



Elders for Change:

Engaging Incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

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The Reach Alliance is a consortium of global universities — with partners in Ghana, South Africa, Mexico, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore — developing the leaders we need to solve urgent local challenges of the hard to reach — those underserved for geographic, administrative, or social reasons. Working in interdisciplinary teams, Reach’s globally minded students use rigorous research methods to identify innovative solutions to climate, public health, and economic challenges. The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide inspiration and a guiding framework. Research is conducted in collaboration with local communities and with guidance from university faculty members, building capacity and skills among Reach’s student researchers.

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Note: Authors are listed alphabetically with the mentor listed last.

Cover photo: An aerial shot of Townsville and Castle Hill from the south with the Ross River in view. (iStock)





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Figure 1. Members of Elders for Change and research team members

Executive Summary

The criminal justice system in Australia has long been marked by severe injustices in its treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up less than 4 per cent of the Australian population, they represent 35 per cent of the country's prison population as a result of systemic racism and the continuation of colonial institutions that persist to this day. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are the fastest-growing population in Australian prisons.¹

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals call for gender equality, reduced inequality, and peace, justice, and strong institutions. However, there are significant barriers to advancing these goals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison face marginalization on multiple fronts where they are separated from their communities, families, and culture. They often experience

complex mental health challenges, and many are victim-survivors of domestic violence. The culture within the prison system, which generally emphasizes punishment over support and care, is not conducive to healing. The punitive prison environment and complex disadvantages make these women in prison especially hard to reach.

In the city of Townsville, the Elders for Change initiative led by Traditional Owners, Historical Owners, and Community Elders from North West Queensland who are accepted and respected in their relevant communities. The Elders for Change provide important cultural support and personalized care for the women incarcerated at the Townsville Women's Correctional Centre (TWCC). Elders for Change help the women in TWCC rediscover themselves, guiding them toward a path of recovery. The initiative emphasizes genuine care, the central role of culture in healing, relationship building, consistency and authenticity, and amplifying lived experience to change women's lives.

¹ "Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians," Australian Bureau of Statistics, 31 August 2023. [🔗](#)

Background: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and the Australian Justice System

For the tens of thousands of years before European arrival, the land now known as Australia was governed by hundreds of sovereign nations, each with distinct languages, cultures, and spiritual (or dreaming) stories and practices. The cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are deeply connected to their land and waters, and to their ancestors. The sovereignty of these nations, their cultures, and traditions were disregarded when the Europeans invaded and colonized Australia in 1788.² Colonizers stole Aboriginal and Torres Strait land without compensation, and fundamentally disrupted their economies, political and spiritual institutions, and governance systems. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, the two centuries since colonization have involved continual resistance against the various settler-colonial strategies of cultural elimination and genocide including violence, dispossession, exploitation, racial segregation, and forced assimilation.³ The Australian justice system still carries out these broader strategies of Australian settler-colonialism and systemic cultural elimination.

Carceral punishment was not a part of life in Australia before colonization. A respected Bindal (Aboriginal) Elder explained that before European invasion there was no word for prison

in their language. However, today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most incarcerated in the world. As of March 2024, 35 per cent of Australia's prison population was made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, meaning they are imprisoned at a rate nearly 10 times higher than their representation in the general Australian population.⁴ The legacy of colonial policies and practices of assimilation, segregation, racial discrimination, and violence have meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today suffer increased rates of poverty, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, and homelessness, which all elevate their risks of incarceration.⁵ Not only do these risk factors contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's overincarceration, but structural racism and strategies of colonialism are entrenched in the criminal justice system itself.

Carceral punishment in Australia has been an important part of policies controlling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly since the so-called Protection Era (roughly 1890 to 1950 but extended into the 1970s in some jurisdictions) when policies and police powers were expanded to control and regulate those communities.⁶ During this period, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — particularly politically active organizers, leaders, and activists — were exiled to live on reservations. Despite no longer pursuing such overtly discriminatory policies, the legacy of overpolicing, control, and "protection" remains a part of criminal justice processes today. This

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- 2 Helen Bishop and Clare Coburn, "An Overview of Traditional Forms of Indigenous Conflict Resolution and Peace in Australia," in *Peace Psychology in Australia*, edited by Diane Bretherton and Nikola Balvin (Boston, MA: Springer US, 2012), 13–30; Elizabeth Venczel, "Settler Colonialism and Prisons: A Comparative Case Study of Canada, Palestine, and Australia," *Settler Colonial Studies* 14, no. 2 (2024): 140–59. [🔗](#)
 - 3 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409. [🔗](#)
 - 4 "Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians," Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Corrective Services, Australia," March 2024. [🔗](#)
 - 5 Venczel, "Settler Colonialism and Prisons."
 - 6 Robert Foster, "'Endless Trouble and Agitation': Aboriginal Activism in the Protectionist Era," *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* 28 (2000): 15–27.

is despite the multiple government inquiries, at both national and state government levels, that have investigated structural racism in the Australian justice system. The most high-profile of these, The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, was concluded in 1991. Its final report made over 339 recommendations for improving the justice system's interaction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and improving policies related to their socioeconomic status and self-determination. In over three decades since the Royal Commission, most recommendations remain unimplemented. Colonization's continued legacy and its strategies of cultural genocide, including the overcriminalization of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, has caused long-term trauma among their communities.

Intersectional Challenges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women Experience

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women face distinct challenges within the Australian justice system, and their experiences of the system intersect with both colonization and gender. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are the fastest-growing population in Australian prisons and are 17 times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be incarcerated.⁷ Despite the rapidly rising rate of imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, they have received little attention from Australian justice inquiries and commissions, which

have tended to focus on men, or at the very least, taken a gender-neutral approach when unpacking the issue of First Nations incarceration. However, the justice system and colonization's lasting policies and impacts are not gender neutral, and this approach has further silenced the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.⁸

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison are victim-survivors of domestic, physical, or sexual violence.⁹ In focus group discussions, some of the women with a lived experience of incarceration disclosed their own experiences with family violence. They also shared how they were often charged with offences when they had been acting in self-defence against a long-term abusive partner. The 2022 Inquiry into Queensland Police Service's responses to domestic and family violence found significant cultural issues with racism and sexism.¹⁰ Evidence submitted to the inquiry found that only 10 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women reported instances of domestic and family violence to police because they distrusted the police.¹¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more likely to be victims of violent crimes than non-Indigenous women and experience a homicide rate that is on average eight times higher.¹²

Their overincarceration has had a vast impact on their families and communities. Eighty per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison are mothers, and many are also carers for

7 "Over-Represented and Overlooked: The Crisis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Growing Over-Imprisonment," Change the Record and Human Rights Law Centre, May 2017.

