were asked to capture ideas and add them to a collective harvest of ideas.

Participant responses: synthesis



Participants generated 88 responses to the guiding question. What follows is a thematic synthesis of those responses, organised across the three levels of the guiding question. Where relevant, verbatim or near-verbatim language from the notes has been preserved to honour participants' own framing.

The breadth and depth of responses — across decriminalisation, policing reform, economic justice, Indigenous sovereignty, legal empowerment, and abolition — demonstrated a room with substantial collective expertise and urgency.

Decriminalise Survival: Sex Work, Drugs, and Status Offences

The single most frequently raised demand across all groups was decriminalisation — of sex work, drug use and drug selling, petty offences, homelessness, and other survival behaviours that criminalise poverty rather than harm.

- *Decriminalisation of sex work and drug use + drug selling*
- *Decriminalisation of petty offences / sex work / SOGIE / drug-use laws*
- *Decriminalise petty crime + offences*
- *Full decriminalisation — policy reforms*
- *Legalise drugs — look at the evidence. The war on drugs doesn't keep people safe. Decriminalisation does. Look at Norway's drug [policy]*
- *Learn from countries that have decriminalised sex work + drug use and adopt their model where possible*
- *Push (social) media that normalises the idea of decrim [or general reduced policing]*
- *Sector collaboration on strong, consistent messaging — change the narrative!*
- *Reframing discourse to pose prisons as itself not a solution*

Transform Policing: Accountability, Reform, and Alternatives

Participants raised fundamental concerns about policing: its role in criminalising women and girls, its accountability failures, and the need for structural alternatives. Responses ranged from calls for reform to explicit calls for defunding and abolition.

- *Abolish the police*
- *Defund the police*
- *Accountability through police funding*
- *Demand govt accountability & transparency re: budget spending — responsibility for social services*
- *Separate review boards for police violence — police don't investigate police*
- *Police training around identity + misidentification [of gender]*
- *There needs to be sensitisation of officers about cultural sensitivity (e.g. Indigenous people may nod but doesn't mean yes)*
- *Local mediators (instead of police) as first response*
- *Cop Watch — grassroots group doing free training to educate community about stop + search rights, especially young people who are targeted*

Build Alternatives to Incarceration

Across all groups, participants called for investment in genuine alternatives to incarceration: community-based, culturally grounded, and led by those with lived experience. Restorative and traditional justice approaches featured prominently.

- *Abolish prisons + build with community-controlled supports*

- *Restorative justice*
- *Restorative justice systems*
- *Alternative justice systems*
- *Alternative 'justice' systems — adopted and embedded in culture, society, etc. — systems that uphold social protection for children*
- *Tapping into traditional justice systems, e.g. mediation*
- *Diversion not incarceration*
- *Women's diversion programs + petty crimes*
- *Remove detention in schools; and de-carcerate schools / restore systems of care*
- *Replace shame with accountability → Create local community covenants of care*
- *Redistribution / end to / rehabilitation / community support / prison alternatives*
- *Goal setting — support to break the cycle*

Address the Roots: Economic Justice and Social Supports

Participants consistently named economic inequality and the absence of adequate social supports as root causes of criminalisation. Solutions ranged from income support to housing, childcare, and universal social services. Hoi

- *Universal minimum income*
- *Universal Basic Income*
- *Universal basic income + healthcare*
- *Tax the rich — tax them a lot*
- *[Decent] housing (mentioned by several participants as critical both before criminalisation and/or when coming out of prison).*
- *Better support for early childcare, CFTB, single mothers*
- *Comprehensive social services for ALL humans*
- *Invest in keeping home [lands] strong + resourced*
- *Flexible funding arrangements so that community organisations can pivot to meet community need*
- *Flexible funding for formerly incarcerated organisations*
- *Less/more accessible reporting requirements for funding*

Centre Lived-Experience and Community Leadership

Participants repeatedly named the importance of centering the voices, leadership, and authority of those with lived-experience of criminalisation — and called out the tendency of mainstream systems to exclude or tokenise those voices.

- *Representation at every stage of [processes] — people with lived experience*
- *Representation of [incarcerated communities] at the decision-making level*
- *Considering whose voices are missing from our advocacy*
- *Amplify voices of communities overrepresented in the aspect of criminalisation*
- *Redfern organisations or groups to support a prison visit, run by people with lived experience, not ppl with degrees*
- *Invest in Indigenous women-led organisations*
- *Invest in First Nations women-led organisations*
- *Flexible funding for formerly incarcerated organisations*
- *Carceral feminism needs to make way to practising meaningful feminist abolition*
- *The revolution will not be branded*

Legal Empowerment and Justice Reform

Participants called for structural legal change, including law reform, litigation strategies, and increased legal support for people in contact with the justice system.

