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School of Social Sciences

# Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Women in Prison: *Pre-prison experiences and post-release reintegration*

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Designed in collaboration with [Beck Maher](#)  
*Design intention: The continuing chain link pattern seen throughout the report is representative of the different barriers faced by these women and their paths which have lead to their imprisonment.*

## Acknowledgment of Country

With respect for Aboriginal cultural protocol and out of recognition that its campuses occupy their traditional lands, Western Sydney University acknowledges the Darug, Tharawal (also historically referred to as Dharawal), Gandangarra and Wiradjuri peoples and thanks them for their support of its work in their lands (Greater Western Sydney and beyond).

## Preface

When one migrates, under forced circumstances, from one's home country to a 'new' country, they carry with them feelings of loss and hope: Loss of the life that one knew, hope for a more secure life. Migration journeys under precarious conditions are fraught with traumatic experiences. Women often make these migration journeys with their children, younger siblings, or other family members. While caring for their children or family members, to ensure their survival, they are also holding within themselves their own experiences of gender-based violence.

Arrival in the 'new' country is met with multiple challenges, including differences in language, and culture, and the use of legalese. Often, just crossing a road seems daunting because of the unfamiliarity of the spaces. Where women can access formal support systems—government or non-government—they begin to rebuild their lives and to make every effort to shift from 'surviving' to 'thriving'. Many engage in this endeavour of rebuilding by negotiating with or resisting the everyday and systemic challenges, without any support. However, given their deep sense of isolation, due to the lack of extended networks and social support, due to unemployment, homelessness, and gender-based violence, they often find themselves manipulated by people who offer to 'help' or provide emotional support. These so-called 'support systems' often pave their pathway to prison.

This report documents the experiences of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women, born in non-English speaking countries, now in prison in NSW. Their narratives typify the experiences articulated above. They also resonate with the experiences of different groups of women I have researched with in spaces of incarceration in very different geographical contexts, such as Bangladeshi women in prisons in India, and migrant women from the Global South in an immigration detention centre in The Netherlands. While there are divergent specificities in terms of the support services and programs available, the experiences of women in different spaces of incarceration also have continuities. This report in many ways represents the polyphony of voices of women from the Global South, but each woman brings with her layered stories, which urge us to understand their experiences better and to do better to support them. I hope readers of this report will be able to understand the nuances of their stories and locate them in the context of these women's experiences, negotiations, and resistances, rather than merely seeing them as CALD women in prison who are 'different culturally and linguistically'. I also hope that their experiences will offer a window into the lives of women in prison more broadly.

This report builds on 'criminology of mobility', a body of knowledge emerging globally that foregrounds the precarities confronting forced migrants, their encounters with bordering processes and the criminal justice system. This body of knowledge brings to focus both specifics and generalities of injustices that occur for women in spaces of incarceration and in institutions that are meant to 'protect' them. To that effect, this research is placed in a continuum with a well-researched area, but provides an authoritative voice of women from the Global South who demand attention to their experiences.

This report is, therefore, a product of the labour of CALD women in a prison in NSW. I am grateful to them for their participation in this research and for generously sharing their wisdom and experiences. They participated in the research knowing that it may not necessarily change their immediate circumstances. This research would not have been possible without their patience, far-sightedness, and willingness to contribute to the 'greater good' of women in prison.

There are several people who have joined me in this journey to 'understand better' and to 'do better'. I extend my gratitude to my colleague Gabrielle Drake for her commitment and support for this research. Ayah Abubasheer and Wayanna Padukka have been excellent research assistants and have contributed to different aspects of the research. I am grateful to my colleagues in the Border Criminologies research network, especially Mary Bosworth and Ana Aliverti, for their engagement with my ideas. I also extend my thanks to Penelope Tong, who has been my mentor since I first began working in prisons in India in 2008, and with whom I have engaged in valuable consultations on aspects of methodology for working in spaces of incarceration. I am grateful to Jana Khalil, Jessica Cox, Jennifer Nguyen, and To'ila Hema, who have engaged with this project in varying capacities, as part of their social work placement activities. Their curiosity and questions about issues confronting women in prison have brought new insights to this research.

This research has been funded by Corrective Services NSW and has received generous support from many staff members there. Kelly Austin and John Abdel-Ahad have spent numerous hours to make it possible for us to reach the women in prison and to speak with them, with the help of interpreters, in a language they understand. Navigating the correctional centres would not have been possible without their support. Their advice and direction have been crucial to bringing this project to fruition. I am also grateful to Kelly Anne-Stewart, whom I first met in 2020 and who encouraged this proposal to work with CALD women in prison. I extend my gratitude to Saffron Cartwright and the staff at the Correctional Centre who accommodated our presence in the centre, amongst their other responsibilities.

I hope this report represents the collective work of all those involved but most importantly, the CALD women whose stories form the crux of it.

**Dr Rimple Mehta,**  
Principal Investigator

Senior Lecturer  
School of Social Sciences  
Western Sydney University  
[r.mehta2@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:r.mehta2@westernsydney.edu.au)



# Introduction

Australia is a multi-cultural society, and this cultural diversity is also reflected in the country's prison population. In Australia, overseas-born persons comprised 18 percent of the prison population in 2022 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In New South Wales (NSW), overseas-born persons comprised 20 percent of the prison population in the 2018 financial year (Corrective Services NSW, 2019). In the same year, about 16 percent of the inmates were from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background—with prisoners from Vietnam, China, Sudan, and Lebanon being the greatest in numbers; Iraq, Iran and Fiji following closely. Eight percent of the total prison population in NSW were women, and about 13 percent of these had a CALD background (Corrective Services NSW, 2019).

Available research suggests that the experiences of CALD women are distinctly different from those in the rest of the prison population. Annabelle Allimant and Beata Ostapiej-Piatkowski have (2011) identified the specific personal barriers for women from CALD backgrounds who are survivors of sexual violence, in terms of their not being able to recognise sexual violence, of physical and emotional isolation, their fears about breaches of confidentiality and about residency status, and their limited access to income support. Lisa Cavallaro's (2010) research has reported that CALD women in the first place are less likely to report violence. Even if they do, they often disengage prematurely, without continuing on to access the support services. This is, to a great extent, due to the barriers they face to accessing the criminal justice system, such as language difficulties, prejudicial attitudes and intimidating court processes. Linda Bartolomei, Eileen Pittaway, and Rebecca Eckert (2014) provide important insights into the ways in which the pre-arrival experiences of refugees may be taken into consideration by those working with women in the context of support service provision. They also highlight the complications of a 'refugee culture' built up over years in refugee sites in countries of asylum, where traditional norms of family and community are held on to strongly. In addition, CALD women face several issues, such as language barriers, visa uncertainties and the fear of deportation, even though they may not have visited their country of birth in many years. In short, due to structural and institutional barriers, CALD women prisoners are more likely to experience isolation and to lack understanding of prison rules and how to access available services, compared to non-CALD women prisoners (Howard & Lobo, 2020).

However, research examining the issues faced by CALD women in Australia is limited. More specifically, most of the existing scholarly work with CALD women has been carried out from the perspective of health (Metusela et al., 2017, Watt et al., 2018, Ussher et al., 2017) or within the discipline of psychology (Shepherd, 2016, Rose et al., 2019). Few of these studies focus on CALD women in prison, and most were carried out in Victorian prisons (Denton, 1995, Centre for the Human Rights of Imprisoned People 2010) more than 10 years ago. This demonstrates the dearth of such research, especially in NSW prisons.

*In Australia, overseas-born  
persons comprised 18 percent  
of the prison population in 2022*

*(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).*

## Introduction (cont.)

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining pre-prison experiences and post-release needs for the reintegration of CALD women in NSW prisons, back into society. It also seeks to create an increased understanding of the needs of CALD women prisoners and to provide information for prison and stakeholders providing social services. More specifically, this study provides a background against which to develop programs within the prison system that can be cognisant of CALD women's experiences of continued trauma. The focus on histories of trauma will also enable an understanding of patterns of recidivism amongst CALD women prisoners, and of how they may want to plan their reintegration into society. In this way, it contributes to the NSW Premier's priorities areas of breaking the cycle of disadvantage and reducing recidivism in the prison population by 5 percent by 2023 (Premier's Priorities, n.d.).

*In the same year, about 16 percent of the inmates were from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background—with prisoners from Vietnam, China, Sudan, and Lebanon being the greatest in numbers; Iraq, Iran and Fiji following closely. Eight percent of the total prison population in NSW were women, and about 13 percent of these had a CALD background*

(Corrective Services NSW, 2019).

## Background of CALD women in Australia

In Australia there are varying definitions of the term Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018), CALD people are individuals who were born in another country, had a parent born in another country or spoke a language other than English in the home. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in contrast, mostly defines the CALD population in terms of English proficiency, languages spoken, religious affiliation, birth country and birth country of parents (ABS 1999). This definition in turn differs from that used from Corrective Services NSW, which utilises a relatively broad definition of CALD, identifying prisoners as CALD if they were born overseas, if their first language is not English, or if they identify with a cultural background that is not Australian (Corrective Services NSW 2020).

In Australia, the fastest growing population in the prison system is constituted by some of the most marginalised women in the community, such as women from CALD backgrounds and Indigenous women (Segrave & Carlton, 2010). The experiences of CALD women are distinctly different from those in the rest of the prison population. Their pathways to imprisonment and the barriers and challenges they face are specific to their experiences. Thus, gaining an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of CALD women in Australia is fundamental to this research.

Mental health is one of the crucial risk factors for imprisonment. According to a study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015), in NSW, 62% of women, out of 206 prison entrants, had experienced long-term and ongoing mental health issues upon entry. Self-harm, particularly, has been found to be a common pattern in prison (Bartels, Easteal and Westgate, 2020). Self-harm occurs because of feelings of extreme emotional pain and psychological distress. Such feelings ultimately can pose as a significant challenge to CALD women, due to the emotionally and psychologically taxing experiences of migration and resettlement. CALD women are also more likely to carry the weight of multiple traumas, given that many of them have been forced to flee their country of birth—often during times of conflict, war, and political upheaval (Rose et al., 2019). Crossing borders, starting anew, reconstructing lives in a foreign country, learning a new language and encountering the social and cultural barriers that come with it, only exacerbates the problem (Rose et al., 2019). Despite this, CALD women's mental health concerns are disregarded, devalued, and paid little attention to.

Exposure to violence and substance use are other factors that can lead to imprisonment. About 71% of women in prisons in Australia have experienced abuse in their relationships (Phelan, Sotiri, & Scott, 2019). It is estimated that 70%-90% of the 3,625 women prisoners in Australia in 2018 had also experienced violence and abuse as children themselves (Gleeson & Baird, 2018). Domestic and family violence is also particularly experienced by migrants, and based on varying pre-immigration exposures the degree of violence experienced can differ between migrant groups (Shepherd, 2016). Despite this, women's experiences with violence, particularly sexual violence, are often disregarded, belittled, and ignored (Allimant & Ostapiej-Piatkowski, 2011). As victims/survivors of violence, women can also use violence themselves as way of coping with and handling their own exploitative experiences (Bartels, et al., 2020). Vast bodies of research have shown that women who have experienced sexual violence and victimisation are more likely to engage in crime (ANROWS, 2018; Segrave & Carlton, 2010; Stathopoulos et al., 2012). According to Queensland Corrective Services, factors such as trauma and victimisation are precursors to criminal activity and significantly influence offending behaviour (Bartels, Easteal & Westgate, 2020).

# 62%

*of women, out of 206 prison entrants, had experienced long-term and ongoing mental health issues upon entry.*

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015)

## Background of CALD women in Australia (cont.)

One study has found that, from a sample of 470 female prisoners, 62% of women in Australia had regularly consumed drugs and alcohol (Johnson, 2004). This suggests that substance use is a likely antecedent to imprisonment. Examining women's imprisonment in Australia through a feminist intersectional approach, Lorana Bartels, Patricia Easteal and Robyn Westgate (2020) found that many women relied on heroin to deal with emotional and psychological distress, motivating them to steal more heroin to cope. More specifically, research has shown that factors such as resettlement and migration (Posselt, et al., 2013), alienation (Schwarz, et al., 2010) and racism (Smith and Reside, 2010; Coffey et al., 2004), can all contribute to substance use. This is particularly relevant to CALD populations, many of whom have experienced migration and resettlement. CALD groups are also more likely than others to face drug- and alcohol-related harms (Maher et al., 2007; Coffey et al., 2004 and Parliament of Victoria, 2008). For instance, there are higher incidence rates of risk factors like Hepatitis C for CALD injecting drug users in Sydney, compared to other populations (Maher et al., 2007).

Housing issues and homelessness too can be pathways to incarceration. Individuals experiencing homelessness are more likely to be arrested and to commit crime than those with stable housing arrangements (McCarthy & Hagan, 1991). In fact, studies have shown that one reason why people experiencing homelessness commit crime is often because they need money to pay for accommodation (Payne et al., 2015). In 2019, 33% of Australian prisoners were found to be homeless before imprisonment (Donaghey & Sowerwine, 2019). Furthermore, severe mental illness and drug and alcohol use are prevalent among homeless people and have been associated with increased risk of involvement with the criminal justice system (Greenberg and Rosenheck, 2008). This has been found to be particularly the case for women (Elwood Martin et al., 2012). Since housing is fundamental to social, cultural, and economic development, Braithwaite (2021) highlights the challenges experienced by refugees and asylum seekers, who are given limited choice about where they live and their living conditions. Thus, providing housing choices can have a substantial impact on reducing crime and incarceration among CALD women and their families.

Education and unemployment play key roles in influencing engagement with criminal activity. For immigrants and refugees, many fled their homes in dire circumstances, having acquired only limited or disrupted education, thereby increasing their risk of participating in crime (Bartels, 2011). Unemployment is another major factor in offending, as structural unemployment has also been found to increase motivations for offending (Britt, 1997; Andresen, 2012). In particular, Kayaoglu's research (2022) found that refugees in informal employment are more likely to offend, given the long working hours and low wages.

As is discussed in greater detail in this report, limited access to services can significantly increase the chances of offending. Globally, studies have found that increasing access to services such as schooling and healthcare, assists in reducing crime. Melina Altamirano, Sarah Berens and Sandra Ley (2020) argue that investing in greater access to welfare services is more beneficial to reducing crime than is implementing state policies. Immigrants who live in communities where there is little access to social services are more likely to participate in offending behaviours than those who do have access (Bernat, 2017). CALD individuals in Australia face additional difficulties and obstacles to accessing mental health services, such as language barriers and lack of awareness of the support services accessible to them (Rose et al., 2020). Importantly, many CALD people convicted had not accessed services for mental health before participating in crime (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Research has also shown that increased access to services that are culturally specific and that encourage social connectedness, helps CALD individuals in Australia better adjust and overcome the feelings of frustration and detachment that often come hand in hand with resettlement (Shepherd, 2016). CALD individuals with little family support are also particularly reliant on a variety of services to assist them with settlement (Shepherd, 2016). In other words, access to services fosters belongingness and community (Brewer, 2009). Without these services, CALD individuals, especially women, risk marginalisation and alienation, leaving them vulnerable to embarking on a pathway to crime (Shepherd, 2016).

