

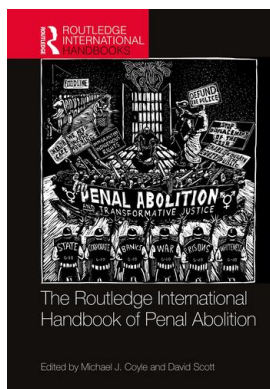
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A word waiting to happen

Sisters Inside's abolition journey

Debbie Kilroy and Suzi Quixley

Introduction

Perhaps Sisters Inside (referred to as “Sisters”) has always been an abolitionist organisation. If you’d asked a 23-year-old Debbie Kilroy, with ten years of periodic imprisonment under her belt, she would certainly have said “prisons are bullshit”, even though she couldn’t imagine a world without prisons.

This chapter reflects on Sisters’ advocacy with and for criminalised women and girls, over almost three decades of prison expansion and privatisation. It tracks our growing awareness of the logical outcome of the organisation’s values – abolition of the carceral state. In the early years, we largely focused on institutional reform. This chapter explores how we have progressively engaged, articulated and become confident in advocating for prison abolition (the “word that was waiting to happen”), through both the public activism and service delivery arms of the organisation. Our activism and law reform operates at a state, national and international level. Our service delivery is reflected in our model of service, service priorities and staffing. This chapter demonstrates what we’ve learned about the interdependence of these two aspects of Sisters and explains how they articulate to contribute toward abolition.

Debbie Kilroy – the driving force behind Sisters Inside

It is impossible to learn from Sisters’ experiences without recognising the leading role of Debbie Kilroy since our inception. Having a single organisational leader with lived prison experience has been central to the congruence between our service provision and systemic advocacy; our credibility with criminalised women; and the exponential growth in Sisters’ analysis and activism. Debbie Kilroy has been the consistent public face of Sisters since the early 1990s and remains our CEO.

While a prisoner herself, Debbie Kilroy was instrumental in driving reform within the main Brisbane women’s prison. After 32 years of conservative rule, in 1989 the (more progressive) Labor Party returned to power in Queensland. Reformists were appointed in key government roles affecting women’s prisons. This created a rare “moment” when women prisoners were, for the first time, given a (limited) voice in the running of the prison. Debbie Kilroy’s participation in prisoner advisory groups were the starting point to her decision not to return to prison.

Upon leaving prison, Debbie Kilroy promised other women prisoners that she would continue to address the injustices and violence they experienced on a daily basis and left prison determined to establish an organisation to achieve this. Her continuing relationships with many and varied criminalised women enables Sisters to function in a manner that is genuinely accountable to criminalised women in Queensland and more widely. From the outset, she was driven by the motto “Nothing about us, without us”, which remains a core principle of Sisters.

Following release, Debbie Kilroy realised that she needed to learn more in order to be an effective advocate and establish a viable organisation. She began building a pool of (then) mentors – women with substantial political, media, legal, academic and community services expertise – most of whom still actively contribute to Sisters. Maintaining a small, loyal, dedicated pool of professional allies – each with their own specialist competencies, networks and influence – has proven critical to Sisters’ success.

Debbie Kilroy has progressively engaged with leading national and international practitioners, thinkers and activists. She has driven shared understanding of prisons as the state’s first response to the issues of women and girls deliberately pushed to the margins of our capitalist society. She has “brought the organisation along with her” in recognising and embracing the nexus between our struggle and other social justice movements – particularly amongst our First Nations Peoples who are outrageously disproportionately subjected to surveillance and isolation by systems of social control, including the criminal legal system. Debbie Kilroy has built our understanding of the role of neoliberalism in criminalisation: the use of state institutions to individualise social issues (such as poverty, homelessness, mental health issues and abuse), and making women and girls responsible for deliberate state failures to address or meet their needs and to reckon with the sovereignty of our First Nations Peoples. In short, Debbie Kilroy has driven Sisters’ transformation from a reformist to an abolitionist organisation.

