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CPS Education Department
Tel.: 613-526-9397, ext 263
education@cps.ca

The Stories of Aboriginal Women Mothers Post-release: The Unheard Voices on Country



“...They need to wake up with a purpose. They need someone to believe in them...they need the agencies that's going to be always open to them...they need to be lifted, not forgotten...”

Presenter: Emma Tufuga

Aboriginal Chief Investigator:
Associate Professor Jocelyn Jones

Acknowledgement of Country



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- Aboriginal Women's Group in Kwinana
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Aboriginal Women's Advisory Group

Auntie Millie Penny (AM)

Joanne Ugle

Julie Dunlop

Dr Carol Dowling

Roslyn Indinch

Supervisory Team

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Professor David Keatley-Murdoch University

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Dr Jamie Zander-Murdoch University

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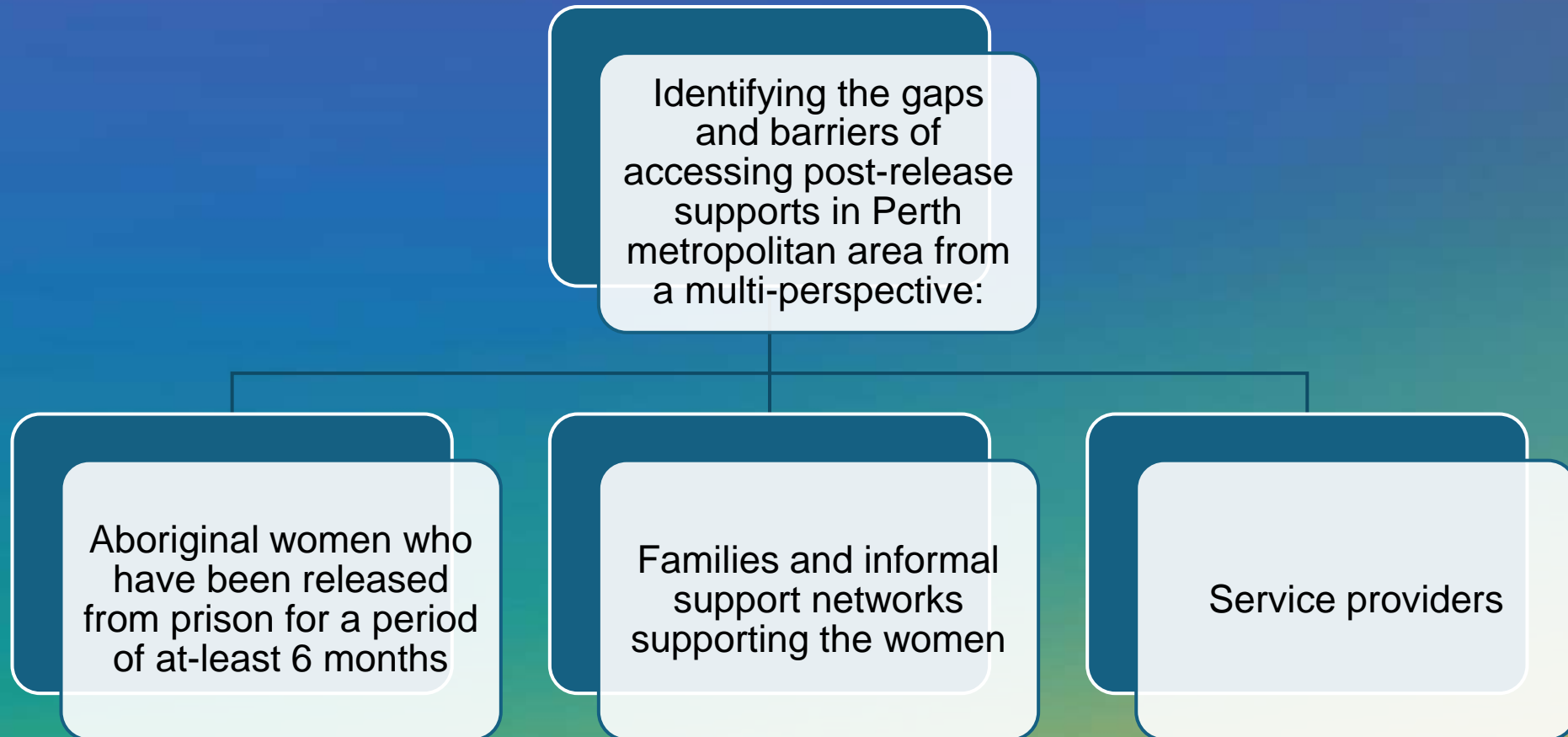
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Research aims and objectives