- *Legal reforms and advocacy*
- *Challenge the law through litigation*
- *Increase access to lawyers + supports / programs + people in prisons*
- *Intensive casework support for people in prison*
- *Addressing misidentification*
- *Women who are misidentified need strong advocacy and a female interpreter*
- *Interpreters + access to information + supports in language*
- *Monitoring of implementation of existing [treaties] + [strategies]*
- *Funding transparency + feedback loops / roles with implementers*

Indigenous Justice and Sovereignty

The specific crisis of Indigenous women's incarceration — in Australia and globally — was named repeatedly and with urgency. Participants called for Indigenous-led solutions, accountability for deaths in custody, and recognition of sovereign justice systems.

- *Invest in Indigenous women-led organisations*
- *Invest in First Nations women-led organisations*
- *Indigenous-female-led justice reinvestment*
- *Tapping into traditional justice systems, e.g. mediation*
- *Deaths in custody — Naarm reviews of corrections etc. / Royal Naarm [Commission] / Phyllis Frost programs underfunded / Djirra / Aboriginal independent visitor scheme / prison — what they see / reported back to Minister*
- *Djirra + Aboriginal Justice [looking at] research of misidentification of Aboriginal women in domestic violence. Maybe treaty will change this?*
- *There needs to be sensitisation of officers about cultural sensitivity (e.g. Indigenous people may nod but doesn't mean yes)*

Health, Welfare in Custody, and Material Conditions

Participants raised the inadequate material conditions experienced by women in custody — with specific attention to healthcare, menstrual health, and the needs of pregnant women.

- *[Armenia / one participant noted]: we have a small initiative for women in prison — no pads or gyno available for those [in custody]*
- *Stop [jailing] pregnant women*
- *Harm reduction — choices for those who want it*
- *Resources (funding) for harm reduction programs / Strengthening re-integration into society*
- *Establish safe places for culturally appropriate, diverse individual [support] for women, non-binary + those who identify as women, and while [in] establishment*
- *Be provided with care as consideration / [needs] based on their individual needs*

Changing the Narrative: Media, Public Awareness, and Advocacy

Participants identified the need to shift public narratives about criminalisation, prisons, and the people who are incarcerated.

- *Media ethics — to reduce glamorisation of policing/incarceration etc. — Act. Stop prison porn.*

- *Push (social) media that normalises the idea of decrim*
- *Sector collaboration on strong, consistent messaging — change the narrative!*
- *How do we influence broader public understanding and awareness about [sex work and] funding?*
- *Abolish mainstream [organisations] / change over to alternative funding*
- *People only see one version of incarcerated people, we need to flip that narrative*

Global Solidarity and International Frameworks

Participants situated the session's themes in an explicitly global frame, drawing connections to international frameworks, other countries' approaches, and solidarity across borders.

- *Learn from countries that have decriminalised sex work + drug use, adopt their model where possible*
- *Alternative 'justice' systems — adopted that can be embedded in culture, society, etc.*
- *Palestine prisoners [be] respected*
- *CSW70 good step, what now? Also more coordination at other forums*
- *The CSW70 Agreed Conclusions — use this lever*
- *Monitoring of implementation of existing [international] treaties*
- *Comprehensive social services for ALL humans*
- *Look at how we can use int. law to influence national and/or global*
- *What is the role for lawyers and judges?*

Closing observations

Laura brought participants back together and told them next steps, including this report. Debbie Kilroy OAM closed the session with a group moment chanting “free her”.

Reflections

The energy of the session — its size, its breadth of geography and experience, and the urgency of participants' contributions — affirmed the centrality of this issue to any serious feminist agenda. The room held organisers, advocates, researchers, people with direct lived experience of incarceration, and policymakers. The ideas generated were not abstract, they were grounded in the lived reality of what criminalisation does to women and girls, and what genuine justice might look like.

The post-it notes collected from 180 participants reflect a movement with clarity about what needs to change: decriminalise survival behaviours, defund and transform policing, invest in community-controlled alternatives, address the economic roots of criminalisation, and centre the voices and leadership of those most affected — most urgently, Indigenous women and women with lived experience of the justice system.

