



WOMEN'S
AND GIRLS'
EMERGENCY
CENTRE

WALK WITH HER

FRAMEWORK

FOR SUPPORTING WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN INCARCERATED

ALWAYS WAS, ALWAYS WILL BE ABORIGINAL LAND.

The Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC) acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country and recognise their continuing connection to land, waterways, language, and culture.

WAGEC works on the unceded lands of the Gadigal, Wangal and Dharawal people of the Eora Nation, and we pay our deepest respects to Elders past and present.

WAGEC also recognise the inter-generational trauma and structural racism that colonisation has, and continues to, inflict on First Nations people. That includes our position in a system whose history is one of perpetuating and exacerbating genocide, removal, oppression, and racism.

We pay tribute to the many generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have led, and continue to lead, the way in creating safer futures for women and children, as well as culturally safe spaces for community.

We do our best to honour their strength and resilience as allies in the fight for safety, equality and justice.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

The Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC) acknowledges the strength, resilience and wisdom of women with lived experience of incarceration, homelessness, and gender-based violence.

WAGEC recognises that women with lived experience possess unique knowledge and insights that cannot be gained through professional qualifications alone. We honour their courage in navigating systems that were not designed to support them, and in sharing their stories to create meaningful change.

We acknowledge that systems of justice, housing, and family support have historically overlooked the specific needs of women, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, pregnant women, and mothers. We recognise the compounding impacts of trauma, violence, poverty, and structural marginalisation on women's pathways into and out of imprisonment.

We pay tribute to the women who have shaped the *Walk With Her* Framework through their lived experience, feedback, and guidance. Their contributions keep our work grounded in the realities of women's lives and community needs.

WAGEC is committed to centering the voices of women with lived experience. We honour their courage and expertise, and pledge to listen, learn, and strengthen our practice alongside the women we serve.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF WOMEN WHO NEED SAFE ACCOMMODATION TO BE REUNIFIED WITH THEIR CHILDREN

WAGEC recognises that access to safe, stable accommodation is often essential for women to be reunited with their children.

Housing is not just a practical need, but a foundation for stability, connection, healing, and rebuilding family relationships. We are committed to advocating for timely access to safe housing so women and children can be together safely.

SECTOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

WAGEC consulted 150 practitioners representing 44 organisations across New South Wales (NSW) that support women accessing homelessness services following incarceration.

Through these conversations, practitioners expressed a clear need for guidance on how to best prepare themselves to provide support to women in the most respectful and responsive way possible.

WAGEC's *Walk With Her* Framework has been created out of that need.

WELCOME

I recently visited Wellington Correctional Centre as part of the consultation with women who have experienced incarceration, for the development of this Framework.

Before I visited, I had been reflecting on the stats we sadly know too well— 30% of women who enter prison in NSW do so from homelessness, while 50% exit into homelessness. Aboriginal women are 22 times more likely to be incarcerated than other women.

The women we met reflected these stats and openly shared with us their experiences of discrimination, abuse, addiction and poverty. They did so in service of others with care, wisdom and clarity. Their insights are the foundation of this Framework.

Towards the end of the consultation, one of the women realised she had worked with WAGEC previously. She thanked us for supporting Her, for not judging Her, and for standing with Her even when things got hard. She told us that one WAGEC teammate was still calling Her, and they were the only calls she ever received. She was getting out soon, and this time because of this support, she would have somewhere to go.

When we stand up and stand together for the women who have been ushered into the margins of our communities, we can create real change and real safety not only for the woman before us, but for Her children, Her family, and Her whole community.

Thank you for *Walking With Her* until that vital outcome.

Nicole Yade
CEO, WAGEC



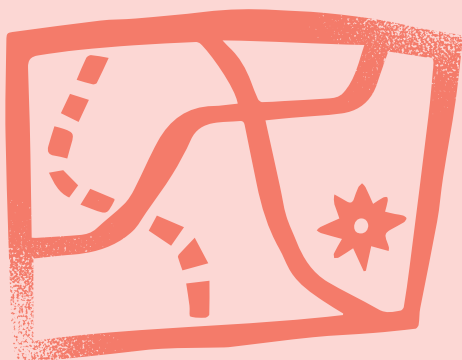
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“We’ve got hopes,
dreams, and plans.
We just need support
to get there.”



“I’m absolutely
terrified of getting out
because I don’t know
where I’m going to go.”



“Being two minutes
late can ruin
everything.”



“I was a victim — and
I got punished for it.”



“If you don’t have
housing, you end up
back with the same
people, the same
environment.”



“If nothing changes,
nothing changes.”

ANY ONE OF US CAN END UP IN PRISON

When I first started at From Now, many people, including my family and friends, were worried. “Aren’t you scared?” “These women are dangerous.”

The truth is, any one of us could find ourselves in custody through circumstances we never anticipated. This framework challenges the narratives that keep women stuck in cycles of stigma, isolation, and system harm.

Women are often defined by their time in custody, yet this represents only a small part of their story. Many leave prison navigating grief, loss, and disconnection, without stable housing, identification, or meaningful support. Without the right responses, these barriers can deepen cycles of crisis.

A pivotal moment in my early career was learning that women giving birth in custody were cuffed to hospital beds, with limited time to bond with their babies. That reality changed me. It exposed the inhumanity embedded in our systems.

Women leaving prison need more than checklists. They deserve dignity, understanding, and real opportunities to rebuild. This framework supports workers to walk alongside them with consistency, compassion, and respect.

Jemma Malik

Program Lead – From Now



INTRODUCTION

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF SPECIALIST HOMELESSNESS SERVICE PRACTITIONERS

In 2023–24, the Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) sector in Australia supported around 8,900 clients exiting custody, including 1,825 in NSW. Approximately 69% required assistance with accommodation, yet only 2,800 received this support. Many clients already had prior engagement with SHS agencies.¹

According to the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2025–35, over half of people preparing to leave prison expect to be homeless, with nearly half of these relying on short-term or emergency accommodation.² People exiting incarceration into homelessness are twice as likely to reoffend and return to prison within nine months of release.³

SHS practitioners are often the bridge between incarceration and safety. The way a practitioner listens, assesses, plans, and walks alongside a woman when she leaves prison can determine whether she moves into stability, or whether she returns to unsafe environments, homelessness, or further involvement with the justice system.

Those working in the SHS sector operate closer to the intersection of homelessness and incarceration than most systems ever will. This work involves proximity to harm, resilience, refusal, survival, and complexity. It comes with both responsibility and opportunity.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INCARCERATION OF WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA

1. Why Understanding This History Matters

No system of incarceration exists in isolation. It is shaped by the society around it. Poverty, colonisation, gendered expectations, and social control have all influenced how women experience incarceration in Australia. Too often, women are judged for surviving circumstances beyond their control, carrying stigma long after their sentence has ended. Systems frequently misunderstand these realities, responding with punishment and exclusion rather than support, healing, and opportunities to rebuild.

2. Early Foundations: Punishing Poverty

The Australian justice system was imposed through colonisation in 1788, alongside the forced dispossession of Aboriginal peoples and the transportation of people as convict labour. For Aboriginal communities, this marked the beginning of ongoing, systemic harm that continues today. For women, incarceration has long been linked to labour, control, and expectations around reproduction.

Developed during a time of widespread poverty and instability, the Australian system was designed to regulate behaviour and distinguish between those seen as ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ of support.

Women were often positioned as undeserving, particularly when experiencing poverty or when they did not meet social expectations around behaviour, sexuality, or motherhood. In this way, structural disadvantage became criminalised, shaping pathways into the justice system rather than addressing the causes of harm.

3. Women’s Experience of Incarceration

Historically in Australia, most women were imprisoned for minor offences such as property crime, vagrancy, or poverty-related offences. Women also faced strong social judgement, with those who breached strict gender expectations labelled immoral or unfit. Exploitation and unsafe conditions both before and during incarceration often

meant separation from children, families, and communities. Women were subjected to forced removal, alongside practices that reinforced shame and loss of dignity such as limited access to personal and menstrual care.

For Aboriginal women, these harms are compounded by the ongoing impacts of colonisation, including dispossession from Country, disruption of Cultural connections, kinship systems, language and Lore, and the erosion of autonomy and self-determination. These impacts, together with systemic racism and structural inequities, continue to affect Aboriginal women today.

For women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, language barriers and culturally unresponsive systems can make it harder to understand their rights, access support, and have their experiences recognised and responded to appropriately.

These patterns are not only historical. They continue to shape women's experiences of the justice system to this day.

Despite this, women have always drawn on collective strength, caring for one another, resisting harmful systems, and holding onto dignity, connection and identity in the face of ongoing injustice.