8 Chris Cunneen, "Policing Indigenous Women" in *Conflict, Politics and Crime: Aboriginal Communities and the Police* (New York: Routledge, 2021); "Over-Represented and Overlooked."

9 Mandy Wilson et al., "Violence in the Lives of Incarcerated Aboriginal Mothers in Western Australia," *SAGE Open* 7, no. 1 (January 2017): 215824401668681. [🔗](#)

10 Deborah Richards, "Independent Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service Responses to Domestic and Family Violence," 21 November 2022. [🔗](#)

11 Aimee McVeigh, "Queensland Council of Social Service Submission to The Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service Responses to Domestic and Family Violence" (QCOSS, 8 July 2022). [🔗](#)

12 Kyllie Cripps, "Indigenous Women and Intimate Partner Homicide in Australia: Confronting the Impunity of Policing Failures," *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 35, no. 3 (2023): 293–311. [🔗](#)

other children and the elderly.¹³ When mothers and caretakers are imprisoned, their children are often removed from their communities by child protection agencies and placed in temporary homes, often in non-Indigenous households, challenging their sense of cultural connection, stability, and development. This perpetuates what is commonly referred to as intergenerational trauma — passed down from one generation to their children. A study in New South Wales showed that over half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison were removed from their own families as children, often as a result of their own parent’s incarceration. Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being removed from their families at a higher rate than during the Stolen Generation period, which was a period of assimilatory government policies that saw Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children forcibly removed from their families to be raised in white families.¹⁴ Women in Townsville felt the impact of intergenerational trauma acutely. One Elder summarized this during a focus group: “Why are our people like this? Because of colonization, because of intergenerational trauma. Transgenerational trauma continues today. That is why our prisons are full of our people.”

About Our Research

We conducted week-long fieldwork in Townsville with the Elders for Change initiative to understand their engagement with the women at the Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre (TWCC). We participated in focus group discussions with Elders who make up the initiative, the staff who support them, TWCC staff and support workers who support women in prison, and women with experience

of incarceration. The research was designed in close collaboration with the Elders for Change. Their involvement was instrumental in creating a supportive environment and encouraging open and honest dialogue. Before data collection, we participated in cultural training facilitated by a Bindal Elder and member of Elders for Change. This training provided us with a deeper understanding of and context for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, with a specific focus on the Northern Queensland region.

Across our fieldwork week, we conducted three focus group sessions. The participants across the three groups consisted of:

- Elders for Change staff members (2)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders from Elders for Change (7)
- Aboriginal women with lived experience of incarceration at TWCC, also known as “Sisters for Change” and occasionally referred to in this case study as a “Sister” (3)
- Staff and support services who work in TWCC including
 - Cultural liaison officers (2)
 - TWCC management staff (1)
 - Drug rehabilitation specialists (2)
 - Aboriginal support workers (2).

During the focus groups, we wanted to learn from Elders for Change about reaching incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women based on their experience at Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre. We also provided a prompt to guide the conversation for all participants: What is the story of Elders for Change from

13 “Over-Represented and Overlooked.”

14 “National Anti-Racism Framework Scoping Report 2022,” Australian Human Rights Commission, December 2022.

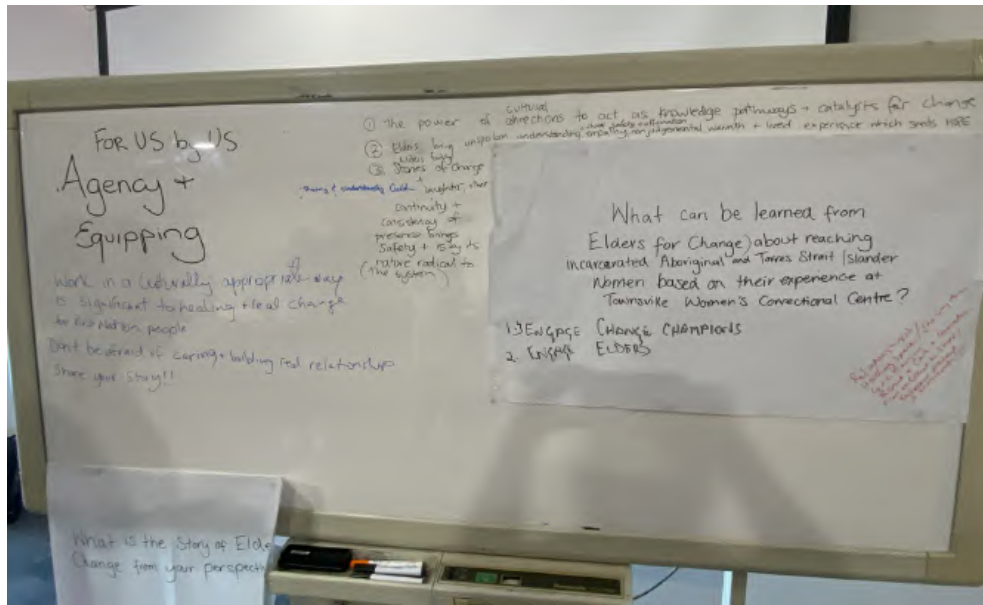


Figure 2. A whiteboard after a focus group

your perspective? The engagement with a diverse range of participants, including Elders, correctional system officers, and women with lived experiences of incarceration, provided insights, and multiple perspectives on the Elders for Change initiative.

Townsville Women's Correctional Centre

Queensland is home to over 237,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, almost one-third of the total Australian First Nations population. Townsville, the largest city in Queensland's tropical north, is home to the third-largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in the state.¹⁵ The region importantly includes Palm Island, also known as "Punishment Island," which was used as a detention centre during the Protection Era between 1918 and 1972. On Palm Island, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Queensland and

neighbouring parts of the Northern Territory were forcibly relocated to live under severe and punitive conditions. Palm Island today is known as Bwgcolman, which translates to "many people" to represent its population from the over 50 language groups originally sent to the island. Palm Island today is an important part of the (recent) history of systemic dispossession and displacement experienced by Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.¹⁶

This legacy of incarceration persists today where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are severely overrepresented across Queensland's prison population. According to Queensland Correctional Service's (QCS) data, as of June 2023, there were 3,607 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the prison system, representing over one-third of the state's total prison population.¹⁷ Queensland also has a higher number of women in prison than other Australian states. In recent years, the number of Aboriginal

15 "Queensland: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population Summary," Australian Bureau of Statistics, Release 1 July 2022. [↗](#)

16 "Palm Island," Queensland Government, March 2018 [↗](#); "Palm Island," Bringing Them Home. [↗](#)

17 "QCS 2022-23 Annual Report Data," Queensland Corrective Services, 20 November 2023. [↗](#)



Figure 3. Location of Townsville and Palm Island

and Torres Strait Islander women incarcerated in Queensland has grown more than 120 per cent.¹⁸ As Figure 5 shows, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women represent just under 5 per cent of Queensland’s female population, but 46 per cent of Queensland’s female population in prison.¹⁹ The Elders for Change initiative takes place within Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre (TWCC), one of Queensland’s two dedicated custodial facilities for women.