This session report will be shared with partners, online via partner platforms, and in a condensed format with Women Deliver and UN Women following the inclusion of these issues in both [CSW70 Agreed Conclusions](#) and the Women Deliver [Melbourne Declaration](#).

A note on absent voices

Dawn Harrington of Free Hearts (USA) and the International Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women was unable to attend Women Deliver 2026 after being denied a visa and entry to Australia. Her statement was read to the session by Debbie Kilroy. Her

absence, caused by precisely the kind of status-based barrier this session named as a driver of criminalisation, was itself a reminder of what is at stake. We acknowledge her voice and her work. We also acknowledge the voices not in the room from other women blocked from forums like this because of their criminal record status or fears around safety when travelling.

Appendix 1

Keynote remarks

Debbie Kilroy OAM (Sisters Inside)

Hello everyone.

I'd like to acknowledge the owners of this land, Naarm, and their Elders passed and present. I also want to acknowledge women who are languishing [in prison] right now. And I want to acknowledge some other formerly incarcerated women here in the room with us. I want to acknowledge [inaudible on recording] Vicki, who's part of a national network. She's quite unwell. She lives in [inaudible on recording] and she couldn't come. And she apologises and wishes that she were here with you all today. And I want to acknowledge Dawn Harrington. Dawn's one of the founding and advisory members of the International Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women (INFIW), like myself. She flew to Los Angeles and has been waiting for days — since last Friday — to have a visa accepted by the Australian Government. We've been trying hard, and in the Minister's office, going through Women Deliver, but she has done absolutely everything and more that they requested of her, and there has been no response. So she's in LA, and she's also written some words that I will read out after I say what I would like to say. And I have written it down because I want to stay on track, because I can be known to wander off down rabbit holes.

I think, you know, we applaud because Women Deliver have a session that's got "prison" in the name.

And I'm not surprised that it's taken this long. And I do want to talk about carceral feminism and abolitionist feminism, because carceral feminists have got us into the situation we have where we have over a million women and girls in cages around the world on any one day.

So I want to start by challenging the premise we've been given: prison is a feminist issue. Because the way that phrase is often used strips prison of its reality. It turns it into something theoretical, something that can be discussed at a distance, something that feels safe to engage with.

A prison is not a concept. It's a place of punishment, control, and violence. Prison is where women disappear. Prison is where poverty is punished. Prison is where state-sanctioned sexual violence is normalised and hidden in plain sight. And there is nothing comfortable about that. In this country and across the world, prison is where the unfinished business of colonisation continues to play out every single day.

Therefore, if we're going to say that prison is a feminist issue, we need to be honest about what that actually means. Because feminism, particularly mainstream feminism, has rarely, if ever, stood by us and stood with us. In fact, carceral feminism has done us harm and will continue to harm many women and girls to come. It has expanded the very systems that cage us. It has justified more policing, more prisons, more punishment, more surveillance — all in the name of protection and so-called community safety. It is widening the net of the prison industrial complex, pulling in more women — Aboriginal women, poor women, racialised women, women with disabilities — into this system. We need to name that clearly, because we cannot build liberation on systems designed for control. We cannot

claim to be working towards safety whilst investing in structures that produce harm. And you cannot call something feminist if it relies on the imprisonment of other women.

If we are serious about prison as a feminist issue, then we must confront colonisation. In Australia, Aboriginal women are the fastest-growing prison population. This is not an accident. This is not a policy failure. This is a system working exactly as it was designed to work — and it's working really well. Prisons are a continuation of colonial control: of land, of bodies, of movement, of family. And when we talk about women in prison without talking about colonisation, we erase the truth.

And we also need to be honest about which women feminism has been willing to stand beside, and which women it has abandoned. Because time and time again, feminism has drawn a line between the deserving and the undeserving. Sex workers, women who use drugs, women who are poor, women who are homeless, women who are criminalised, women who fight back, women who do not present as so-called "perfect victims." This is feminism's organised abandonment of us. These are the women who are pushed out of feminist agendas, or only included on the condition that they change — that they become more palatable and more respectable. But these are also the women most targeted by the prison system.

So when feminism refuses to stand with us, it is not neutral. It is complicit. And we cannot claim to fight for women's liberation whilst excluding the very women most affected by state violence. Liberation that leaves the most marginalised women behind is not liberation at all.

And there is another truth that also needs to be said: the people who know the most about this system are the people who have survived it. Women who have been imprisoned, caged. Women who have been criminalised. Women who have had their children taken from them. Women who have lived through the violence of a system that refuses to see them. We are not just subjects of policy. We are not case studies. We are not stories to be told by others. We are the experts. And yet, too often in these spaces, uncriminalised women — uncriminalised feminists — speak for us. They speak about us. They build their careers on our lives, on our backs, whilst we are shut out of the very rooms where discussions and decisions are being made.

