## Decentering the Prison: Abolitionist Approaches to Working with Criminalised Women

*Paper presented at Sisters Inside conference ‘Is Prison Obsolete?’ 10 October 2014, Brisbane, presented by Amanda George, Phoebe Barton and Emma Russell*

**Amanda:**

* Acknowledgement of Country
* Introduction to Flat Out, the organization stems from a long history in women’s imprisonment activism
* We work with all women including transgender women

**Phoebe:**

Acknowledgment of Country and people in room including children.

In this workshop I start by outlining some of the ways in which Flat Out works with criminalised women from a prison abolitionist perspective, and highlight some of the challenges that arise for us as an activist service-provider organisation. Then, Emma will discuss the tension between abolition and reform that plays out in the context of our work and some of the perceived and actual risks associated with both co-option and organizational legitimacy.

We believe that effective resistance to the expanding carceral state requires interconnected strategies of individual support, systemic advocacy, and social activism. Support services are often urgently needed by those targeted by the Prison Industrial Complex. But, we cannot downplay the simultaneous importance of structural and ideological shifts that are needed to effect the broader conditions producing increasing levels of criminalization and incarceration for women, especially Aboriginal women and refugee and immigrant women, people experiencing mental illness and/or homelessness, people who use drugs, LGBT people, poor and working class people, and others.

As an activist service provider, Flat Out persistently faces two challenges. Firstly, to work with women who have been criminalised in a way that does not reinforce the culture and ethos of the disciplinary and punitive prison environment. Secondly, to avoid replicating elements of the Prison Industrial Complex that we are ultimately aiming to resist.

Flat Out places central importance on women's self-defined priorities before, during, and after imprisonment. Women exiting prison confront various barriers daily. Working alongside criminalised women often requires advocating for child reunification, stable housing, respectful healthcare, meaningful education, legal representation, safety from intimate-partner violence, and a liveable wage. These areas of life need to be negotiated concurrently and seamlessly, rather than compartmentalising them.

The organisation’s support, outreach, and advocacy workers proceed from the belief that women are the experts in their own lives. We know that those who are criminalised often possess intimate knowledge of what is needed to create change; both in regards to their own lives and in the system more broadly. Experiences of state-violence inside prison, as well as the shame and stigma that can accompany women exiting prison, profoundly shape the kinds of support needed. Flat Out is committed to providing ongoing support for women in the versions that they want, and ensuring the funding and structure of our organisation allows this. This work is ongoing and longer-term - there are women who have been in the support of Flat Out over 9 years off-and-on. For some women, being locked up has compelled them to fight and advocate on systemic issues. Activism, lobbying, and speaking out against the prison industrial complex, and involved in movements for change, can be valuable tools for healing. We appreciated Angela Davis’ discussion on the writer’s panel about women claiming the knowledge they produce, and we recognize the power of women as activists and advocates in this fight.

The stance of decarceration cuts across all aspects of Flat Out’s work, and we consider our work with women to be decarceration one- by- one, aiming to increase the length of time women stay outside of prison. So many women return to prison due to a lack of timely access to critical services such as housing, mental health support, and drug and alcohol services. Community organisations and agencies can tangibly impact the lives of criminalised women through the services they provide (or deny on the premise of ‘risk management’ or other forms of criminal record discrimination). Increasingly, both government and non-government welfare services (and therapeutic jurisprudence initiatives such as drug courts) are infused with punitive language and sanctions that, in effect, extend the carceral space beyond prison walls. (*This is what Erica and Debbie were talking about yesterday)*. It is therefore important that Flat Out provides a critical and outspoken voice in the community and government services sector. Our community education over the past 5 years has focused on increasing knowledge and capacity in these sectors, and challenging discriminatory or punitive approaches within them. For example our annual activism and advocacy trainings – which are run at a very low cost for broad accessibility - begin with a session on the history of imprisonment. This aims to begin to demystify the system, which is by-design large, opaque and intimidating. We hope to challenge that opacity, and create a network of support for advocates. Some feedback we received on the trainings is that they are educational, inspirational, and give participants confidence to do risky, unorthodox and transformative work. Community organisations that work with women exiting prison have an important role to play in keeping individual women out of prison, and are also in a position to use their organisational knowledge and resources to advocate for decarceration more broadly.