Methodology

Applied Indigenous Research Paradigms:

- **Types of yarning:** research, collaborative, cross-cultural, social and family Yarning
- (Atkinson; Baird & Adams 2021; Besserab & Ng'andu 2010; Lenore; Hayse & Usher 2013; D'Antoine et al., 2019; Dowling 2024; Lesson et. al., 2016; Kennedy et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2014; Wilson)

Our work was inspired by Atkinson et al. (2021) and Kennedy et al. (2022) on the importance of transparency in using yarning theoretically and practically in research.

Without transparency in information and application of yarning through research practices and reporting, there are risks of 'cultural appropriation' and risk of 'paying lip service to the use of yarning methods', which further impacts research quality (Atkinson et al., 2021, p.199).

- **Relationality and Accountability in Research**

Relationality, in this sense, is a core element of being Indigenous (Atkinson et al., 2021) and through the expression of epistemology and ontology ways of knowing and being and doing (Dowling 2024; Wilson 2008).

Recruitment and Data Process

Integral role of Elders and Aboriginal community in research

- Advisory Women's reference group consist of five respected Elders of Yamatji, Noongar, Bidimia and Palawa descendants.
- Local Aboriginal Community Elder group in Kwinana and Women's community group in Gosnell and Medina

Semi-structured interviews consist of 30 Participants across three studies

Study 1: 10 Aboriginal women

Study 2: 10 family members and support networks

Study 3: 10 workers from across service sectors providing reintegration support to women

Data Analysis

- We employed a thematic approach to analysing data from all three studies, taking an inductive semi-grounded theory approach to generate themes across the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006)

Study 1 Aims: Aboriginal Women's voices

What are the barriers to accessing relevant community and re-entry supports in Perth metropolitan area addressing and meeting Aboriginal women's health and wellbeing post-release?

1

Are current post-release services and community support practices in their design and their delivery model meeting the needs of Aboriginal women post-release?

2

What compounding factors contribute to Aboriginal women experiencing post-release and recidivism.

3

What could be done to improve Aboriginal women's transitioning from prison into the community and improve social outcomes for their families and support networks?

Results: Women's Voices

1. Access barriers to accessing services.

2. Racism and Discrimination

3. Strengths and Resilience of Aboriginal women

4. Ways for service improvement

1. Lack of access to support and safe housing and collateral consequences post-release for women.

"I spent 10 years going in and out of jail. I was – in that time ... I did [Service] and [Service] done nothing to help me either...I found myself back on the street, and that's half the reason I went back to jail. No help. I went back to my abusive partner because there was nothing else. I'm still there now...you find yourself alienated and... Sometimes it's easier to return and stay in that lifestyle."

"I was with [Service] when I got out, and this was when I started battling. I had nowhere to live. I was going from hotel to hotel...selling drugs to support myself, and you know, it got to that point where I was living that lifestyle because there was no support out there... Even though I was reaching out to people....I felt alone. I felt alone at that time. Yeah..."

Homelessness and domestic violence

"...I have gone back so many times because there's nowhere to run but back home again... I've left naked in the middle of the night, mate. I've run down the street naked, and I've knocked on someone's door begging them for help because there's nowhere to run..."

"He broke my jaw twice in a month. I had my jaw wired up, and he broke it again. He broke my sternum. He broke my arm. He's broken my leg...To get away. To get away... I didn't mind jail. Jail was... Don't get me wrong, I couldn't wait to get out, but it was – okay, get in jail. There's no alcohol, there's no drugs, so you get over it..."

Key Themes: Racism and Discrimination

2. Racism and Discrimination

- Narratives of women in our research describe the pervasiveness of racism, attitudes, and communications between services as fragmented.
- As a result, creating a multitude of issues and barriers preventing women from receiving equal and fair access to services and support.
- Consequently, causing some women to disengage and 'fall through the gaps' of service provisions.