TWCC is located on the traditional lands of the Bindal people. As of June 2023, the daily average number of prisoners there was 224 across its high- and low-security facilities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women represent 70 per cent of the prison’s population.²⁰ Queensland is home to over 170 different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups, and the women incarcerated at TWCC reflect the great diversity of cultural backgrounds of the communities throughout Northern Queensland. This diversity underscores the importance of cultural support services that

respect and incorporate the traditions and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.



Figure 4. Townsville community marching for National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week event

18 “Hear Her Voice: Report Two, Volume One,” Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce, 2022. [🔗](#)

19 “QCS 2022-23 Annual Report Data,” Queensland Corrective Services.

20 “Sisters for Change at Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre,” Australian Red Cross, 2020. [🔗](#)

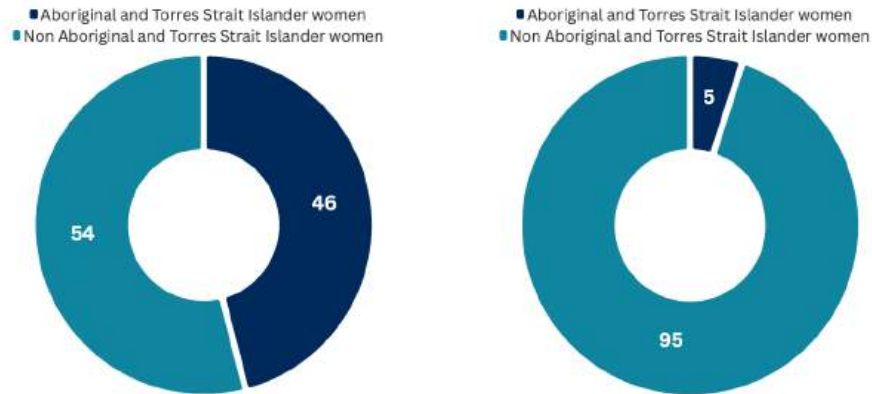


Figure 5. Population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Queensland Prison (left side) versus their population in Queensland (right side)

Hardest to Reach: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women in Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre

Women incarcerated at Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre (TWCC) face numerous barriers that hinder their well-being, healing, and rehabilitation. The challenges women and support workers spoke about during the focus groups include cultural disconnection, family estrangement, fear of punishment, and challenges in accessing rehabilitation programs.

Loss of Cultural Connection, Familial Relationships, and Identity

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in TWCC, cultural connection is a fundamental aspect of their identity and welfare. The spiritual connection to lands, skies, and waterways is integral to their identity, well-being, and cultural continuity. This connection is rooted in their understanding that the land and waterways are living entities, intertwined with their ancestors, spirituality, and cultural practices. Connection

to their heritage provides a foundation of strength and resilience, helping them navigate challenges by grounding them in their cultural roots. Engaging with cultural practices therefore fosters a sense of continuity and purpose. However, in the prison system, there is a serious lack of cultural support. One woman with lived experience of incarceration shared how “When you’re in confinement, like prison, you don’t really have much culture in there ... you can’t touch the grass — you can’t congregate on the grass.”

TWCC has dedicated cultural officers, but they are insufficient to provide culturally affirming support to the women in the facility. Tasked with affirming and maintaining cultural safety, the cultural officers are significantly underresourced with a ratio of approximately one cultural officer for every 250 women. Their roles are overburdened by administrative duties, rendering them unable to react to the urgent and immediate needs of the women in prison. The cultural officers are also restricted by the scope of their positions. During the focus groups, a prison staff member mentioned: “The cultural team can only do so much because of certain policies.” For other correctional staff members, maintaining a culturally safe environment for the women in TWCC is deprioritized because many of the prison staff lack cultural competency. This

can lead to inadequate responses to women's needs and even aggressive behaviours that can retraumatize the women in prison.

The difficulty of maintaining family connections is another significant barrier to the well-being of women in TWCC. In the focus groups, one woman shared that during her time in prison "It was hard to stay connected in a family-oriented way." Making phone calls to family from prison is both expensive and logistically challenging, impeding women's ability to stay in touch with their loved ones. One woman with lived experience of incarceration shared that they needed to earn wages (often as low as AUD 60 per week) to afford their phone calls but also need to budget for things like hygiene essentials. The barriers extend to sending and receiving letters. For example, women in prison often must rely solely on their memory for addresses and contact information. Consequently, if they forget or misspell a word in the address, it is impossible to keep in contact, adding another layer of difficulty in maintaining familial ties. This estrangement from family can contribute to a sense of isolation and abandonment.

The absence of familial and cultural connection leads to a profound sense of loss, making it difficult for women in the prison to maintain their sense of self. In fact, incarceration often leads to a complete redefinition of self, where the women are reduced to a mere number rather than recognized as mothers, sisters, daughters, or aunts. This dehumanizing experience erodes their identity and self-worth. This was summarized during the focus group by a woman with lived experience of incarceration who stated: "Once you're in there, you're no longer an auntie, sister, or a mother. You're a number."

A Culture of Fear and Punishment

The prison environment can be particularly harsh for women experiencing mental health issues and trauma. One Elder who had lived experiences of incarceration expressed concerns about the "culture of fear" within the prison system. This culture is experienced by the staff who work in the prison as well as those incarcerated. As one Elder pointed out "You look at corrections — this is a big, massive system, and many of the staff have trauma — but this system, in terms of safety, it's less safe for some people. It's not a fault thing, it's an organizational thing." This culture of fear is reinforced by the suppression of truth and a lack of transparency regarding prison operations, which obscures the reality of conditions within correctional facilities from both the inmates and the public.