We've been shut out of Women Deliver and many of these big feminist conferences around the world — forever — until today, to have a small conversation in this little group here. And I say: shame. Sometimes that exclusion is literal, and it has been for decades for us. We cannot afford to be here. We cannot get visas to cross borders because of our criminal records. Conversations about us, without us.

There are many formerly incarcerated women who cannot attend here because the registration fee was equivalent to roughly \$1,400 Australian. If there are 6,000 registered women attending, that's over \$9 million Australian dollars in registrations alone. That is absolutely disgusting — that feminists are making money on the backs of those they exclude from the very conversations that come back to shape the policies that control us, that surveil us, that expand the prison industrial complex. That is not inclusion. That is not [inaudible on recording] — that is actual violence against us, again and again and again.

You know, I've sat in international spaces like the Commission on the Status of Women — which I couldn't attend this year. I have a criminal history. I have a visa to enter the US, but I've been told by all my sisters over there: do not enter this country, you will be incarcerated. I always get stopped at the gate. I always get taken to the secondary

screening room. And I've been told I will end up in prison if I cross. So once again we have people who can cross borders easily, to participate, to speak about us for hours.

After decades of organising, women in prison have finally been named in CSW. We've been arguing for that for decades and decades. People get excited about that, and I somewhat understand that. But for me — having done this for decades, having been involved in the criminal legal system and the prison industrial complex and fighting against it for over five decades — I don't think it's something to be praised. We've got to keep fighting. The fight is not over. But it didn't happen because institutions suddenly became enlightened. It happened because of the relentless, unpaid, and often invisible labour of criminalised and formerly incarcerated women — women who organised from inside prison, women who resisted, survived, and refused to be erased.

We cannot talk about progress whilst erasing the people who fought for it.

There is also a question of privilege that we need to confront. Who gets to move freely across borders? Who gets to sit at these tables? Who gets funded to speak? Because the reality is, many feminists have the freedom and the resources to travel, to convene, to influence — and many of us do not. There have been a number of meetings here that I found out about after the fact, where I would have liked to participate and challenge some of the conversations — but they're not on the agenda, they're not on the programme. They're happening on the sidelines, and they are attacking and discussing anti-rights, anti-trans positions. We need to be concerned about those conversations as abolitionists.

I want to be clear about something. There are organisations — organisations moved and led by formerly incarcerated women — that are connected, held accountable, and that carry the messages of women in prison. Women we walk alongside right now, who are doing the work. We are building community responses to violence. We are supporting women coming out of prison. We are creating pathways that do not rely on punishment. We are building our own community because no one else is coming to save us — other than us. We have given up waiting for you all to come and support us. So we're doing it ourselves. We're doing the work — a lot of the work. Some organisations are funded. Some aren't. Our national network is not funded. We're doing it without funding, without recognition, and often without even being seen.

In Australia, as Laura said, we have the National Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls. It's unfunded — unfunded — and yet we continue, because our communities matter, and we know what's at stake. Because we do not have the luxury of walking away. We will not walk away from our sisters inside.

So to the international funders, the funders here sitting in what is deemed a wealthy country — and it is — but there are massive gaps that are not funded by philanthropists, particularly with regard to criminalised and formerly incarcerated women. I'm going to speak directly to you now. What is your role here? I'm concerned about the role of funders and philanthropists, because it seems there's a movement that has been happening in the US for a very long time whereby NGOs have come to rely on philanthropists, and we let governments off the hook for providing the social services that our communities need. And then there's a scramble and a fight — the violence and the harm in that — over who gets the funding and who doesn't. We've got to hold our governments accountable. It's all very well for philanthropists to want to enter this space, but funders also need to hold governments to account. This is not about you. This is about our governments being held to account to ensure that social services are in place for everybody. Because we know that a woman doesn't end up in prison because of something she did today — she has been targeted from the day she was born, particularly Aboriginal women in this country.

So we've got to be serious about gender justice, and we cannot continue to fund the harms whilst letting governments off the hook. A lot of the conversations I'm hearing here are about funding — international funders, philanthropists — with very little about holding the state accountable for the violence caused by failing to provide the services our communities need. We need to shift that. We can't continue down that path. We've got to push back. We've got to think outside the bars.