Systemic and Institutional racism as barriers to accessing supports

"...you have no chance, they look at your skin, and you're fucked pretty much...got out...wasn't in a good frame of mind, had nowhere to go, [worker] didn't show up, waiting and waiting and like [XX] it mate...went to this place to get food and some clothes, waiting there for [XX] hours on end mate....no one comes up and ask how are you love? How can we help you sort of thing... no, all sitting in their swivel chairs look at you like you going to rob the fuckin place..."

Crisis Support and trauma: Strict guidelines and complexity of system processes

"You walk in that place and desperately begging for help...you have to act and look like a battered wife basically...oh come back tomorrow, sorry we have no beds can't help you...then I have to retell my story on repeat mode of how shit my life was... it's fucked...and then they said whether I've been bashed, like seriously...they look at you and judge you like you been lying or something..."

Key Themes: Crisis Support

- Access crisis payment, emergency money is “not free money”, let alone meeting requirements and criteria for women are not straightforward and re-traumatising given women’s circumstances.
- Lack of consideration and understanding of women’s circumstances in domestic violence situations can be a barrier to receiving crisis support, leading to some women having no choice but to place themselves at risk of returning to their abuser.

Access to crisis and emergency payment as complex

“Then you’ve got to go and get emergency payment from [XX]. Now, prime example...you get two – it’s not free money either, two loans on your dole a year... The other week, she was in dire straits and had to be beaten up to get emergency money and emergency payment.... Somewhere to stay... oh, shall I go back to my partner and get bashed and then you’ll give me some fuckin money? Then they pulled their finger out and said, we’ll help you...but I had to pay it back... It was an advance on your payment...”

Awareness and understanding of DV circumstances as a barrier

“When you leave, like I said, you don’t pack your bag...You go in the clothes you are in...you’ve got no toothbrush...not even available to give you a voucher to go and get some new clothes for yourself...so you are desperate...you go back...Of course, you go back because it’s easier...”

Key Themes: Holistic Supports

Holistic Supports

- Experiences of siloed and fractured service provision.
- Resulted in women's non-compliance with services and, in turn, creating confusion, misunderstanding and mistrust between women and services, further creating multiple barriers preventing women from accessing support and consequently escalating other compounded unmet needs.
- Potential disruption to rehabilitation commitments and goals for some women.

"I got out of jail and went to this place, you know, they supposed to help you know, I was hungry...just want to help you...this lady walks in and said, can't help you, contact not here anymore it's over there...I know this [service] give out vouchers to them fellas...how come you can't help us you know...what's going on, you know what I mean it's like a competition out here Sister, sorry can't help you...so where do you go? You know what I mean, Sister..."

Disconnection with little effort

"... [Worker] she's excellent, helped me the first few days of getting out...Coming out of prison and being in that isolation, like your mental state, your brain is not functioning to the outside level... So, it took me a couple of days to bounce back into things...she was there for me for the first three days. Still, I haven't heard from her since... so I can see whether I was somebody who was looking to go backwards. I could see how easy it is – for somebody to give up... because sometimes you need that extra help to be there...some people don't have that confidence..."

Service Inconsistency

"But every time you go in there, you've got a new counsellor...They're not hanging around– you know. So, [John Doe's] gone, you've got the new one. Then, what? I've got to tell you my life story all over again; it's like shove it, I'm not engaging – you know what I mean, no consistency..."

Key Themes: Employment and Education

Employment and Education Training

- Experiences of multiple barriers and setbacks accessing employment, training, and education in prison and upon release.
- Training and education programs don't necessarily guarantee access to securing employment on release. Much more powerful factors (systemic and Institutional racism) were at play, as illustrated by one of the quotes.
- Limited effort in providing practical and realistic support navigating system processes and pathways, achieving employment goals on release.

"...Education, it's sad...they're put in a box there...they're doing kindergarten work. What are you getting paid for when you come and educate people? We're not going back to kindergarten days. You're looking at us like we're just nothing. They're never going to be educated. They're always going to be like that... Most of them don't even know how to read or write...that's a barrier for employment too; you do an interview and read something..."

"...We are hand on hand skills people...how to work a machinery or even retailing girl...I was the second Aboriginal to get that job because it was always cleaning... [Sister Girl] became the first to do the retailing, and then it was me. I'll tell you what, I was so nervous... but when you're on the side serving, it's just a different atmosphere. It's like, I can do this...That's what they should be doing for many Aboriginal people..."