Key guidance in the ongoing development of Sisters’ abolitionist stance comes from Angela Davis. At the turn of the century our then President, Anne Warner, encouraged Debbie Kilroy to engage with Angela Davis’s thinking. This immediately influenced the organisation at a management level. The organisation more widely engaged with abolitionist thinking through Angela Davis’s keynote address at Sisters’ 2001 Inaugural International Conference (held in Brisbane) entitled “Is Prison Obsolete?”, which was later reflected in her book of the same title (Davis, 2003). This remained the conference title until 2018 when, marking our firm commitment to abolitionism, the conference was retitled “Imagining Abolition . . . A World Without Prisons”. Angela Davis has spoken at all nine Sisters biennial international conferences, sharing her growing understanding of abolition and progressively crafting “the next step” in the Australian abolitionist movement’s thinking. Subsequent conferences have also enjoyed the input and support of abolitionists from throughout Australia, the USA, Canada, UK and Aotearoa (NZ). More recently, Debbie Kilroy has also extended her engagement with women activists in the third and fourth worlds.

Also in 2000, Debbie Kilroy began building working relationships with like-minded organisations across the first world. In particular, she met and began working closely with Kim Pate, then National Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS). Sisters and CAEFS have jointly made several submissions on women’s rights and criminalisation to United Nations forums. Most notably, Debbie Kilroy and Kim Pate worked closely in contributing to the development of the “Bangkok Rules”. Since 2013, Sisters has had NGO consultative status at the UN and has facilitated criminalised women’s input to special rapporteurs visiting Australia.

Since the 1990s, Debbie Kilroy has regularly visited prisons and engaged with women prisoners and several smaller (often unfunded) organisations in other Australian jurisdictions and

internationally. She has a national profile and is widely accepted as the *de facto* national spokesperson of the women's prison abolitionist movement.

The early days – focus on in-prison services (1992–1999)

Sisters is an independent community organisation in Queensland, Australia, that advocates for the collective human rights of criminalised women and girls and provides services to meet their own and their children's needs. Sisters was established in 1992 by criminalised women with support from professional women in the free world. Our purpose has always been to advance the voices and priorities of criminalised and imprisoned women and girls, particularly women and girls of colour.

At the same time, Sisters was lobbying for funding to provide sexual assault counselling for women prisoners – the priority determined by women prisoners themselves. In 1994, an Aboriginal woman was released from prison and died within 24 hours at the hand of her violent partner. This generated impetus within the Queensland Government to recognise the critical role of domestic and family violence in the lives of women prisoners. Sisters soon received funding for a small project to develop resources about domestic violence (a poster and DVD) for women prisoners. Later that year, we received our first substantial funding to employ two sexual assault counsellors in the Brisbane women's prison. (This programme has been continually funded since 1994.) Throughout the 1990s, we received a variety of small grants for projects (including a release kit for women and booklets by and for children of women prisoners) and short-term staff (e.g., transition and hepatitis C workers), and we gained access to girls in the (then) children's prison for the first time.

Sisters was not yet an independent legal entity: funds for the counselling service were managed by an auspicing organisation. It soon became evident that criminalised women themselves could not have a controlling interest in Sisters' programmes and services whilst the organisation did not manage its own money and take the lead role in negotiations with government. Despite the significant workload involved for a small emerging organisation and the risk of distraction from our central priorities, Sisters embarked on the process toward incorporation in 1999.

Anyone with a criminal record cannot legally be a voting member of the management committee of an NGO in Queensland. Sisters had to grapple with the tension between this and our commitment to being driven by criminalised women. From the outset, a constitutional bylaw required that a steering group of at least five women prisoners be part of all decisions made by the management committee. The voting members of our committee were professional "mentors". (Having a stable, values-committed, politically informed governance structure has been crucial to our ongoing success, and most of the original committee remain members.) During this era, Sisters' management committee meetings were held inside the main Brisbane women's prison, and women prisoners fully participated in the committee's deliberations: voting members of the management committee committed to being driven by criminalised women in all decisions that impacted the organisation's direction, priorities, policies and services. This governance approach, which soon also included participation by women post-release, continues to this day and has been fundamental to Sisters' ongoing accountability to criminalised women.

The Bedrock – "Our Values and Vision" (1999)

Concurrent with incorporation, Sisters committed to a substantial process to firmly establish our meaning and direction. The resulting document, "Our Values and Vision" (referred to as "the/our Values") is deeply embedded in Sisters' culture and processes.