# 33%

*of Australian prisoners  
in 2019 were found to be  
homeless before imprisonment.*

*(Donaghey & Sowerwine, 2019)*

# 71%

*of women in prisons in  
Australia have experienced  
abuse in their relationships*

*(Phelan, Sotiri, & Scott, 2019)*

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## Methodology

An intersectional feminist approach comprising qualitative interviews, a focus group and an online survey, was used as the framework for the qualitative and quantitative methodologies adopted for this study. The research questions were designed to help understand the experiences of CALD women prisoners within the matrix of an international politics of mobilities, state borders, penal systems and institutions of family and community that are underpinned by a patriarchal logic. In other words, this study does not locate the issue of sexual and domestic violence, for example, within the cultural context of CALD communities alone. Rather, it identifies the experiences of CALD women prisoners within the spectrum of patriarchal violence, which encompasses constructions of the family, community, and state. The emphasis is on understanding how different intersecting identities create situations of marginalisation for CALD women: pre-prison, in-prison and post-release. Therefore, the proposed study goes beyond discussing the issues posed by their linguistic and cultural background in a new country, to discuss the need to make available services and programs that can take into consideration the specificities of marginalisation. While the research focuses on women's experiences of marginalisation, it also draws on their resilience, negotiation and resistance to the situations they are confronted with. This will enable a strengthening of support services and programs for CALD women in prisons, an area that lacks focus in terms both of research and intervention, and this study makes a significant contribution to addressing this issue.

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## Research questions

1. How do CALD women's pre-prison experiences contribute to their pathways to crime?
2. What are the experiences of and needs for services and programs of CALD women in prison?
3. How can we work with CALD women to effectively plan services and programs for their post-release reintegration into society?

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## Recruitment and selection of participants

For the purposes of this study, CALD women in prison who were born overseas in countries in the Global South, and who came to Australia either as an adult or a child, were considered for participation in the research. In the first instance, two members of the research team (RM and GD) visited the prison and organised an information session with groups of CALD women, to introduce themselves and explain the study's purpose and procedures. Prior to the researchers' visit, a recruitment flyer was broadcasted through the tablet computers in the prison, so women were made aware of the upcoming information sessions. Three groups, allocated on the basis of language, attended the information sessions of one hour each. An interpreter was available at each session according to the preferred language of the group. At the end of this session, women were given the participant information sheets and consent forms, which were available in different community languages (Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Arabic). Where necessary, interpreters helped with explaining these documents in the languages spoken by the women. The researchers communicated to those women who signed the consent forms, the timeframe in which they would return for the interviews, and that there would be another opportunity then for discussion and for answering any questions they may have about the research process.

During subsequent visits, the researchers met the women individually, explained the study to them and answered any questions that they had. They sought their consent again before proceeding with the interviews. Negotiating women's consent statements was an ongoing process, as women had the choice to withdraw from the research process at any stage of the research.

As far as possible, the focus group participants recruited involved multiple stakeholders: from the Corrective Services NSW staff (who engage with issues of CALD women in prison regularly), Justice Health & Forensic Mental Health Network (JH&FMHN) staff, women with lived experience of the prison, and NGO representatives who had experience of working with women in prison. As a part of the qualitative research methodology, we used purposive sampling, which was carried out through the process of "... recruiting participants from places where they are easily accessible" (Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne, 2007, p. 310). Therefore, we approached the participants directly and shared the recruitment flyers with each of the participants, who were given at least a week to consider their participation. The participants signed consent forms on the day of their participation in the focus group discussion.

The survey participants were drawn from the prison staff who engage with women in prison regularly, to enable us to understand the needs for services of CALD women in prison. We invited the prison staff to participate in an anonymous online survey that focused on their understanding of the pre-prison experiences of CALD women, their access to services in prison, and their reintegration needs. We relied on Corrective Services NSW to broadcast the participation information sheet to the prison staff. The participation information sheet clearly outlined the prison staff's role in and contribution to the research process, the potential risks and benefits arising from the study, and the link to the survey, which was expected to take approximately 15-20 minutes. The front page of the survey required the prison staff to consent to take the survey. On the front page it was noted that participation is voluntary and not required for their role, and that they could discontinue with the survey at any point.



## Methods

Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews of about 1-1 ½ hours each were conducted with CALD women in a prison in NSW, to understand their experiences and needs for services and programs: pre-prison, in prison and post-release. Women who participated in the interviews were in the age group of 19-69 years and had arrived in Australia between 1978 and 2020. Some of them were now citizens, while others were on a range of visas, including bridging, tourist, humanitarian, spouse and student visas. They were all born overseas in a range of countries in the Global South. Some of the languages spoken at home were Arabic, Spanish, Vietnamese, Farsi, Filipino, Nepalese, Tongan and Mandarin. The interviews were conducted with the support of a National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) certified interpreter in cases where women participants identified the need for same.

One focus group was conducted with multiple stakeholders such as Corrective Services NSW staff—both from management and from those working directly with women in the Correctional Centres, representatives from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and JH&FMHN, and women with lived experience. Our focus in the multi-stakeholder focus group discussion was on understanding the different perspectives on the experiences of CALD women in prison. The focus group and interviews were carried out from April 2022 to June 2022. They were recorded, transcribed and de-identified before analysis. An online, anonymous survey of Corrective Services NSW staff was rolled out in June 2022 and was closed in September 2022.

Eighty-two prison staff answered the online survey questions about the experiences of CALD women in prison, based on their experience of working with them.

## Analysis and terminology

The narratives of the women and the stakeholders were coded using NVivo 12 software by one of the team members and were analysed with an emphasis on allowing themes and issues to emerge in an open-ended way (RM). An iterative analysis process was followed to explore issues that may not have been featured in the existing literature or that may not have been taken into consideration by the researchers in planning the study. The quantitative data were first explored using Qualtrics built-in analysis tools, which provided simple bar charts showing the frequency statistics. Descriptive analyses were used to analyse the closed responses of the survey, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the recurring themes from the open questions in the survey. Next, we conducted correlational analyses to determine relationships between variables impacting the experiences of CALD women prisoners. Finally, the survey data, in the form of free-form answers, were reviewed for themes and insights. A summary of the research findings from the interviews, and recommendations collated on the basis of the three different methods of data collection, was presented to the CALD women in prison. Any additional recommendations made by the women during the presentation have been included in this report.

In this report, we have avoided using terms such as women “offenders”, “abettors”, and “criminals”, which we consider derogatory and which do not take into consideration the impact of intersecting identities on people’s experiences. Instead, and for the sake of maintaining women’s dignity, we have used the term “women in prison” or “women prisoners”. We have also used the term “CALD women”, to an extent, to refer to women born overseas in countries other than those classified by the ABS—Australia’s national statistical agency—as “main English-speaking countries” (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2019). The term “CALD women” is often used synonymously with other terms and phrases used in different global contexts, such as “ethnic women” (widely used in England), “minority and racial women”, “BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME))”, and specific names used for cultural backgrounds such as African, Asian, and Hispanic. The term “CALD women” has been critiqued for the inconsistency of definitions. (Pham et al., 2021). It is also a term that has a colonial connotation, where Anglo-Celtic cultures are considered as the norm and everything else as ‘diverse’. However, noting these limitations, we have used the term “CALD women” throughout this report because it is the term commonly used in Australia, especially by service providers and agencies.

Throughout the report pseudonyms have been used for women in a way that does not identify their racial or ethnic background.

## Limitations and challenges

The interviews conducted with the women in prison presented some unique challenges to researchers. The researchers needed to schedule, and re-schedule, the interviews weeks in advance, which was further complicated by the complications of Covid-19, such as staff shortages, screening processes, and lockdowns. Given the nature of the research study, the interviews were also triggering for some of the women prisoners, particularly those with trauma. The researchers referred the women who needed support to the Principal Advisor Women’s Services, who made the necessary referrals for mental health and support services. Another challenging aspect of the duty of care of the researchers towards the CALD women in prison was managing fears around confidentiality and fears of retribution. To reduce these fears in this research, the researchers gave the women reassurances about confidentiality, and reiterated that they could discontinue their participation at any point of the research. With respect to the focus group, we encouraged all participants to maintain confidentiality regarding the discussions; however, we could not ensure that the responses were strictly confidential, given the multi-stakeholder participation in the focus group. Also, the online anonymous survey was limited by possible self-selection bias. While all the above-mentioned barriers and obstacles to qualitative prison research were not insurmountable, they were certainly challenging.

# CALD women's experiences

## Pre-prison experiences

### MIGRATION: REASONS AND IMPACT

Women who participated in this research had migrated either as children with their parents, or as adults. A host of socio-economic and political circumstances had necessitated their migration out of their country. They came as refugees or asylum seekers. Some had left their home country due to the impact of development projects, some came seeking protection from violence. Women who came to Australia as young adults or at a mature age were seeking employment to support family members. Some came on partner or tourist visas, while others came as students. Gender-based violence [discussed in the "Forms of violence experienced" section, below] emerged as one of the most common reasons for migration; often applicable in conjunction with other reasons. Women also narrated their parents' and siblings' experiences of violence, which had created the need for their family's migration. Giselle spoke about the political violence inflicted on her father. She said:

*Yeah, but it's very upsetting. To a point where they had to actually hang my dad from his hands from the ceiling. They actually tied his hands and then he was hanging from the ceiling, and they started throwing—you know the pencils? Sharp pencils all over his body, naked. I do understand what he went through is a big trauma. It's a big thing. It's very severe, very serious, very hurtful. My dad used to [sleep] in hospital for 10 days straight, like never woke up after all that. We did live with a father with a really serious psychological problem. It did affect all of us.*

Traumatic experiences also continued in their migration journeys. This is particularly true for women who came to Australia seeking asylum, or as refugees. Women migrated in the hope of a safer environment and/or financial security, but their narratives suggest that their hopes were challenged at every step. Describing the migration journey, Erin said:

*Yes, I've got my other three siblings but there was two brothers, but my baby sister born here, but one die on the boat because it was, we got five kids but one die on the boat because of too much, he was only a bub, he couldn't handle it. That was a bit dramatic, but I didn't, I wasn't you know, I wasn't aware of that because I was too young.*

For some women, migration from their home country to Australia also involved transiting through another country, where they were often met with hostility and violence. Jessica spoke about traumatic experiences of the migration journey:

*Yeah, we came as—so we just started the process of coming in. There was, like, hiding in the bushes and trying to stay in the motel with everybody and everyone and then I remember even the Army coming through and we all had to go quiet because we were hiding and then you had to jump on a little boat and from a little boat you had to get to a bigger boat. So it was just like that. And then, yeah, like eating the grains of rice in the boat not even cooked and my mum had to hold me over the boat to actually to get to the toilet because there was no proper toilet and then it started all over again when we arrived in Australia.*

These traumatic experiences had a long-term impact on the women, and often they did not realise this till a very late stage in their life. In part this was because a number of them shouldered responsibilities for siblings and other family members and did not find time and opportunity to focus on their own needs. The narratives of the women in prison suggest that they were usually the eldest sibling. Some of the women had up to 6 siblings, and it was culturally expected that they would take care of the younger siblings and parents. Women often found themselves under extreme financial and emotional stress due to their caring and other responsibilities in respect of family members. Several women initially took up employment offers in farms or as cleaners, or any other jobs that were easily available and did not require particular qualifications. Some became involved in import/export businesses and facilitated the movement of goods between their home country and Australia. There were others who came to Australia to study and worked hard to make enough money to sustain themselves, as well as their families back home.

## Pre-prison experiences (cont.)

Most of the women said that they did not know too many people before they arrived in Australia, but some initially stayed with acquaintances or extended family members on their arrival in Australia. People seeking asylum stayed in detention centres in different parts of Australia, and refugees found themselves in communities with other resettled refugees.

Most women reported initially 'feeling lost' or facing difficulties because of not knowing English or the 'laws of the land' in Australia. Some highlighted more practical everyday challenges, such as navigating the transport system or understanding the signs on the roads. Sara said:

*Of course, the language barrier was a big problem. And of course because you don't know the rules and the law of the land. And what makes it even more difficult if you don't speak the language, of course you will not know the law and regulation. So that made life really difficult.*

Sara added that when she arrived in Australia, she found the train timetable very confusing, and it took her "ages to be able to get it". There were also challenges related to navigating their way around Australia. Selina highlighted how challenges are exacerbated when most people living in a refugee community are unable to understand English, and there is little acceptance of refugees within the broader Australian community. She said:

*And there was like more community of refugees who all stuck together, because we didn't speak English. And back then I didn't—I think Australia did not understand how to accept migrants back then [1970s], because we were pretty much the first boat people to do this around the world. But growing up—the people got more accepting of us, and going to school, learning to speak English, things got a lot better.*

The inability to speak English and the lack of interpreter support in institutions had a detrimental impact on women's ability to resettle in Australia. Marina said:

*So if I were to have something that frustrates me, or something that is inconvenient to me, I can't really voice out my concerns. I can't say it to somebody else. Or if I don't understand my rights, I can't ask what am I supposed to do. So whatever they tell me to do, I'll have to do it. So yeah, that creates a lot of difficulty for me as a non-English speaker.*

Women's migration journeys were forced and were due to different forms of violence, particularly gender-based violence. Their trials and tribulations continued through their migration journeys as well as on arrival in Australia. Comprehending and navigating the institutions and systems in Australia, with limited community or family support and understanding of English, created very challenging circumstances for the women.

*I can't really voice out my concerns. I can't say it to somebody else. Or if I don't understand my rights, I can't ask what am I supposed to do. So whatever they tell me to do, I'll have to do it. So yeah, that creates a lot of difficulty for me as a non-English speaker.*

## EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

Women who came to Australia as children or young adults experienced marginalisation and discrimination, which often shaped their pathways to prison [see "Pathways to prison" section]. Some women had to drop out of school due to carer responsibilities, poverty or gendered community norms that did not uphold women's right to education. Many women reported experiences of racism at school. They were bullied and shamed for their appearance or for the kind of food they carried in their lunch box. They often experienced neglect and alienation in school and in other institutions they engaged with. These experiences led to their dropping out of school and making friends with people who in many cases manipulated their vulnerabilities, which ultimately shaped their pathway to prison. Jessica had a baby when she was 16 years old. She said:

*But so I met the father of my daughter when I was very, very young. I was about 15 years old I met him. It wasn't the best choice but he was the only person that gave me attention, I guess, and pretended to care about me. I dropped out of school because I was just going through so much drama.*

Jacinda reported being bullied in school for her sexuality. She said:

*[where I grew up] it's poorer and the pupil it's very strict there, very, very strict there, just I'm still a normal girl, I didn't cut my hair, but I already been with a girl. So sometimes I went to—I remember few times I went to school and some people still holding some stuff toward me, they said I'm not a normal person, I'm like an animal or something because very, at that moment, about 20 years ago, yeah, so it's very terrible.*

Women also reported experiences of sexual and emotional abuse in their childhood by parents and extended family members. Many had experienced domestic and family violence, political violence, or state-inflicted violence vicariously through their parents. All these experiences had a severe impact on their mental health [see "Mental health implications" section]. Experiences of neglect in out-of-home care added to their feelings of insecurity and alienation.

Many women said that their relationship with their parents was constrained, as they tried to navigate the cultural and linguistic differences between their home country and Australia. There was an inter-generational difference in the way migration and resettlement were experienced by children and their parents. While the children learnt English and Australian values and lifestyle in school, their parents were hesitant to adopt the same and were determined to keep their cultural values and traditions alive. This created emotionally difficult relationships within the family and led to increased gendered control and surveillance of women's movements and activities.

A major source of frustration for young adult migrants has been unemployment and the lack of response to their numerous job applications. This is exacerbated by difficulties in accessing Centrelink payments, due either to a lack of information or lacking access to the necessary documentation. Given these challenges, women often accepted working in precarious jobs, where their safety and security was not assured, and where they received low wages. Deb said:

*"I'll do it." And then I hesitated because I was like, "Why should I do it?" And it was \$50 an hour, "Oh, okay. I'll do it." It's gone now. Damn. But, yeah, it was like you feel like you're not good enough because you thought, I'm an all-right [worker in my profession]. Why doesn't anyone want to hire me? So, yeah. I started applying for unpaid internships because I might need to get my foot in the door somehow, so, yeah.*

For many women, experiences of racism, neglect, abuse, marginalisation and unemployment shaped their early experiences of living in Australia. This was exacerbated by the absence of support from their parents, who responded to the impact of migration by holding on to the traditions of their country of origin.