"...I did a beautician course in there for eyebrows and waxing. I wanted to pursue that, but the thing with that is it's hard because they want to know your background...that's the kind of thing that held me back...That's why it's hard for me to find a job... people look at you, they're like, sorry, - some big word...You're not suitable for this job..."

"...Not having the help I need with finding a job...all they did was just set me up with a CV and a resume and sent me on my way...I got one job interview out of all the jobs that I've applied for...I didn't know that I needed a tax file number straight away. I had to apply for that... because I've been in jail for that long. I didn't think that's the first thing to get..."

Key Themes: Healthcare Support

Accessing Healthcare support

- Lack of empathy and fragmented interactions with staff as barriers to accessing and obtaining adequate medical treatment and support.
- Consequently, this impacted their social and emotional well-being, further disrupting rehabilitation commitments and building trust with staff.
- The in-existence of healthcare support for babies and lack of cultural awareness of some staff providing support to women with babies.
- Bureaucracy of system processes, guidelines and requirements for obtaining disability support, a barrier

“...We try our best to give the best to our kids...we come from backgrounds of intergenerational trauma...don’t have much...racism and dealing with the [X] white system is like fighting against big currents...every time you try in that place it’s like they don’t want you to thrive... you know...you ask to see a doctor because you are in pain, and they think you are lying...”

“I got breast cancer while I was in there too... That wasn’t good because– my release date was in Feb, and I got diagnosed in December. I tried to get out so that I could have radiation and that and my operation on the outside, and no one would take my letter to the fucking powers that be...I wrote outstanding letters. – I was only asking for a month early release on compassionate grounds, and – like you put the form in the blue box...It doesn’t get any further... because it never got to the powers that be...”

“I think that was the one silly rule for the nursery...babies aren’t allowed to be seen by the doctors at the prison because they are not prisoners...”

“... then would say things like, no, babies don’t need toys... [Their child] doesn’t have toys, but that’s [their child] This is my child, not [their] child, so we’d have to get family to go out and do it...”

“...To get on to disability, it’s like a joke...I’ve got many injuries from the past like – and I’m 60 years old and I’m in pain every day.... they won’t accept my medical certificates that say I cannot work. They say we can’t accept them because that’s for long-term...”

Themes: DCP, Parole and Identification access issues

DCP: Gaining access and reunification with children

“...DCP still wasn’t meeting me halfway...practically putting barriers up. During the three years I was supposed to be in jail, I got [two years] visits. There was not one visit besides Skype, and there was no person-to-person or face-to-face contact. When we did apply for it, I had to go through the head office of Justice, but Justice knocked it back because DCP what they were saying...They’re quick to take our kids but not quick to help us... or meet me halfway when I’m trying my best to show them that I want to be a better mother...but they speak to you like you’re a second-class citizen...”

Parole: Expectations as barriers and challenges

“...They say, “You’ve got your parole. Congratulations.”...And then you think, Okay, what’s the conditions? Well, when they do, it’s always the condition. That’s been there for years. “Yeah, I can do that. I can report.” Then they go, “Oh, you have a curfew.” That’s where it fails...Isn’t it bad enough that you spent that [time] in your room and locked up at a particular time? And now you still want to lock me up... When they knocked, I didn’t represent myself at the door,” You know? Curfews are for bail conditions. So, what are they trying to do?”

“...felt like it would be better going back in and just finishing my full time, then come out, because not only just I’ve got 13 conditions If I don’t abide by one of them, they can send me straight back in...I’ve got a curfew, I’ve got urinalysis, I cannot enter an alcohol licensed premises, can’t buy alcohol. I have to get on Jobseeker to look for a job. I cannot – that’s the conditions that I have...even if I was to get off Centrelink, I could go straight back in... to lay that much on me and then not having the help...”

Identification:

“... there’s so much lacking in that, where they don’t get their key card...You want your bank card, birth certificate, and Medicare by the time before you leave...And it felt good when you got all your IDs because I had people coming out, even family members with no IDs. They had to go and get a birth certificate to get access to their payment from Centrelink or the bank, open a bank account, put it that way, you know, Black folks don’t have much, and you’ve got to have 100 points in the eyes of society, that makes it hard...”