4. What Has Changed and What Has Stayed the Same

Looking back, incarceration in Australia has prioritised control over healing. While the justice system has shifted away from earlier models of forced labour such as the Female Factories, and towards rehabilitation and community-based alternatives, it remains shaped by structures designed to control rather than support.

The number of criminalised women rose by 40% in NSW, from 36,635 in 2014 to 50,527 in 2023—a growth rate far exceeding the increase in criminalised men (17%).⁴

Women continue to be criminalised due to poverty, trauma and a lack of support, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continuing to be significantly over-represented in the prison system. Current data from the Keeping Women Out of Prison (KWOOP) Coalition shows they are around 22 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous women.⁵

Criminalised women are most commonly charged with offences such as shoplifting, drug possession, domestic violence (DV) related assault, and breaches of bail or Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs).⁶

Women in prison are still giving birth under restraint and observation — a clear example of a system built upon control over support.

5. Moving Forward: A From Now Perspective

The WAGEC From Now program provides critical support for women transitioning from incarceration in NSW through two complementary streams: dedicated supported accommodation, and outreach case management services.

Established to address significant gaps in post-release support, From Now offers a rare combination of supported accommodation, child protection, intensive case management, and trauma-informed wraparound services specifically designed for women navigating the complex challenges of community reintegration.

A From Now perspective shifts the focus from control towards better understanding of what has happened to women to reach this point and what support they need to move forward positively. This includes trauma-informed care, cultural safety, strengths-based practice, and holistic support.⁷

6. Conclusion

Women's experiences of incarceration are shaped by histories of poverty, violence, inequality and colonisation — not individual failure. Understanding this helps us see that many women leaving prison have been navigating harm long before incarceration, and many continue to face significant barriers on release.

Many women are criminalised for low-level or minor offences or are misidentified as the primary aggressor in contexts of domestic and family violence. A growing number of women are held on remand for extended periods only to receive non-custodial outcomes, highlighting how the system can compound, rather than resolve, existing disadvantage.

GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF PRISON

Women's experiences of incarceration differ from men's in several significant ways:

- Women are more likely to be incarcerated for low-level, survival-related offences such as shoplifting, drug use, and breach-related matters.
- Women are more likely to experience short, disruptive periods in custody that destabilise housing, parenting, income, and safety.⁸
- Half of the female prison population at any point in time is on remand, and over half of these women will never receive a custodial sentence.⁹
- 60% of women in custody are mothers of dependent children.¹⁰
- A significant proportion of incarcerated women have experienced extremely high levels of historical abuse and victimisation.¹¹
- A majority of women charged with DV offences have themselves previously been identified as victims of DV, with this proportion significantly higher for Aboriginal women.
- There is growing recognition that women are often misidentified as perpetrators of violence, when in fact they are the victim-survivors of longstanding family violence.
- Childhood sexual abuse has been experienced by at least one in two women offenders.¹²
- Once released from incarceration, women are 16 times more likely to die from violence than women of the same age in the general population.¹³

These realities shape how women engage with support services and systems of authority. For women on remand, who make up the majority of those imprisoned, access to support programs is denied, leaving them to endure boredom, declining wellbeing, and a sense of wasted time, further destabilising their lives.

Imprisonment does not reduce crime for women. Instead, incarceration cuts women off from housing, essential services, medication, and contact with their families and support networks. If we truly want safer communities, supporting women through services, not incarceration, is the solution.

The Experience of First Nations Women

The harms to women caused by incarceration are not evenly distributed. Aboriginal women are imprisoned at vastly disproportionate rates, reflecting the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism, and intergenerational trauma. Many Aboriginal women are imprisoned far from Country and family. Even brief periods of remand can trigger child protection involvement, compounding harm across generations.

- Aboriginal women are imprisoned at rates 22 times higher than non-Indigenous women.¹⁴
- In NSW, 30% of the adult prison population and 50% of youth detainees are Aboriginal despite accounting for 3% of the NSW population.¹⁵
- A NSW study in 2014 revealed that 70% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female prisoners disclosed that they were survivors of child sexual abuse, with 44% subject to ongoing sexual abuse as adults and 78% experiencing violence as adults.¹⁶
- In 2025, Australia recorded the highest number of Indigenous deaths in custody since 1979, with 33 of the 113 people who died identifying as Aboriginal. NSW recorded the highest number of Indigenous deaths in prison custody of all states and territories, with the NSW Government saying that the increase was “largely driven by rising remand rates”.¹⁷
- The Audit Office of NSW recently examined whether Corrective Services NSW and Youth Justice NSW were providing effective and efficient support and programs for First Nations peoples in custody and after release to reduce reoffending. It found that while Corrective Services policy requires staff to provide pre-release planning and support to reintegrate people into the community, in practice, caseworkers mainly encouraged inmates to make their own arrangements.¹⁸

The Experience of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Women

Incarcerated women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds face risks both similar to and distinct from Indigenous women. These include vulnerabilities associated with the experience of sexual assault before imprisonment, and linguistic and cultural barriers that impact their ability to navigate the justice system. On release, a lack of resources and support networks often result in women returning to violent homes, being exiled or disowned.

Housing, Harm, and the Cycle of Incarceration

There is a well-established relationship between homelessness and incarceration.

- Around one in three women enter custody from homelessness or unstable housing, and one in two exit custody into homelessness.¹⁹
- People exiting custody into homelessness are almost twice as likely to return to prison within nine months of release.²⁰
- The number of women in prison in Australia is increasing.



SHS practitioners encounter women at precisely this point of risk, where housing instability, trauma, and system pressures converge. We know that stable housing is one of the strongest protective factors against reoffending and further harm.

When women are reduced to labels like ‘homeless’ or ‘incarcerated,’ their experiences are turned into deficits. Acts of resistance may get read as risk. Strength can become harder to see. When we slow down and stay relational in our language, different meanings start to emerge. Defiance can be understood as survival. Refusal can be recognised as agency. We begin to see women’s lives in their full complexity.

As SHS practitioners, we often sit at the point where language can either loosen or reinforce these labels. We can choose to see a woman not as a category, but as someone moving through a moment in a much bigger life. These moments don’t define Her; they are part of a broader story that could belong to any of us. Our role is to walk alongside Her, especially where the systems around Her fall short.





ABOUT THIS FRAMEWORK



WHY THE FRAMEWORK EXISTS

The *Walk With Her* Framework exists because women have told us they need support to access safer options when they leave incarceration. Many have no safe place to go and feel excluded or turned away by services because of their incarceration, leaving them with little choice but to return to situations they are trying to move away from.

Women talk about navigating homelessness, violence and trauma, while rebuilding their lives in systems that are often not designed with them in mind, and needing support that is respectful, consistent and grounded in trust.

SHS practitioners are often the bridge between incarceration and safety. The way a practitioner walks with Her can shape what happens next, supporting a woman to reconnect with housing, safety and community, or reinforcing shame, mistrust and isolation.

This Framework supports practice that keeps the woman at the centre, honouring Her experience, building trust, and working alongside Her in ways that support dignity, safety and connection as she rebuilds Her life.



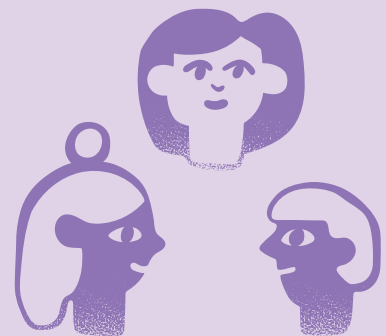
WHO THE FRAMEWORK IS FOR

The *Walk With Her* Framework encourages SHS organisations and practitioners to work with more women who have experienced incarceration.

It offers practical tools, reflective approaches and practices to encourage practitioners to stay relational, grounded and person-centred in high-pressure, complex situations that can feel fast-paced and crisis-driven. It encourages practitioners to pause and reflect on their own assumptions, experiences and responses, and to consider how these shape their interactions with women seeking support.

The *Walk With Her* Framework recognises that every woman's experiences are different. Rather than reducing women to labels or risk categories, it encourages practitioners to respond with curiosity, dignity and care, walking alongside Her as she finds safety and stability.

Organisations, managers and leaders are also invited to use this Framework to encourage reflective, relational and trauma-informed practice across teams and organisations. When practised collectively, reflection becomes part of workplace culture, strengthening accountability and shared learning, and fostering safer, more supportive services for both practitioners and their clients.



HOW THE FRAMEWORK IS STRUCTURED

The *Walk With Her* Framework begins with understanding where each of us is walking from, so we can walk alongside Her as she navigates the landscape that lies ahead, guided by Her choices, strengths and priorities.