## Pre-prison experiences (cont.)

### FORMS OF VIOLENCE EXPERIENCED

Violence emerged as a major reason for women to migrate from their home country to Australia, and thereafter shaping their pathway to prison. Domestic and family violence and intimate partner sexual violence emerged as the most common forms of violence experienced by women, both in Australia and in their home country. A few women came to Australia with mothers trying to escape domestic violence in their home country. A few women also reported sexuality-based violence as the reason for their migration. State-inflicted violence or religious and political persecution were some of the other forms that forced women's migration.

Violence against women needs to be seen on a continuum of changing forms and perpetrators, but is persistent in creating traumatic experiences for women. Women narrated experiences of extreme forms of violence, which in some cases may have turned fatal had they not escaped or been rescued from that situation. Broken sternums, burst ear drums, bleeding foreheads constitute examples of what women had been through before coming into prison. Some women had experienced sexual and physical violence in their childhood as well, before they met their intimate partners, who also inflicted violence on them. Sexual abuse by a father or a cousin was a common experience for a number of women.

Women reported moving from one women's refuge to another, first as children with their mother and then for themselves with their own daughters. The cycle of violence was followed by cyclical movements to women's refuges. Jemina said:

*At one point me and my mother were in a women's refuge because of violence, domestic violence, from my step-father and she ended up leaving me there because I was with my ex and she, from one day to the next, she never told me anything, she just ended up leaving me, and I was about, how old was I, I think I was just turning 15 or something like that. So, I was in a women's refuge all on my own and that's when I first just started working as well, I started working, I had dropped out of school by that time I think, I wasn't going to school. And after that it was a really—it was just—after my mum left me in the women's refuge it was just always up and down with her; we'd live together and then I'd move out or I'd go and I ended up going with my ex-partner.*

The cycle of violence created another cyclical movement for women, between institutions of justice. Sara, who had experienced domestic violence said:

*So I describe myself as just all running, running. Going to the court, going to the police station, because of violence. We were fighting all the time. And he did hit me many times and caused me trouble. Even if I was with my friends, he would come and start fighting. And I would describe that the two or three years before I came to prison as just very hectic. Just between the police station, doing reports or in the court.*

Some women reported being in denial of the domestic violence they had experienced. It took them a long time to acknowledge same, to understand its impact on their lives and how it shaped their pathways to prison. Sunee said:

*I've been in denial that I have experienced that until four months ago. So, when I came to jail, I refused that I was a victim of domestic violence and it took me two years to actually say that I was a victim of domestic violence. You rationalise what happened, and refuse it definitely happened, that it was—it's normal to fight, it's normal, this and that. And I think also it's a cultural thing that women are supposed to endure whatever ... because the man of the house is supposed to be the head of the house.*

Women spoke about other forms of violence, apart from physical violence, such as financial and emotional abuse. Jemina said:

*He wasn't abusive, physically abusive, but I think it was more financial and emotional abuse where he was just using me for my money or using me for a place to stay. Not that I had much, I didn't have much money to begin with, but he had his job and he would spend all of his money on weed and drinks and, I don't know, partying with his friends and then I had to do everything, I had to pay for everything, and then he'd end up asking me for money. So, it was just really—it wasn't a nice feeling. I felt very used so every single relationship I've had with my three sons' fathers they've all been bad, that's why now I just don't believe in getting married, I want to stay single, I don't want to be with anybody, I'll date someone, but it's not something that's permanent.*

Sunee had a similar experience to Jemina. She spoke about emotional manipulation by her partner and how it took a long time for her to realise its implications for her:

*He was able to actually make me believe that I can't decide anything without his approval. That was it. I was just wired to follow him. Yes, I earn all the money, but he still has a say of when I can actually spend my money. And it's different, and it took me jail time to finally realise I'm not alone.... So when I got to jail and met women who had the same experience, I finally realised, my God, I'm not alone, I'm not alone. And there's a lot of us who doesn't get heard, because we didn't know we can speak. It's about that. It's like just not being heard.*

Sunee talks about the need to raise awareness about the impact of domestic violence on women:

*It's more of educating people. Unfortunately, I mean you know you're intellectual but no, those little things? No-one actually goes door to door and say, "Hey, read this booklet. Maybe if it takes five of them, you're probably a part of domestic violence or just family violence." But no, no, that doesn't really happen. If you see an ad on TV, if you're experiencing domestic violence, report. But like what I said, you don't actually admit to yourself that you're experiencing that, not unless there's a clear cut, "Hey, here's a checklist. If you take five out of this 10, most likely you are a part of this group." There's no awareness, a total awareness. People talk about it on TV, but people who are experiencing it are the ones who are actually quiet. So I would actually say, if I was more aware of this, all of this might have been prevented. I might not be part of that relationship anymore before any of this happened.*

The range of forms of violence experienced by women had a deep impact on their mental health. It had a detrimental impact on them but also on the next generation in terms of their employability, secure housing, access to health care, access to education and establishing secure social relations.

*Violence emerged as a major reason for women to migrate from their home country to Australia... Domestic and family violence and intimate partner sexual violence emerged as the most common forms of violence experienced by women, both in Australia and in their home country.*

## Pre-prison experiences (cont.)

### NETWORKS AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Crossing both social and political borders is challenging for women on many fronts as, in the process, they lose their networks and social relations. Establishing new relationships in a country unfamiliar to them is difficult due both to cultural and linguistic differences. However, refugee women mentioned that when they first arrived, they found solidarity and connections with other refugee communities. They were able to maintain some semblance of a social life when living with other refugee communities, through the soccer club, women's groups and religious groups, to name a few.

While this is one perspective, the other is that refugees and people seeking asylum were so traumatised by their experiences in their home country and during the journey to Australia, a new destination country, that they often found it difficult to establish new networks and social relations. This had an intergenerational impact on the wellbeing of the next generation also, and shaped their experiences in Australia. Marina said:

*No-one really focused on that [connections with the broader community]. No-one really focused on that. For me it was more like—no, no-one really cared, no-one really cared, no-one. And then it's not something you would go and talk about. It's not something you would go tell. It was just okay, it happened, you're here [Australia] now, move on. Just do what you have to do but I believe that the children suffered the most.*

Giselle, who came to Australia as a child with parents who were escaping a war, spoke about the impact of her father's sense of isolation on her and her siblings. She said:

*We first arrived in Darwin. It was—obviously, because there was no people there, my dad was traumatised, because he loves people, that's—he socialises and that. He ended up in hospital—sorry. He ended up in hospital. Because he hated it there, there's no one there. Only us .... He wants people to speak to, to interact with. Then we stayed, literally, in Darwin for a month. I think if mum had a voice—because we were all young—we would stay in Darwin. We would all finish uni at very young ages, because there would be—my siblings, they're pretty smart, but again, all those family issues did impact all of us badly.*

Most women, who arrived in Australia as adults, mentioned that they were too busy in their household chores and caring responsibilities, and that this was exacerbated by the family's migration. They had to organise groceries and be engaged with the regular household responsibilities as well as caring for the mental health implications of migration on their family members. This prevented them from reaching out to other women or members of their own or other communities. Isolation emerged as a common experience for many women. Some of the women referred to their connections with objects or animals, and how that sustained them through very difficult times. Finding it extremely difficult to deal with the isolation, Jacinda said, she found a deep connection with her dog, whom she missed in prison.

Women said they found it difficult to build relationships of trust and were often emotionally, sexually, or financially manipulated by people who seemed to initially offer 'help' but later put them in circumstances that paved their pathway to prison. For some women, the sense of isolation was exploited by intimate partners who emotionally abused them. Partners often restricted their social interactions with friends and family members. This resulted in a complete absence of any support system for the women through their experiences of violence and abuse. Sunee said:

*I think I was isolated from my family. My partner was successful in isolating me from my family, so no-one else knew, I mean, in depth of what was happening to me. So everybody was a shock when they found out what happened. And they're in shock still, discovering what transpired in my 10 years of the relationship, because it was easy for him to take me away because I have very close family. But the fact that he was able to take me out of that equation, I think, it's more of that.*

Jemina said she was ostracised from her local religious community when she spoke about her experiences of sexual violence. Instead of receiving empathy and support, Jemina was judged for her character and excluded from the community. This meant the little support that she had from there, by way of meeting people regularly and speaking with them, was also lost.

Women were apprehensive that their very limited social networks would be further diminished when they were released from the prison. Some of them were aware that they would have to develop new friendships and relationships because their existing ones were often responsible for their pathway to prison. Jemina said:

*At the moment, no, I don't have any friends that I'm in contact with here. It's kind of sad, but to be honest with you, I think I need new friends too. Yeah. I don't want to return to jail. Once I'm out of here I don't want to come back here, and I need a totally different circle of friends and associates.*

In the absence of healthy networks and supportive groups, women often found themselves returning to gangs or groups that deal with drugs. Some women reported they felt safer in these 'outlawed' groups compared to their own home or workplace.

## Pre-prison experiences (cont.)

### MENTAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Many of the women interviewed reported having mental health issues in various life stages. Their mental health was shaped by their traumatic migration journeys, by violence, by isolation and the challenges of settling in a new country while navigating cultural and linguistic differences as well as intergenerational trauma. Women who had experienced domestic violence as a child dealt with the mental health implications through the greater part of their adult life as well, and often with very little support. Giselle said:

*Then there was a lot of domestic violence in the house. He used to—my dad, majority of the time, his domestic violence was verbally, mentally. I believe, from my studies, mental abuse and verbal abuse are more hurtful than actual physical. Because with physical—people can get hurt, yes I can get hurt, but I can just look after my wounds. But when it comes to verbal and mental it stays there.*

Giselle reflects on her youth and attempts to recollect and make sense of the mental health impact of domestic violence she experienced as a child. She said:

*I started suffering from—I did suffer from psychological seizures [from] a very, very young age. Basically, they're like epileptic seizures, but it's actually psychological. When I get stressed out, when I get upset, when I cry and over-cry, I would actually have these seizures.*

She further added:

*My mental health, I know for a fact now that I'm, although I wasn't a hundred percent, so I was always cutting my wrist, I was always cutting my stomach, wherever I could cut I would cut. But once or twice it did go deep and ended up in hospital, but I was scared so they had me, I don't remember, they had to get me on Valiums.*

Women also reported that they were ashamed of their migrant or refugee identity as children because of how they were bullied in school for their looks and the food they carried for lunch. One of the women said that as a result of this shame, she developed an eating disorder and would often go to the bathroom in the school to eat her lunch to avoid meeting other children. Her experiences were exacerbated by experiences of domestic violence at home.

Intergenerational trauma, particularly the experiences of their mothers, severely impacted the overall wellbeing of women who were interviewed. Jessica's mother attempted suicide in a detention centre in Australia, she said:

*I was upset about my mum because 'til now I'm just like my mum hung herself and she was going to die. If she were to die, what would've happened to me? But I don't blame her. I ask her now, she goes, "You put yourself in a position where you don't know what's going on." You know, her mental health wasn't right. Until now it will never be right. She's been diagnosed with schizophrenia and all these mental health issues and stuff like that. So I take my hat off to her.*

Experiencing domestic violence as an adult turned a few women to attempts at suicide. This in turn led to their hospitalisation and often they had to take psychiatric medicines, while their husband or partner continued with the violence on their return home. The circumstances of violence did not change for many women even after attempts at suicide or intervention by the police.

Some women used alcohol or drugs as a way to cope with trauma, which was often the cumulative effect of migration journeys, loss of networks and social relations, violence, separation from their children, who have been placed in out-of-home care, and abandonment by their partner. Contrary to the idea of safety at home, some women stated the sense of insecurity they felt at home and how 'life on the streets' provided them better security. Jemina said:

*So, I think I was—due to that trauma I was self-medicating with alcohol. So I have to find a different way of dealing with my trauma, than turning to alcohol, and turning to—I was finding that I was—I felt safer in a social setting out on the street, rather than being on my own in my own—because I was—I live on—on the outside I live on my own. I have my one-bedroom unit. But I felt safer on the street than what I felt at home. So, I have to find a way to cope, you know. And I do have those things, you know, I have a psychologist that I see on the outside every month, but there has to be something more intense.*

Despite these severe mental health impacts on women, they reported that they received very little mental health support whilst in prison or before their entry into prison. Women who came as refugees did receive mental health support initially from not-for-profit organisations, but there was little support for their ongoing issues as years passed. Women who came to Australia on other visas were not eligible for the free sessions available within the Medicare policy, and could not afford to pay for private practitioners. This, and the absence of community support left women isolated, to fend for themselves while also coping with their histories of trauma.

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## Pre-prison experiences (cont.)

### ACCESS TO SERVICES

Most women reported limited to no access to social or economic support services prior to their entry into prison. Women who had arrived as refugees or asylum seekers did receive some initial support, but this often changed once they moved from their first city/town of arrival. Jessica said:

*There was no support besides that [mental health], especially when I came to Sydney, it's rare. It was a rare thing to be an immigrant from a detention centre. Whereas I feel like in Adelaide more people understood that. Whereas here, everyone was too busy. That's weird, it's really weird. Over there I feel like people recognised and cared and genuinely wanted to help and make you move forward.*

The absence of ongoing mental health support was flagged as one of the major issues by women who came to Australia as refugees. In some instances, women stated that they were unable to access mental health support due to gendered cultural norms that prohibited women from accessing mental health support. Giselle, who came as a refugee when she was a young child said:

*I think in Australia, they don't have enough support for the ethnic migrants and ethnic—especially young fellows. I don't think we got enough support. When I came here, I'm—we didn't have good counselling or good psychology. Because—yes, we're being offered, but I had to say no, because I'm scared of dad. But what if there's more girls like me and my family out there?*

Giselle further added that it was only recently that she had started receiving support from a psychologist, while she had never been in contact with a social worker, which she thinks would have been useful for her.

This question about access to services and programs prior to entry into prison received very few responses. Many women expressed surprise to hear that a variety of social and economic support services were offered by both governmental and nongovernmental organisations. Sara succinctly summarised what many women may have felt about availability and access to services and programs. She said:

*To me, how I see this is that you are either lucky, or you are either dying in front of them, for people to come and support you.*

This statement emphasises the urgent need to make social and economic services and programs accessible to CALD women particularly, to eliminate their pathways to prison.