And so I want to end this opening with this: we are not waiting for solutions. We are the solutions. We are the women who have survived prison. There are women surviving in prison today. We are the women who resisted it. We have organised against it. And we have the knowledge, the analysis, and the vision. We are the intellects in this space. We know what safety looks like. We know what community accountability looks like. We know what needs to change.

The question is: are you ready to listen? Are you ready to hear? Are you ready to act? And are you ready to follow our lead? Because liberation will not come from the top down. It will come from us. We keep us safe. Thank you.

Dawn Harrington (absent, message read out on her behalf by Shillan Shelby's from the National Network of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls)

I stand here today as part of the International Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women — a global movement of women across more than 35 countries, women who have lived this reality and are working together to transform it.

And I want to be clear from the beginning: the incarceration of women is not a side issue. It is not a niche issue. It is a feminist issue. Because across the world, women and girls are being incarcerated at alarming and increasing rates — not because we are dangerous, but because we are poor, because we are survivors. We are navigating violence, trauma, capitalism, racism, and all manner of other impossible conditions. And when women are incarcerated, we lose our children, our homes, our communities. Entire systems of care collapse, because women are the backbone of families and communities all around the world.

This is not accidental. This is structural. It is rooted in patriarchy, in colonialism, in global systems that criminalise survivors and punish poverty instead of addressing harm.

And yet, too often, the mainstream feminist movement has not fully taken this up. Too often, we are spoken about but not listened to, included but not centred, acknowledged but treated as an afterthought.

But let me say this clearly: you cannot claim to fight for women's liberation whilst ignoring the millions of women behind bars. Because feminism is about bodily autonomy, and there is no greater violation of bodily autonomy than a cage. Feminism is about freedom from violence, and prisons are sites of violence — physical, emotional, reproductive, and systemic. Feminism is about dignity and human rights, and incarcerated women are denied both every single day.

So this is not an add-on to feminism. This is central to it.

And what we are building through the International Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women is not just resistance — it is leadership. We are women who have lived this system. We are the experts. We are the ones closest to the problem, and therefore closest to the

solution — and yet furthest away from the resources we need to create change. We are building alternatives. We are creating global solidarity. We are shifting the paradigm from punishment to care, from cages to community, from isolation to liberation.

But we are also making a clear call: do not speak for us. Do not design solutions without us. Do not place us at the margins of a movement that is about our lives. Centre us. Fund our leadership. Follow our lead. Stand with us — not in symbolism, but in shared strategy and shared power.

Because when you centre formerly incarcerated women, you are not just including us — you are strengthening the entire global feminist movement.

And if we are serious about liberation — global, collective, and real — then we must be just as serious about ending the incarceration of women and girls.

We are not a footnote. We are the movement.

Thank you.

Laura Cook (Women Beyond Walls), in response to opening statements from Debbie and Dawn

Thank you, and we will pass on our thanks to Dawn as well for those words. And just to pick up on something Debbie mentioned there — we did a piece of research a few years ago now, in 2021 — and I can't imagine the situation has got any better since then. It was called [Forgotten by Funders](#), and in it we actually looked at organisations working globally whose work they saw as working with or for girls impacted by criminal legal systems. We found that fewer than a quarter of those organisations that did have funding — and many were working in the way Debbie described, actually unfunded and just getting on with the work — but for those that were funded, fewer than a quarter were funded by feminist funders. So a real challenge there, I think. But also, again, a challenge to our governments. Anyone here from a government, please listen carefully too — because everything you see up there, all of the laws that I mentioned at the beginning, these are things that are upheld by states, that are practised by states, but that can also be abolished by states. So we do have that opportunity here today.

And going back to that question I mentioned earlier — what needs to change, locally, nationally, globally — Debbie and Dawn have already given us, I think, some strong provocations in those words. But I also wanted to turn to a few other wonderful guests in our circle today who are going to give us some sparks — I'm going to call them sparks of thought, or creativity, or ideas — for us to be able to discuss that question further.

So, with these provocations — if you're somebody listening in the room, I know there are some events where you can sit there on your mobile phone or your laptop and not really listen. I do sometimes question why people are in the room when that happens. But I think for this, I would love you to listen to these provocations extra carefully, because we are then going to be turning to all of you to help us problem-solve in this room today. Because as Debbie and Dawn have so articulately put it, there is a problem — a very big problem — that needs addressing here.