The Framework's three practice areas support practitioners to prioritise care, connection and relationships, even when systems are focused on compliance and control.

WHERE I'M WALKING FROM

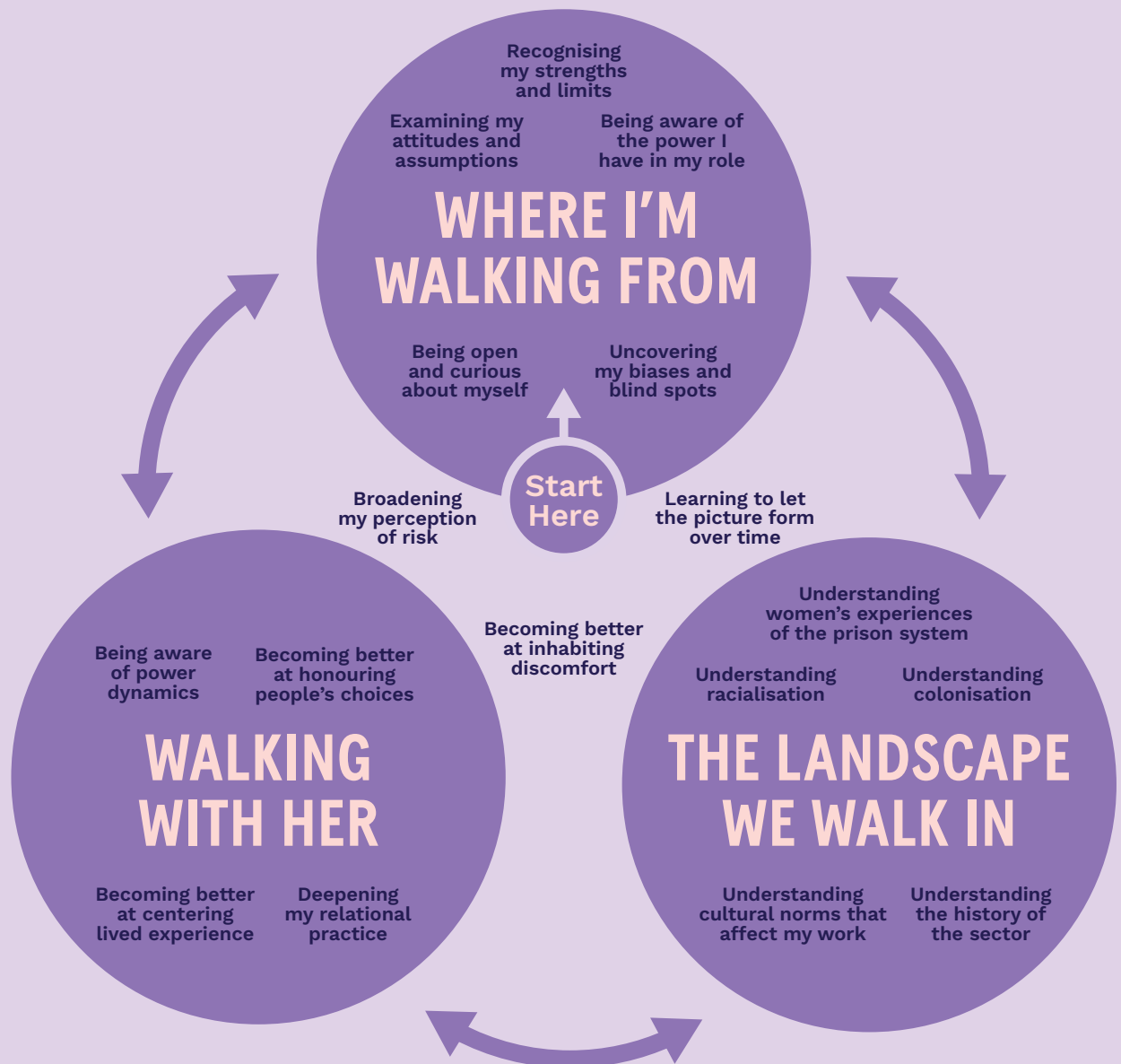
Focuses on self reflection and understanding yourself. It encourages you to consider your own experiences, assumptions, values, culture and biases, and how these shape the way you respond to women seeking support.

HOW I WALK WITH HER

Is about relational practice. It focuses on how you can build trust with women, listen without judgement, recognise power dynamics and respect each woman as the expert in Her own life.

THE LANDSCAPE WE WALK IN

Provides background and context. It will help you to understand the systems and experiences that may influence the lives of women who have been incarcerated, and their experiences of safety, systems, and trust in others.



HOW TO USE THE FRAMEWORK

FIRST, WALK WITH US, SO YOU CAN WALK WITH HER

This Framework is a living guide that you can return to over time. It is not something to move through from beginning to end, but something to draw on as you walk alongside women in your practice. Different reflections, tools, and sections may become more relevant to you at different moments in your journey.

Although primarily a tool for individual reflection, this Framework can also encourage shared learning and conversations that can strengthen organisation-wide practice.

Importantly, the *Walk With Her* Framework does not replace existing SHS responsibilities, safety requirements, or accountability processes. Instead, it supports you to carry out these responsibilities in ways that remain person-centred, trauma-informed, and relational.

We also recognise that what you know about your local context, communities and environment is essential to how this Framework is brought to life in practice.

A set of accompanying tools has also been developed to support practice. These resources can further help you strengthen your reflection practice, build confidence in relational practice, and continue walking alongside women with dignity, safety, and care.

TOOLS THAT SUPPORT THE FRAMEWORK



EXPERIENCE COMPASS

An interactive tool you can use to explore how your identity and life story shape what you experience and how you move through the world. You can use this to orient yourself for reflective practice.



PRACTICE CARDS

A deck of cards to help you intentionally shape your practice: exploring how you want to respond to the situations and assumptions that arise in your work, and identifying responses that feel grounded and relational.



PRACTICE TOOLKIT

A booklet with instructions and prompts for the Experience Compass and Practice Cards.

WHERE I'M WALKING FROM





UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF IN THE WORK

Where we start matters. How can we meet Her where she is if we don't first understand where we ourselves are walking from?

We all carry lenses shaped by our histories, cultures, environments, and systems of power. These shape what we notice, how we interpret behaviour, and what feels easy or difficult in our work.

The experiences of women leaving prison may be very different from your own. They may be shaped by trauma, violence, homelessness, child protection involvement, criminalisation, poverty, racism, stigma, and other forms of marginalisation. While we can understand the impact of these experiences, we cannot fully step into Her shoes. Instead, we can listen from where we stand, while staying aware of how our own experiences shape what we see and how we understand Her story. This awareness supports more thoughtful, responsive practice.

Working effectively with women who have experienced incarceration begins with understanding yourself. Your beliefs, values, assumptions, culture, and lived experience all influence how you listen, respond, ask questions, and hold power. These interactions can build trust and safety, or unintentionally reinforce the judgement and harm many women have experienced in systems.

Relational awareness asks you to reflect on your position in the world, including the beliefs, culture, and systems that have shaped you. Our first reactions are often shaped by long held and inherited ways of thinking, and can take time to recognise and shift.

Bias is part of being human. Our assumptions about risk, parenting, substance use, culture, and control can influence how we understand women who have been incarcerated. By noticing these responses, you can create space between your initial reaction and how you respond, supporting more reflective, compassionate, and relational practice.

Relational practice also requires recognising difference, rather than minimising or overlooking it. Every woman has Her own experiences, context, and priorities. Paying attention to these differences helps you respond in ways that are informed, respectful, and grounded in Her reality.

In this section, you will explore six key practices to help you do this: Positionality; Self Reflection; Critical Self Reflection; Cultural Responsiveness; Cultural Safety; and Decolonised Practice.



1. POSITIONALITY

Positionality is a recognition that the way each of us sees the world, the knowledge that we have, and how we understand our environment, differs from person to person. Reflecting on our own positionality is critical to moving towards a more culturally responsive, safe, and decolonising practice in the work we do.

As an SHS practitioner, this includes:

- Noticing what you bring to each interaction.
- Understanding the systems that have impacted the lives of the women you work with.
- Building trust grounded in humility, curiosity, and respect.
- Strengthening connections and reducing harm.

What we believe, notice and respond to is shaped by our own experiences and the different environments we walk through. Recognising where we stand in relation to power, safety, and systems influences the way we work with others. It reminds us that we are part of organisations and systems that have been shaped by power and historical legacies of racism, ableism, sexism, and other forms of inequality.

Taking time to understand your own experiences and assumptions can help you build stronger, more respectful relationships with the women you support.

To explore your own beliefs, values or perceptions, ask yourself these questions:

- Where do I stand in relation to the women I work with?
- How might my experiences shape my assumptions?
- How do institutional histories shape my approach?