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### PATHWAYS TO PRISON

Women reported a whole range of issues—social, economic, political, cultural—that led them into vulnerable circumstances, which eventually shaped their pathway to prison. This section discusses the most immediate circumstances that shaped women's pathways to prison, considered against the backdrop of the cumulative impact of issues discussed in the previous sections. Covid-19 and its implications for reduced employment opportunities further exacerbated the situation of women. It not only increased their economic responsibilities but also augmented the caring responsibilities manifold times. Jasmine said:

*Everything went okay until COVID sets in and during lockdown, I would have to go without work. They say there's no work for me. So that make it difficult and so I was allowed to live in a property, in a house, which grows cannabis. Look I did not know then, I did not know that they did it until the police came in and I was arrested.*

Similarly, under pressure to take care of her children during the Covid-19 pandemic, Cynthia said:

*During the COVID time, I'm finding all sorts of problems and I just wanted to have money to be able to pay the rent so the children—my children could have a roof over their head and I was [blindly] follow some people going to do some stuff—shoplifting and that is the reason why I end up in here. Now I'm so [remorseful] about what I've done.*

A number of women were the eldest amongst their siblings and were culturally expected to take care of their younger siblings as well as ageing or ailing parents. Some women discontinued school due to caring responsibilities or due to poverty. Some reported that the vast cultural and linguistic differences in the new country made it difficult for their parents to encourage them to stay in school. Erin said:

*I couldn't get in school, I couldn't get any of that because my dad didn't have the language barrier, because the school wanted so much paperwork when my dad couldn't provide. I had to go to court, I had to break the law to get into custody, to get my education going. What do you do?*

According to Pearl, better support systems for her and her family would have mitigated the factors that led to her dropping out of school and ultimately going to prison. She said:

*Just probably better family support like for my mum. Yeah, maybe if I had been given more of a chance to finish school, I might not have gone down the path that I did.*

Almost all the women interviewed had experienced some form of violence in their life, including domestic violence, intimate partner violence, violence in the workplace, child abuse, religious persecution, state-inflicted violence. These experiences of violence, especially in the home, created feelings of insecurity for women, and they felt isolated in the absence of any support. Jemina, who was raped in her unit by someone she knew from her religious community's weekly gathering, said:

*Before that [rape] I was happy to sit in my own unit and I felt safe, but after that, no, everything just changed for me. So I blame him for my situation right now because if it wasn't for him I wouldn't have been out [on the streets] and I wouldn't have been hanging around people. I know that, yes, I'm a grown person and I have choices in what I do, but he's a little bit responsible for my situation at the moment because if it wasn't for him I would have been in my unit and I would have felt safe where I was, at home. He got the ball rolling, it just all went downhill from there.*

Pre-prison  
experiences  
(cont.)

*So, unfortunately, I went to supplying drugs to get away from him and, I'll be honest, it's because the boys that I worked for, the men that I worked for, the syndicate that I was with protected me more than the police. That's why. And they did. He didn't come near me after that. I actually got a break [from domestic violence] for a little while. I actually got a break.*

Jemina, who used alcohol to cope with her trauma and experience of insecurity at home, said that it was sexual violence, the group that she drank with and her life on the streets, that paved her pathway to prison. She said:

*Drinking. I have an issue with alcohol. Whenever I am drinking—I call it socialising, but really I shouldn't be hanging around these people that I hang around. It's just not—every time—the last two times I have been in jail there's an issue where something happens, I'm on the scene, and then I get put into prison, you know.*

Women survivors of domestic violence spoke about their experiences of moving from one women's refuge to another, and the number of complaints they had made to the police. Some women had experienced this when they were children living in a women's refuge with their mother; now they were back experiencing it as an adult. Many women spoke about the delayed response of the police officers to their complaints. Some also spoke about inaction from the police, despite repeated complaints. The inability to find justice drove women into gangs, which claimed to provide support to the women. Jessica said:

*So, unfortunately, I went to supplying drugs to get away from him and, I'll be honest, it's because the boys that I worked for, the men that I worked for, the syndicate that I was with protected me more than the police. That's why. And they did. He didn't come near me after that. I actually got a break [from domestic violence] for a little while. I actually got a break.*

She further added:

*I just gave up and I said, do you know what? I want to make quick money. I'm sick of this. I'm sick of running away [to the refuge]. I'm sick of the police not helping me. I'm sick of the support, there's no support. Every time something wrong happens, I'm the one that has to leave [and go to the refuge] instead of trying to protect me. So that's why I, unfortunately, went to drug-dealing and then I ended up in gaol.*

Jemina corroborated Jessica's narrative about police inaction and delayed response. She said:

*I went to the police three times. They refused to do anything about it. And I just felt really unsafe in my own unit, because this place is really easy to break into. Anybody could break into it; you could break into my place. You could just take your key card, slip it into the lock and you're inside. So I felt safer on the street with—drinking with people, rather than staying at home in my own unit. I felt really unsafe. There's no security, there's no security screens. The police are shocking; they take ages to get to anybody, if you call them they don't appear, unless somebody is damaging property. But if it's somebody's welfare, they really don't care. So, yeah, this—and I don't like to blame other people for my own mistakes, but this has part of—this is part of the reason why I'm here, you know. This is what it all led to, me being in jail this time.*

She further added:

*I just felt a lot more safer outside with other people rather than being at home and just worried about my safety, at least outside I could get away. And I did try to contact police three times about this incident and they did nothing, they just told me to go to court and apply for an AVO, but immediately they wouldn't deal with it even though I was showing them text messages, threatening text messages, they just didn't want to do anything about it. So, I just felt a lot safer outside around people.*

The fact that women felt safer and better protected from domestic violence on the streets or in drug dealing gangs is reflective of the limited support they receive from the justice system when they approached it. Also, when women must go from one women's refuge to another, it impacts their employment as well as their children's education. While the pathway to prison for some women was shaped in the process of their escaping from the perpetrators of violence, others retaliated to violence in their own defence and were then convicted of harm to their partner or husband.

Pearl also attributed the reason for her being in prison to "making the wrong choices and being around probably people that weren't too good for me." The company of people that women found themselves in, in the absence of a healthy family and community life, created the circumstances of their heightened vulnerability.

Lack of opportunities for education or access to education, due to language issues; unsafe housing or homelessness due to gender-based violence; linguistic and cultural differences exacerbated by gender and age (especially with regard to understanding the laws in Australia); poverty and the absence of any institutional or family support system; family and carer responsibilities; domestic violence and delayed police responses or inaction; isolation and the promise of community in a gang—all these factors led to creating situations of vulnerability for women, which then shaped their pathway to prison.

*I just felt a lot more safer outside with other people rather than being at home and just worried about my safety, at least outside I could get away. And I did try to contact police three times about this incident and they did nothing, they just told me to go to court and apply for an AVO, but immediately they wouldn't deal with it even though I was showing them text messages, threatening text messages, they just didn't want to do anything about it. So, I just felt a lot safer outside around people.*

## Prison experiences

Women's experiences in prison need to be understood in the context of their experiences before prison. For many women, the experience of confinement was not new because they had been confronted by several institutional and cultural norms that limited their freedom. However, prison life too away any sense of freedom that they may have felt in other spaces of confinement. Many women spoke about the feeling of stagnation they experienced whilst in prison. They felt that they had a lot of time on their hands but limited number of activities that engaged them in a meaningful way. The absence of creative activities that were available and accessible, led to monotony and boredom in their everyday lives. This was particularly difficult for women on remand, who had limited or no access to the services and programs available to women who have been convicted. Elvina said:

*When you're on remand, there's not much to do. You're just stuck in the wing, especially because U Block and T Block are supermax. So you can't really do much. Only a few girls work and most of us just sit around.*

Women compared their experiences with the experiences of men they knew who were in prison. They pointed out vast differences in access to gym, barbecue, and education opportunities. While boredom and stagnation were an experience shared by most women in prison, many women also shared their experiences of racism by the prison staff members or other women in prison. Some women felt that their inability to speak and understand English was often used as an opportunity by women whom they referred to as 'Western women', [of Anglo-Celtic background] to abuse them in English. Women often chose not to respond to racist slurs or comments by other women, as they did not want to 'get into trouble' or to 'provoke any fights'. Jacinda said:

*And then sometimes and then we don't want to get any trouble here, we in the jail already, but some Western people they say, "Oh, we already in the jail," they don't scare anything anymore, but for us different, we are in jail already so we don't want to get anymore trouble, that's all, we just want to get out more, sooner, as soon as possible, but for them it's different. Whenever they're swearing at us or bully us we just walk away, ignore them or don't want to get fight or something, we just walk away.*

There were several other covert ways in which women experienced racism within the prison. Selina said her cellmate stated that she hoped she would never get an Asian roommate, without realising Selina's cultural heritage. She said:

*One of the white girls were like, "I don't care who moves in here, as long as it's not an Asian." You know, and I turned around and I said, "Excuse me?" They go, oh, not you, you're like an Aussie, you know. I go, "Listen, I still am Asian at the end of the day. No need for the racist comments."*

Experiences of racism as well as bullying by other women and prison staff, made the everyday life in prison even more difficult for the CALD women. In fact, Jacinda said that it was the bullying by 'Western people' in prison that she found harder to deal with, in comparison to the overall conditions in prison. She attributed this experience to other CALD women in prison as well.

Experiences of racism and sexism often intersected, for women in prison. Although prison spaces are institutionally gendered, the interaction of staff members with the women was particularly reflective of their experiences of sexism and racism. Jessica said:

*I asked if I could get my bra out of my property and the officer turned around and said —this is a male officer, he goes, "Why do you want it out of your property?" I go, "Because I want to go for a run and I don't have proper support. He goes, "Well, from what I can see you've got nothing there anyway so you'll be fine." So this is the kind of talk we're getting like spoken to which we just, "Okay. No problem," and we'll walk off. Doors shut in our faces. It's just inhumane, inhumane.*

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*We need some more salt. We need some salt on the side. They should put some salt and pepper on the side in the kitchen. That'd be nice.*

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Giselle suggested changes within the institution so that women did not have such experiences, and that staff should have a better awareness of cultural diversity and the experiences of women within prison. She said:

*I think Corrective Services, they should be trained—I wish you can put that in your research, they should be trained where they—I'm not saying, yeah we're all [ingrained] but people, they're not all the same category. They need to understand. Then I've—I'm not saying a bit of background, it's not—but a bit of understanding where different people come from as well. It's—it was just—it was a major issue here—when I got here.*

Understanding cultural diversity is a dynamic and complex process with different signifiers including ethnicity, language, religion, arts, and food. Food, for instance, is integral to social organisation in many communities. Women interviewed referred to the challenges they experienced in prison due to the food habits that were different to those they were used to in their home country and/or ethnic community in Australia. They found it difficult to adjust to the changes in the way food was cooked, as well as what was served as food in the prison. Marina said:

*So you know we Asians, we eat a lot of meat and we eat a lot of rice. And I'm not very familiar with the food that is provided here so that is also one of the challenges for immigrant prisoners in here. We are not very accustomed to the food, but we can't really make any demands or we can't do anything because we are in here to repent and to get punished.*

While the women may not 'demand' food they are accustomed to, it is understood that proper intake of food is integral to maintaining the health of women in prison. Variations in food such as the quantity of salt or the kind of meat served, change women's relationship to food within prison. Karina suggested:

*We need some more salt. We need some salt on the side. They should put some salt and pepper on the side in the kitchen. That'd be nice.*

Connections to food have implications not only for physical health but for mental health also. Some women did opt to buy food such as noodles or rice to supplement the food they were given in prison. However, given that the women found it challenging to sustain themselves on the low wages they earned by working in the prison, it was challenging for them to keep buying food separately.



## Prison experiences (cont.)

Income in prison versus expenses in prison was another issue that was brought up by several women during the interviews. Women often used the money in their buy-up account to pay for phone calls to their family, to send gifts for their children or to buy food for themselves within the prison. The limited money also had an impact on their access to health and sanitation needs. Erin said:

*The periods, that was terrible, it's like there's only—okay I get it, we're all girls, but there's a bigger girl, so you need supersize. They give us regular, and some girls are smaller so regular's too big for a smaller girl. It's just a panty liner, some girls they use the panty liner because some girls don't bleed a lot, but they have to buy them. But some girls don't have the money to buy, so what do they do? Do they go without? The poor girls that don't have support from their family, they don't have enough money so they don't help—what can they do, they don't help them.*

Jacinda echoed how their everyday basic requirements were impacted: for instance, that they did not have enough clean clothes to wear if the laundry were delayed for some reason. She said:

*And the funny thing is the officer only give to us four t-shirts, only four t-shirts, but sometimes one week we can wash clothes once, we don't have enough clothes to wear, if you don't have money to buy the buy-up stuff, so we don't have clothes to wear, that's the funny thing.*

The wages earned by the women differed based on which department they worked in within the prison, but irrespective of that, women did not have enough to sustain themselves. Some women also worried that they would have no money to restart their life after prison.

Women built strong solidarity and supported each other emotionally in a context where they had little support from "Western people—inmates or staff". Cairo said:

*It's very difficult, because they [CALD women] will be crying, they would feel totally helpless and hopeless. And, look, we inmates, we try to help each other out, so whatever we can do, we try to help out.*

As discussed in detail in the next section, they also supported each other with interpreting English. It was easier for the CALD women to understand and share each other's experience, even if their country of birth was different. Erin, referring to the experiences of CALD women in prison said:

*...they [CALD women] feel so deprived, they feel so violated. Wouldn't you if that was somebody like violated? Because what, we're women, we're allowed to look after each other. Not everybody gets support but we're here to support each other, that's why we're in the same boat, we support each other here.*

CALD women also connected over the identity of being born overseas and from a non Anglo-Celtic background. This provided them with a sense of the shared experience of exclusion within the prison.

## ACCESS TO SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Women spoke at length about the limited access to services and programs within the prison; a majority of the reasons for this limited access appeared to be institutional, as opposed to the common belief that CALD women don't access services and programs due to cultural and linguistic barriers.

### Waiting Lists

Long waiting lists for appointments with doctors, dentists, optometrists, and psychologists seemed to be the most common reason for women's limited access to these health services. Jessica said:

*There's a waiting list for anything. So if there is somebody who needs more, they will put them as a priority and they'll just push you back. Everything's on a waiting list here.*

The low frequency of visits by health professionals, as well as the limited number of staff members, prevented women from having access to health services in a timely manner. Women who were interviewed mentioned that they often 'managed' with some basic medicines such as paracetamol and received medical attention when their condition became much worse. Women reported that the delay in seeing a health professional could range from 1 to 6 months. Often, by the time they got an appointment, they would have gone through a distressing and sometimes painful experience and found a way to cope with it. For instance, health issues such as migraine may be invisible, but have a debilitating impact on a person's health and require timely medication.

Given the histories of violence and trauma experienced by CALD women, it is essential for them to have access to mental health services whilst in prison. With respect to mental health support, Sunee said:

*There's a psychologist here, but they're servicing, what, 300 women? So they get to see the urgent cases and urgent cases are the ones who actually smashed their arm or are planning to harm their—I mean self-harm. If you're one of the normal ones, you don't get seen because there is no urgency. And the people who are actually doing a lot of work—I mean, they're doing a good job, but it's very limited.*

Like physical health, mental health also resides on a spectrum of wellbeing. The unavailability of appropriate mental health services increases women's chances of recidivism, as it takes away from them the opportunity to work through their trauma and re-imagine their lives after prison.

### Access to interpreters

Availability of and access to interpreters emerged as a serious matter of concern for women in prison. CALD women's access to services and programs in prison relies heavily on their access to interpreters. Sunee said:

*So I didn't know that I can actually talk to a SAPO [Services and Programs Officer]. You know what I mean? I mean, I don't know what's going on, I don't know the services provided, no-one can actually tell them [CALD women] what can be provided.*

CALD women's everyday experience in prison, especially their interaction with systems in prison, is also directly impacted by their levels of ability to understand and speak in English. This was particularly true for announcements in the prison, where instructions were given for women to perform a certain activity or congregate at a certain place. Sunee said:

*Okay, inmates has [have] to do this and that, and they're all sitting there because they have no clue what was being announced. And then they get yelled at by, unfortunately, the officers for not obeying an instruction and this is because they don't understand the instruction.*



## Prison experiences (cont.)

In addition to adding to women's angst while in prison, the unavailability of interpreters is a health risk, especially at times when there might be an emergency. Sunee added:

*Unfortunately, even the officers can't explain to the people ... so there's really no available translator at any time. So even in here, if someone has an emergency after, what, 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock and there's no translator, there is no way. We [women in prison] don't know how to attend to these people so that they know.*

Karina spoke about a time when she missed an opportunity for an appointment with the psychologist, as she did not understand what was meant when asked by the prison staff. She said:

*I called mental health from here two weeks ago and they said I declined mental health. I'm like, how could I decline mental health because I don't know when they asked me. And I literally don't know half of the things how it works. You know, when you're new, you're scared, confused, everything comes all at once.*

Women who had recently moved to Australia found it challenging to transfer their medical records from their country of origin because they did not know how to navigate the language barrier. The unavailability of interpreters feels extremely disempowering to some women. One of them described it as “no English, no leg to stand on”. Women often interpreted for each other and extended solidarity in the context of limited institutional support. Women valued being around other women who understood their cultural and linguistic context. It gave them a sense of relief from their isolation, albeit momentarily. Women supported each other with interpreting documents and filling out request forms in the prison. Sunee said:

*It's a big deal if they know hey, I actually have someone who I can talk to. Even if they complain, they tried to complain. So even if they have something they would ask us to write it for them in English, because the only thing you can submit for a request is in English. I mean most of them don't even write in English.*

Women stated that they were often asked by staff to interpret for other women. While women did that to support each other, some women felt that relying on each other for interpretation may have a detrimental impact, especially if the interpretation is around health issues. Interpretation of personal or health issues risks the lack of accuracy, which may also jeopardize women's relationships with each other in prison.