At a developmental level, criminalised women played the leading role in developing our Values and model of service (“Inclusive Support”), which articulates how these values are applied in practice. At a governance level, women prisoners and women with lived experience on the outside have a high level of continuing input through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms. Criminalised women collectively contribute to our service delivery approach through implementation of (formal and informal) participatory action research by workers. And our use of Inclusive Support means that individual women have the power in making decisions about their lives.

All Sisters’ work is underpinned by our Values – a detailed (five-page) document which articulates our values and long-term vision and the organisational framework required to operate consistently with these. It is difficult to adequately stress how central this document is to all aspects of the operations of Sisters. All staff and management are required to agree to work within the Values. All new staff spend two days during the induction process exploring the Values and their articulation into our model of service. Two group readings and discussion of the Values with all Sisters staff are institutionalised into our annual calendar.

The values development process demanded a high level of commitment by participants. Twelve women, including four First Nations women, participated in six days of workshops (August to December 1999) held within the high-security section of the Brisbane women’s prison to allow for involvement by both short- and long-term women prisoners. Most participants were women prisoners and women with lived prison experience, with a few professional women also involved. All contributed ideas for values for consideration by the group. Between three full weekend workshops, there were several weeks’ break to allow all participants to think about the issues raised and for women prisoners to talk with other women on the inside.

The workshop process demonstrates Sisters’ commitment to genuine ownership by criminalised women. In brief, at the first weekend each woman identified 30 values which she wanted the new organisation to hold and wrote each in the form of a sentence on a piece of paper. Participants were encouraged to think about four ideological themes – values about individual human nature and higher power; values about the relationship between individuals and groups (including family); values about the role of the state, governance and the law; and values about social maintenance or change. All ideas were then “visually planned” – grouped on the floor according to theme. These were then compiled, providing everyone with the opportunity to think about their response between workshops. At the second weekend, each woman placed a green stick-on dot on any statements they did not understand and a red dot on any statement they disagreed with. The group then progressively worked through every “dotted” value – in the first instance, negotiating unclear wording to statements which everyone could understand and, in the second instance, discussing each value with which anyone disagreed. This included substantial debate on a wide variety of issues – everything from whether there’s a god or “good” and “evil”; to capital punishment and the sacredness of human life; to law and justice; to human rights. Ultimately, the group reached consensus on every value they wanted Sisters to hold, including a very few situations where individual women chose not to block consensus following detailed discussion. Apart from managing the process, the main role of the facilitator was to craft these values, in the words of the group, into a statement: “Our Values and Vision”.

The “values” identified by group members ranged from the philosophical to the practical. Much of the latter part of the process focused on discussing issues such as whether Sisters should primarily be an advocacy organisation or a service provider. This led to the clear separation of roles which has proven critical to the organisation – with management taking exclusive responsibility for systemic advocacy and staff providing services, including individual advocacy. Ultimately, a clear decision was made that, should Sisters be forced to choose

between these two roles, our priority would be public advocacy. It was also decided that our Values would not be altered in any way unless Sisters went through the full process of values development again.

“Our Values and Vision” are “of their day”. Sisters has grown enormously over the past two decades. It is easy to see gaps in the process and outcomes – lack of commentary about Australia’s colonial history; limited commentary on racism and other forms of oppression; no mention of the prison industrial complex or carceral state; no analysis of sexuality or gender. Nor was there explicit mention (or discussion) of prison abolition. Yet, it is remarkable to see how congruent the Values are with abolitionism. The Values have stood Sisters in good stead through the major challenges of the past two decades – being locked out of the prison; extending post-release services; engaging with abolitionism; taking an increasingly outspoken position on carceral structures; and ultimately, prioritising services focused on decarceration.

The establishment era – continuing focus on women prisoners (2000–2004)

During this era, our Brisbane-based services grew. With ongoing sexual assault counselling available, women prisoners identified their next priority as the needs of mothers in prison and their children. We received funding for two ongoing programs – one which supports mothers in prison and facilitates visits by their children and the other for young people affected by (their own or family) criminalisation – which continue to this day.

Beginning in the early 2000s, women have increasingly been refused bail, even on very minor charges, due to failures of the state – most commonly homelessness, untreated mental health issues and/or substance abuse issues. The year 2003 marked the beginnings of Sisters’ decarceration services, not yet articulated as “abolitionist”. We established an unfunded Supreme Court Bail (SCB) Programme in partnership with the University of Queensland: law students supported women who were remanded in prison by lower courts to appeal this decision to the highest court in Queensland. This programme continued until 2016 when, due to severe overcrowding in the main women’s prison in Brisbane, the Queensland Government funded Sisters to upscale the programme. (Ultimately funding was provided to provide SCB support to all women prisoners on remand in Queensland.)

