The experience of Aboriginal women in prisons is further compounded by seeking help from a government departments and agencies that are not built to provide capacity building and support to them and their children. Most of the women are highly traumatised from compounding life events including family violence, child removals, poverty and grief and loss and is further heightened through the experience of being incarcerated.

In my observations whilst visiting Aboriginal women in prison they have told me on how they have wanted to leave violent relationships and have gone to seek help and refuge only to be flagged in the system as unable or unwilling to protect their children from violence. This systemic contact results in the removal of the children with more permanent consequences in child placement through government policies. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities in particular their mothers has a historical legacy for Aboriginal people.

The removal of Aboriginal women from their role in families and communities, further fragments and exacerbates the social and cultural issues that occur in the everyday lives of Aboriginal people. The immediate consequence for the women on a deeply personal level is the interruption of attachment to their children resulting in transmission of inter-generational trauma and further entrenching cycles of disempowerment, sometimes resulting in multiple generations of Aboriginal women from the same families incarcerated at the same time.

Many of the Aboriginal women are hyper vigilant due to their trauma and medication is used for behavioural management, rather than having culturally led therapeutic responses these should be lead by Aboriginal organisations and workers to engage with Aboriginal women on their specific needs across remand, sentenced and pre-release facilities.

The current through care models offered to Aboriginal women are founded in mainstream psychology and are individualist in their approach. They are built on the premise that post release Aboriginal women are able to function based on the work done through cognitive skills courses. But sadly, the reality is that many return to families and communities that are not able to support women recently released from prison, nor are the mainstream agencies able to case manage the social and cultural obligations that Aboriginal women have in family and community contexts. At systemic level we set Aboriginal women up to fail, we expect them to live separately from their support mechanisms and their cultural obligations – not engaging the families and communities in their journey back into society, thus creating a revolving door for Aboriginal women in the justice system.

Mapping the journey into, through and post release from the justice system is critical in understanding the challenges, barriers and experiences to build a new system that enables diversionary away from the current high levels of Aboriginal women in prison and to be responsive to the transmission of intergenerational trauma of Aboriginal people and communities.

Crime prevention initiatives and investment into Aboriginal Youth Justice strategies should be a priority for all governments to work on the drivers of justice based issues in Aboriginal communities, rather than tertiary responses.

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