Some women who decided to rely on themselves to understand what was 'going on' in the prison used a dictionary to translate words so that they could fill out forms, as well as communicate with the prison staff and other women in prison. Women across cultural backgrounds also depended on the use of hand gestures and signs to convey messages to each other.

Women's solidarity towards each other cannot replace the need for stronger institutional arrangements for access to interpreters. While access to interpreters is only one of the systemic issues that impacts CALD women in prison, it is an extremely crucial one to facilitate access to other services and programs.

“no English, no  
leg to stand on”.

## Services and programs available within prison

There are institutional factors that make access to information about services and programs challenging for CALD women. Some of these factors include: the services and programs being inaccessible for women on remand; the information is shared with the women soon after their custody when they are anxious; issues with the language in which information is communicated; the attitude and approach of the staff member who gives the information. Jemina said:

*I know that they give you books and there's lists of support services, but I think they're very hard to access, and also a few—I've noticed with a lot of the programs you can't access them unless you're sentenced, that's really frustrating, I think that people that are here on remand should be able to access programs and educational things as well, and even work, you can't work unless you're sentenced. I find there needs to be more programs I think that I can access and other women can access, I'd like to—there's a lot of things that I would like to put my name down, but I can't.*

When women hear about services and programs right after they enter prison, they often cannot register the information, as they are anxious and trying to grapple with drastic change in their everyday life. One woman reported how there was an error in the recording of her name in the prison. She said that the person administering the Intake Screening Questionnaire (ISQ) did not understand her accent, and hence her name was misspelt. This created barriers for her access to services, as well as to the information about her deportation that she needed. Women reported that they did not always know who they could approach with their questions, or issues that they may have. This also, of course, differed for women in respect of the amount of time they had spent in prison. The longer they are there, the better their awareness of resources in prison.

*I found that if you don't have any prior knowledge of these services nobody will tell you that it's there, nobody will tell you that it's available. The staff won't tell you that it's available or sit you down and say, hey, there's this program running or there's this after-release program or whatever, you find out through the other inmates, that's something that I find really frustrating. And it's not just that, it's not just about programs or whatever or accessing things, it's just pretty much everyday life in jail, they won't tell you, they just expect you to know this stuff.*

Women also stated that they often did not know what kind of questions they should be asking to access the services and programs available in the prison. Along with being oblivious of these services and programs, they also hesitated to ask questions, as they felt they did not always have the language to do so. Jemina said:

*You have to fill out a request form or put your name down on a list, you have to go into the office and tell them that you need to see the SAPO. I don't even know it stands for, SAPO, S-A-P-O, and they're the ones that are meant to tell you about all these programs, different programs and stuff. But I find that they won't tell you unless you ask.*

Limited access to educational programs was another issue highlighted by the women. Many women expressed an interest in pursuing further education so that they could gain knowledge or learn skills that would enable them to start afresh after their prison sentence was completed. Women said that they would benefit from being able to access and print some course materials within the prison. Marina said:

*There is no education, nothing besides reading books in the library. No programs, no nothing. Once you're finished with HIPU and IDATP [High Intensity Program Units and Intensive Drug and Alcohol Treatment Program] they throw you somewhere else to a different gaol because it's more like work; they don't really want you to get educated. They just want you to work for the Corrective Services, that's it.*

## Prison experiences (cont.)

Women stated that they would like to have more chaplaincy or religious services apart from the limited ones available. Erin said:

*Yes, there is, there is a lot available, but it's only once a week. Like the Buddhists, the Buddhists only come once a week. There's Catholic every day, there's the Muslim once a week, Greek Orthodox there's none of that. That's the only people that come in is Muslim, Buddhist and Catholic, that's the only three main ones we've got in jail.*

Prisons in NSW have introduced the use of tablet computers for prisoners. While technology has facilitated easy access to services and programs, there are barriers for some women, as they are unable to go past the first page of the tablet computer, which is only available in English and French. Sunee said:

*And these [CALD women] are the people who mostly has no access to anything. I mean, we're given tablets ... and we get to read the news. There's translation, but the thing is, for you to get to the point where that you can get different languages, it's all English. So when you open the tablet, it's all in English. There's [are] only two options, I think, French and English. And then for you to get to the news, where you can actually select the language if you want to read in—if you don't understand the first part of the instructions, then you're lost. That's it. You don't get to use it anyway.*

Also, many women find it difficult to go through the different pages and options to reach the service they want to access through the tablet. According to some women, although there were services available, they were of no benefit to women who did not know about them or could not access them.

The limited availability of movies/ TV channels in different languages or with subtitles increased the monotony of prison life for women who could not understand English. The same was true of the limited access to books in languages other than English. It limited their access to any form of entertainment or recreation.

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## CONTACT WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS, CHILDREN

Maintaining contact with family and community, and mothering from prison, is extremely challenging for women. None of the women we interviewed had children with them in prison, but many had children in foster care in their home country either with their grandmother or father, ex-partner or husband, or with extended family members. On average, the women had between 1 to 6 children, in the age range of 3-36 years. Depending on the circumstances of the arrest, some women had lost contact with their children; often they did not know their whereabouts until a few days after coming into prison. Jemina said:

*And then I came in here and it was even worse. I had no contacts, so no mental health support, no support at all, I couldn't even tell my son where I was or his caseworker where I was. I did contact the caseworkers in the jail and they told me that they had contacted his caseworkers so that was okay, but still it was really hard for the first month because of the COVID.*

Jessica said:

*They really need to understand that the mothers that have actually a good bond with their children, not to separate them more than what's already happening. It's not easy in here.*

Children who were with their grandparents experienced a challenging time if they were born in Australia, spoke in English and did not speak the language that their grandparents spoke. This also created a challenge for them in terms of getting in contact with their mothers in prison. The grandparents were often unable to access the audio-visual links (AVL) technology and had to rely on a relative or friend who was tech savvy to come and help them connect the children with their mothers in prison. This was particularly difficult when in-person meetings were not permitted in prison, and the only way children could meet their mothers was through the AVL service. Deb said:

*And I was going to say about the video links as well, what's hard for families I think is ringing up and booking the visit, because it's all in English. And my mum has had heaps of trouble doing it, she can do it. But she's always like, oh, it depends what lady I get. Some people are not patient and they'll just hang up, or whatever. And, yeah, a lot of people that weren't able to visit people in here but now can, unless they have someone that speaks English, it's hard for them to ring up, because there is no other line that will speak to you in your own language or anything like that.*

Women in prison also found it challenging to coordinate with the school timings of their children, when they would be at home, with the time when the tablet computer was available for them to use in prison. A woman narrated how she tried to assist her child with her homework. This was so that she could remain connected with the progress of her child, as well as experience an everyday conversation with her. Given that different prisons have different norms around the use of tablets and phones, women worried about coordinating times with their children if they heard they were going to be transferred to another prison.

Women spoke about the expensiveness of phone calls in prison and how the wages they earned were not enough to maintain contact with their family overseas. Due to irregular contact with family, women often received the news about a death in the family much later. Not being able to go to the funeral, not being able to grieve with their loved ones, made it much harder for women who had family overseas. Family members overseas often find it difficult to contact women in prison if they are moved to another prison.

Isolation within prison was difficult for the women but they preferred to share their emotions with women in prison or to keep it to themselves. They did not want to share their emotions or hardships with their families outside, because they did not want them to 'worry about them'. All of these factors led to a distance between the women and their family members. Women knew that they would have to work hard towards rebuilding these relationships after their release from prison.

## Post-release apprehensions and aspirations

Preparing for life after prison, or even thinking about it, was challenging for women in prison. They had little support to plan for their life after release from prison. Jacinda said:

*I try, I still every day—because my psychologist tell me, “Try to spend only 10 minutes to think about future, just 10 minutes,” so now I still every night I just spend 10 minutes wind down, I just think what else should I do, make a plan when I released, just 10 minutes, that’s it. Otherwise, if I don’t spend that 10 minutes, I spend whole night to think about it so I say every day just think.*

### DEPORTATION

The thought of life after prison caused great anxiety for several women, as it created a sense of void and hopelessness. This experience was different for women who had Australian residency or citizenship, compared to those who were on temporary visas or visas that expired while they were in prison. Women whose visas were cancelled or had expired while they were in prison, were going to be deported to their country of citizenship after the end of their prison sentence. For these women, the uncertainty around deportation processes, timelines and the risks associated with going back to the home country, preoccupied them throughout their prison term. A few women said that they were not clear about the process and whether they had an option to challenge their deportation. Marina said that she received her deportation letter in English, and she could not find someone to interpret it for her accurately. She did not understand the implications of the letter and what she was required to do. Sunee reiterated that and said:

*First is the question whether or not I’m going back to my country, or I’m going to Villawood. That’s most of the questions the international inmates ask, because we don’t know where we’re going. I mean, after the trial is done, or after we get the sentence served, nobody knows if they’re actually flying out of the country or they’re going to Villawood. No-one actually talks to them, no-one talks to us. The only time they would find out where to go is during the day that they’d get picked up.*

Deb also echoed the need to have more information about the deportation process and its implications for prospects of returning to Australia. She said:

*And I have a lot of questions, even though I’m going home and that’s it, I have a lot of questions because I get out on say the 31 December, and if I can, I want to be on a plane that day and I want to go home, even if that means that I have to pay for it myself. But because they liaised with Border Force, it’s like once I’m released, they hand me over to Border Force. ... If they don’t [allow me to buy my own ticket], then I have to go to Villawood, the detention centre, and it depends on whether or not I will be escorted back. What the criteria is for that, I don’t know. Yeah, so I also want to know will I ever be able to come back to Australia. Will I have a period that I’m banned? Can I do anything about it? Can I?*

Women suggested the need to have access to immigration lawyers who could explain to them the options for legally challenging their deportation. Deportation had several life-changing implications for women whose families and children were in Australia. It also meant they would have to go back to a country where their life and livelihood were threatened in the first place. Lana said:

*At the moment, I was thinking I hope they will give me a chance to stay in Australia. I will fight. I’m not going back. I’m not going to sign the deportment paper because I have my life in here, my children. Not only that, I can—if I can stay in Australia I can work. I’m not reliant on family [or someone]. I can work myself. I can find a job. I can look after my mental health.*

Lack of clarity around the deportation process and the legal mechanisms available for appealing their deportation, left women anxious about where they would go after release from prison. It also limited their capacity to plan constructively for their life after prison.

### EMPLOYMENT

Most of the women believed that employment opportunities would not be available to them on their release from prison, and hence thought that self-employment was the only option available. Women spoke about setting up a business or enterprise with their friends or family members. They were convinced that the requirement of a police check would make them ineligible for most jobs. Giselle said:

*Unfortunately, the only way where I can work, it has to be a job that doesn’t involve police check. Nowadays, it’s very, very hard to look for that .... What I’m going to do, I will maybe set up a business from the house ..., where I can be self-employed which does not include a police check.*

Sana also had plans to employ other women released from prison in her enterprise. She said:

*I have a friend who also has a restaurant in Newcastle and that restaurant is very busy. So she told me that, once I got released, she would help me to start up the business there. And also so I noticed that, once we’ve been in prison, once you get out, it’s going to be very difficult, extremely difficult for us to get hired by any employer. So, I thought that I just better start up with my own business, and then maybe starting up a place for other inmates from here, once they are released. They could come to me and then I would refer them for a job.*

Elvina was also convinced that a police check would preclude any employment opportunities for her. She said:

*Yeah, finding work after we leave, it’s very hard because you need either criminal history checks or working children’s check or things like that. And it’s very hard, and that’s why a lot of us, we’re in relapse. And that’s why I relapse a lot too, that’s—yeah. It’s very hard to do that.*

Elvina spoke about the risk confronting women who did not have adequate education or professional training to make a new start after their prison term: Lack of employment opportunities would pave their pathways back to prison.

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## Post-release apprehensions and aspirations (cont.)

### ISSUES OF HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Safe housing after release from prison was an issue of concern for women. As discussed in the previous sections, home was not a safe space for many women. It was the space where they had experienced different forms of abuse and violence. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that women left prison hoping to go back to those unsafe living spaces. Jemina said:

*I need housing. I mean, I already have housing, but I need stable housing. I can't go back to that place where I'm at, it's not safe. I need to—it needs to be housing where it's not just stable, but I'd like for my son to be able to come and see me so it needs to be a safe place, it needs to be somewhere that I can call home and that he would be comfortable to come and see me at. I'd like to either study or, yeah, I think I'd prefer studying rather than going straight into work. I think I just—and to have supports in the community.*

Women whose children were separated from them and who were in out-of-home care worried about coordination between the different institutions to ensure a safe return of their children to them. Others, such as Sandy, were concerned about securing a home where she could live with her son, who needed his own space. She said:

*I'm going to be lost. First of all where I am going to live? What address had to put in prison before I left because as I left they suppose I going for bail, I'm going to be in bail, I had to have an address, my son lives in a flat with one bedroom, I can't live with him, he needs his privacy. So I was thinking yesterday I have to talk to my friend, I don't have family, that difficult it is.*

The issues of housing were exacerbated for women who did not have family in Australia. They would often rely on friends to give them some space in their accommodation till they were able to find something more stable and long term. The issues of employment and housing are intertwined. It is difficult for women to find secure housing till they find a secure source of employment.

### OVER-SURVEILLANCE DUE TO POLICE RECORD

Women were concerned that once they were released from prison, they would constantly be under surveillance, because their name featured in police records. Elvina said:

*So once you're in the system, it's very hard to get out of. If you fuck up one time, you're back in jail kind of thing. So yeah. If you have a record or you get a record, you could end up back for one little thing you do, you come back to jail.*

Sara echoed the fear around being on police record and getting arrested frequently. She said:

*You know, if your name has been filed for any reason with the police, then from that point on, then you're known to them. And even if you were suspected with something, even if you didn't do it, then for them, you have done it.*

Women felt that this constant surveillance would prevent them from starting their life afresh.

### REVISITING RELATIONSHIPS TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF INCARCERATION

Women spoke about the need to revisit and reflect on the relationships they had formed before their entry into prison. Some of the women acknowledged the need to sever ties with people who had paved their pathway to prison. Often these people were in the drugs trade or in gangs. This scenario was true for women who had experienced isolation from family and community at a very young age. They would often find comfort in the company offered by the gangs. After being in prison they recognised that these associations had put them in a vulnerable position, which paved their pathway to prison. To break the cycle of incarceration they would need to revisit these relationships and establish new ones where their best interests were considered.