Themes: Cultural Awareness

Lack of cultural knowledge and understanding of services and workers can be a barrier to being heard given their unique circumstances as Aboriginal women.

“...cultural awareness, that's a real important one... because it just gave them a bit of educating where this is our world... This is what happens in our world. This is what happens when you're black. This how you get approached by the law, the justice, DCP, everything. This is the whole package, you know, just to show... There's a certain way how you've got to talk, engage with Indigenous people...”

Family Dynamic

“...because I don't think that they can really understand - the struggles of how growing up in - just getting out of prison. You're going home to people that are still on drugs and stuff like... You're trying to get into transitional housing or something like that and I feel that they can't really emphasise with you, or connect with you because they might not have been of in that situation themselves... It's different because we're more invested in our families...”

Women's business, Men's business

“...I had to go on and sign up for a counselling session... recently, - because my worker got changed... she was an Aboriginal lady, Auntie [XX] I call her, and she got changed to this other dude... I'm not being judgemental, but I asked after the session, I said, look, can you please put me onto a female counsellor or a female... an Indigenous one if they could... I just thought I wasn't being listened.”

Themes: Mob supporting Mob

The significance of relationality and connection, providing support with awareness and understanding of personal and cultural circumstances

“...like I’ve got a good caseworker at the moment... She’s not Indigenous... Yeah, she’s good. She’s very supportive. But you know, there’s only a certain number of things that she can do. Like, so she can’t sort of push the boundaries, but I feel that if there was more support and help in that area of more brave advocates... Because you feel safer. Safe being around... Like you know, being around your own mob and stuff like that...”

... Just getting out and you know, the other day I went to a work seminar and just something that I’ve never done in my life... I walked in there and there were all white fellas there. I was thinking, oh no, if I would have had like a big sister with me, like a mentor to help come with me... Yeah... having that - like having a buddy, type thing or big sister or aunt or something like that there. It’s like - yeah, because I felt really scared... I was like, intimidating about it... Unfamiliar territory... I walked in and I was like, oh my God. Like I really wanted to run for the door, you know...”

Increase the presence of Aboriginal workers in service delivery

“.... working with Aboriginal people there should be more Aboriginal workers here to work with their people....”

Themes: Strength and Resilience

3. Women's narratives reflect and demonstrate the strength of their identity, cultural knowledge, and motivations, which have led them to overcome and withstand racism and adversity, ultimately breaking the so-called 'cycle of reoffending'.

"They said, you can't change, you can. And they said that in the courthouse when my son finally got sentenced...it became so powerful to me, the lawyer said, the prosecutor and the judge said there's no proof that they could change. That's the word they used, there's no proof... He said, there is, it's his mum...that's the proof because I've been in the system. I've done it all and came out by the end...That's when your people say, wow, my sister...it was awesome to give them a bit of dignity, a bit of, hey you special, you matter, so it was boss, you know..."

Turning Points

"...I got out and decided it was time to get my boy back.... I lost my son at the age of three when I was in prison through DCP, and that was a tough road to walk on...not knowing where he is and your hands are tied, you become powerless, and you become angry also, angry at the system. Angry at yourself... I also got sick of going to the funerals. I went to all my family funerals, my mother, my grandparents, the last one was my brother, and I think that was a turnaround too, where I couldn't no more. I got my son back; it took me eight years. He's now 13 this year; he lives with me permanently, so it shows you can do it..."

Life lessons and commitment to their children, family, and culture, ultimately, their strength and leadership skills as potential future leaders and role models empowering communities.

"...That's what I said to the girls, they're waiting for us, our kids...It's been too long now... connecting back with your children...I'll tell you what, I can't get enough of taking my kids out, my grandchildren. I didn't know what it was until my life changed. My eyes opened. I'll tell you I love it..."

"...I've learned to listen to them. I was the one who always answered the question, shut it down, that's it, drop that, but I'll sit there, and I'll listen. I was like, can I say something? Then I'll say something else, and at the end, they'll say, thanks, mum. You're welcome, and that's a good feeling to have, and that's what we need in our women. Come on. Come on, my sisters. We can do this. They all have skills; they've got leadership skills. I've seen it all; they're not silly..."

Themes: Power of Lived Experience

Women with lived experience who have been through the system spoke about the power of sharing their stories of strength and cultural resilience as healing and a voice of hope and strength empowering other women and communities.