This reflection isn't about guilt or judgement. It is about helping you move towards greater clarity, connection, and accountability in your practice.

2. SELF REFLECTION

Where positionality is recognising the lenses we wear and the perceptions we bring, self reflection is what we do next.

It is the act of stopping to think about how our experiences, assumptions, and perceptions shape our choices and decisions. It asks us to consider what we might be missing, how things may be different for the women we support, and what discomfort we might be noticing or avoiding because of our own perspectives.

When we don't stop to do this reflection, our work can feel 'easier'. We don't have to confront the ways we may be contributing to harm for our clients, or how we are benefitting from the social systems or structures around us.

It's important to also acknowledge that spending time reflecting doesn't change the nature of the work we do. Instead, it changes our perceived level of discomfort. It makes the work we do more honest, and that honesty allows us to work with more integrity.

Reflection work is an ongoing process of turning inward and questioning yourself. To help you with self-reflection, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are my assumptions (instead of accepting them as 'just how things are')?
- What am I not seeing because of where I stand and who I am?
- What comes more easily to me here and what might that mean for others whose experiences are different?
- What biases do I need to challenge, particularly the subtle or unconscious kind?
- Am I open to being wrong, learning more, and shifting my perspective?
- Self reflection is an ongoing practice. What can I do to keep returning to this work?

Self reflection isn't just for individuals. When teams and organisations look inward collectively, a shared commitment to accountability and growth is fostered.

3. CRITICAL SELF REFLECTION

Critical self reflection goes further. It asks not only what your assumptions are, but who gets to hold power in shaping them and who has never had that choice.

It involves examining where your assumptions come from, how they are shaped by institutions, policies, and power, and how you may benefit from them, consciously or unconsciously. It also requires actively learning from this reflection, and considering how your behaviours, assumptions, and biases may impact the women you support.

To explore a deeper level of self reflection, ask yourself:

- Where do my assumptions come from?
- What power do I hold in this moment, and how might that be felt by Her?
- How have colonial, racial, gendered, or class-based narratives shaped what I think is ‘normal’ or ‘true’?

Your answers may help you to:

- Identify how privilege and power shape your interactions.
- See the hidden influence of institutions, policies, and histories.
- Recognise when your responses may unintentionally reinforce inequality.
- Make room for multiple truths and lived experiences.
- See what the similarities and differences between Her experiences and your own are.²¹

With greater self reflection, you’ll not only see the experiences of women leaving incarceration more clearly, but you’ll also respond differently because of what you can now see.

4. CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Cultural responsiveness is how you put critical self reflection into practice.

It involves intentionally adjusting how you engage, recognising that each woman's experiences, identity, culture, and history shape Her needs and choices.

It means listening, responding with respect, and working in ways that support cultural safety, dignity, and self-determination. This includes being aware of how your responses are shaped when working with women whose experiences may differ from your own, including systemic barriers such as incarceration.

Cultural responsiveness recognises and respects difference without assuming experiences are the same or equal. It helps us understand how identity, culture, history, and social systems shape each woman's life. By remaining curious and open, we can respond in ways that are guided by Her experiences rather than our own assumptions.

In practice, this means staying open, adapting your approach, and continuing to listen and adjust over time as Her needs, circumstances, and sense of safety change.

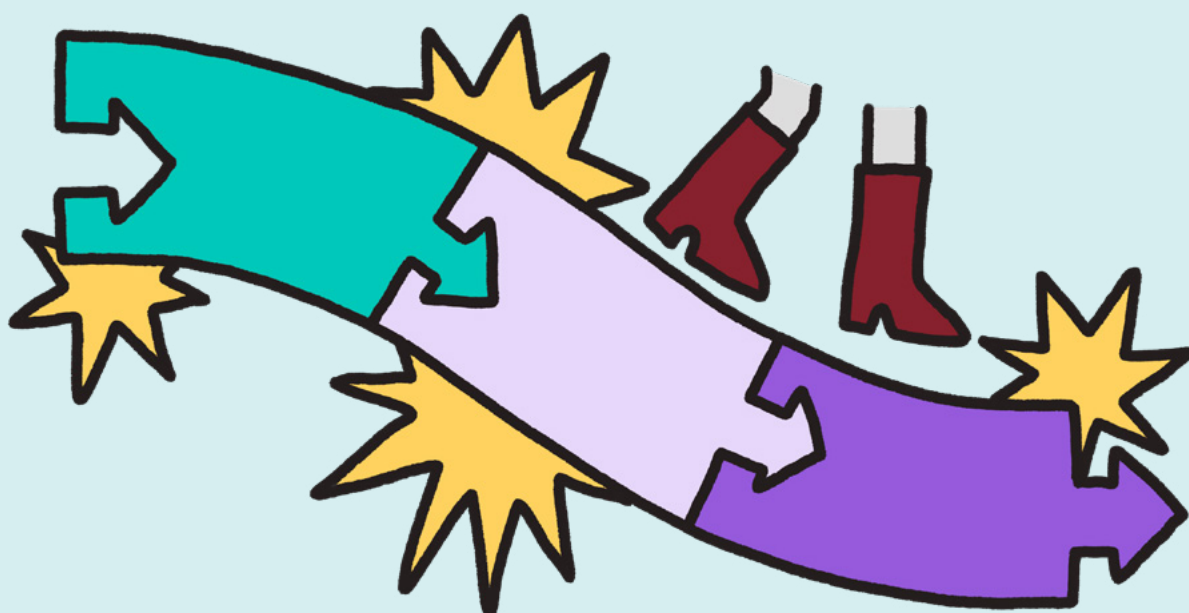


Putting it into Practice

Being culturally responsive includes noticing things like:

- How a woman's experiences of prison, trauma, or system involvement may impact how she engages.
- Where assumptions about 'readiness', 'compliance' or 'motivation' may not reflect Her reality.
- How power imbalances may affect trust building, safety or decision-making, or how safety, support and choice are understood.
- Your own reactions and how these might influence how you respond.

It also means not assuming that what worked for one woman will work for another. It means being willing to sit in the space of not fully knowing, while also being responsive within it.



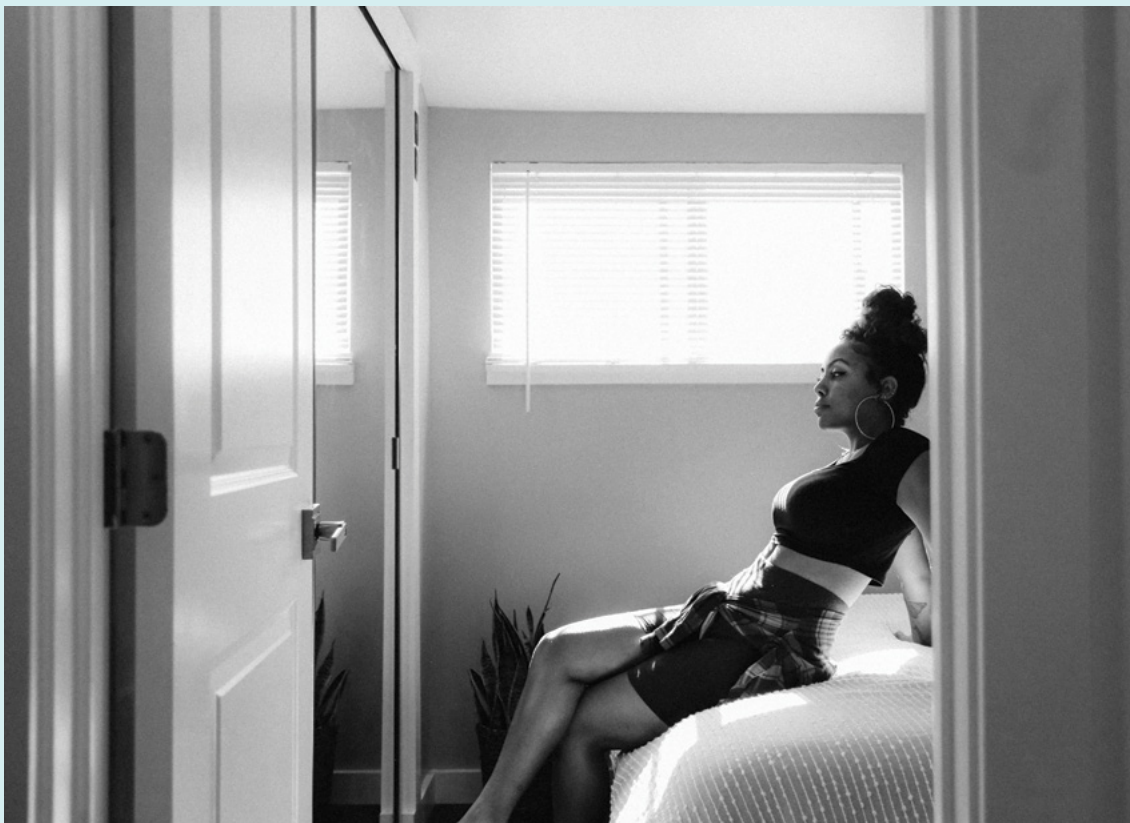
Difference Matters: Why Not Seeing Difference is Harmful

Fairness isn't about treating everyone the same. When we don't acknowledge difference, we can miss the realities of a woman's experience and overlook what she needs to feel safe and supported. This can cause harm.