Women who wanted to return to their families and children found it challenging to establish these relationships in a renewed manner. This also involved getting past the stigmatisation that they had to experience due to having spent time in prison. Sara said:

*Like people when they get out of prison, their mental health would be affected. They would suffer. They would be suffering from mental health problems. That's one issue. There is something else is that, not everyone has their mother to take care of their children when they are in jail. Others don't have anyone, so their children are taken away from them. And it takes a huge effort to get their family back together. So that's another problem, is that people lose their family.*

Social support that was enabling and empowering was crucial for women to stay out of prison. Isolation and ostracism by family and friends may further increase women's chances of incarceration. Women consciously wanted to revisit their relationships and create a safe space for themselves. This would also require regular mental health support offered in a sustained manner both before and after prison.

*I need housing. I mean, I already have housing, but I need stable housing. I can't go back to that place where I'm at, it's not safe. I need to—it needs to be housing where it's not just stable, but I'd like for my son to be able to come and see me so it needs to be a safe place, it needs to be somewhere that I can call home and that he would be comfortable to come and see me at. I'd like to either study or, yeah, I think I'd prefer studying rather than going straight into work. I think I just—and to have supports in the community.*

# Stakeholder perspectives

Stakeholders from different professional backgrounds who worked directly or indirectly with CALD women in prison participated in a focus group discussion and presented compelling narratives about their perspectives on experiences of CALD women in prison.

## ENTRY INTO PRISON AND ACCESS TO INTERPRETERS

Language and cultural differences have commonly been identified as the main reasons why CALD people in Australia face challenges during the resettlement process. However, there are several layers involved in understanding what constitute such cultural and linguistic differences. One of the male members of the focus group discussion, who also was from a CALD background, emphasised the need to see the differences between what is usually homogenised as a 'CALD' group.

*It's a hard one, because one of the biggest problems that we have is especially when people speak English, we think we're on the same level but no. We might speak the same language, but we share different values, different perspectives on life, different expectations. Very often that I think is also where the problem lies and the confusion.*

This narrative draws attention to the need for a case-by-case approach when working with people from diverse backgrounds. Discussing the nuances of language and its use, one of the female correctional officers spoke about the challenges faced by CALD women when they first enter prison. She said:

They can have a book which has all the information. Sometimes they don't even know how to read, so speaking is one thing, reading is a different total thing. So it's very hard when to, how to distinguish between reading, writing, so it takes time. But it takes—I don't think so in first 24 or 48 hours you can come to know. It takes at least a week, especially in jails, at least minimum a week or some inmate from a different unit will say, oh Miss, that person doesn't speak English, can you put her in my own unit?

A representative from a not-for-profit organisation pointed out that women experience fear when they first come to prison and are introduced to all the systems and rules within the prison. She said that when women first arrive in the prison, sitting in a room with people you don't know is "the scariest part of custody" because you don't know what is awaiting you. She further added:

*But I think at the start it's really important that CALD women are explained from day one, when they come in, that they sit with somebody who is of their nationality, background, language and they're explained everything. ... They can sit with the CALD women, depending on who it is and explain from top to bottom, this is what you can get, this is what you can't, this is what you can do, this is what you need to do, whatever it is. I think it would help in the integration and them reaching out for help later, if that makes sense?*

A representative from JH&FMHN mentioned that when women are transferred to a prison, they always mention on their Health Problem Notification Form (HPNF) whether they speak English or not, and whether they should be housed with a woman from a similar cultural and linguistic background. However, there are challenges for JH&FMHN professionals to access interpreters in a timely manner. At times they need to wait up to 40 minutes or more to get an appropriate interpreter, and this creates pressure on them as Corrective Services NSW are wanting to prepare the women for reception at the correctional centre.

The information about a woman identifying as being from a CALD background is also recorded by the Services and Programs Officer (SAPO) in the Intake Screening Questionnaire (ISQ) in the first 48 hours. However, if the women are provided with information in the first few hours of their arrival in a prison, likely they are unable to process it, as they are very anxious and are trying to come to terms with their new reality. As a result of this, the questions that they answer around their language abilities or other details during the intake session, which is a few hours after they arrive, may often be inaccurate.

## Stakeholder perspectives (cont.)

The correctional centre staff stated that they go by the information that is handed over to them, on the basis of the ISQ and HPNF. While the correctional centre staff are able to identify that the needs and circumstances of the women they are meeting may be different from what has been recorded on the forms, they do not have any discretion in respect of where the woman should be placed but rather, need to follow the security protocol. One of the representatives from JH&FMHN summarised this appropriately. She said:

*Mixing is difficult as well because, as I said, we can only recommend that they be housed with somebody else. It's up to Corrective Services where they house them, so we don't really have much say in that. We can only recommend that they be housed with somebody that's of the similar background, or similar language speaking, so that they feel more comfortable. But on reception it's normally identified by—as I said, Justice Health and Corrective Services are always—we're pulled apart a little bit, because we want to do health and they want to do security, which is fair enough.*

The tensions between the security and wellbeing of the woman are exacerbated when women are placed in cells on the basis of the crimes they are charged with. In such cases, women are housed with women who do not speak their language, causing their problems to increase significantly. Officers seek the help of other women to understand what a woman who cannot speak English is trying to communicate, or what help she is requesting. But often, even if women speak the same language, they are unable to understand the different dialects. If an officer belongs to the same cultural and linguistic background as the woman who is seeking support, the former is wary of making their ability to speak the language known to the woman. This is for two reasons: first, they are prohibited from doing so in their professional capacity and second, they may be suspected of favouritism towards prisoners from their own cultural and linguistic background. A female correctional officer shared:

*But we are little bit scared to use it [language other than English], especially around inmates, because it doesn't look like oh, we are helping them. It looks like oh my God, what information are we sharing with them [in a language other than English, which everyone doesn't understand].*

The representative from JH&FMHN echoed a similar issue and mentioned how they have to wait for a professional interpreter, even if a nurse may be able to speak the language of the woman she is engaging with. However, a correctional officer mentioned that she was often asked to use her language skills to get 'intel' on the prisoners, which she felt was unfair, considering she was not allowed to use her language skills to support them.

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Members of the group who directly worked with CALD women in the correctional centre, unanimously agreed on the challenges presented by the use of an interpreter. One of the female correctional officers stated that she observed inaccuracies in interpretation even when she used a professional interpreter to communicate with the women. However, given these professional boundaries she was unable to intervene even in cases where she knew the language spoken by the woman. A psychologist in the group mentioned that interpreters often used English words also to communicate technical information to the women, and that this did not serve the purpose of having an interpreter.

These challenges impacted the professional capacity of each of the members to support women, whether it was in terms of onboarding, booking appointments or providing access to services and programs. One of the representatives from JH&FMHN said:

*I onboarded a client who I think was Vietnamese as well, could not speak any English, they tried to book an interpreter and we came across many, many barriers and I just didn't end up doing the intake because I couldn't get the interpreter. So, what did end up happening was that one of the inmates had to translate and it was really difficult, because I had to explain the service in really simple terms and it ended up being what she was looking for, but it was so awful that we weren't able to at least explain to her the information of what we do and even what's out there potentially.*

While accessing interpreters in a timely manner is one aspect of the problem, the limited attempts by professionals working in the correctional centres to access the interpreters is another. Given that CALD women occupy at least 13% of the prison population, this number is abysmally low. The member further added that nurses often used Google Translate, which is not within the acceptable norms. Younger nurses who are new to the profession are often not made aware of the procedure for initiating a request for an interpreter, and hence feel hesitant to use the service.

### HEALTH

When asked about the issues they think CALD women are confronted with prior to their entry into prison, the members stated that they were overpoliced, due to racism. They acknowledged the vulnerability of CALD women in the community, as many of them don't have strong English skills and they run the risk of being taken advantage of by people who may manipulate them and involve them in crimes. They were also at a disadvantage because of the differences in social and cultural practices in Australia compared to the country where they were living previously. Most importantly they carry trauma because of their migration journeys or due to their experiences of violence or human rights violations in the previous country of residence. A representative from JH&FMHN pointed out how the process of bringing them to prison and searching them, triggered traumatic memories for some women. She said:

*So if they've come from war countries, especially being put in a RIT [Risk Intervention Team] cell, possibly being stripped of all their clothing, being under camera, having lights turned off or lights turned on all night, that is a torture tactic that they have utilised in other countries. For a patient to already be at risk of self-harm and then they're put in this RIT cell and they don't speak English, or they speak very limited, they're already feeling like they're being punished in that area.*

She further added that it was often challenging to discuss mental health issues, as women did not acknowledge or were still not aware of their trauma, and words like PTSD were not familiar to them. According to her:

*So then when the mental health nurse or we speak to them and they say they're having nightmares, or recurring nightmares where they wake up in sweats, it's kind of we have to really dig deep, or overseas they've never seen a mental health person. They've just explained this to us and then it's a starting point, because a lot of them haven't even accessed services on the outside. So, we don't even have a release of information to go by where they've previously been on medications, or if they've been on medication overseas it's really difficult to get that information back to us, because it is a non-English speaking country and they don't understand what we've written on the release of information. It's just—it's massive barriers.*



## Stakeholder perspectives (cont.)

A representative from JH&FMHN pointed out that there was peer pressure amongst the CALD women, which also prevented some of them from opting for medication. She said:

*I notice when they do come for medication normally the CALD women will all be huddled together. If they are coming for medication, a lot of the other CALD women sometimes can be supportive, but also if those women are a little bit more culturally—their culture is a bit stronger, they'll be like why do you need this medication? They'll question them and so then they will just stop taking the medication, because it's easier to stop taking the medication than be judged by those around you.*

### FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Members of the group also acknowledged that many of the CALD women in prison had been impacted significantly by domestic and family violence. One of the representatives of a not-for-profit organisation said:

*These [CALD] women have had a strong sense of family, commitment to family, loyalty to family and down the path, unpacking when we've built that rapport and they've shared with me what's happened, in my opinion the crimes were all connected to loyalty to family, family business. They don't know what they're doing, transporting money or whatever it is, then they caught up in this—yeah.*

*Then it's that of you can't actually expose what's happened, so they take the rap. They do the time for the family and those same family members that have been involved in all of this are the family members who have supported them, done visitation, everything, kept the family running and when they get released, they go back to that same family where all of this has happened. So, there's a very strong sense of family values, family loyalty, commitment, that sort of thing and it's very interesting, because they share with you their story.*

In the absence of the support of extended family and friends in a country where they were not born or had not grown up in, women often tend to go back to their partners and husbands or to family members who have been violent towards them. For some of these women, whatever family they had in Australia appeared to be their only protective factor. Talking about their problems with community members in Australia, if any, also seems to be threatening, as it may bring shame to their family and, as a result, threaten their position in the family. Because of shame they do not tell the family back in their home country about their experiences of violence or that they have been in prison. This increases their isolation and vulnerability, leading them back into the cycle of violence that may retrace their pathway to prison.

*In the absence of the support of extended family and friends in a country where they were not born or had not grown up in, women often tend to go back to their partners and husbands or to family members who have been violent towards them.*

### ACCESS TO SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

A representative from JH&FMHN also spoke about the shame experienced by CALD women, because of which they do not often speak about their trauma and about the health issues that they may be experiencing. They believe that they deserve the punishment of being in prison and do not reach out to access or find out about the services and programs. A representative from a not-for-profit organisation summed up the experiences of CALD women. She said:

*It's very difficult for them [CALD women] to obtain services, it's very difficult for them to integrate into a community. They're kind of waiting—it's hard enough going into jail and being pulled away from everything you know, dealing with your mistake and owning the responsibility and all the rest of it. But it's even harder when you need support, and you need to speak up and you can't. They're really disadvantaged in many ways. It's especially hard I guess when it comes to the legal side of it and going to Court, not understanding where they're going at four in the morning ... because no one's really explained it properly.*

This cycle of disadvantage is reflected in their limited access to lawyers, as a result of which they spend longer periods of time in remand. A few members of the group agreed that women who did not speak or understand English stayed on remand for a much longer time due to their inability to communicate with their lawyers or to send the required documents/letters within the appropriate time limit.

One of the correctional centre staff members also spoke about their limited capacity in supporting CALD women. She referred to an incident when she was unable to make an overseas call to enable a CALD woman to connect with her family when her father had just passed away. Another correctional centre staff member pointed out that there are very few referrals for CALD women for the Corrective Services NSW's EQUIPS (Explore, Question, Understand, Investigate, Practice, Succeed) program, which is focused on 'addiction, aggression and domestic abuse', or other programs more broadly. She added that out of the 10 referrals for Victim Services in a week there are usually none for CALD women; there may be about one a month. This is primarily because of the lack of knowledge about the availability of these services and programs amongst CALD women.

Focus group members suggested that English classes should be organised for the CALD women while they are in prison so that they can navigate the system and have access to their rights and justice. One of the Corrective Services NSW staff members said that it is important to bring educational programs back into correctional settings. He said:

*For people who work in Corrective Services, sort of they lament the removal of education out of correctional settings, because it's one thing education officers used to do is to run English classes—and English is not just for CALD people. You have and correctional centres have a large inmate population, regardless of their cultural background and country of birth. They come in with low literacy, so you need to be—you know, you had a mix of Aboriginal inmate, you had a mix of white, Anglo-Saxon inmate, CALD inmate, all together learning English and they learnt in one, two, three, Level 1, 2, 3 in corrective services.*

CALD women often experience shame while reaching out to correctional centre officers of the same ethnicity as them. A correctional officer from a CALD background said:

*I have noticed they will not come and talk to me, there is an Aussie officer, they will go and talk to them rather than coming toward me, because they think that we might be passing a judgement on them. So that's initial and one day we do ask them, they'll say, no, I don't want to talk to them. They're not very open. They won't open up to us at all, so that's a barrier, even if we say we don't judge you, but in their heads it's very hard to [remove that], yeah, it's from the same background, you might be judging, you're going to back to same community.*



## Stakeholder perspectives (cont.)

The experience of shame also prevents CALD women from accessing mental health services. Speaking to a psychologist is seen as disempowering or as a sign of 'weakness'. Nightmares and flashbacks have been a part of women's lives for long enough for them to normalise it and not perceive it as a mental health issue. In addition, if the psychologist is a man, they find it extremely uncomfortable to open up to them or divulge any information about themselves. A psychologist said:

*We talked earlier about family etcetera and when you have a woman being raised either in Australia or overseas, where the male is more of a family member, has a protective role, you don't have to have much to do with males outside of family. Then you find yourself in an office with a male psychologist, that's some—well that presents problems. I mean the—we're up front and we say, look, we're not going to talk about trauma issues etcetera, we're going to talk about your immediate symptoms.*

Apart from shame, members acknowledged the long waiting lists for accessing mental health services, which discouraged women from accessing them. They also discussed the limitations of a 15-minute session with a psychologist once every few weeks or months, where only the immediate issues are discussed. Such an approach was not effective for women who have long histories of trauma.

Shame also plays a crucial role in how women access mentoring services offered by not-for-profit organisations once they leave prison. They prefer that their family members are not made aware of their time in prison and want to put that part of their life in abeyance.

*Nightmares and flashbacks have been a part of women's lives for long enough for them to normalise it and not perceive it as a mental health issue.*

### RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STAKEHOLDERS

Members of the focus group thought that it might be useful to have staff who are representative of the prison population in terms of their gender and ethnicity/nationality. This could create a more culturally and linguistically sensitive place for women in prison. The other suggestion that was proposed by the members was to have the correctional centre staff and facilitators of services and programs go and approach the CALD women. They could make the women aware of what is available and how they may access it. For instance, the SAPO could reach out to the women, to work with them on their reintegration plan. Pamphlets in multiple languages with pictorial representations could be made available in different languages, for women to know about the processes and norms within the prison, as well as the services and programs available. There was also the suggestion that an immigration liaison officer should visit the prison and assist women who were going to be deported at the end of their prison term. This would resolve confusion around the immigration process and help clarify how the documents that women receive for their deportation can be interpreted.