Increasing community literacy around processes and practices of criminalisation, incarceration, and the illusion of safety and ‘protection’ that the Prison Industrial Complex constructs is critical work. ‘Commonsense’ connections between crime and punishment, and crime and social harm, need to be demystified and challenged. Safety is often understood and defined by the absence of violence and intimidation that can be achieved, for example, through an increase in surveillance, policing, or imprisonment. However, as Jessie Lee Jackson and Erica Meiners (visiting activist and educator at this conference) point out, safety can also be understood as a positive value: to be able and supported to flourish, with strong communities, adequate resources to care for yourself and your family, housing, employment, health care, and education. On a micro level, Flat Out’s abolitionist politics function through our practical support and advocacy work for real safety in women’s lives.

**Emma:**

Acknowledgement of Country: “yagara” to the south and “toorabal” people to the north

A problem for abolitionist activists and feminists over time has frequently been that in highlighting abuses, discrimination and problems within the prison, government responses to these ‘problems’ are co-opted into reforms inside the system. These reforms generally fail to weaken the grip of the prison as the preferred response to issues of poverty, homelessness, systemic racism and victimization; ultimately leaving these pressing issues unaddressed or reproduced. In Victoria, uneven criminalization practices and structural disadvantage continue to be reframed in official corrections discourses as individual pathologies, *criminogenic needs,* and risk management issues. It is an ongoing challenge to find productive ways to intervene in these discourses and reframe the terms of reference so that the solution doesn’t immediately and always become more control and more prisons (for example, from over-crowding to expansion).

The prison system has shown many times that it is adept at responding to criticism and incorporating it, if only by renaming old strategies with new labels. The glossy rhetoric of prisons called 'centres', with ‘rooms’ instead of cells, ‘communities’ inside new prisons, and services purporting to address women’s ‘unique’ needs. This sanitising language often has a legitimising effect on imprisonment, masking the dehumanising realities of incarceration, and directing attention away from deep-rooted social problems that fuel criminalisation. It is thus relatively unsurprising that, for example, gender responsive policies inside prisons have failed to reduce the number of people in women’s prisons in Victoria. In fact, the number of women behind bars has increased more than 75% since the introduction of the gender responsive policy ‘Better Pathways’ in 2005.

As Cassandra Shaylor pointed out this morning, the popularity of ‘speciality jails’ routinely function as a tool of expansion in the U.S., and in Victoria recently a purpose-built geriatric prison in Ararat has been pitched as a response to the ageing prison population. Over the past decade we’ve watched how gender-responsive policies in Victoria that claimed to address the concerns raised by activists and advocates but have in many ways entrenched and masked the issues criminalised women face. While in some ways these kinds of reforms hold potential to ameliorate the pains of incarceration for women and other distinct populations such as older prisoners or trans folks as Erica talked about, they also enable the prison to claim a more humane face. The feminisation of prison policy and the construction of ‘kinder, gentler cages’ falls far short of addressing the structural conditions contributing to gendered and racialised criminalisation. It also avoids fundamentally questioning the prison system itself.

When focusing on women’s support and advocacy post-release, it is important to emphasise that from an abolitionist perspective, conditions inside women’s prisons are by no means irrelevant. A balance is necessarily established between campaigning for reforms that are vital to safeguard the lives of women inside prison, women exiting prison, and strategies designed to promote the eventual abolition of prisons. As an organization with an expressed abolitionist position, Flat Out actively contests harmful practices inside prison (such as strip-searches, inadequate and neglectful health services and treatment), while maintaining a fundamental opposition to reforms that increase prison funding and capacities to cage more and more people.

Striking this balance is complicated, as Angela Davis (1998a) argues; prison reform movements internationally and throughout history have paradoxically bolstered rather than diminished the stronghold of prisons on the lives of the individuals they hold captive. This is an ongoing tension for those of us who want the prison walls to come down in the longer-term, and in the meantime to ensure people survive the experience of imprisonment and can reclaim their lives on the outside.

