

Freedom Inside – Crowdfunding For Book Clubs

We are fundraising \$55,000 to run a year of book club programs for women inside NSW correctional facilities. This is an exciting new stage of the Freedom Inside initiative.

Key information, contacts, and links:

- [This is the link to the crowdfunding campaign](#)
- All donations over \$2 are tax-deductible, all money raised going straight to Women's Justice Network for this specific program
- Gorla Larman (CEO of Women's Justice Network; admin@wjn.org.au 02 8011 0699) and Bri Lee (author, academic, and advocate; <mailto:bri.lee.writer@gmail.com>) are available for media and comment

Why do these women need this program?

Women in NSW are being incarcerated at an unprecedented rate and they face unique challenges. Women in prison demonstrate higher levels of previous victimisation, poorer mental health and serious mental illness, substance misuse, increased rates of infection from blood borne viruses, unemployment, and lower educational attainment than men. Almost all of the women WJN help come from deeply disadvantaged backgrounds and most report a history of childhood and adult sexual, emotional, or physical abuse.

When these women are provided with gender-responsive social support, recidivism rates are reduced and so are the costs to the community. Almost two-thirds of incarcerated women are sentenced for minor offences and serve less than 6 months in custody. Many serve lengthy periods on remand whilst awaiting trial leaving them ineligible for rehabilitative programs. Approximately 60% of women incarcerated are the primary carers of their children. The emotional, social and economic costs for mothers, children and families can be extensive.

What has Freedom Inside done so far?

Author Bri Lee and the Women's Justice Network together launched the 'Freedom Inside' project in November 2021 with the help of [Gleebooks](#). The goal was to get more and better books to women incarcerated in New South Wales. Since then, over \$30,000 worth of books have been purchased and sent straight to correctional facilities. The books come from a list of titles specifically requested by the women inside. There are a wide range of fiction and nonfiction titles. Some of these are children's books that better allow women to read to their children outside. Some of these are 'early readers' that assist women trying to improve their English competency. (We are still working on the best way to get more books in other languages.)



The success of the program has encouraged NSW Corrective Services to expedite the process and possibility of having tablets with public library logins accessible to incarcerated women. Overall we have been blown away by the support and success of this initiative. It's time to take the next step and provide these women with even more and better reading and learning experiences.

Why book clubs?

Reading books when you are locked up away from the outside world becomes your way of coping. You can escape to other worlds through books. This book project will be facilitated by women who know what it is like to be in their situation. It's an opportunity to connect with others and it provides a mechanism for sharing similar experiences. It also gives the women an activity to look forward to, building confidence and communication skills. Ally Colquitt was previously incarcerated and now works for the Women's Justice Network. You can read



about how much reading meant to her inside in the piece she wrote for *The Guardian* here: [‘Reading freed my mind from prison – those suffering in the broken justice system deserve the same.’](#)

What the money will be used for?

The majority of the money raised will be used to pay the facilitators for their time and travel expenses. A small amount is required for insurances, audit accounting, and administrative support costs. (Delivering programs inside correctional facilities is a complex process!) \$55,000 will cover the cost of running the project for a full year, but ideally we are hoping to raise enough to pilot the project for up to two years. Working together with Corrective Services NSW, during this time we will gather data about the project's effectiveness so that we can evaluate it and aim for a more sustainable and ongoing funding model. The project will be evaluated to see the benefits of connecting women through a shared interest of books.

Who are the Women's Justice Network?

WJN is a grassroots community organisation committed to advancing the prospects and wellbeing of women and girls affected by or at risk from the criminal justice system. [You can read more about WJN on their website here.](#) They systemically advocate to improve the criminal justice system and delivers an evidence-based practical mentoring program which:

- Provides gender-responsive social support, and engages women and girls in the community in a safe space that is non-stigmatised
- Fosters a positive self-identity enabling everyone to live the life they deserve to
- Supports women and girls vulnerable to reoffending in making choices that positively contribute to the community

WJN's vision is that all these women and girls live free from violence and discrimination, benefit from adequate living standards, are treated with dignity and respect, and are empowered to secure and preserve their individual rights. WJN's goals are:

- Reduce the recidivism rate of women and girls being imprisoned.
- Establish dialogue with women and girls affected by the criminal justice system, government and non-government agencies and other relevant stakeholders.
- Provide evidence based practical mentoring and non-stigmatised support.
- Advocate for systemic change.
- Promote community awareness and education.

Who is Bri Lee?

Bri Lee is an award-winning author, academic, and activist. Her books include *Eggshell Skull*, *Beauty*, and *Who Gets to be Smart*. Her freelance writing has appeared in *The Monthly*, *The Saturday Paper*, *Good Weekend*, and elsewhere. Bri's advocacy around consent helped secure legislative and procedural changes for survivors accessing justice, and for this work she was named a *Fin Review* 'Woman of Influence' in 2019. She is now a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney law school researching defamation law defences for public interest journalism. She lives and works on Gadigal land. You can stay up to date with Bri's work by subscribing to [her weekly newsletter, News & Reviews, here](#). And [her website with all her work and information is available here](#).