When working with women who have experienced incarceration, removing their differences and seeing everyone as the same can limit our practice. We risk:

- Erasing Her identity and overlooking what makes a woman who she is.
- Ignoring Her lived experience and failing to recognise that trauma, racism, poverty, or incarceration can't be neutralised by simply pretending they are not there.
- Reinforcing inequality and missing the barriers some women face.

Difference is not something to 'look past'. It is something to notice, value, and work with.





Putting it into Practice

Recognising and responding to difference is an important part of relational and culturally responsive practice.

The table below shows the difference between approaches that overlook women's unique experiences, and approaches that respond to them with care, curiosity, and respect.

Minimising Difference	Noticing Difference
Treating all women in the same way.	Seeing each woman's unique circumstances.
Using a one-size-fits-all approach.	Adapting support to each woman's background and needs.
Reinforcing invisibility, stigma, or shame.	Building safety, trust, and rapport.
Assuming equal access and opportunity.	Acknowledging intersectional barriers.

5. CULTURAL SAFETY

Cultural safety means checking with the women we are supporting to ensure the adjustments we make to our lenses are actually helping Her feel seen, respected, and safe.

Unlike reflection practices, this is about how others experience your work, particularly those from marginalised, disadvantaged, or Indigenous communities. Cultural safety shifts the focus from our intentions as practitioners to our impact on the women we support.

Cultural safety is:

Client-defined

- Safety is judged by the woman seeking support, not assumed by you. For example, saying ‘I think it is safe’ does not make it safe. Only the client’s perception counts.
-

Relational and power-conscious

- Recognises historical and ongoing power imbalances related to colonisation, marginalisation, and systemic inequities.
 - Seeks to mitigate harm created by dominant norms, assumptions, and practices.
-

Responsive and context-specific

- Depends on the context, relationships, and specific people or communities involved, rather than being a fixed checklist.
 - Requires continuous feedback and adaptation.
-

Accountable

- Focuses on actions, outcomes, and impact, rather than just awareness.
- Encourages you to continually reflect and adjust your responses and actions to minimise harm, even if unintentional.



Putting it into Practice

Cultural safety centres another's experience, while cultural responsiveness centres our own actions and adjustments. Together, they represent a shift from 'providing care' to ensuring care is safe and suitable for those we support, particularly people from diverse backgrounds. Both are necessary.

While we can reflect on and adjust our own lenses, cultural safety is determined by the woman or community when they feel seen, respected, and safe in their engagement with us.

Cultural safety includes responding to feedback and repairing harm. If a woman indicates she feels unsafe, unheard, or disrespected: pause, listen, and adjust your approach. This may include acknowledging harm, reflecting on your actions, and working with Her to understand what would feel safer moving forward.

This means actively creating space for feedback, being open to challenge, and recognising that cultural safety is not something you can achieve once, but something that is continually negotiated through the relationship.

6. DECOLONISED PRACTICE

Decolonised practice means actively taking our lenses off and continually working to keep them off.

It is an ongoing practice of not letting inherited ways of seeing, especially those shaped by colonisation, go unexamined.

It means being open to reflecting on your assumptions, noticing how they shape your responses, and being willing to unsettle or shift them. These ways of seeing can reappear, so this is work we return to over time.

Decolonised practice also means staying mindful of how power shows up in our roles, in systems, and in the broader context we're working within — and holding ourselves accountable for how this shapes our practice.

We may never fully see without lenses, but this work invites us to notice the perspectives we bring, and to not assume they are the only way of seeing.

Learning about our own position, and the context of the organisation we work within, supports this. Through reflection and staying culturally responsive, we can begin to question our assumptions and respond more thoughtfully.

We are then better placed to:

- **Learn about our shared history of colonisation** and recognise the continuing impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- **Listen to and learn from Aboriginal and international First Nations' approaches** to ensure inclusive and respectful dialogue.
- **Develop a better understanding of foundational concepts** like sovereignty, kinship, Country, and self-determination.
- **Seek out the wisdom of Elders, community leaders, scholars, and advocates.**

- **Engage with First Nations culture, language, and law.**
- **Reflect deeply on our own sense of self and place in society,** including knowing what Country we are on.
- **Continue to educate ourselves** about the diversity of cultures, experiences of racism, practices of privilege, and identities that we engage with.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



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Reconciliation Australia Truth Telling Resource Hub

reconciliation.org.au/our-work/truth-telling/resources

Towards Truth

towardstruth.org.au/about

Map of First Nations Massacres across Australia

c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/introduction.php

Indigenous History–Deep Time:

abc.net.au/news/deeptime

What Country are you on?

aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia

Uluru Statement from the Heart

ulurustatement.org

UNDERSTANDING RISK

HOW WE WORK WITH RISK

When we talk about risk in the *Walk With Her* Framework, we recognise both the responsibility of the organisation to provide safe and effective services, and the lived reality of women navigating harm and instability.

At an organisational level, risk relates to the safety of staff, other clients, service delivery, and compliance, and is managed through policies, structured assessment processes, supervision, and shared decision-making that are designed to protect the service and the people within it. These systems create a level of safety, consistency, and accountability that organisations can rely on.

Women, however, do not have this same level of protection. Risk in their lives is often immediate and shaped by violence, trauma, health, poverty, and structural barriers, without the safeguards that organisational policies provide. When women, especially those leaving incarceration, are excluded or ‘risked out’ of services, this gap widens and their exposure to harm can increase significantly. This reinforces the importance of working towards inclusion, risk mitigation, and alternative supports wherever possible, rather than defaulting to withdrawal of service.



REFRAMING RISK AS RELATIONAL

When you are working with women leaving incarceration, understanding risk relationally helps you to respond with curiosity, care and context, rather than judgement or exclusion.

Reframing risk as relational means moving away from seeing risk as something located within the woman herself, and instead understanding risk in the context of Her relationships, environments, systems, past trauma, and experiences.

Encountering risk is a common part of our work as SHS practitioners. Completing risk assessments enables us to determine whether the service we offer is appropriate for our client. They help us to consider factors such as housing dynamics, the safety of communal living, and whether the type of support we offer (crisis accommodation, case management, or outreach) is what the woman needs and wants.

The way we approach risk assessments and how we define risk shapes how we offer support in practice. Each service will have its own frameworks²² and procedures for responding to risk, and as an experienced practitioner, you will bring your own set of assumptions, experiences, and perspectives. However, there are ways of thinking about risk that can allow the women you are working with to feel safer and better understood.

In SHS work, risk doesn't exist in isolation. It is shaped by relationships, trauma, environments, systems, housing instability, safety concerns, and lived experience. It is also important to remember that people themselves are not risks. Risk emerges in the spaces between people, relationships, environments, and systems. It sits within complexity and uncertainty and is part of the reality of life. It should not be a barrier to care. Risk assessments are intended to support risk reduction rather than exclude people.

Rather than asking 'What is wrong with this person?' or 'How do we manage this woman?', it is better to ask:

- What is happening here?
- What may this woman be responding to?
- What support or safety might help right now?

Taking this approach doesn't mean ignoring safety concerns or removing accountability. It means approaching risk with a curious and open mind, recognising that trust, safety and engagement are shaped through trusted, equal relationships.

REFRAMING RISK AS RELATIONAL: THE 'FIVE CS'

1 COMMITMENT

Make sure you are focused on your relationship with the woman and Her wellbeing.

2 CURIOSITY

Stay open to understanding Her unique perspectives, experiences, and context, rather than making assumptions.

3 COMPASSION

Respond to Her story and experiences with empathy, care, and humanity.

4 COMPETENCE

Bring all your knowledge, skills, and judgment so you can provide safe and effective trauma-informed and client-centred support.