Provocations

Maria Alessi (Legal Empowerment Fund)

Thank you very much. And I would like to acknowledge and align myself with the thoughts of Debbie and Dawn. As a feminist who is also an abolitionist, I want death to the prison industrial complex, as well as to patriarchy, racism, and imperialism.

So, from a purely funders' perspective — my name is Maria Alessi. I'm a Programme Officer with the Legal Empowerment Fund. The Legal Empowerment Fund funds community groups and grassroots organisations using legal empowerment strategies to push for access to justice across multiple areas of work. One of the ways in which we do fund — and we do fund — is by supporting women's groups working with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women across the world, but especially currently in North America and South America — Brazil, Mexico, the US, and [inaudible on recording].

One of the things we have learned from this process is that an important consideration is ensuring that you offer flexible and unrestricted funding. You cannot work effectively with groups that have been criminalised, people who are working in complex contexts, if you structure your support as project funding or funding that comes with restrictions. The funding must allow people to pivot and respond to the challenges arising within their communities and their organising.

We also think carefully about the ways in which our funding might unintentionally exacerbate prison practices — because prison is not just a physical space. It also manifests in the practices within the wider community that show up with a prison mentality. So how money moves, and to whom it moves, matters enormously. One of the things we often hear from some of our partners is that sometimes you apply for funding, receive it, and suddenly become an administrator. You are no longer embedded in the work you set out to do, but are instead consumed with sending quarterly reports, and someone is constantly asking you for numbers — everything measured only in numbers, and not in the quality of relationships or the processes that organisations are going through. This is a consequence of the nature of the funding world and the infrastructure through which it is built. It is complex to navigate, but being aware of it makes it easier to think carefully about what it is you are actually funding.

One of the things we have also learned over time — and this sits at the heart of the Legal Empowerment Fund's approach — is that formal justice systems are not producing the results we might hope for. A great deal of funding for access to justice has focused on judges, police officers, and prison systems, but not on justice systems that build community, that build reconciliation, that build accountability — systems that are not solely reliant on incarceration. So how do you find and support people who are building such systems and experimenting with such approaches, so that we have genuine alternatives to what remains the dominant cultural system of justice?

It is also important to pay attention to context. We run a participatory grant-making process that is informed by people with lived experience who are also doing the work — because you can have lived experience and not be doing the work, but there are people who have lived experience and are doing the work. Those are the people who inform what our proposals look like, what our processes look like, and who also get to select the people doing the work. That decision is not mine to make. My role is to handle the more administrative aspects and to pay attention to data and conversations happening in the world — to say, this might be something worth exploring and building knowledge around — but not to pick who gets funded. We are a team of seven, and we do not have all the lived experiences in the world. So why would we be the ones to decide what would work, or

which community or organisation is worth funding? We leave that decision to people with lived experience.

Something else I want to bring into this conversation, which I feel strongly about, is the need to honestly acknowledge the infrastructure that produces the funding we rely on. Even as we pursue funding and work within it, we must acknowledge that there is a patriarchal, capitalist structure that produces and distributes funding. This money comes from practices and infrastructures that enable the existence of class, racism, and inequality. Being able to acknowledge that also places a responsibility on those who receive and move funding — to ensure that money reaches quickly and effectively the people it will work best for. Simply put: money is political.

I invite people to look at a statement by Frida, the Young Feminist Fund, in which they spoke about money being necessary but also being a political thing, and what that means for the work they are doing.

So, as I think about coming into this space, I invite us to consider: what are the ways in which money can move better? For funders in this space, if you do not have the right infrastructure, who can you rely on to ensure money actually reaches the people who need it? For government entities, there is an entire government infrastructure to navigate — so how do you ensure you have the right people to help you get money into communities? But also, how do you ensure that you carry the responsibility of shielding those who cannot shield themselves?

If you are going to fund, and you stipulate that you can only fund formalised groups, consider this: there are countries — Uganda, Ghana, for example — where if LBQ women formalise their organisations, they are effectively making themselves available to be arrested. If sex workers formalise their organisations, they are only drawing themselves to the attention of formal systems and structures. So how do you ensure that these groups are able to receive resourcing without being placed in greater harm? And how do we acknowledge that some of us hold the power to shield ourselves from that kind of harm in ways that others cannot — and therefore take on that pressure ourselves, and let the groups continue to do the work?

My invitation, especially to the funders in this room, is to reflect on that, and to consider how we might adjust our infrastructure — in whatever ways we can — to deliver resources to the communities and individuals who are doing the work.

Thank you very much.