Sisters bought our first, very modest, property in 2001. (We have subsequently upgraded over the years, as the organisation has grown.) This may seem unrelated to abolition: in fact, it’s been very valuable contribution to our courage to maintain a firm position, particularly during periods of conservative government. It has made it easier not to compromise when under political pressure to modify our public stance on issues or provide services inconsistent our Constitution and Values. It has enabled us to take risks (such as a social enterprise project) and employ workers in roles for which we do not receive funding. Equity in our current property would allow Sisters to function for several years without relying on government funding.

During the 2000s, we also began contributing to government inquiries. In 1998, Sisters had undertaken a substantial survey of 100 women prisoners in Queensland which particularly focused on First Nations women prisoners, mothers in prison and very young women prisoners. This study formed the basis of our 2003 submission to the national “Poverty in Australia Inquiry”, which addressed sexual assault of prisoners by the state (particularly strip searching), use of isolation, the importance of language and the economic drivers of women’s imprisonment. These agendas continue to be dominant themes in Sisters’ public advocacy, and this study continues to provide a benchmark for comparative analysis. In 2000 we also, jointly with the Prisoners Legal Service, submitted our first major document on the needs of women prisoners

to the Queensland Government. Sisters' abolitionist tendencies were already evident, with this substantial submission putting a case against imprisoning women.

Our 2004 submission to the Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland (ADCQ) was a landmark document which was emulated by prison activist groups in other Australian jurisdictions. We provided evidence of systemic discrimination against women prisoners in Queensland on the basis of sex, race, religion and disability. Human rights breaches highlighted included the classification system; limited low-security beds; limited access to conditional and community release; limited access to programmes, work and health care; strip searching; and use of segregation. This complaint led to a two-year investigation by the ADCQ, with the findings detailed in their 2006 report.

The big test – advocacy versus service provision (2004)

The carceral state did not respond kindly to Sisters' complaint to the ADCQ. Our services to women in prison were immediately curtailed. The situation then exploded when Debbie Kilroy publicly likened the treatment of women prisoners in Queensland (particularly, describing strip searching as sexual assault by the state) to the treatment of prisoners by the US Military in Abu Ghraib. Prison officers threatened to go out on strike, and Sisters was locked out of women's prisons. Our services were excluded from prisons for several months; Debbie Kilroy was locked out for several years; and it took until 2018 for our management committee to be allowed to meet inside prison.

Our clarity about the relative priority of systemic advocacy over service delivery during the values development process became critical here. Sisters chose not to apologise or soften our position on human rights abuses in women's prisons. As a result, Debbie Kilroy's media profile and national recognition grew, including being awarded an Order of Australia Medal (2003) and the Australian Human Rights Medal (2004) and being the subject of a biography and documentary. Sisters had become a national player.

The lockout inevitably led to Sisters more deeply exploring ways to reduce women's risk of returning to prison. By necessity, we increased our emphasis on post-release support and upscaled our focus on continuity of support for women. For example, significant resources in our mothers' and children's programmes were dedicated to family reunification including advocacy with and for women with child "protection" authorities – an emphasis which continues to this day.

The emergence – reaching out to women on the outside (2005 to 2012)

With a Labor Government in power in Queensland, Sisters enjoyed a period of slow but steady growth for seven years. This was an era of consolidation for the organisation – both in terms of our public advocacy role and our approach to working with criminalised women. This era was marked by a greater emphasis on First Nations women and decarceration programmes.

Sisters had progressively recognised the incredibly disproportionate imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, which has consistently increased faster than the imprisonment rate of both of other women and First Nations men over the past two decades. During this era, we focused on the need for a dedicated approach to working with First Nations women and their families and communities. Sisters extended our efforts to build relationships with Aboriginal Elders, community leaders and First Nations-controlled services in and around Brisbane. We placed an increasing emphasis on employing First Nations staff. We appointed an Elder as

Senior First Nations Practitioner – a role which continues to support our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and has the authority to direct other staff in their work with First Nations women. Sisters also required non-First Nations staff to take responsibility for their own cultural learning. Our collective understanding of the intersection between race and criminalisation was consolidated at the 2007 Sisters Conference, which was held in Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory (NT). By chance, the conference coincided with the beginning of “The Intervention” – the military take-over of many Aboriginal communities in the NT, which required suspension of sections of the Australian Racial Discrimination Act. This placed the conference at the fulcrum of Aboriginal activism against The Intervention and forged alliances between Sisters and national Aboriginal leaders which continue to this day.