For example, we were told in detail during the focus groups about how mandatory drug testing is conducted by internal prison staff rather than independent external agencies, which is problematic because evaluations by internal prison staff are influenced by personal relationships, undermining the objectivity of assessments. Hence, independent external agencies would have been more credible and transparent, bringing unbiased results and adherence to standardized protocols. Furthermore, there was insufficient disclosure about how the prison addresses inmates' medical needs, and inadequate reporting on the use of excessive force and violence. This was evident in the QCS's data used for annual reporting, which discloses cases of abuse for prisoner-to-prisoner violence, and prisoner-to-officer violence, but does not disclose instances of excessive violence by prison staff.²¹

Male guards with limited cultural competency in female correctional centres are sometimes a

21 "QCS 2022-23 Annual Report Data," Queensland Corrective Services.

source of violence. For women who are victim-survivors of domestic violence, their presence can be retraumatizing, intensifying their fear of punishment and further isolating them. As a result, they find it increasingly difficult to engage with support services. Women with lived experience further shared that women who spoke up about injustices lost privileges, which included their jobs, visits from family, and phone calls. Women's request forms for services, resources, family visits, or actions from the prison administration would sometimes inexplicably go missing, and solitary detention is a frequently used punishment.

The Elders for Change detailed many instances of punishment through serving time in solitary detention units, which are wholly inappropriate for addressing the complex needs of women with psychological or mental health challenges. These detention units are isolating and dehumanizing, with a lack of sanitation, regular cleaning, or any privacy from surveillance and cameras. Overall, the prison's punitive and sometimes violent responses to situations can be retraumatizing, creating an environment of fear and suppression. This culture of fear, compounded by a lack of adequate mental health support, discourages women from speaking out about their needs and experiences.

Challenges to Accessing Help

Women in TWCC face significant barriers to accessing necessary programs and support. The prison system's internal bureaucracy presents complicated touchpoints — formal administrative checks and physical checks for moving between different areas, each requiring numerous permissions and procedures. This makes navigation from one point to another a challenging task. Rehabilitation is not prioritized

above work in the institution. The women in TWCC need exemptions from their in-prison employment to participate in programs that could aid their rehabilitation or personal development such as courses and classes. This priority on prison work not only limits their access to supportive resources but also perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage. One woman with lived experience of incarceration shared the intimidation she experienced from her work supervisor if she asked for leave to complete rehabilitative programs and courses. She was often threatened with losing her job if she did not complete all her shifts and the male managers would often react aggressively and raise their voices in response to her requests. The small weekly wage from in-prison employment is vital for women to afford phone calls or purchase sanitary products and the institutional hierarchy further inhibits them from seeking support or participating in rehabilitation programs. Overall, the intersection of gender, culture, and trauma often renders these women "hardest to reach."

Systemic Barriers for Rehabilitation Initiatives

Across the criminal justice system, rehabilitation initiatives face significant barriers that hinder their implementation and success. The justice system's resistance to change is a major obstacle. Government agencies and prison administrations have been resistant to adopting new policies and practices, especially those that require a fundamental shift in approach from punitive to rehabilitative.²² Despite overwhelming evidence that Australia's prison system is failing to address recidivism (reoffending after release), Australia's so-called tough-on-crime approach has informed many of the criminal justice processes and practices.

22 Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Australia's Prison Dilemma* (Canberra: Productivity Commission, 2021).



Figure 6. Elders for Change staff, stakeholders, and members of the research group

The bureaucratic nature of government institutions means that reforms are often delayed. These delays can be particularly detrimental to initiatives that require timely intervention and continuous support, such as those aimed at reducing recidivism through cultural and community engagement. In the focus groups, this was commonly referred to as “red tape” reflecting the complicated hierarchy of stakeholders, policies, and agencies that often need to be coordinated to enable initiatives and interventions to operate. Staff turnover and election cycles further complicate this system’s need for vital grassroots and place-based initiatives.

Government funding is also misaligned with the need for long-term, authentic interventions. Across the focus groups, we heard how government funding for in-prison programs is precarious and tied to results. As an Elders for Change staff member commented: “It’s really hard to convince government about caring.” While governments around Australia are attempting to invest more in preventative, holistic, and grassroots funding, the pressure for programs to be metrics-driven may not address the deep-seated issues that

lead people to prison. Effective rehabilitation and healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires long-term investment in initiatives that are culturally safe and address the structural and systemic barriers people face.²³ In the focus groups, people commented that programs would be more effective if they could focus on the holistic well-being of the participants beyond easy-to-synthesize metrics of success, acknowledging that true healing and rehabilitation take time.

Elders for Change

One Elder described the Elders for Change as “trailblazers.” Elders for Change is a volunteer-driven initiative and consists of Traditional Owners, Historical Owners, and Community Elders from North West Queensland who are accepted and respected in their communities. The Elders for Change bring authenticity to the concept of cultural support and safety within TWCC.

Through effective relationship building, empowerment, and advocacy, the Elders for

23 “ADCQ Submission to the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee Inquiry on Strategies to Prevent and Reduce Criminal Activity,” Anti-Discrimination Committee Queensland, 2014. [↗](#)

Change have provided a vital support to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at TWCC. As one Elder stated during the focus groups, the Elders for Change are “beacons for hope and change.”

Relationships

At the core of the Elders for Change initiative is their ability to form and maintain relationships both inside and beyond the walls of TWCC. To facilitate effective engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, relationships need to be built upon pillars of trust, integrity, and continuity.²⁴ Although the cultural liaison officers employed by the prison are constrained by resources, responsibilities, and prison policies, the Elders for Change can overcome such barriers, existing as their own entity. Bearing their yellow ID badges, which grant them access to the prison, the Elders for Change can visit on a consistent basis, enabling them to build and form trusting and nurturing bonds with the women inside prison.

Being recognized as an Elder in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities comes with significant respect. Being an Elder is much more than an age — Elders are looked to for guidance, leadership, support, and wisdom. A woman with lived experience of incarceration explained how, in their cultures, people are “not just raised by our father and mother — we are also raised by our Elders.” The Elders’ role in the community significantly amplifies their capacity to build relationships and connections.