Dr Elena Jeffreys (Scarlet Alliance / Australian Sex Workers Association)

Thank you. I'm going to stand up. Hi everyone. My name is Elena. I'm a sex worker. I'm a cis white woman of Italian first-generation heritage on one side, and on the other side, white Anglo second fleet family. I pay my respects to the elders of this land, and also to the Yamaji people, on whose lands I grew up.

When facing court for drug charges — drug dealing charges — as a young woman, I was confronted on arrival by the same prosecuting officer who had been assigned to the sexual assault case I had reported — my own sexual assault case — less than a year earlier, when I was 19 years old. I just want to let that land. In Western Australia, the same effort and attention by the state was given to prosecuting me, a 19-year-old, for selling drugs, as was given to the two men who had raped and assaulted me.

A drug conviction in Western Australia also gives officers the power to strip-search a person. So when an unrelated bench warrant for my arrest led to me being escorted off a train at Perth train station, the uniformed officer had an excuse to take me into a dark room and search me — which was, in effect, a sexual assault.

A few years later — and this was very early on, when I had just started dating my beautiful wife, Chanel, whom I want to acknowledge — I was 26 years old, and we were in a gay bar, of which there are not many in Perth. I was very nervous and anxious. And I found that where we were sitting, I was sitting right next to the lesbian officer who had assaulted me whilst in uniform — and she behaved, of course, as though everything was completely normal.

In that same year, the Western Australian Government extended powers to police to force sex workers to undergo cavity searches. Refusal to undergo a cavity search at the direction of police results in a criminal charge in WA. Entrapment — police acting as a client in order to gather evidence — is also permitted in that jurisdiction.

When we achieved the decriminalisation of sex work in Queensland in 2024, we were successful in removing that police power to entrap entirely. In fact, we were successful across the board. [Huge round of applause] Thank you very much — it has been a huge achievement. In Queensland, we successfully removed every single police power in relation to sex workers and every exceptional regulation. That makes Queensland the fourth jurisdiction in Australia to have implemented decriminalisation. And decriminalisation, to be clear, is the removal or repeal of police powers over sex workers and our workplaces.

And yes — like many, many sex workers — I personally experienced police entrapment during the 24 years it was in place in Queensland.

We are still campaigning — sex workers across Australia — for decriminalisation in the states and territories where it has not yet been implemented. We are also campaigning to remove police powers of strip search, cavity search, entry into homes without warrants, phone tapping, surveillance, and targeting — and, for migrants in our community, deportation or indefinite detention.

Scarlet Alliance has recently campaigned for Asian migrant community members and trans women to gain access to gender-affirming care whilst in immigration detention, and ultimately to be released.

As activists and anti-prison campaigners, we are compelled to argue for urgent and immediate prison reform to protect our community members — indeed, to protect ourselves — from those instruments of oppression, violence, genocide, and death. All of these timelines of advocacy — decriminalisation, ending police involvement in sex workers' lives, prison abolition, drug legalisation and reform, and efforts to ensure our survival when incarcerated — are not just valid but necessary for our wellbeing.

And I'm going to give a brief introduction to what Cam is going to say next, though I believe you'll also give a short introduction to Cam. I want to introduce Cam with this quote: fighting for immediate and urgent changes in policy, as part of harm reduction for sister girls who are currently incarcerated in the Northern Territory, is integral and urgent — it impacts their survival right now, critically.

And thank you to [inaudible on recording] and the National Network for giving us feedback on how we present this material. We do feel confident that we can hold both timelines of

advocacy in parallel, ensuring simultaneously that working towards the abolition of the current prison system is maintained as our optimal campaign goal.

Cameron Billie (SWOP NT / SWRG)

So my name is Cameron. This is what Sister Girls from the Northern Territory want you to know. And I am the messenger today. I would like to acknowledge that I do not speak for or on behalf of Sister Girls. These are their own words, which they want to be heard, and have asked to be heard in this space today.

I'll be using the term Kuman Jai, stating our respect for a Sister Girl who has died. This respect extends to her kin, her custodial land, and her communities. We use her pseudonym with Kuman Jai, adhering to important cultural protocols.

In the Northern Territory, from 2016 to 2018, a criminal lawyer from the Northern Australian Aboriginal Justice Association, with Kuman Jai Sam — a Sister Girl who was a member of the Sex Worker Reference Group and a peer educator at the Sex Worker Outreach Programme Northern Territory — jointly supported Sister Girls in Garamilla, also called Darwin, in the courts and in incarceration at the men's wing of Holtze Prison in the Northern Territory.