As an activist service-provider organization, Flat Out negotiates and reflects upon these competing pressures on a near-daily basis. For example, we organise a bi-monthly information and self-advocacy program in Melbourne’s maximum-security prison for women. Imprisoned women choose topics, and we facilitate speakers from the community to run sessions inside – in an environment where access to information is routinely denied – to support women’s self-advocacy and self-determination upon release. We are forced to balance the benefits of this program against the knowledge that it has the potential to, in some ways, function to make the prison run more smoothly by partly filling the vast gap in service provision inside. The threshold is somewhat unclear: When do we become another cog in the prison machine/industry?

Another challenge we face amongst peer-organizations, is that simultaneously engaging in individual support and systemic advocacy means that our resources and time are divided, as opposed to organisations that focus solely on activism or service provision. It is a challenge for us to be effective and legitimate in both of these areas, and to have them inform each other in concrete ways. We have been critiqued by the service-sector for being un-strategic by being outwardly abolitionist, and challenged by activists to be louder and more visible. For some, our decision to remain independent and not amalgamate can be viewed as un-strategic – but the absorption of small organisations like ours into big agencies risks destroying the critical voice. There are very few major service-providers that critique government. Others within the system say that without radical voices like Flat Out, they’d be unable to ‘hold the line’. In a sense, radical and abolitionist politics widen the political spectrum. *In a number of contexts, if we didn’t speak up, there would be silence.*

Maintaining access to the prison to support women is an issue that risks tempering how outspoken we are. However, our access to the prison as advocates is always precarious, because the system will always prioritize what they term the ‘good order and security’ of the prison, which often serves as a justification for the exercise of exclusion and control. The rules of the prison are constantly moving and malleable, which is strategic on their part. If the ‘line in the sand’ was clear, we could potentially challenge it. Instead, the gatekeeping is more surreptitious.

An issue that arises in individual advocacy work with imprisoned people is the prison’s dislike and fear of people who *visit prison both as a worker and in a personal capacity (visiting friends or loved ones inside).* – the prison want it to be strictly one way or the other. This inflexible logic severely disadvantages Aboriginal people (because of the over-representation of their communities) and disproportionately affects women, who are more likely to be in caregiver roles. For these reasons and more, it is really important to push back on the prison’s system of either/or professional or personal visitor within individual advocacy work.

Flat Out has always (over our 26 year history) been expressly feminist and abolitionist, and we consciously fund our systemic change work through philanthropy, donations and grassroots fundraising to maintain some autonomy in our organisational voice. We pay particular attention to Flat Out being a well governed and managed organisation to ensure it cannot be easily discredited or dismissed.

Often our values are at odds with what the system measures in terms of “outcomes”. For example, we don’t support abstinence unless a woman says that, instead we align closer with harm reduction principles. Whereas many other post-release services use a ‘zero-tolerance’ model with drug and alcohol use, similar to restrictive parole conditions.

## Phoebe:

*Lastly and to wrap up*, none of us can do this work alone. Being part of a broader National and International movement for abolition deeply informs our politics and our work. We’re also part of a network of service providers advocating for individuals and families.

We know that women who enter prison struggling with often multiple forms of structural disadvantage will return to the same conditions upon release, often experiencing heightened trauma and new kinds of discrimination based on their term of imprisonment or criminal-record. As such, we recognize that our approach to systemic advocacy needs to extend beyond a sole focus on the prison if we are to begin to challenge the driving forces contributing to carceral expansion. As U.S. activist Alexander Lee (2008, 111) asserts:

If prison abolition requires creating a world where prisons are no longer needed, then the real work of abolition must be done away from prisons – in shelters, health clinics, schools, and in battles over government budget allocations. Prisons and the human rights violations that occur within them are merely distractions from the real problems sustaining their existence.

An example of our work in this area was campaigning for ‘TAFE not Jail’ in response to cuts to the TAFE education system in Victoria in favour of ever-extending carceral budgets. From our experience, building the connections between service delivery and social change work strengthens both practices. But this approach is not without its challenges. This model ensures that the individual needs of women who are criminalised, imprisoned, or recently released from prison are met alongside agitating for systemic changes that build towards our longer-term vision of a society without prisons. Because, without a doubt, if we leave the overall structure of the Prison Industrial Complex intact while doing this work, it will find new ways to (over)fill its walls.