One woman who engaged with Elders for Change during her incarceration at TWCC commented that the Elders for Change have a distinct “aura and vibe to them.” Multiple stakeholders echoed this sentiment that the Elders for Change have

a warmth that contributes to their ability to form connections. Visually they stand out by the eye-catching, colourful tops they wear when they visit. These shirts are adorned with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flags, bearing the powerful statement “Always was, Always will be” — emphasizing the traditional ownership of the land by its First people. In stark contrast to the standard, sterile blue uniforms that prison officers wear, every detail of the Elders for Change, including their attire, contributes to their powerful presence. In the words of a woman with lived experience of incarceration, the Elders’ presence “gives us that bit more of hope ... you can’t get that from paid services or officers.”

The entire foundation of Elders for Change, as an initiative, is built upon their ability to form relationships with the women inside the prison and maintain their connections with women’s families and loved ones outside. As a result, they are well-positioned to empower and advocate for these women.



Figure 7. An Elder’s colourful shirt

24 Janet Hunt, “Engaging with Indigenous Australia — Exploring the Conditions for Effective Relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities,” Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, October 2013. [↗](#)

Empowerment

Incarceration removes people from their country, kinship, and language. Many of the women speak of the difficulties connecting with culture, which leaves them feeling isolated, helpless, and powerless. Elders for Change aims to empower them by facilitating a journey of cultural reconnection that enriches their sense of belonging, purpose, and self-worth. The Elders for Change recognize that a strong cultural identity is essential for mental and emotional well-being. Through yarning circles (a place to gather and share stories, discuss troubles, educate, and nurture relationships), they provide the women with a “sense of security and a taste of home.” That valuable work of building cultural connection and identity is acknowledged by a 2018 study showing that increased cultural engagement was associated with decreased rates of recidivism among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.²⁵ By championing cultural reconnection, the Elders for Change play pivotal roles in empowering these women.

Recognizing personal strengths is another way that Elders for Change empower women in prison. They empathize that reintegration back into community, after release, can be difficult for numerous reasons including stigma attached to a criminal history, racial biases, and a lack of opportunities. As a result of these barriers, many people released from prison find themselves stuck in a cycle of disadvantage and end up reoffending. In 2021, the Queensland Sentencing Council found that across the state, 70 per cent of sentenced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were repeat offenders. Not only are Indigenous offenders more likely to return to prison than their non-Indigenous counterparts, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

also have the highest rates of readmission.²⁶ To reduce recidivism, the Elders for Change believe that fostering personal strengths and encouraging external interests are key drivers of positive change.

Explaining their culture, one Elder described how “everyone is valued for what they bring to the table, where every person has a natural gift or talent to give.” Elders for Change build on these strengths through a range of activities tailored to the women’s interests such as art, dance, and poetry. They also conduct workshops on pertinent topics such as traumatic brain injury and domestic violence to try to help the women rise above the systemic barriers and cycles of disadvantage. During the focus groups, one of the Elders explained that “just because you [the women] are in here, doesn’t define who you are as a person and doesn’t define your future.” Embracing such an approach provides these women with hope for their future and sets them up for success.

Stories of Change

One Sister disclosed that connecting with her Elders completely changed her perspective about her ice (crystal methamphetamine) use and changed her outlook on her future. In her past, not only had she spent time in the criminal justice system but she had also had her children removed by child safety. She described the joy and fulfillment of just seeing and being around the Elders for Change during her time in Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre, and how connecting with her Elders was the one thing that had helped her through her drug addiction.

25 Stephane M. Shepherd, Rosa Hazel Delgado, Juanita Sherwood, and Yin Paradies, “The Impact of Indigenous Cultural Identity and Cultural Engagement on Violent Offending,” *BMC Public Health* 18, no. 1 (2017). [↗](#)

26 “Connecting the Dots: The Sentencing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Queensland,” Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council (Brisbane: Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council, 2021); Matthew Willis and John-Patrick Moore, “Reintegration of Indigenous Prisoners,” *Australian Institute of Criminology*, 2008. [↗](#)

Now she is a practising artist and has reconnected with her children, community, and culture. She has even delivered speeches to mayors and politicians on child safety systems, and the impact of ice on the community.

On the impact that Elders for Change had on her she said "I've been to rehab, jail ... this is the first time I've tried my Elders and it's working. I'm actually saying no to ice. I can be there for my children."

Advocacy

Elders for Change also plays a crucial role in advocacy by amplifying the voices of incarcerated women who are otherwise silenced. In focus groups, we often heard about the culture of fear leading to suppression of truth regarding the reality of life behind bars. This fear stops women from speaking up when they observe injustices in prison because they risk losing their job or money, getting hurt, or becoming subject to even more punishment. The Elders for Change confront this problem by giving the women a voice to express themselves without any fear of consequences. The women feel safe and heard by the Elders, who can take their stories back out into the community to pursue positive change. One woman with lived experience shared that when the Elders for Change visited prison, "I did have a voice."

The Elders for Change are powerful and influential members of the community. Many have overcome significant hurdles in their own lives to gain experience in academia, advocacy, and activism. They have networks spanning all levels of government and community which enables them to advocate for policy reform, advocating for crime prevention, community development, and ensuring that the women inside of Townsville

Women's Correctional Centre are treated with dignity and respect. The Elders for Change's advocacy is not restricted to the government but also occurs through educating university students and prison officers about cultural safety and training. Elders champion the women in prison, and they most importantly continue to "carry stories from the inside and bring them out."

Lessons Learned

We identified five key lessons that Elders for Change's experience can teach us for empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison.

Prioritizing Care Over Punishment Can Reduce Recidivism

The correctional system's culture of punishment must shift its focus toward healing and compassion. At Townsville Women's Correctional Centre (TWCC), women endure severe punishment through isolation, deprivation of basic healthcare, and mental anguish. The Elders for Change have observed, and in some cases experienced themselves, the harmful effects of this punitive approach and instead champion actions rooted in care and empathy. This strategy offers crucial lessons, particularly in its potential to reduce recidivism and pave the way for more positive futures for these incarcerated women.

During focus groups, participants shared multiple examples of solitary confinement used as punishment. The isolation of the detention unit created further opportunities for punishment. For example, women recounted how, in solitary confinement, access to the toilet was controlled by staff members who sometimes deny access. Having to live in such isolation exacerbates their mental health struggles when what they truly need is compassion and care.