Members spoke about the gap between the correctional centre staff members and the women. They proposed organising more festivals or community meals in the prison so that the prisoners and officers could interact with each other in more informal spaces. For women this would reduce the stress in approaching officers when they need something.

# Corrective Services NSW staff perspectives: Survey findings

A total of 82 participants from the Corrective Services NSW staff completed the online survey for this study. Of the participants, 62.20% were female, 30.49% males; 6.11% preferred not to indicate their gender. The majority of the participants (36.59%) were between 51 and 65 years of age, followed by participants within the age ranges of 35-50 (32.92%), 18-34 years (25.61%), and above 65 years (3.66%). Most of the participants (79.27%) in this survey were born in Australia, while 24.39% of the total sample of prison staff were born in New Zealand, United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland. When asked if they identified as CALD, 35.53% of the survey participants indicated "Yes" whilst 64.47% indicated "No". The online survey was analysed, and is presented below in a manner that, as much as possible, reflects the Corrective Services NSW staff's own perspectives on the pre-prison experiences of CALD women, their access to services in prison, and their post-release reintegration needs.

## CALD women's experiences before prison

The survey participants' understandings of the impact on pathways to prison of CALD women's pre-prison experiences of disadvantage, were mixed. Only a third of the participants believed that there was "definitely" an impact of disadvantage on CALD women's pathways to prison. However, very few participants (7.31%) believed that there would "probably not" be an impact or "definitely not" (3.66%). About 17% of the participants did not respond to this question. As for the issues and factors that lead CALD women to prison, the participants identified two major factors. Fourteen (17.1%) of the participants identified family issues and violence to be the biggest factor leading CALD women to prison. Two of the participants clearly referred to "growing up in violent families" and "not knowing anything different to what their parents have shown them". Eleven (13.4%) of the participants identified cultural differences and cultural barriers as the second biggest factor leading CALD women to prison. Their responses included issues related to "cultural misogyny", "conflicting values", "cultural roles", being "unaware or social norms" and "applying their country's social or class structure in Australia". This cultural aspect was closely followed by the issue of language barriers, which was reported by 10 (12.2%) of the participants in responses such as "no access to information in their language".

These perceptions largely align with the prevalent beliefs about CALD women in Australia: that they are bound by family and cultural expectations and that their crimes are a continuation of their experiences of violence. This view is limiting and denies CALD women any agency, that they may be negotiating and resisting socio-cultural norms and state borders. It also undermines the role of structures and institutions in creating circumstances of marginalisation for women.

## CALD women's experiences in prison

Three main issues emerged from the participants' perspectives on the experiences of CALD women in prison: language barriers, culture, and lack of access to available services. Fifteen (18.3%) of the participants reported language barriers to be the biggest issue affecting the experiences of CALD women in prison. Responses included "not understanding the system", getting "no effort to help them learn" from the prison system, and "women who cannot understand or speak English will feel especially isolated and frightened". The second most important issue affecting CALD women's experiences in prison was culture. Specifically, 13 (16%) of the participants reported "cultural expectations", "not knowing the culture code of conduct", "preconceived ideas of how each culture behaves" and having their "cultural needs [such as traditional food or religious practices] unmet". Additionally, 3 participants indicated that by not having their "cultural differences understood by others", CALD women "are not able to effectively communicate with prison staff or inmates". The third most reported issue for CALD women in prison was the limited access to available services. For example, the majority of participants indicated that mental health services were available, but also stated that they were often not accessed by CALD women in prison. This issue was closely followed by interpreter and employment services, drug and alcohol services, and welfare services.

In relation to the challenges associated with this limited access to available services, the participants in this survey identified specific challenges that CALD women prisoners may encounter in accessing each of the available services (See Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1, the biggest challenge in accessing mental health services was stigma (27.71%), followed by long waiting lists (24.1%). Similarly, stigma was considered the biggest challenge (29.03%) in uptake of drug and alcohol services; followed by the long waiting lists (22.58%). A different pattern was observed for welfare services, religious and spiritual services, and interpreter services. For welfare services, limited interpreter services (24%) and mistrust (24%), scores were the highest, whilst stigma (10%) was the lowest. Similarly, for religious and spiritual services, 34.29% of the participants indicated that both limited interpreter services and the lack of accessible information were the greatest challenges, while 11.41% of the participants indicated stigma to be the lowest. Scores for interpreter services represented the biggest gap, with 42.11% of participants identifying the limited interpreter services as the biggest challenge, and only 5.26% choosing stigma. Finally, for health services, the biggest challenge was long waiting lists (36.54%), while both stigma and lack of accessible information were equally considered the least challenging (11.54%).

*Three main issues emerged from the participants' perspectives on the experiences of CALD women in prison: language barriers, culture, and lack of access to available services.*

### CHALLENGES FACED BY CALD WOMEN IN ACCESSING AVAILABLE SERVICES IN PRISON

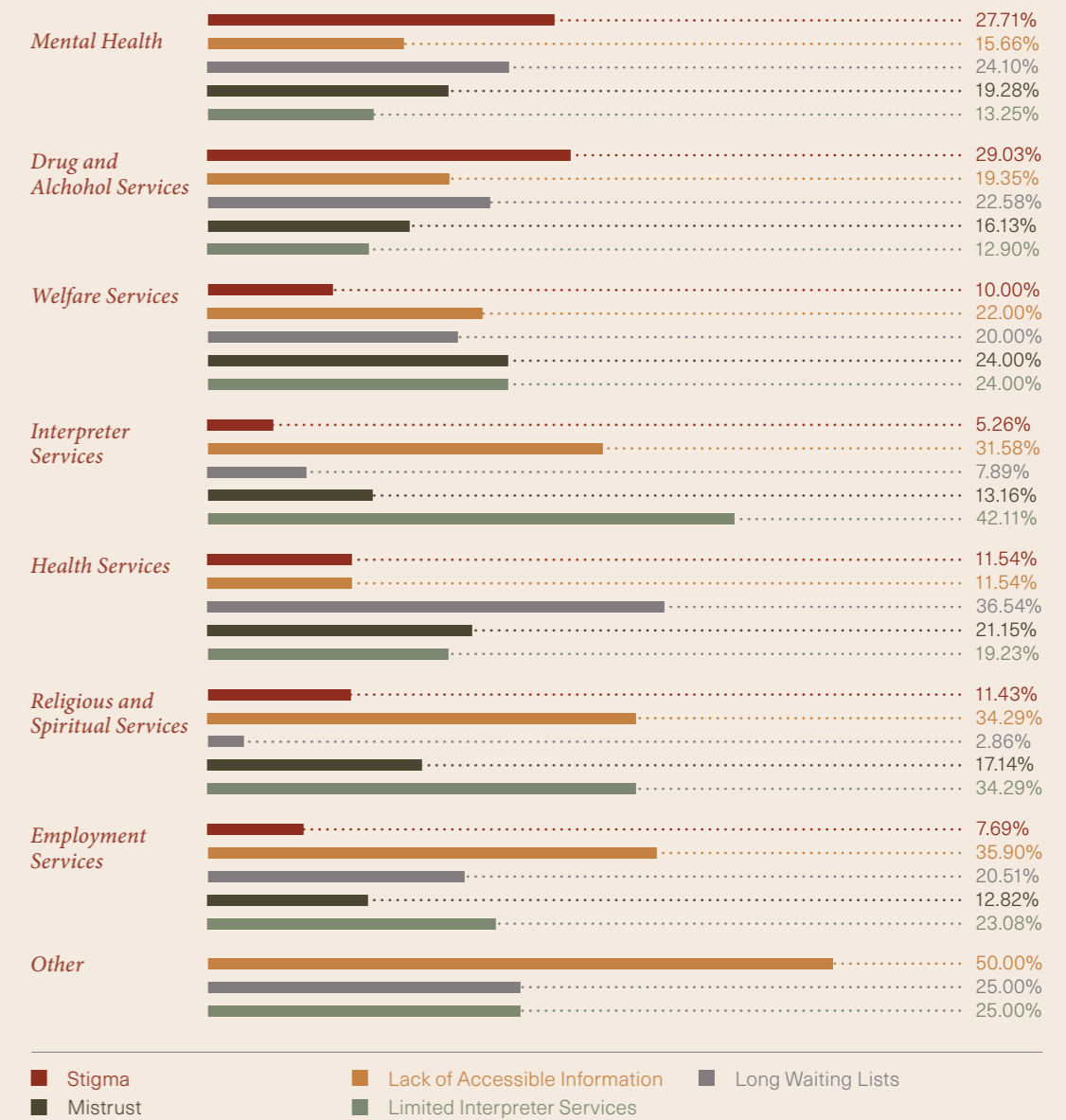


Figure 1: Challenges Faced by CALD Women in Accessing Available Services in Prison

## CALD women's experiences in prison (cont.)

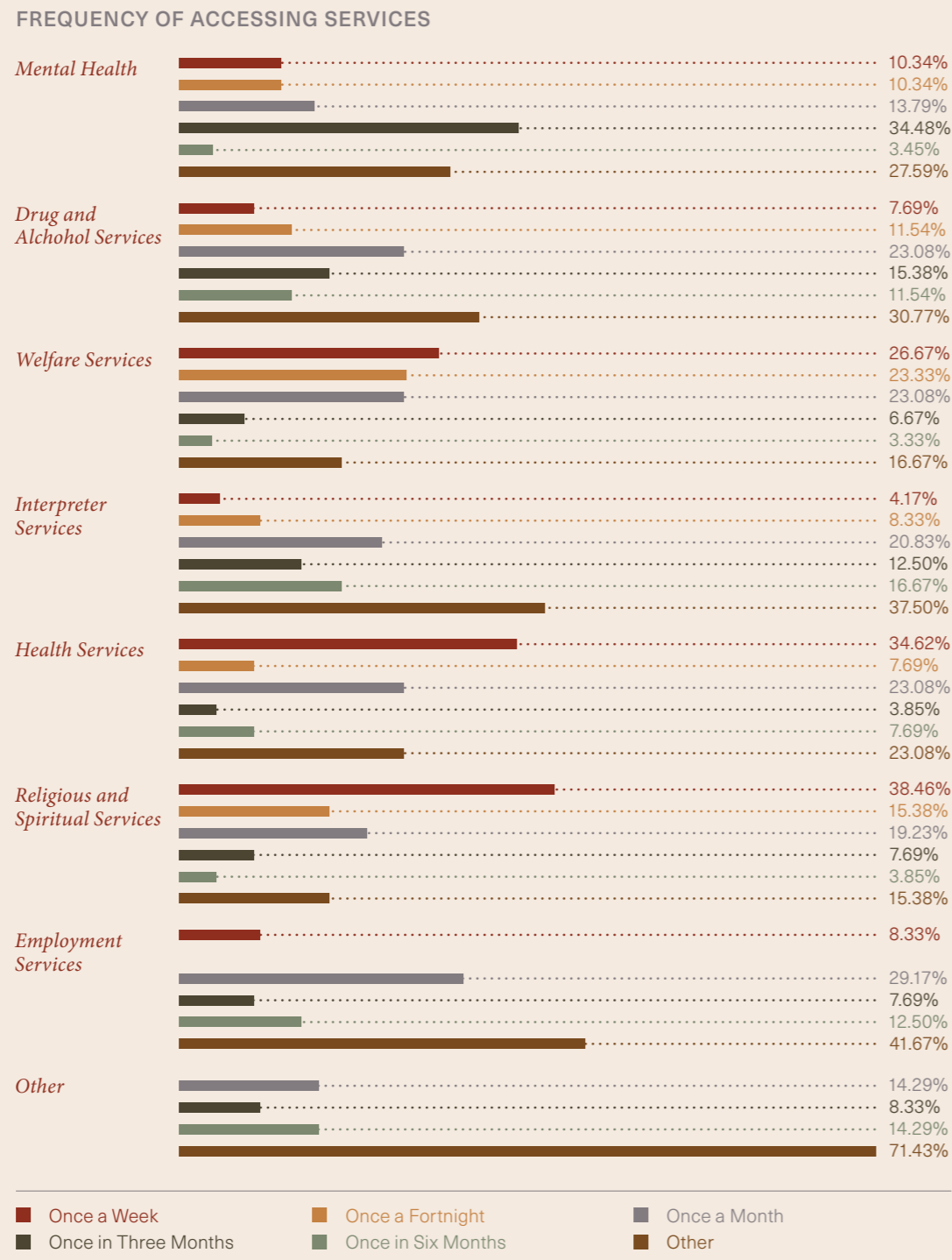


Figure 2: Frequency of Accessing Services

It is worth highlighting that the frequency of accessing different services varies, depending on the nature of each service (see Figure 2). Religious and spiritual services, followed by health services then welfare services, were accessed the most compared to other services. According to the staff participants, these three services were accessed by women prisoners once a week. On the other hand, interpreter services, drug and alcohol services, and employment services were largely accessed once in six months—which is the least frequent, compared to other services. It is important to note that access to interpreter services impacts access to all other services.

## SERVICES AND CONSIDERATION OF CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AMONGST CALD WOMEN IN PRISON

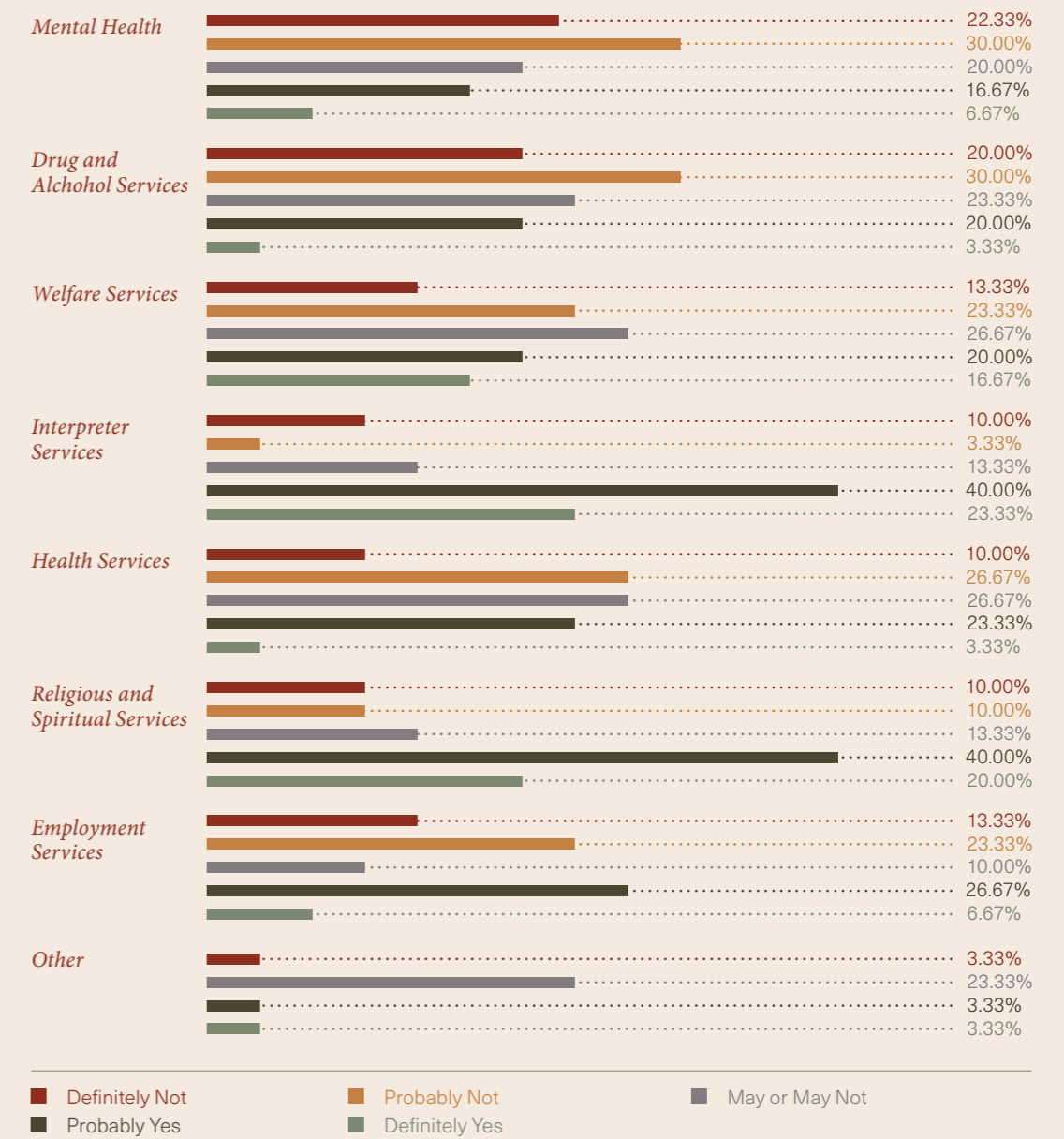


Figure 3: Services and Consideration of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity amongst CALD Women in Prison

Cultural and linguistic considerations should also be taken into account when examining the experiences of CALD women in prison (See Figure 3). For example, staff participants indicated that mental health services, closely followed by drug and alcohol services and employment services, were either “definitely not” or “probably not” adequately equipped to consider cultural and linguistic diversity. The same considerations were more ambiguous for welfare services and health services, as participants indicated that cultural and linguistic diversity “may or may not” be considered for such services. On the other hand, interpreter services, closely followed by religious and spiritual services, were considered to be “definitely” cognisant of cultural and linguistic diversity.