“...I’ll tell you what, these girls I’d done jail with. I think the powerful thing when they got up and shared their story...I feel it’s essential...that they’re not alone gives hope and hearing it from your kind, it’s more powerful ...”

“...I describe myself as a marathon runner, cheering them on the side. I use my lived experience...having lived experience...It’s a beautiful journey; I have a connection and build a relationship with them. I have the respect where they say, you can now call me Dolly because you’re family...”

Their testimonies as warriors and survivors of system failure illustrate their determination, unconditional love, and commitment to uplift, support and empower their people.

“...there needs to be leaders, leaders, voices, strong women, strong, resilient women...That’s what I said to them in Bandyup when I left...I will never forget that day when I was leaving...they weren’t allowed to hug me and kiss me, but they couldn’t stop it because I was just all over them, come from that way and that way, and they just let it go...there were so many tears. I was tearing up seeing my sister, girls, nieces, and mum, and I said, this is it. No more...”

Their narratives illustrate their potential and capabilities as matriarchs and leaders who have solutions to offer in areas where systems ‘can be better’ for their people.

“...I feel so blessed... I’m free from explaining myself to the system. I’m free from not going to courts anymore...I’m sitting on the other side now, and I’m watching. I’m watching my sister; they are still doing the same thing to my people...they still fail... So – now I can see better... And now I can talk to my people. I can talk because I lived it. I can see where they fail. I can see where it can be better...”

Themes: The right people and under good leadership

Women's narratives illustrate the significance of working with the right people under good leadership.

"...My case worker is great, and she had this belief in me. She said I know you can do it. Because I'd let her know I've had five or six other sentences before, before this last sentence that I did, and I let her know that every time I've applied for parole, I've never been granted it.... because they've held my record against me... She wrote me a letter in support and said, I've got faith in you..."

"... [My manager] was lovely. She was one of the best bosses I ever met, being the first boss, you know. Me and I just had that connection. We just yarned, and she took me out a few times, and people say, just come on board and go out with the big boss here. They called... And that laugh, we just had that laugh together. She says whenever you come around me, you make me laugh..."

Providing services that believe in them and empower them to build 'self-esteem' is crucial in service delivery when working with Aboriginal people.

"They need to wake up with a purpose. They need someone to believe in them, someone who will be there 24/7, running on the side of them. They need agencies that are always open to them. They need to be lifted, not forgotten..."

"...It's beautiful to see your mob thriving, and you're telling them that. That's what they want to hear; well done, Brother, that's boss; it's so we can do it. You hear stories now; I can buy my kids something on Christmas instead of stealing it. That's what we need for our people, to build that self-esteem, you know, that encouragement..."