The lack of prioritization for the well-being of women in prison is further evident in their limited access to healthcare. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have spent time in prison are at higher risk of poorer health as a result of increased exposure to risk factors. Such poor health manifests through mental health conditions and chronic health conditions such as asthma, cardiovascular disease, and arthritis.²⁷ Considering this context, it is no surprise that mental and physical health deteriorates in prison. One of the Elders highlighted that when a woman has a mental health crisis (such as a psychotic episode or suicide attempt) the response is often to remove her to an isolated cell with 24-hour surveillance. The Better Health Channel Victoria suggests that during such a crisis, front-line responders should show dignity and respect, provide hope for recovery, and ensure the person feels comforted and supported.²⁸ This is in stark contrast to what occurs in prison and speaks to a culture where mental health is compromised. Another Elder described how the prison staff “play games with people’s lives,” a sentiment underscored by the refusal to provide appropriate medical treatment due to biases, such as accusations of “drug-seeking behaviour,” or sheer indifference to the severity of medical issues. In one focus group, participants recalled losing a friend in detention who died from a head injury after being denied adequate medical attention. Multiple examples were shared in the focus groups of women experiencing pyelonephritis (kidney infection) and sepsis.

The Elders for Change initiative combats the shortcomings of the traditional correctional system and offers an approach focused on healing, compassion, and care. The Elders for Change provide nonjudgmental, genuine care for the women in prison, a practice that has proven

transformative for the women we heard from. The Elders for Change emphasize the importance of “relating to people at their level,” a method that fosters such a deep connection between the Elders and women that words are not needed to communicate. In stark contrast to the prison system’s reliance on isolation and punishment, the Elders’ nurturing approach often mirrors the role of a mother or auntie and offers a profound sense of belonging and hope. As one Elder observed, “if they [women in prison] are surrounded by fear there is no chance for rehabilitation.” Elders for Change try to eliminate such fear and create a comfortable environment to help women in prison. The improved environment renewed a sense of purpose and determination that enabled women in prison to escape a life of abuse and addiction. The work of the Elders for Change underscores an essential lesson: punishment and fear counteract rehabilitation and healing. By contrast, an approach rooted in compassion and love, that prioritizes mental and physical well-being, offers women in prison their best chance at a better life.

Reconnecting with Culture and Identity Is Crucial for Healing

An Elder stated that in the prison, “women start to lose their identity.” While they experience an absence of family and cultural connection, there is also a serious lack of cultural support given inadequate cultural competency in prison policies and a large portion of correctional staff. Embedding cultural knowledge into prison processes has been limited by significant barriers, including resource shortages. As one cultural officer said of the prison environment, “Most don’t know that so many different communities are there. And everyone comes from their own unique set of circumstances ... we wouldn’t

27 “Health of People in Prison,” Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022. [↗](#)

28 “Mental Health First Aid for Someone Who Is Suicidal,” Better Health Channel. [↗](#)

maintain the connections we have without the Elders.”

The genuine engagement between the Elders for Change and women in prison provides a sense of security and a taste of home. As one woman with lived experience of incarceration said of the Elders for Change, “They keep us connected with our families, our culture ... because we lose a lot of it. You lose yourself and then you lose your identity. You lose your family, you lose everything.” Connecting to culture is effective support for women in prison — Aboriginal and Torres Islander women in prison must maintain their culture and identity as a part of healing. Through their engagement with women in Townsville Women’s Correctional Centre, Elders for Change have demonstrated this value.

The Elders for Change initiative has provided a transformative opportunity to enrich cultural understanding and support within Townsville’s prison settings. The Elders for Change’s insights and roles, shaped by cultural knowledge and authority as well as personal experiences, are especially valuable in addressing sensitive issues like grief and loss. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, when a loved one passes away, the entire community gathers to share in “Sorry Business” — a period of cultural practices conducted to mark the experience of grief or loss, for example, after someone’s death. In the prison environment, women are not able to engage in Sorry Business, or their usual cultural practices around grief and loss, making these experiences particularly disorientating and difficult. The Elders for Change help with creating an environment for Sorry Business and help the women process grief and loss in a way that affirms their culture. They also help and empower the women to celebrate their culture, for example, through dancing and celebrating occasions such as National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week, celebrations held across Australia in the first week of July each year,

to celebrate and recognize the history, culture, and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Elders for Change apply their knowledge, skills, and experiences to help women navigate their circumstances in prison and provide opportunities to recognize their own strengths for life after incarceration. Since many of the women in prison have no one in their corner, and no mother figure, the Elders for Change approach prioritizes creating a safe environment for the women in prison. With the Elders, the women can share their stories, challenges, and hopes, knowing they’ll be listened to without being judged or misunderstood. By fostering a sense of hope, and being a source of practical, culturally relevant advice, Elders for Change empowers individuals to build a better future. They take a strength-based approach, guided by authentic relationships with the women.

Across the focus groups, women with previous experiences of incarceration shared that they aspired to pursue arts, community organizing, or psychology and counselling. All these women said that the Elders for Change’s support was crucial to helping them form hopes for the future and recognize the unique value they bring to their communities. The Elders for Change’s culturally led approach has created a more supportive environment that promotes understanding and healing among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison, which is central to their rehabilitation and healing.

Relationships Are Everything

The Elders for Change maintain and leverage the relationships they develop. These relationships are not confined to their community but extend far and wide into custodial settings, community organizations, and government agencies. Learning from Elders for Change is vital. Numerous focus group participants underscored

the importance of consistency, perseverance, rallying support from “change champions,” and advocating at the political level. These key pillars leverage relationships to achieve meaningful and impactful change.

Stories of Change

A Sister who had been incarcerated at TWCC detailed her experience of postnatal depression as a young mom who had experienced domestic violence and was separated from her own family (who were in the criminal justice system). She detailed that with the help of Elders for Change, she regained her connection with culture but also her belief in herself.

Now, she is pursuing her interests in mental health work and psychology, hoping to provide guidance for Aboriginal women who are experiencing mental illness.

The success of the Elders for Change initiative stems from their ability to form relationships with the women in prison — cemented by continuity, consistency, and perseverance. Early on, the Elders for Change recognized that many cultural support programs for the women in prison didn't last for very long. Multiple people we spoke with echoed one woman's observation that “when the government sees something is going good, they stop it.” Elders for Change understand that initiatives have to be driven by community leaders. They recognized that building trust is a challenging and lengthy process that can be achieved only through continuity and consistency. Combined with their endearing

and nonjudgemental approach, the simplicity of just being able to show up regularly for the women in prison helps provide them with hope and support. This continuity and consistency necessary to form relationships cannot be replicated by short-term programs.