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## Reintegration of CALD women exiting prison

Participants reported that secure housing is the most important factor that benefits the reintegration plans designed for CALD women exiting prison. This was closely followed by family and community support and then mental health support. On the other hand, social connections and education were equally considered to some of the least important in benefiting reintegration plans, whilst drug and alcohol support was the least important in benefiting those plans. Participants also believed that there was a lack of “employment services” and “interpreter services” as well as “availability of services” for CALD women in prison. Therefore, access to services and programs, especially employment services, was the most immediate concern for CALD women exiting prison.



# Summary and recommendations

This research aimed to explore the experiences of CALD women in a NSW prison in terms of their pre-prison experiences, their pathways into prison, and their post-release needs and services for community reintegration. To achieve this, we used quantitative data collection through an online survey and qualitative approaches comprising interviews and a focus group. This section outlines the key findings and recommendations that emerge from this research.

CALD women's pathways to imprisonment, the barriers and challenges they experience in accessing and negotiating support in prison, as well as their post-release integration into the community, are distinctly different to those in the rest of the prison population, and thus require focused practice and policy responses (Allimant et al., 2011; Rose et al., 2019; Howard & Lobo, 2020). Given that women from CALD backgrounds and Indigenous women are the fastest growing populations across the entire prison system, with significant numbers of women on remand without access to programs, it is crucial that policy and practice changes be implemented as a priority (Segrave & Carlton 2010; KOOP 2020).

## WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO PRISON

This report has highlighted the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding CALD women's experiences and pathways to prison. CALD women's intersecting identities, such as gender, race, sexuality, and migration status, which create distinct experiences of marginalisation, are critical to understanding women's pathways and informing program and service design.

CALD women in prison have multiple and complex histories of trauma that need to be acknowledged and understood. Many women fled violence as children or adults, religious and political persecution, or state inflicted violence. In travelling to Australia their migration journeys involved traumatic experiences such as the death of a family member, violence, or food insecurity. Domestic violence, intimate partner and sexual violence, were the most common forms of violence experienced by women, both in Australia and in their home country. This is supported by other studies in which women's experiences of domestic violence are identified as the most important factor in women's pathways to prison (see, for example, Nuytiens & Christiaens 2016). CALD women experience significant difficulties in leaving violence, with barriers to accessing women's refuges, both as children and as adults, and inaction or delayed responses by police to their complaints of domestic violence. There is a need for increasing police sensitivity and responsiveness to cases of domestic violence, and to ensure that Apprehended Violence Orders (AVO) against intimate partners are enforced, so that women do not have to move from one refuge to another, unsettling their lives each time. Moreover, in cases where women have experienced severe forms of violence, or in cases where they have responsibility for children, alternatives to imprisonment may be practised. Key to reducing women's pathways to prison is the recognition of women's trauma experiences and the provision of ongoing, accessible and holistic mental health support.

Many of the women who participated in this study were the eldest sibling in their family subject to cultural expectations that they would provide for younger siblings and parents. This finding is both distinct and important, as it highlights the role of cultural and gendered expectations in shaping CALD women's pathways to prison. These expectations lead to extreme financial and emotional stress for women, and often to leaving school early or having disrupted schooling. Experiences of marginalisation, racial discrimination, and being bullied were also common reasons for women leaving school.

*Key to reducing women's pathways to prison is the recognition of women's trauma experiences and the provision of ongoing, accessible and holistic mental health support.*

## Summary and recommendations (cont.)

Limited or disrupted education means that many women work in low paid and precarious jobs where both personal and employment safety, and security, are not guaranteed. These barriers are exacerbated for women who don't speak and/or understand the English language, those experiencing visa precarity, and those who lack access to the necessary documents to access Centrelink and other support services. Many women reported experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity due to the lack of affordable and safe housing. Women's narratives also drew attention to the adverse economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reduced job availability, the lack of access to education, and homelessness, in paving CALD women's pathways to prison.

Negotiating a foreign country, learning a new language, trying to understand new social, political, cultural, and legal contexts is complex and challenging—even more so when women are isolated and disconnected from both informal and formal support systems. Acknowledging and addressing these issues is key to disrupting CALD women's pathways to prison.

### PRISON EXPERIENCES

Coming into prison is a distressing and often traumatic experience for women, compounded by their histories of violence and trauma, and made worse by language barriers impacting women's ability to understand prison systems and processes and to communicate their personal circumstances. The current practice is for women to complete the Intake Screening Questionnaire (ISQ) and the Health Problem Notification Form (HPNF) when they enter prison. Noting that many women have histories of trauma, with potential impact on cognition and memory, coupled with language barriers, it is important that CALD women have an extended 'orientation' to the prison, with their ISQ and HPNF being reviewed within the first few weeks to provide for accurate information. During the first few weeks, it is important that women be provided with accessible information and that they understand the role of the SAPO, as well as how to request SAPO support.

Central to CALD women's everyday experiences in prison, their participation in programs and services, and their ability to maintain relationships with family and friends outside prison, is their access to interpreter services. CALD women are mostly supported through peer translation, and while women want to support each other, there are obvious privacy concerns and risks for accuracy of information conveyed, especially where there are health or legal implications. Some staff use 'Google Translate' when working with CALD women; many are unsure how to access and work with interpreters, and there are very low referrals to and requests for interpreter services. Such practices are consistent with findings from earlier studies with CALD women in NSW prisons, which highlighted significant difficulties being experienced by CALD women in accessing health care services due to language barriers and to the reported frequent use of peer translators in place of interpreters (Watt et al., 2018).

These practices appear to be incongruent with key policy directions outlined in the NSW Custodial Operations Policy and Procedures, which specifies:

*Language assistance will be provided to any inmate or a member of their family who has advised they have, or is observed to have, difficulty communicating in English, and further that this assistance can include accredited bi-lingual staff under the Community Language Allowance Scheme (CLAS); telephone or onsite interpreters; and the interpreter service via video conferencing. It is the responsibility of all CSNSW staff to access and utilise the most effective range of available language services. Individual staff are responsible for addressing language service needs and are not required to seek approval to access these services once the need has been identified ... For privacy and security reasons, inmates should not be used as interpreters except in cases of extreme urgency and until accredited language assistance can be obtained (Corrective Services NSW, 2017, 4-5).<sup>1</sup>*

Linked to women's lack of access to interpreter services is CALD women's knowledge of, access to, and use of other services within the prison. Corrective Services NSW staff recognised that CALD women may remain on remand longer, as they may have limited access to legal services, may miss key dates and have difficulties accessing necessary documents. There are very few referrals for CALD women for various programs and services, such as EQUIPS and Victim Services.

The long waiting lists for medical and allied health professionals exacerbate the distress they experience in the prison. Women's access to mental health services requires urgent attention. There are long wait times to see psychologists, and consultations are too brief to provide the support and services required, given CALD women's experiences of trauma and marginalisation. Women need accessible information about mental health services and a serviceable process for accessing this—ideally the SAPO, using an interpreter if required, could provide regular advice to women about these services. Women on remand, often for more than 12 months, also need access and support to services and programs. Mental health support is crucial for women's immediate health and wellbeing, as well as their ability to reunite with their children, rebuild lives, and prevent recidivism.

CALD women reported frequent experiences of racism and bullying by prison staff and by other women in prison. Women emphasised the need for prison staff to have better awareness of cultural diversity, and CALD women's distinct pathways and experiences—this was reinforced by the survey responses of Corrective Services NSW staff, which indicated a limited understanding of CALD women's experiences. Understanding cultural diversity and the observable aspects of culture such as religion, language, race, ethnicity, arts, and food by the prison system is essential for the mental and physical health of CALD women. Strategies to build culturally responsive practice in correctional centres require, although they are not limited to: professional development opportunities for correctional officers, specifically SAPOs; pre-qualifying training courses to include content focused on the experiences and practices of CALD peoples; and increasing the diversity of Corrective Services NSW staff so they are representative of the prison population in relation to their gender and ethnicity/nationality.

### POST-RELEASE REINTEGRATION OF CALD WOMEN IN NSW

Many of the experiences that shape CALD women's pathways to prison remain concerns and barriers in relation to women's reintegration into the community: these include visa precarity, violence, mental health issues, isolation, access to safe, ongoing, and affordable housing, and employment. Although some women earned wages in prison, it was clear that their income was insufficient to support themselves, and they were concerned about their post-release financial situation. Thus, this research finds strong evidence for supporting accessibility to public transport (Transport NSW Opal card) or taxi vouchers to women on release, ensuring safe housing for women exiting prison, and dispelling the myths around unavailability of employment after release by supporting women in securing work. Securing safe housing and employment is particularly critical for CALD women leaving prison because they often have very little social and familial support in Australia. Also, like most women in prison, they are often stigmatised by criminal records, and mostly they are required to complete criminal background checks to get accommodation and work.

Most women receive very limited or no support to plan for life after prison—some only finding out where they are going on the day of their release. Letters notifying them about their transfer to Villawood Immigration Detention Centre are received late and often are not comprehended by the women, due to language barriers or limited awareness of legalese. Access to case management and 'throughcare' is currently only available to women with sentences greater than three months, which excludes most women who have shorter sentences and those who are on remand in NSW.<sup>2</sup>

1) [https://www.correctiveservices.dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/related-links/publications-and-policies/policies-defined-by-gipa-act/Policy\\_for\\_Case\\_Management\\_in\\_Correctional\\_Centres.pdf](https://www.correctiveservices.dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/related-links/publications-and-policies/policies-defined-by-gipa-act/Policy_for_Case_Management_in_Correctional_Centres.pdf)

2) <https://correctiveservices.dcj.nsw.gov.au/csnsw-home/correctional-centres/custodial-operations-policy-and-procedures-copp.html>



## Summary and recommendations (cont.)

### POST-RELEASE REINTEGRATION OF CALD WOMEN IN NSW (CONT.)

CALD women need holistic, coordinated, and planned support to prepare for leaving prison and their reintegration into the community. Central to this preparation and reintegration is access to interpreter services, ongoing mental health support, and access to safe, secure housing.

Notwithstanding the significant contribution of this research to understanding CALD women's pathways to prison, their experiences of prison and reintegration challenges, further research is needed to understand the reintegration experiences of CALD women leaving prison.

Key policy and practice recommendations relating to Corrective Services NSW are set out below. We note that these recommendations, though proposed with specific reference to CALD women, may be broadly applicable to all women in prison and may contribute to their overall wellbeing.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Admission/Intake

- Women should be provided with accessible information about all programs and services available in prison. This includes, but is not limited to, printed information in different languages, as well as video or pictorial presentations for women who may not be able to read. Information should be provided when CALD women enter the prison, and reinforced in the days and weeks following.
- Women are often nervous/anxious at the time of entry into prison and may provide personal details that are not accurate; or there may be a spelling mistake. Mistakes may also be made because of differences in accents, so there should be scope to rectify this later, as it can limit access to services.
- Timely coordination with in-person interpreter services is required at the time of CALD women's entry into prison. CALD women may be hesitant to divulge their details to an interpreter on the phone, as they may not trust a person they can't see.

#### Corrective Services NSW staff

- There is a need to offer professional development opportunities for correctional officers, specifically SAPOs; pre-qualifying training courses should include content focused on the experiences and practices of CALD peoples.
- Increased diversity of Corrective Services NSW staff would ensure they are more representative of the prison population in relation to their gender and ethnicity/nationality.
- SAPOs should reach out to the women by visiting their cells and introducing themselves. This will encourage women to reach out to the SAPOs at times when they need support and will remove barriers to accessing services and programs.
- Training programs for staff are needed to increase staff awareness of the long-term impact of gender-based violence, and of women in prison's experiences of racism and sexism.
- CALD women must be represented on the Inmate Development Committee (IDC).

#### Collaborating with other institutions and professionals

- As a part of the 'throughcare' program, a social worker should work with CALD women from the time they enter prison till they are released. In addition, support should be provided to women when they are in the community for up to one year, along with ongoing support for specific services as relevant to each woman.
- An immigration liaison officer must visit the prison and provide advice to women who receive letters for transfer to Villawood Immigration Detention Centre after their release from prison.

#### Health

- On entry to prison increased, accessible and ongoing access is required to culturally appropriate mental health and drug and alcohol services, including for CALD women on remand.
- Facilitating prompt and regular access to health and mental health services is essential. For women from some CALD backgrounds, access to a woman psychologist or doctor is crucial for them to be able to access these services.

#### Language

- All application forms for access to services and programs must be available in different languages. This could be streamlined by creating digital forms on the tablets that would have the capacity for translation into different languages.
- The tablet computers must have instructions in different languages on the opening page.
- Staff should have easy access to a phone so as to be able to contact interpreters, to communicate with women in prison so that they can communicate their health and other issues. It is crucial to ensure that the telephone sound works and that the interpreter can be heard clearly.
- Corrective Services NSW should ensure that the interpreters who are called upon are non-judgmental in their approach and interpret accurately. Higher levels of NAATI certification amongst interpreters should be considered, given the legal and sensitive nature of information shared by women in prison.
- It is also essential that all relevant parties recognise the fact that, although women from similar linguistic backgrounds often support each other and extend their solidarity, they cannot be a substitute for professional interpreters.

#### Contact with family and significant others

- Decisions about the transfer of women from one prison to another should take into consideration the disruption this may cause in their contact with family, especially children.
- Women must be provided with access to telephones or AVL so that they can contact their family members or significant others as soon as their transfer orders are prepared.
- The instructions for accessing AVL to contact women in prison should be stated clearly on the Corrective Services NSW website in different languages, to facilitate access for family members who may not read English.
- Consideration should be given to subsidizing the phone call rates for CALD women who have family overseas, so that they are commensurate with their meagre wages in prison.

#### Creative and Cultural

- A wide range of books, TV channels and movies in languages other than English should be made available.
- Creative activities should be introduced, to meaningfully engage women's time in prison. For example: basic English lessons, art projects, celebrations that provide opportunities for women to come together, such as a 'Festival of Colour'.
- Special buy-ups around the time of cultural/religious festivals should be resumed.

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