During this era, Sisters extended our concept of “lived experience”. In the early days, we focused on employing women with lived prison experience . . . and we still consider these women “gold”! As the organisation grew, we recognised the value of employing staff with other shared backgrounds and experiences to the women we work with. The employment of First Nations staff was particularly important. We had previously employed (typically 25%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff: over the past five years this has increased to around 50%, with the majority of Sisters staff now being women of colour, mainly First Nations women. We also value shared experiences such as a history of family violence, mental health issues or homelessness. These shared characteristics are at least equally valued to paper qualifications when appointing staff.

Despite limited resources, during this era Sisters increasingly invested in research and writing. Service delivery alone cannot address the fundamental causes of women’s criminalisation, including adverse social values, legislation and government policies. Similarly, “big picture” advocacy has an important long-term role but limited capacity to improve the immediate situation of women. Accordingly, Sisters is committed to advocacy at multiple levels, including aiming to reduce the power of the carceral state at a policy level. During this era, we began developing several submissions each year to various Queensland, national and international authorities. Of particular note was our substantial submission to the National Human Rights Consultation in 2009, which addressed the wide variety of issues and human rights violations affecting criminalised women, girls and their children and called for national human rights legislation in Australia.

Sisters also developed national resources relevant to women prisoners and their allies. In 2007, we produced the first edition of *Working with Women with Lived Prison Experience*. This detailed guide was a self-directed learning resource designed to support other jurisdictions to develop services to meet the rights and needs of criminalised women. For the first time, we articulated an abolitionist position and provided practical steps to implement a human rights-based approach to organisational and service development. The guide recognised the importance of language – challenging terms such as “correctional”, “offender”, “criminal” and “girls”, preferring language which recognised the racialised, class-based nature of criminalisation of women such as “criminalised” (something that’s imposed on someone), “prison” (to describe all institutions of confinement, including children’s, mental health and immigration prisons) and “women” (a rejection of the prison culture of “infantilising” women prisoners). The guide was updated in 2010 under a revised title, and a third edition is in progress. Sisters also published *Human Rights inAction* (2009) – a practical guide to preparing for and surviving imprisonment in Queensland, with a focus on women prisoners’ rights, which was largely transferable to other Australian jurisdictions.

Our international profile grew during this era. In 2008, Sisters submitted a detailed, evidence-based complaint about breaches of women prisoners’ right to education in Queensland

to the UN Human Rights Council. We worked in partnership with the CAEFS to issue statements at various United Nations conferences. Our major joint piece of work was a comprehensive response in 2009 to an early draft of the (now) *Bangkok Rules*, which proposed an alternate set of rules for the treatment of women prisoners, driven by human rights principles and evidence about the realities of women's imprisonment internationally. Collectively, these submissions contributed to Sisters' reputation as a "serious player" in policy decision making . . . a reputation which has significantly contributed to our credibility and growth.

In terms of service delivery, in 2006 Sisters was funded to undertake an 18-month National Homelessness Demonstration Project. Using participatory action research, this project concurrently supported women (including 40% First Nations women) throughout Queensland to access housing following their release from prison and engaged them in developing the first incarnation of our model of service. Ideas generated through the project were progressively crafted into "Inclusive Support", through both workshops with Sisters staff and input from women.

Sisters has publicly critiqued "case management" – the dominant model of service with marginalised and disenfranchised groups in Australia. Case management is a domineering model, where staff from different agencies share information about "clients" (called "case conferencing") and jointly decide what is "in their best interest". This diminishes women's power and often demands their compliance with authorities, albeit in the guise of power sharing. Despite having been imposed on criminalised women – generally, by multiple services over many years – case management has been clearly ineffective in addressing the rights and needs of these women, girls and their children.