Moving up from the grassroots, engaging “change champions” is also vital in overcoming the disconnect between policymakers and those in prison. One of the cultural officers working in the prison explained that “change champions” are individuals who make up the “middle” layer of management and help connect lofty ideas and plans with the practical day-to-day operations on the ground. Such champions include cultural liaison officers who see the immense difficulties stemming from a lack of cultural support for the women in prison. Others include stakeholders from external programs, such as drug rehabilitation specialists who witness the deterioration of addiction and withdrawal within incarcerated populations. These hardships inspire change champions to support and buy into initiatives such as Elders for Change — a crucial role as these individuals can also rally support from those with decision-making power.

Numerous prison stakeholders, including prison officers, support workers, and external program officers, spoke highly of the Elders for Change. One cultural officer described how the Elders for Change “do a lot of hard work for us by going into the prison.” While Elders for Change can aid the change champions, the benefits are mutual. One cultural officer expressed how, for initiatives like Elders for Change to gain footing and make headway, “you need to have buy-in from staff.” Being able to engage the change champions is essential to help navigate systemic resistance and the slow pace of change within government institutions. Alongside grassroots relationships,

engaging the middle layer and cultivating change champions is equally important.

Elders for Change also aim to nurture relationships with policy- and decision makers to enact impactful change. One Elder described the initiative as “a magic web of communication and relationships that includes and transcends custodial settings.” These connections extend to agencies such as Queensland Corrective Services, Youth Justice, Department of Housing, Queensland Police, and the Magistrates Court. The Elders for Change recognize that relationships need to be created within such organizations to dictate and influence policy reform. These goals have been advanced through significant reforms such as the Path to Treaty, which aims to initiate truth-telling and healing processes in Queensland, and Raise the Age, a measure to increase the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14. Additionally, there is substantial involvement in the Justice Reinvestment program, which focuses on shifting power to community and reducing the incarceration rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and children.

Interventions Need to Be Long-term and Authentic

To make meaningful and lasting change, interventions need to prioritize long-term commitment and authenticity over short-term metrics. The Elders for Change initiative demonstrates that true transformation requires sustained, genuine effort. As one Elder emphasized, “If you start this journey, you cannot give up; you have to see it through.” This enduring commitment is crucial for initiatives aimed at supporting incarcerated women. Long-term involvement from all stakeholders not only enhances the initiative’s credibility but also ensures continuous support for incarcerated women. The focus groups emphasized that the Elders for Change’s consistent presence fosters

trust and stability, creating a sense of security and continuity that is crucial for healing.



Figure 8. Elders for Change banner at Deadly Day Out, a community NAIDOC week event

The Elders for Change also emphasize that healing from incarceration is a deep, ongoing process that involves recovery from intergenerational trauma. Metrics like recidivism rates or educational achievements are important indicators of success in rehabilitation, but they cannot fully capture the holistic healing process. The deeper aspects of rehabilitation, such as restoring cultural identities and rebuilding self-worth, were crucially important. But because they are hard to capture and report on, sometimes they get overlooked by decision makers. A drug rehabilitation specialist emphasized this point by asking: “Elders for Change makes us able to do our jobs better. But it’s not written anywhere. How can you measure and report on a relationship?” Elders for Change provides holistic support. One Elder with lived experience of incarceration commented that the “Elders are an untapped resource,” and their unique support transcends

traditional methods and centres on authenticity and care.

Nothing About Us Without Us: Listening to People with Lived Experience

Since colonization, Australian government policies and laws have dispossessed, disenfranchised, and silenced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. After 200 years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resistance, resilience, and advocacy, the Australian government has described itself as being on a path to reconciliation since 1991. However, the growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, men, and (alarmingly) children in the country's prisons indicates that government action has so far not aligned with this rhetoric. As the Elders for Change in Townsville have advocated, amplifying voices with lived experience will ensure that policies and initiatives to combat this issue are informed and effective.

An Elder for Change staff member's perspective was that "the biggest barrier is that the women are invisible and they're voiceless while they're inside." One Elder with lived experience of incarceration further commented that: "the people who are supposed to be looking after [the women in prison] are actually suppressing their voice." A lot about the prison environment retraumatizes women. Without the voices of the women inside, there is no transparency into the realities of the prison system, as one Elder said of her own experience in prison: "when the doors close transparency ends."

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison, their perspectives and voices shed light on more than just their time in prison because there are many overlapping systems that women in prison must navigate. When speaking about the child protection system and the high rates of removal of Aboriginal children, one Elder

emphasized that "you need to hear the voices, especially women who have had their children taken by child safety."

In the focus groups, one Elder summarized the empowerment of women in TWCC through telling their stories as "taking stories from the grassroots to the top." The Elders for Change know that change happens through telling and listening to stories. This is why listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have served time in prison is critical to creating positive change. An Elders for Change staff member summarized this in a focus group when they said: "holding a story for a woman can be a very powerful thing." This lesson was driven home time and time again during focus groups. When discussing what makes the Elders for Change initiative so impactful for the women in TWCC, a support worker for women in prison said that it was "The fact that they've been heard ... that they've been given hope for the future ... that feeling of being a part of something — that's what the Elders give them."

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in TWCC can become Elders for the next generation. A support worker emphasized how the women currently in prison "are going to be Elders themselves one day." Listening to the stories of these women and the Elders for Change, and valuing their lived experiences and cultural knowledge as necessary to advance solutions to the issues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's incarceration is not just important — it's urgent. The initiative demonstrates the power of storytelling and emphasizes the value of listening and of being heard. As an Elder with lived experience of incarceration put it, "It's about giving women a voice to express themselves ... When you have a voice then anything is possible."

Stories of Change

A Sister we spoke to in Townsville reflected on her motivation to be a positive example for the next generation, like her Elders have been for her. From being previously involved in both using and distributing drugs, and being incarcerated at TWCC, she's now committed to giving back to help the younger generations, who she knows look up to her. She commented on how much damage drugs and alcohol have had on her generation, and how much this has motivated her to make changes to be a mentor for the future.

Conclusion: Opportunities for Reaching the Hardest to Reach

Elders for Change is a powerful example of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership generating positive change through holistic support for the hardest to reach in their communities. It exemplifies the influence of grassroots initiatives in empowering women experiencing marginalization: the importance of care, culture, relationships, consistency, authenticity, and amplifying lived experiences as paramount in addressing the issue of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison. However, to reach hard-to-reach populations everywhere, and ultimately advance the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, this Elders for Change initiative case study presents three key opportunities broadly applicable to policymakers, decision makers, and changemakers from grassroots and global contexts.