Many Sister Girls from the Northern Territory live traditional lives, holding cultural knowledge which forges unbreakable spiritual connections to Country. Sister Girl is a term used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-identify. The term is used more generally to describe trans women and/or gender-diverse people who often take on female, Sister Girl, or LGBT roles within traditional communities.

Sister Girls have led Brothers and Sisters Northern Territory advocacy for decades, calling for non-binary incarceration facilities that are culturally, physically, and emotionally safe for Sister Girls and transgender people. Their advocacy, alongside other stakeholders, provided extensive recommendations for amendments to the Northern Territory's trans and intersex incarceration policy. Northern Territory Governments have omitted the key safety recommendation to ensure safer incarceration of Sister Girls and transgender people away from both men's and women's prisons. Significantly, for Sister Girls culturally, both spaces are not always safe — as noted by Kuman Jai Sam in her work with the Northern Australian Aboriginal Justice Association lawyers.

Rose Ngala, the Northern Territory Sister Girl and transgender advocate, states:

"To place transgender women in men's prisons is to subject them to a heightened risk of physical and sexual violence. These facilities often fail to provide adequate protection, leaving transgender individuals vulnerable to abuse and trauma. Placing transgender women in men's prisons disregards their gender identity and basic human rights, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination and harm. It is imperative that we prioritise the safety and wellbeing of transgender individuals within the carceral system by providing housing that aligns with their gender identity."

And from Crystal Love, another Northern Territory Sister Girl, Tiwi elder and advocate:

"In Aboriginal custom, your hair is your crown. Your hair belongs to your body. In our Aboriginal custom, we keep our hair — it's part of our culture. It is like a crown for a woman, or for a man. And for Sister Girls, their hair is their most prized possession. It makes them female. It makes them who they are."

And this is a snapshot of Sister Girls' statements to SWAP — the Sex Worker Outreach Project in the Northern Territory — in relation to their experiences in Holtze Prison.

The first, from 2016:

"I cannot afford the operation. I'm a Sister Girl. When you visit me in prison, I cut my hair off and grow a beard so that they leave me alone. I'm always scared when I'm in prison because it's hard to act like a man when I'm not."

The second, from 2018:

"When I say I am a Sister Girl to the guards, they laugh at me. They don't think I am a Sister Girl because I cut my hair now. They just think that I don't want to be here in this place."

And the third, from February 2025:

"Didn't anyone tell you where I was? I've been locked up again — 18 months in solitary confinement. I just got out two days ago, so I came to visit you. I've got nowhere to live, and I need work."

Thank you for letting me pass this message on today.

Ruth Birgin (WHRIN)

I think as a preface, we should acknowledge that in so many countries around the world, women's prisons are populated by more than half women who are there for non-violent, petty drug offences.

The women's movement likes to talk about inclusion, but when it comes to women and gender-diverse people who use drugs, that inclusion has not been evident. The women's movement has not been immune to drug prohibition propaganda, and has tended to push aside these issues.

You've been told that drug wars are a matter of public health and wellbeing — which is a gross distortion, and one that masks systemic violence by the state. You were told that the War on Drugs protects society. But what is actually happening is that people are being imprisoned. Behind those walls are women — often mothers, survivors of violence, and survivors of systemic poverty. The so-called War on Drugs is a deliberate war on the most marginalised.

When we use drug laws to punish women for being poor, for being sex workers, for being deemed unfit mothers, we are weaponising the state against the most marginalised. Once they are in the system, everything that feminism claims to fight against — state violence, loss of bodily autonomy, separation from children, stigma, surveillance — becomes normalised. And yet the women's movement has been largely silent, or worse, comfortable with the idea that some women are too complicated or too stigmatised to collaborate with.

You cannot claim bodily autonomy and also support systems that criminalise women for what we put in our bodies. You cannot talk about ending violence against women whilst

ignoring the violence of the prison system. You cannot talk about equality whilst accepting that some women are more punishable than others. If the feminist movement really wants to dismantle patriarchal violence, why is it so often silent when women are locked away so commonly for non-violent offences?

Harm reduction without feminism is blind to gender oppression. And feminism without harm reduction is abandoning women to the punitive state. We need decriminalisation, legalisation, and gender-responsive, peer-led harm reduction services.

Feminism without women who use drugs in the room is choosing who gets left behind. And it is now time to proactively include women and gender-diverse people who use drugs in the women's movement.

And I want to leave with a question — perhaps the question — how much longer will it take before decriminalisation and legalisation are recognised as basic feminist issues?