By contrast, Inclusive Support is a "power with" model of service. It demands that Sisters workers walk alongside women, supporting them to determine and address their own priorities – whether or not these fit neatly into our funded programmes. Clarity about our model has proven critical to our ability to argue for, and defend, a voluntary, confidential, women-driven, rights-based, culturally informed approach. Evaluations of our services have enabled us to demonstrate the success of Inclusive Support in enabling women to stay out of prison. Inculcation of new staff into our Values and Inclusive Support is essential to maintaining Sisters' culture and consistency of practice, particularly as we continue to grow.

From 2007 to 2010, Sisters undertook our first funded decarceration programme. The Special Circumstances Court (SCC) was a pilot diversion programme in Brisbane which offered homeless people with mental health issues appearing in the Magistrates (lower) Court on minor matters service support as an alternative to imprisonment. Sisters was available to all women appearing before the SCC to meet any needs which placed them at risk of further criminalisation. The project was remarkably successful, with only nine of the 240 women returning to prison for further "offences" over a three-year period and 30% participation by First Nations women. Critical to the success of the programme was a substantial allocation of flexible "brokerage" funding, which could be used to meet a variety of needs identified by women themselves. Inclusion of brokerage funds in all funding proposals has become a hallmark of Sisters programmes.

The crush – three years of conservative government (2012–2015)

Sisters, along with other social justice organisations, was hit hard when the (conservative) Liberal National Party (LNP) returned to government in Queensland in 2012. We were the first of many organisations to have programmes defunded. The new government instituted "gag clauses" as a condition of funding: organisations were required to agree not to undertake systemic advocacy

(including not having links to advocacy organisations on their website!). Sisters was one of the few organisations that chose not to accept funds on these terms (reinforcing, again, the importance of our early values decisions). Instead, we focused on systemic advocacy over these years – including an increased mainstream media profile and many submissions to government inquiries (available on the Sisters Inside website: <https://www.sistersinside.com.au>).

Sisters' commitment to seeking funds from multiple different sources paid off during this period. Australian Government-funded services were critical to maintaining some continuity of support to criminalised women and girls during this period. These included youth services, mental health support and parenting support programmes.

Our consistent principled stance set the groundwork for Sisters' growth when the Labor Party returned to power. Popular wisdom in the community services industry generally holds that organisations should not publicly challenge governments; that they should quietly subcontract government services “on the cheap”; and that they should restrict their activities to funded services, whether or not these meet the needs of service users. Sisters' success over the long term challenges these assumptions. It demonstrates that, provided the organisation invests in building relationships at all levels, speaking truth to power and asserting the rights and needs of participants can be a pathway to success.

The blossoming – prioritising decarceration (2015–present)

Since 2015, Sisters has experienced exponential growth. It is now by far the largest Australian organisation focused on criminalised women and girls, currently employing 45 staff members. Sadly, this has occurred alongside massive growth in the prison industrial complex in Queensland (and nationally). In 2018, a new women's prison opened in Gatton (100 km from Brisbane). This is the first private women's prison in Queensland and the first women's prison operated by Serco in the world.

Townsville (1,500 kilometers north of Brisbane) hosts the only women's prison outside southern Queensland. Sisters' long-standing commitment to establishing a service in Townsville was particularly driven by the large number of First Nations women imprisoned there, many of whom are from remote communities. Approximately 80% of women prisoners are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and almost 50% are on remand. Established in 2017, our Townsville office now provides many of the services available in Brisbane including Supreme Court Bail (SCB) support, support to mothers and their children, health support, housing support and anti-violence counselling.

Over recent years, changes in government priorities have enabled Sisters to more explicitly focus on decarceration – that is, programmes and services which directly reduce the number of women in prison. Our SCB programme was extended to Townsville in 2017 and to Gatton in 2018. In Brisbane in 2018, we were funded to intervene early to reduce the number of girls (aged 10 to 17) held on remand: this provided the prototype for a service for women which has commenced recently. Sisters now has staff inside the Brisbane police watchhouse and courts, supporting women and girls to access bail through providing pre-release and post-release support. Our youth workers also work inside the Brisbane children's prison, supporting girls on remand to access bail. And Sisters workers now support women pre- and post-release from Gatton.