The importance of culture. Policies, programs, and initiatives everywhere need to prioritize culture. We highlighted the harm that comes with

removing people from their culture, community and, ultimately, their identity. We also highlight the power of culture in reaching people who have been isolated and marginalized. Because people learn about and make sense of the world through their culture, connecting with people through a culturally safe approach informed by lived experience is the most effective way to create meaningful change.

Change must be embraced at every level.

Elders for Change are innovators in how they have navigated the complex, siloed, and intricate bureaucracy that is the justice system. For grassroots initiatives with limited resources, tackling large government agencies or structures is a significant challenge. However, by forming relationships with key stakeholders, and sharing their vision for the future with people in the community, prison staff, management, and policymakers, Elders for Change are bringing people on the journey with them. They acknowledge the importance of grassroots, community-led change, but that it cannot exist in a vacuum from the broader structures it is working within.

Change must be championed by place-based knowledge holders. Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Elders are deeply respected knowledge holders and leaders. They garner the respect and cultural authority necessary to champion meaningful changes. They understand their communities' needs, are deeply familiar with the local context, and can act as truth tellers. Elders for Change ultimately demonstrates the incomparable leadership of place-based knowledge holders in reaching hard-to-reach populations around the world.

Research Team



Maisa Binte Haque is an honours student (bachelor of biomedicine) at The Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health, University of Melbourne. She is from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her research journey began as a research assistant on a project exploring Aboriginal memory frameworks, sparking her curiosity about the hardest-to-reach populations. This experience, combined with her training in Culturally Responsive Practice, has sharpened her qualitative research skills and strengthened her ability to work across interdisciplinary fields. She was also a student ambassador for the Faculty of MDHS, a peer health advocate, and executive member of Strive student health initiatives.

“During my journey as a Reach researcher, from conducting fieldwork in Townsville to connecting with the Elders from the Elders for Change initiative and other stakeholders, and hearing their stories, each moment was a profound learning experience. I aspire for our research to weave a narrative that honours the lives and voices of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, fostering awareness and compassion.”



Cindy (Siqi) Li is a master of criminology student at the University of Melbourne with a strong passion for addressing social inequalities, particularly those affecting marginalized communities. She previously participated in public health projects in China, where she worked to raise awareness about sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS among low-income workers. This experience deepened her understanding of the importance of education and healthcare. During her undergraduate studies, Cindy founded and led her university's swimming club, where she promoted healthy living while also fostering a supportive and inclusive community. Her academic interests lie in using an intersectional approach to explore and address the challenges faced by marginalized groups.

“Participating in the Reach Alliance program has been an incredibly valuable opportunity for me. I've had the chance to meet and learn from many insightful and experienced people, and I was fortunate to collaborate with Elders for Change, gaining a deeper understanding of the stories and challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This experience has made me reflect more deeply on social justice, and it has filled me with hope about how we can work together to build a more equitable society. I believe that such collaboration and learning are key to driving real change.”



Anggi Arinta Putri is pursuing her master of management degree at the University of Melbourne. She currently works for an Indonesian state-owned company that focuses on delivering subsidized housing across Indonesia. She seeks to work with diverse individuals and communities and collaborate on positive transformations.

“Being part of the Reach Alliance has been an eye-opening experience. The insights gained from community partners, mentors, and peers, along with our collective effort to create meaningful change, have been invaluable. Collaborating with Elders for Change has deepened my understanding of cultural resilience and community ties. I hope this case study will empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and inspire more inclusive practices that honour the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”



Braven Rathesh is in his final year of medicine at the University of Melbourne. Throughout his studies, he has gained extensive knowledge about First Nations Health and the importance of cultural safety and awareness. He recognizes the complex interplay between social determinants of health and health outcomes and is passionate about continuing to make a meaningful impact in this field in his career as a doctor. Outside the world of medicine, Braven is deeply connected to his Sri Lankan heritage. He dedicates much of his time to learning his native language, enjoying Tamil music, and watching Tamil films.

"I am deeply grateful for my experience with Elders for Change. Engaging with the Elders allowed me to witness the immense power of face-to-face interaction and the significance of storytelling and listening. This opportunity enriched my understanding of Indigenous Australian history, and I look forward to incorporating these lessons into my practice as I begin my medical career."



Belinda Thompson is a master of social policy student at the University of Melbourne. She has recently joined the Program Development and Effectiveness team at Djirra, an Aboriginal community-controlled organization delivering holistic, culturally safe, specialist family violence services for Aboriginal women and children. Before that, Belinda worked for The Big Issue, a social enterprise providing opportunities for people experiencing homelessness, marginalization, and disadvantage. She has also worked in renewable energy and youth development.

"The Reach experience was an incredible opportunity to learn from truly inspiring people. It was such a privilege to learn from and collaborate with the Elders for Change, as well as our mentors and my team. I hope our case study conveys the crisis of the overincarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the incredible strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and the important impact of the Elders for Change."

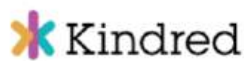


Maria Rodrigues is the director of Kindred, an international nonprofit organization that builds social and emotional well-being using a community development approach. With offices in Colombia and Australia, Kindred supports people, organizations, and governments to identify factors causing psychological distress and address them together. Maria's experience as a researcher, educator, and development practitioner spans over 15 years working at the intersection of mental health, social justice, and cross-cultural peacebuilding.

"Supporting students on their research journey has been an energizing and eye-opening experience. My goal as a mentor was to show students what is possible when you truly collaborate with community partners to engage local people as active participants and put their priorities front and centre throughout the research process. Working with the students in this way deepened my own understanding of how productive research partnerships can be built."



Elders for Change is a collaborative initiative of Traditional Custodians and Elders from North West Queensland, Australia, focused on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at the Townsville Women's Correctional Centre. In partnership with the Australian Red Cross, they provide cultural support, grief counselling, and education. The group also works with Youth Justice and Queensland Corrective Services to integrate Elders' perspectives into restorative justice and improve support for incarcerated men, aiming to strengthen cultural identity and community ties for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



Kindred Collaborative's Reach Alliance 2023 initiative supported student-led research projects in India and Guatemala. Team India explored scalable solutions for addressing mental health disorders through a local nonprofit, while Team Guatemala focused on empowering education leaders to improve education quality in rural communities. The research was presented at the Reach Alliance Symposium in Mexico, which brought together global thinkers to discuss sustainable development goals and social inequality. The projects were conducted in partnership with organizations Atmiyata and ConnectEd.

<https://kindred.com/co/reach-alliance-2023/>



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