5 CORRESPONDING

Take responsive, intentional and flexible actions that align with Her needs, circumstances, and changing context.²³

WHAT REFRAMING RISK LOOKS LIKE

Traditional Framing of Risk	Relational Framing of Risk
Risk is in the client ('risky person').	Risk is in relationships between people, organisations and systems.
Risk management is for protection of the service (gatekeeping, liability, exclusion).	Risk management is a collective, negotiated process through safety planning.
Emphasis is on assessment, controlling the risk and 'screening out'.	Emphasis is on curiosity and putting supports in place to 'screen in'.

In an SHS context, risk is not static. As practitioners, we often move between what is known and unknown. Navigating this uncertainty is part of building meaningful relationships and responding to how women's needs and circumstances change over time.

Relational practice means accepting that you won't always have clear answers. Much of this work takes place in temporary and often uncertain spaces, where you may be navigating crisis alongside women.

At times, women may be focused on survival. They may not be able to engage easily. At other times, what looks like disengagement or refusal may be a way of protecting themselves or responding to systems that have limited their choices.

Understanding this supports you to remain patient, flexible, and respectful, and to respond in ways that prioritise safety, dignity, and trust.

Curiosity is central to this work. It means staying open, engaged, and responsive to the ways women and their circumstances can change. We cannot fully know Her all at once. Instead, we come to understand Her over time, through trust, listening, and ongoing relationship.

Reframing risk as relational acknowledges that:

- **Risk is contextual.** Women's behaviours may arise from trauma histories, systemic failures, and unmet needs.
- **Risk is relational.** Women often carry greater risk when engaging with services (exposure, rejection, judgement, or past harm) while services hold responsibility for how safety and trust are built.
- **Risk is non-predictive.** Risk assessments indicate possibilities, not certainties, and must be held with humility and curiosity.
- **Risk is dynamic.** The level of risk shifts as your relationships deepen, environments change, and trust is built. It is constantly changing, along with your safety planning.
- **Risk is transformational.** When dignity and resilience are present, change can emerge, not just harm.



“To be curious is to be satisfied with uncertainty as part of knowing.”

— Gweneth Hartrick Doane and Colleen Varcoe²⁴

MY LIVED EXPERIENCE

This is an exercise in reflection. There is no right or wrong response, it is simply a place to start.

At the beginning of this *Walk With Her* Framework, what did you think when you read the words, ‘incarcerated women’? Write down the first ideas that come to mind.



You can also write in a notebook, on your phone or anywhere that works for you

What we think next is where awareness and choice begin.

Thinking about all you have learnt about yourself, your assumptions, perceptions, biases, and experiences, what does ‘women in incarceration’ mean to you now?



You can also write in a notebook, on your phone or anywhere that works for you

Return here throughout your learning to see how your perceptions and understanding change over time.

“Choosing to be curious is choosing to be vulnerable because it requires us to surrender to uncertainty. It wasn’t always a choice; we were born curious. But over time, we learn that curiosity, like vulnerability, can lead to hurt. As a result, we turn to self-protecting—choosing certainty over curiosity, armour over vulnerability, and knowing over learning.”

— Brené Brown ²⁵



HOW I WALK WITH HER





RELATIONAL PRACTICE

Hearing a woman's experiences can be confronting and challenging. When she shares Her story, she is making herself vulnerable, often revisiting painful experiences in the hope of being heard, believed, and supported.

For many women leaving incarceration, engagement with services has not always been safe or positive. They may have experienced systems shaped by control, judgement, and surveillance, where trust has felt unsafe, temporary, or conditional. Some have been harmed by the very services meant to support them.

As a result, even reaching out can feel like a big step. Giving time, showing compassion, and responding with care are essential to building trust and creating safer, more respectful relationships.

This means the relationships we build matter — right from the first interaction.

So how do we do this?

Trust is rarely built through pressure, urgency, or demands. More often, it grows slowly through consistency, honesty, boundaries, care, and compassion.

Relational practice asks us to stay curious instead of making assumptions. It asks us to slow down, be patient, and listen. It doesn't mean removing boundaries or avoiding accountability. Rather, it means allowing a woman to choose to tell Her own story in Her words, in Her own time — recognising she is the expert in Her own life.

Sometimes a woman won't want to answer your questions, attend appointments, or accept support straight away. Her past experiences may have shaped Her expectations, leaving Her unsure of whom to trust. Rather than seeing this as resistance or non-compliance, as Her practitioner you should accept and understand this as communication and self-protection, or Her way of maintaining control in situations where previously Her control was taken away.

For you, this work can feel uncertain and uncomfortable at times. You will not always have the right words, immediate answers, or complete understanding of a woman's experiences. Relational practice asks you to stay present anyway — to listen, reflect, adapt, and continue learning. It also means being transparent: be honest about what we can and can't do, how decisions are made, and what information is shared, so trust can be built over time.

We know women who leave prison are shaped by survival, strength, and lived experience. When you acknowledge this, the relationships you form become part of rebuilding Her safety and dignity.





Putting it into practice

Relational practice can look like:

- Slowing down and listening deeply.
- Recognising your role within our society's systems of power.
- Respecting Her agency, knowledge, and lived experience.
- Listening to Her without reframing Her stories to avoid your own discomfort.
- Explaining processes and service limitations clearly and honestly.
- Showing Her she is valued by giving Her time.
- Recognising a woman's refusal as Her right.
- Tailoring your support to the woman's individual needs.
- Staying aware of power dynamics in conversations and decision-making.
- Reflecting on how your own experiences, assumptions, and role may shape the interaction.
- Acknowledging complexity, contradiction, and uncertainty.
- Allowing what you hear to change your actions.
- Advocating for Her in the systems that may have silenced Her.
- Engaging in ways that are genuine and active.

RELATIONAL PRACTICE IN ACTION

The following pages have been adapted from de Souza and Dreher's Indigenous Conceptualisation²⁶ for the SHS context. They show how by listening carefully and respectfully first, rather than prioritising compliance, assessment or behavioural change, you can strengthen relationship building.





A WOMAN REFUSES TO COMPLETE AN INTAKE ASSESSMENT.



WHAT TO HOLD IN MIND

- Her refusal may be an expression of choice, boundary setting, or self-protection.
- Her 'no' is information, not a problem to solve.
- She may be testing safety, trust, or power dynamics.
- What sits beneath this for Her?
(E.g. experiences of harm, fear, loss of control.)



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- How is power showing up between us right now?
- What might be going on for Her that has led to this 'no', and how can I stay curious about what it's telling me rather than trying to fix it?
- Am I moving too quickly or focusing on what I need?
- Can I slow down by letting go of the form and focusing on connection first?
- How am I showing up in this moment?
- How might that be shaping Her sense of safety and trust?



YOU NOTICE A WOMAN BECOMING QUIET WHEN DISCUSSING FAMILY.



WHAT TO HOLD IN MIND

- Does this reflect trauma, grief, fear, or a cultural context?
- How are systems, history, and power shaping what she can and can't say?
- Safety is created through how we respond to these moments.
- It is important to adjust ourselves, not push Her to adjust.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- What might be sitting underneath this silence or shift?
- Am I giving Her space, or am I (even gently) pushing for more?
- What would it look like to ease off here?
- How can I respond in a way that helps Her feel safer?



A WOMAN WANTS TO FOCUS ON RECONNECTING WITH HER CHILDREN INSTEAD OF A HOUSING PROGRAM.



WHAT TO HOLD IN MIND

- This is what matters to Her most right now.
- Her goal is not the barrier to the work. It is the work.
- Service priorities and system expectations may not align with Her goals.
- Her hopes and strengths are present in what she is naming.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- Am I focusing more on program priorities than what matters to Her?
- What does reconnection mean to Her?
(E.g. contact, visits, custody, and relationship repair.)
- How can I stay alongside Her while also holding the bigger picture?
- Did I balance Her priorities with program expectations in a respectful way?



A WOMAN EXPRESSES ANGER ABOUT THE JUSTICE SYSTEM OR SERVICES THAT HAVE FAILED HER.



WHAT TO HOLD IN MIND

- Her response may be shaped by harm, stigma, and past experiences with systems.
- Anger can be a valid and meaningful response.
- This is often not about you personally, but about what she has experienced.
- There can be a pull to defend, explain, or fix. Noticing this matters.
- Staying with Her experience is part of building trust.