RECOMMENDATIONS

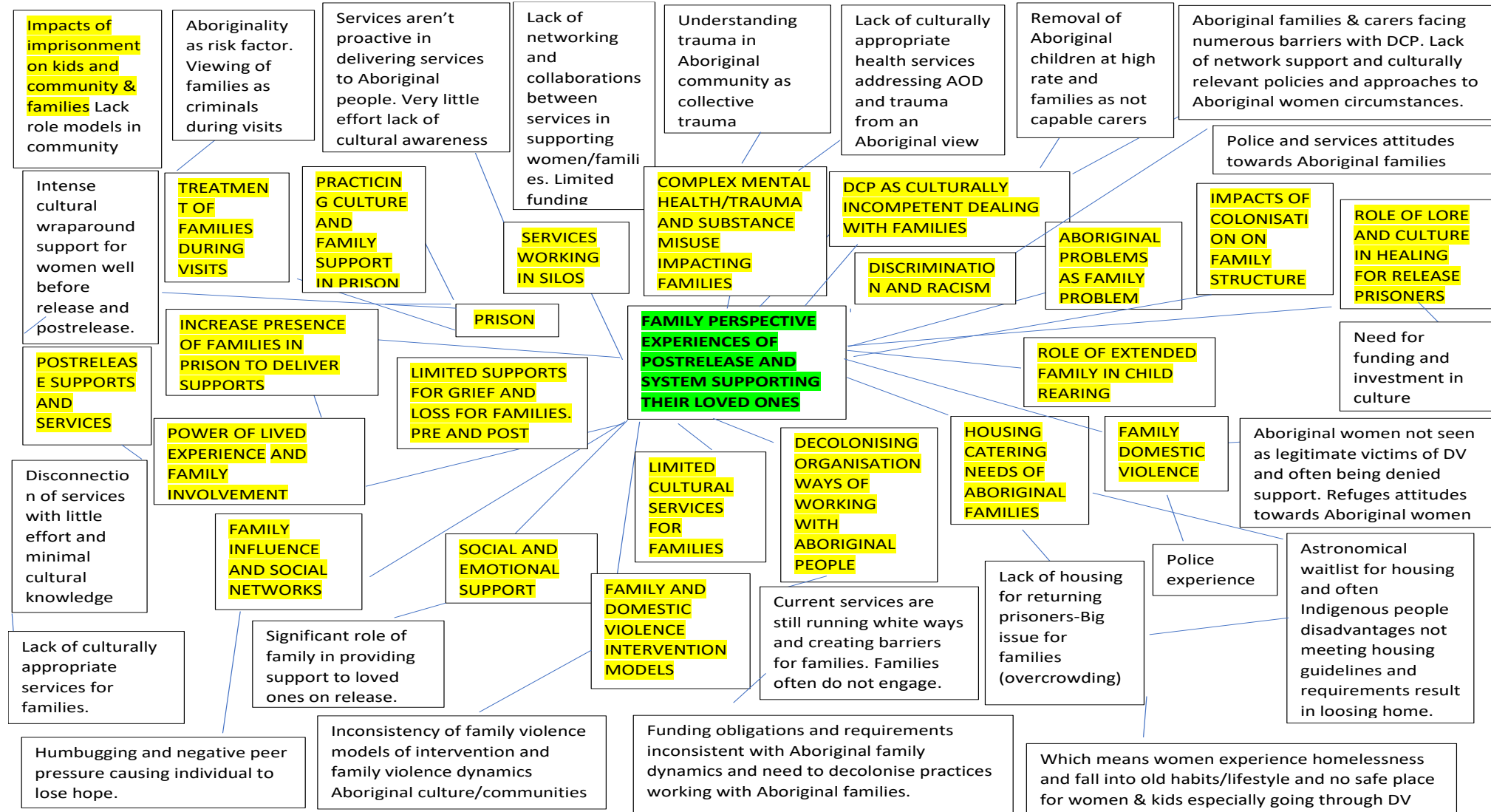
“...Attitudes, attitudes have to change because those attitudes are still there, and institutional racism is still there. It might be guided under something else, but it’s still there...that’s the first thing you pick up is those attitudes and assumptions...”

- Despite barriers and services experienced and felt throughout sectors and systems, service providers must prioritise their commitment to ‘client-led’ engagement working with the most disadvantaged.
- Collaborations between services, Aboriginal communities, peoples, and supports are critical for system change to be more effective between sectors delivering holistic support.
- Prioritising conversations addressing systemic failings (racism and discrimination) embedded within services and supports, systems, and processes, rather than describing women as a ‘hard to reach group’.
- A collaborative approach, investing in more housing and resources, raising cultural awareness, involving Aboriginal people, service consistency, changing attitudes, and effective silo-busting between services are key to delivering effective and meaningful support for Aboriginal women post-release.

Voices of families

- Borne the brunt of multiple system failures addressing the needs of women
 - Housing issues
 - Lack of culturally safe supports-unaddressed issues
 - Racism and discrimination
- Challenges and barriers to accessing out-of-home care services
 - Children reunification
 - Lack of cultural consideration/awareness
 - Lack of accountability and transparency
- Stigma associated with the 'Aboriginal problem' as a family problem portrayed by media
- Role of law and culture in healing and restoration

Voices of Families



Voices of services

Access Issues

- Housing
- Lack of rehabilitation programs/supports
- Service disconnection-services working in silos
- Racism and discrimination
- Lack of cultural awareness
- Complex/lengthy referrals
- Client disengagement-substance misuse
- ID issues
- Family influence/negative peers