Sisters has not been consistently successful in accessing funding to provide services. We only earn the trust of women when we stick to our principles! Government authorities want all service providers to be part of their structures and processes, including women's involvement being mandatory (e.g., a condition of parole) and workers participating in case conferencing about women's lives (often in their absence). Two critical elements of Inclusive Support are that women

and girls are completely voluntarily involved with our programmes and services (they can leave and return at any time) and we treat their personal information as completely confidential within Sisters (we will never share this with authorities without women's express permission on each occasion). Sisters' principled stance in these areas has resulted in our failure to win several major tenders (worth millions of dollars) – for which we were transparently the best-qualified organisation. As a result, we have often lobbied (with some success) at a political level for the opportunity to run evidence-based services which fall outside the parameters and constraints of existing funded programmes.

The growth of Sisters has presented new challenges, most importantly how to maintain our organisational culture and values, within and across two locations. Over the past four years, we have institutionalised systems and processes that have proven effective over time. We maintain a coherent, values-driven approach across the organisation through investing in staff induction and involving all staff in annual working days and training. We have also built our capacity to work with First Nations women through substantial (three-day) events – with dedicated opportunities for healing amongst our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and cultural learning for all Sisters workers.

At a daily level, our service delivery informs our systemic advocacy work. Weekly Inclusive Support meetings are an opportunity for workers to report back emerging themes, issues and concerns. Our workers inside prison report back human rights violations and contribute to decarceration through supporting women to apply for SCB or identifying women past their parole date. Our workers inside police watchhouses and the courts gather evidence of injustices in treatment and sentencing well beyond incidents reported in media. Our workers with women post-release gather data on the factors that contribute to women returning to prison – particularly as a result of failures of state carceral, child “protection”, housing and health systems. All workers contribute to building a picture of the changing face of criminalisation of women in Queensland which is critical to ensuring up-to-date public advocacy.

In 2019, Sisters continued to innovate. Several new decarceration strategies are currently being trialed. Our first use of GoFundMe has proved highly successful. Western Australia is the only Australian state where people can be automatically imprisoned for unpaid fines. By December, we had raised and spent over \$500,000 to pay the fines of Aboriginal women in prison or at risk of imprisonment, whilst at the same time advocating for law reform. “Barista Sistas”, our first social enterprise project, provides work experience opportunities for participants in our employment programmes and serves as a location for community education. And we have engaged the services of a First Nations Healer to work with highly traumatised women and to improve the collective cultural competence of our staff.

Conclusion

Sisters aspires to an inclusive, equitable society free of the key drivers of women's criminalisation – deeply embedded systemic sexism, racism and classism. In such a society, prisons would be unnecessary – the abolition of prisons would be an outcome of this better world, rather than a goal in itself. However, we recognise that this is a very long-term goal. We work toward this vision through short-term strategies in both our public advocacy and our decarceration practice. Sisters energetically advocates against individual and systemic breaches of women's human rights, particularly abuses by the state, poverty and racism. We advocate for social improvements consistent with abolition. At a service delivery level, we aim to reduce the number of women in prison through decarceration: intervening as early as possible to prevent women (and children's) engagement with the carceral system.

The carceral juggernaut rolls on. Over the past 12 months, several Australian states, including Queensland, have announced building of new prisons worth billions of dollars. On the other hand, an abolitionist position is increasingly being recognised as legitimate, though still marginal. Abolitionists are increasingly being included on panels at conferences, and abolitionist opinion pieces are beginning to appear in mainstream media. Sisters will continue to maintain a high profile and seize opportunities to advocate for the abolition of the carceral state and reallocation of its resources to build inclusive, equitable communities as they arise.

The most critical element of Sisters' success, and ability to sustain the long fight, has been our consistency. This has been maintained through four main means – a strong leader; the ongoing empowerment of criminalised women at all levels; a long-term pool of professional allies; and the early establishment and ongoing maintenance of clear, non-negotiable values.

Our Values are the lynchpin that holds the many different aspects of our abolitionist struggle together. In the words of Angela Davis at our 2018 Conference, Sisters will continue to “turn walls into bridges” and build a creative and collective struggle toward dismemberment of the carceral state. As Aboriginal Elder, Aunty Lilla Watson, quoted in her presentation to the United Nations:

*If you have come to help me,
You are wasting your time
But if you have come because your liberation
Is bound up with mine
Then let us work together.*

(Aboriginal activists group,
Queensland, 1970s)

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