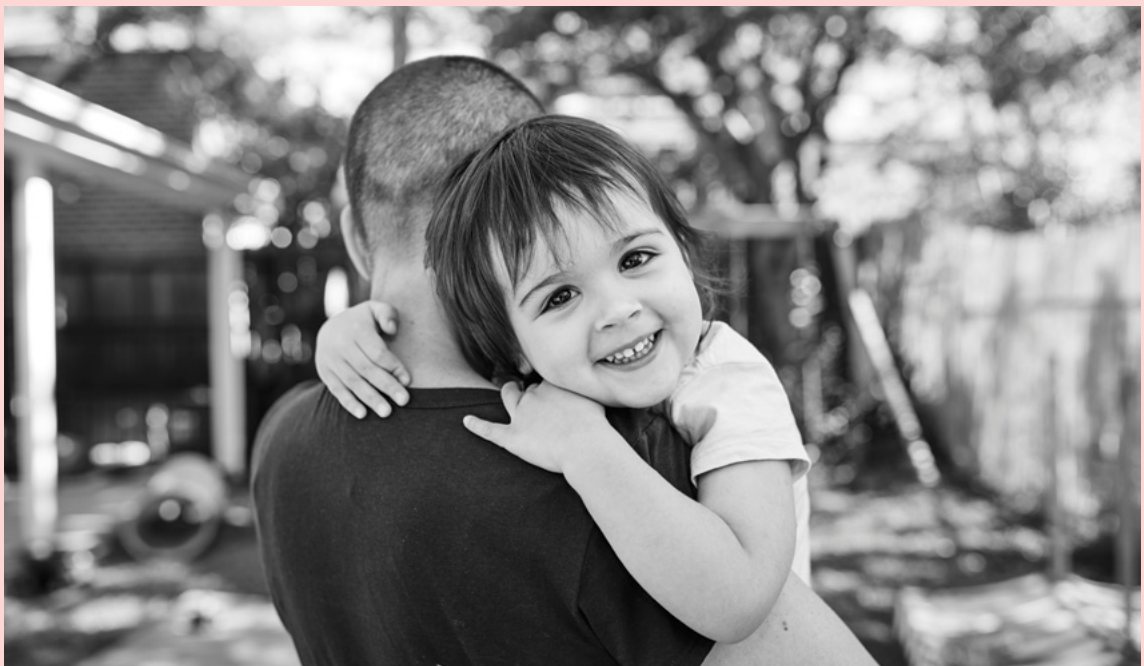
REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- What has she been through that has led to this?
- What is coming up for me right now? (E.g. wanting to fix it, defend it, or move on.)
- Am I taking this personally, or can I stay focused on Her experience?
- Am I really listening, or am I trying to explain or defend things?
- What would it look like to stay with Her in this moment?

Women who have been in prison are often expected to show compliance, gratitude, or ‘readiness for change’ before receiving support. These expectations can unintentionally mirror the prison system, where access to resources, safety, or care often depends on obedience, disclosure, or participation.

Relational practice shifts this expectation. It encourages you to prioritise relationship-building, listening, and respecting Her agency, even when interactions may feel uncertain, slow, or challenging.

This approach recognises that meaningful support often begins with being present, listening deeply, and accepting that some women may choose not to engage with your suggestions and support. It means not turning to intervention or problem solving at the first opportunity. Instead, by allowing Her to set boundaries and shape the way she wishes to engage with you (or your service), you can begin to build a relationship where trust, dignity, and self-determination are central.



HEARING HER

Hearing Her is vital to this work.

As SHS practitioners, our understanding of safety, risk, behaviour, and support is shaped by organisational policy, procedures, and our own experiences. Women leaving incarceration may present to you as angry, withdrawn, inconsistent, or hesitant to engage. These may be responses that are shaped by fear, shame, exhaustion, or past experiences of not being heard or believed.

When we ask a woman to share Her story, it is important to recognise that we do not hold all the knowledge about what comes next. Hearing Her means listening for context, not just facts. It means paying attention to the systems, pressures, and experiences shaping Her world, while acknowledging that we may not fully understand everything she has been through.

Being guided by Her knowledge and perspective helps build trust and supports more meaningful, respectful relationships as we walk alongside Her.





Putting it into Practice

Hearing Her can look like:

- Asking yourself ‘What am I hearing, and what might I be missing?’
- Asking yourself ‘What might she be responding to?’
- Asking yourself ‘What assumptions am I bringing?’
- Asking yourself ‘Am I responding in a way that supports safety, dignity, and choice?’
- Asking yourself ‘Am I being guided by Her experience or my own?’
- Understanding that Her behaviour may reflect stress, fear, or ways of protecting herself.
- Reflecting on whose knowledge is shaping decisions, and whose may be overlooked.

RECOGNISING HER AS THE EXPERT IN HER OWN LIFE

When working with women who have experienced incarceration, it is important to reflect on how you understand knowledge and whose knowledge you value.

People understand the world through different experiences and contexts. While recognising this difference is important, treating all perspectives as equally valid can limit deeper reflection and your ability to fully understand the experiences of others.

Taking into consideration a woman's lived experience offers you a different way of understanding. It can help you to see that what she says or how she acts is shaped by who she is, Her experiences, and the context she is in. As an SHS practitioner, by recognising the limits of what you know and actively engaging with different perspectives, you can deepen your understanding.²⁷

Your professional experience and background are important, but it is equally relevant to acknowledge that this knowledge doesn't provide a full understanding of the realities of many of the women you work with. There is always more to understand beyond the first perspective or information shared. Every woman's experience is complex and shaped by many parts of Her life, not just by what you see in the moment.

Recognising this can support you to approach your work with humility, to listen deeply, and to value each woman as the expert in Her own life. It can help you see Her as a whole person, shaped by Her experiences, history, and context—not just what is happening to Her right now.



Putting it into Practice

The examples on the following pages are designed to encourage you to slow down and centre women's voices in your everyday practice.

Using quotes drawn directly from our consultations with women in the Wellington Correctional Centre, the examples demonstrate how the *Walk With Her* Framework can be applied in real-world situations.

When a woman shares Her story, take time to reflect on Her words and consider Her needs, strengths, and the barriers she is navigating. Think about what may sit beneath Her words, such as fear, frustration, grief, hope, or past experiences of harm. Consider what other aspects of Her life, such as Her family, culture, history, and community may impact or influence how she is feeling.²⁸

Consider how you can respond in ways that affirm dignity, build partnership, and support shared action.





“I AM TERRIFIED OF GETTING OUT... I DON'T WANT TO LET MY KIDS DOWN AGAIN.”



What matters to Her

Safety, stability, being a good parent, not repeating past harm.

What's in the way for Her

Fear of release, lack of housing, pressure of reunification expectations.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- What power do I hold in this interaction, and how can I support what happens next?
- Am I moving too quickly to fix, rather than sitting with what she is feeling?
- Am I centring what matters to Her?



**“TWO MINUTES LATE,
AND THEY CANCELLED
THE WHOLE MEETING.”**



What matters to Her

Fairness, understanding, flexibility.

What’s in the way for Her

Rigid systems, punitive rules, transport challenges.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- What flexibility is already within the system that I can use?
- Am I reinforcing systems, or questioning them when they create barriers?
- How can I advocate here?



**“SOME OF US CAN’T READ...
HOW DO I READ THE LIST?”**



What matters to Her

Dignity, accessibility, not feeling shamed.

What’s in the way for Her

Literacy barriers, inaccessible information.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- Am I assuming this information is easy to understand?
- How might my approach create or reduce shame?
- How can I make this more accessible and supportive?



**“WE FEEL LOWER THAN
THE WORKER, THEY
LOOK DOWN ON US.”**



What matters to Her

Respect, equality, being heard.

What’s in the way for Her

Power imbalance, past experiences of judgement.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- Does this role automatically give me power and authority?
- How might my language, tone, or body language reinforce this?
- What can I do to actively share power in this interaction?



**“WE JUST GET PASSED FROM
ONE SERVICE TO ANOTHER.”**



What matters to Her

Consistency, continuity, trust.

What’s in the way for Her

Fragmented service system, lack of coordination.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- I am part of a service system that can feel fragmented — am I contributing to Her feeling passed around or staying alongside Her?
- What does accountability look like here?



**"I AM VULNERABLE...
THERE IS NOWHERE ELSE TO GO."**



What matters to Her

Safety, protection from harm, stable options.

What's in the way for Her

Unsafe accommodation options, exposure to DV or drugs.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- Am I prioritising what is available, or what feels safe for Her?
- How am I responding to Her experience of risk?
- Am I reinforcing system expectations without recognising their impact?



**“I NEED TO GET A HOME
BEFORE I GET MY KIDS...
I JUST WANT SUPPORT.”**



What matters to Her

Reunification, stability, emotional support.

What’s in the way for Her

Housing requirements, mental health,
systemic thresholds.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- How can I support Her goals while acknowledging systemic barriers?



**“WE ARE TREATED LIKE
WE ARE NOT WORTHY
OF THE HELP.”**



What matters to Her

Worth, dignity, belief in self.

What’s in the way for Her

Stigma, systemic judgement, past exclusion.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- Am I approaching this from a place of assessment or belief?
- How do I show that she is worthy of support?