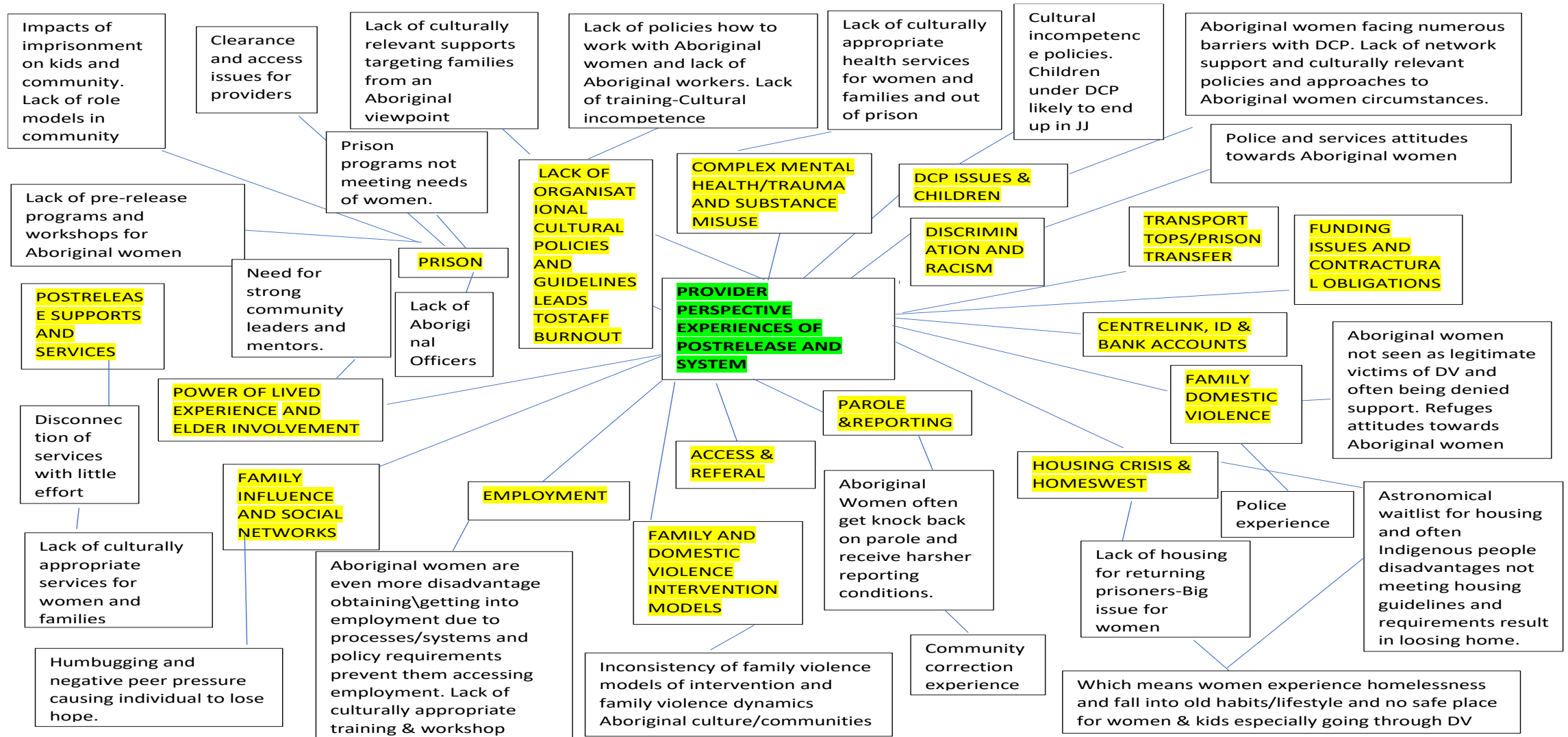
Justice access issues

- Clearance
- Covid impact
- Communication breakdown/disconnection/attitudes
- Outdated programs with minimum impact
- Parole expectations/attitudes/requirements

Internal issues

- Inadequate resources for burnout
- Outdated paperwork/assessments
- Lengthy paperwork/admin over client engagement
- short term funding/funding obligations (CCHO Impact)
- Limited knowledge of existing workplace policies
- Absence of Aboriginal-specific policies
- Lack of Aboriginal staff/inadequate support
- Staff /management disconnection
- Inadequate training/supports

Service Provider voices



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THANK YOU



Emma Tufuga

Murdoch University

e.tufuga@ecu.edu.au

emma.tufuga@murdoch.edu.au