**“MAKE THE PHONE CALL IN
FRONT OF US... SIT WITH US.”**



What matters to Her

Connection, practical support, confidence-building.

What's in the way for Her

Expectation to self-navigate systems.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- Am I choosing efficiency over connection?
- What would it look like to slow down and do this alongside Her?



**“I WANT A NORMAL LIFE...
I WANT TO WORK...
I HAVE IDEAS.”**



What matters to Her

Hope, purpose, independence.

What’s in the way for Her

Limited opportunities, stigma, system focus on deficits.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU

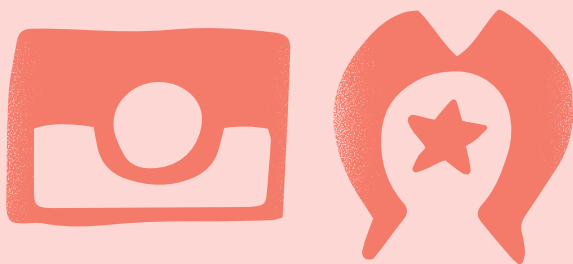
- Am I overlooking Her goals because I’m focused on immediate needs?
- How can I support both Her stability now and Her future aspirations?

CONSIDERING CULTURE

Considering culture within the *Walk With Her* Framework means recognising that every interaction is shaped by the meeting of different worldviews, histories, and lived experiences.

As an SHS practitioner, you are encouraged to reflect on your own culture, privilege and assumptions, while actively noticing and responding to the cultural context of the woman you are walking alongside. This includes acknowledging the impacts of colonisation, systemic inequality and intersectionality, and prioritising culturally safe, decolonised practice that honours Aboriginal leadership and diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing.

In practice, this means approaching each woman as the expert in Her own life. It looks like working with humility and openness and aiming to build safety through relationships that support dignity, choice and self-determination, rather than imposing assumptions or control.



TRUST AND TIME

Trust takes time and patience.

As SHS practitioners we know this. Women leaving prison have experienced relationships and systems where trust has been broken, rushed, or dependent on their behaviours. When they've asked for help, the response hasn't been what they needed or wanted. They have felt unsafe and unheard. Because of this, many women who have been incarcerated are cautious when building new relationships, even when the support you are offering can help.

A woman may engage with you one day but withdraw the next. She may test boundaries, avoid questions, miss appointments or disappear for periods of time. This doesn't necessarily mean she doesn't want your support. It may reflect Her uncertainty, fear, exhaustion, or simply Her need to maintain control and safety.

As SHS practitioners, to build trust we need to respect this. We need to give Her time, regardless of how this makes us feel.

It is only natural to want to offer solutions. Relational practice encourages you not to rush to fix things. It asks you to stay with uncomfortable and challenging moments, even when you do not know what may happen next. It requires you to slow down, listen, be patient, and allow Her to lead.





Putting it into practice

What this might look like for you:

- Accepting that you don't have all the answers, and you can't fully understand a woman's experience.
- Paying attention to what you are seeing and hearing now, while accepting that situations and what you understand may change as the relationship grows.
- Reflecting on your own biases and assumptions.
- Not rushing or pressuring conversations or engagement, despite your urge to move forward.
- Being willing to sit with difficult feelings when conversations feel uncomfortable or challenging.
- Letting the woman lead Her own story at Her pace, while you learn through listening and hearing.
- Being consistent and honest.
- Recognising that a small step for you might be meaningful, positive progress for Her.

This form of relational practice shifts the focus from the urgency of managing and solving a crisis to spending time on strengthening your relationship with Her so she feels safe and respected.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Good Practice Guidelines For the Specialist

Domestic and Family Violence Sector in NSW

dvnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/DVNSW-Good-Practice-Guidelines-2022.pdf

Transgender Prisoners in Australia:

An Examination of the Issues, Law and Policy

classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/FlinLawJL/2017/8.pdf

TransHub

transhub.org.au/legal/prison/

Walama List Factsheet

indigenousjustice.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/mp/files/resources/files/walama-list-fact-sheet.pdf

Corrective Services NSW Women's Handbook

correctiveservices.dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/Womens-Handbook-complete.pdf

Willow Legal Information Project

willow.org.au

Ombudsman NSW Investigation into

Inmate Discipline in NSW Correctional Centres

ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/investigation-into-inmate-discipline-in-nsw-correctional-centres

Corrective Services NSW

correctiveservices.dcj.nsw.gov.au

A NOTE ON VICARIOUS RESILIENCE

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

As SHS practitioners, we are privileged to be part of moments of strength, change, and hope with the women we support.

In your work, you might witness a woman's survival, courage, humour, adaptability, and resilience. At the same time, working alongside women experiencing homelessness, incarceration, and violence can be hard and emotionally demanding. What you see and what you hear can involve exposure to:

- Complex trauma
- Systemic injustice
- Crisis-driven engagement

Over time, this can impact how you feel and respond, leading to:

- Emotional fatigue
- Feeling less connected or empathic at times
- Frustration when engagement is difficult
- Burnout
- Vicarious trauma

“Vicarious trauma can focus on ways our clients’ pain infect us with hopelessness, yet often our clients inform, transform, educate, provoke and educate us.”

— Vikki Reynolds ²⁹

This ‘vicarious resilience’ is the positive counterpart to vicarious trauma that we can sometimes overlook.

Holding onto these moments can help sustain hope and connection in our work.

Good practice in crisis support is not about choosing between trauma and resilience. It is about holding both. We need to pay attention to the impact of this work on ourselves. This means being honest about how the work is affecting you and making space for your own needs. You need to give yourself time to prioritise your self-care needs and to stay connected with your support networks.

Vicarious resilience can also be a source of strength. When you actively engage with vicarious resilience:

- You can reduce your risk of burnout.
- You can better sustain empathy.
- Your practice becomes more strengths-based.
- You are better placed to honour Her agency.

Working with a Resilience Lens

Trauma Lens	Resilience Lens
Harm, marginalisation, violence.	Strength, survival, resilience.
What is not working?	What is working (even slightly)?
Barriers to engagement.	Efforts to stay connected.



THE LANDSCAPE WE WALK IN





UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES OF WOMEN LEAVING INCARCERATION

Women leaving custody face multiple barriers that compound disadvantage and criminalisation.

While case planning should be individualised and responsive to the woman you are working with, having a general understanding of these barriers can strengthen practice. For example, women leaving prison may face additional disadvantages, marginalisation, and stigma related to their incarceration.

Consultations with the SHS sector and the Audit Report into Corrective Services have shown that while Corrective Services are supposed to assist with pre-release planning and support, this often doesn't occur. While the responsibility shouldn't solely be on the community to plug this gap, it does mean that SHS need to stay informed about the barriers women face immediately following release from incarceration. This is particularly important given we know that 50% of women will leave prison into homelessness.³⁰

POST-RELEASE BARRIERS

- No fixed address delays or prevents a woman's release, effectively criminalising homelessness.
- Without identification documents a woman struggles to access Centrelink, Medicare, banking, voting, and other essential services.
- When a woman is released without prescriptions or continuity of healthcare, such as mental health and substance use treatment, the risk of immediate and long-term poor health outcomes increases.
- Housing debts or a poor tenancy history increase the risk of homelessness.
- Challenges with family reunification, including navigating child protection systems and rebuilding trust with children and kin, increase the risk of poorer outcomes for both mothers and their children.
- Limited access to income support, education, and employment pathways can perpetuate cycles of poverty and incarceration.



FINAL REFLECTION

Walking with women who have experienced incarceration asks us to do this work differently. To pause. To listen. To recognise that what we see is only part of a much bigger story.

Our role isn't to fix or define, but to stay alongside, aware of how our assumptions and language shape what becomes possible.

This work is relational. Trust grows through consistency, care, and time, not control.

Understanding the realities women face on release helps to shift our response from reactive to intentional. It allows us to anticipate barriers, adapt our approach, and meet women where they are without judgement or pressure.

The invitation is simple:

Stay curious. Stay reflective. *Walk With Her.*

Because how we show up can be the difference between another closed door or a real chance at safety and change.



“Being in prison is the first time I felt safe. I’d been homeless, and I used drugs to stay awake so I knew who was following me.”



“We just need a bit of help to put us on the right track, but we are often treated like we are not worthy of the help, so it goes around and around.”



“Kids are key to our success. There is nothing left without the kids. If it wasn’t for my kids, I wouldn’t be here anymore.”



“The people who work with us need to understand our experiences and hear what has happened to us.”

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RESOURCES

You can find additional resources
on the WAGEC website:

wagec.org.au/walk-with-her/resources

