
Invest in Women. Accelerate progress.

This year's UN International Women's Day theme "Invest in Women" underscores the importance of recognizing the value of women's contributions and potential, but also a call to action to support their empowerment and advancement.

International Women's Day has come and gone, with some wonderful celebrations of women's achievements and acknowledgement of the work of the women who have come before us. Celebrating the United Nations theme Invest in women: Accelerate progress, this focus acknowledged that when women are given equal opportunities to earn, learn and lead – entire communities thrive.

We understand that taking a gendered lens can support women in ways that meet them where they are, consider their unique needs and address issues that impact them as women, mothers, partners, sisters, daughters, caregivers. Providing women with opportunities to build their capabilities can have positive impacts far beyond the individual.

Investing in a woman's future can have a ripple effect on her family and community. We see this on a regular basis at WAM, by providing a relational model we engage with women who often fall between the cracks, who can be overlooked, or don't fit into current service system responses. We take an individual approach and look for ways to walk the journey with our women, side by side.

We also invest in our women mentors - providing training, support and ongoing professional development to ensure they have the confidence and skills to fulfil their role. Our mentors form part of a strong community of women who share their insights and learnings and understand how women can become criminalised because of their disadvantage and complexities in their life.

Much of our funding to deliver our adult women's mentoring program is from the State Government, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to expand our service delivery and engage more women across Melbourne and Ballarat. **However, our Young Women's program, targeting 12–18-year-olds who are at risk of being entrenched in the justice system is in threat of ending.**

The Living Free Project is a successful model of early intervention, currently operating in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula and surrounding suburbs, led by Taskforce/Windana in partnership with WAM and Peninsula Community Legal Centre.

Most recently funded through a Federal Government grant, this vital initiative faces closure in June 2024, leaving a critical void in resources for our most vulnerable girls and young women, and a notable absence of a dedicated platform for collaborative, integrated care.

Every week, numerous young women and girls are reported missing across Australia, while others encounter the justice system at an early age due to myriad complex circumstances beyond their control. These challenges encompass trauma, abuse, sexual exploitation, mental health issues, substance abuse, homelessness, among others. Consequently, many of these individuals find themselves caught up in a justice system ill-equipped to address such multifaceted issues, often leading to repeated encounters with the law when what is truly needed is a proactive approach to disrupt this cycle.

The lack of adequate funding for programs supporting young women and girls at risk of criminalisation is a critical issue that demands urgent attention. Despite the clear evidence of the effectiveness of early intervention initiatives in diverting vulnerable individuals away from the justice system, resources remain scarce. This scarcity perpetuates cycles of disadvantage, leaving many young girls without the support they need to thrive.

As we reflect on the theme of "Invest in Women" in the aftermath of UN International Women's Day, it's crucial to recognize that investing in the well-being and empowerment of young women and girls is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in the future. By allocating resources towards wrap-around programs that address the underlying factors driving girls into the justice system, we can break the cycle of criminalisation and foster a society where all women and girls have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Let's keep calling on governments, businesses and society more broadly to invest in women, and see what progress we can achieve.

- Tricia Ciampa, Executive Officer
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WAM Movie Night – all welcome

BOOK YOUR TICKETS TODAY

*sales end this weekend



Part crime mystery, part comedy, and mostly foul language, **Wicked Little Letters** brings Olivia Colman and Jessie Buckley together again for a delightfully outrageous film inspired by true events. Join us for our first WAMily Movie Night for 2024 - at Cinema Nova, Carlton.

A 1920s English seaside town bears witness to a dark, absurd scandal in this riotous mystery comedy. Based on a stranger-than-fiction true story, "**Wicked Little Letters**" follows two neighbours: deeply-conservative local Edith Swan (Olivia Colman) and rowdy Irish migrant Rose Gooding (Jessie Buckley). When Edith and fellow residents start to receive wicked letters full of unintentionally hilarious profanities, foul-mouthed Rose is charged with the crime. The anonymous letters prompt a national uproar, and a trial ensues. However, as the town's women, led by Police Officer Gladys Moss (Anjana Vasan), begin to investigate the crime themselves, they suspect that something is amiss and Rose might not be the culprit after all.—STUDIOCANAL

Join us at Cinema Nova in Carlton on Wednesday 27th March from 6.30pm.
Limited tickets still available - Buy your tickets, and pre-purchase movie snacks [here](#).

Lived Experience Framework

With funding from the Collier Charitable Fund and Victoria Women's Trust, WAM will be developing and embedding a Lived Experience Framework. This will be created through co-design and consultation with women with lived experience of the justice system, beginning with workshops with our peer group.

WAM's lived experience peer group has been growing, offering a supportive space for women who have experienced criminalisation to share their insights, gain support from one another, and advocate on issues they are passionate about. Many of the women in the group are eager to share their knowledge and experiences to make meaningful change to the lives of women who have been impacted by their contact with the justice system and intersecting issues, such as family violence.

With the experience and advocacy goals of WAM's peer group, we applied for additional funding to offset the costs of developing this Lived Experience Framework, where women who contribute and are involved will be remunerated for their time. Their valuable ideas,

storytelling, values, and advocacy will inform the work and practice of WAM.

We aim to host a number of workshops facilitated by Cathy, our Lived Experience Peer Group Facilitator, and myself, supporting the women in the peer group to develop their own lived experience framework. At the same time, we will also be interviewing women with living and lived experience of the justice system to understand what they believe is important to include in the framework through meaningful consultation.

This framework will provide WAM with an important resource that has been created by the voices of women who have been impacted by the justice system. It will contribute to WAM's goals of empowering women, advocating for folks with justice system involvement, and improve our practice through the lens of lived experience.

If you would like to be involved, please contact us at: phaedra@womenandmentoring.org.au

[Phaedra Thain – Intake & Assessment Coordinator](#)



WAM has joined the Justice Reform Initiative as a supporter organisation that shares the belief that prisons are ineffective as a deterrent, ineffective at reducing crime, and ineffective at addressing the drivers of criminal justice system involvement.

This is a movement of organisations with expert knowledge, professional and lived experience that is determined to create change, challenge the overreliance on incarceration and promote an alternative vision. You can find out more by visiting: <https://www.justicereforminitiative.org.au/>



What the WAM team have been up to

Recently we welcomed **Nina Taylor**, Member for Albert Park, Parliamentary Secretary for Justice, and **Juliana Addison**, Member for Wendouree, and Chair of the Women's Correctional Services Advisory Committee to our office.

It was a positive meeting with both deepening their understanding of the support WAM mentors offers, particularly in relation to service navigation and long-term support for women whilst being able to remain in community or fulfill their corrections orders.



Volunteer Mentors

This month we kicked off our first volunteer training for the year, with twelve prospective mentors in attendance. We welcome: *Ananya, Deana, Fiona, Harprabh, Heather, Jasmine, Kate, Kylie, Lili, Lisa, Miranda, and Shardae* to the WAMily.

There will be several opportunities to attend Volunteer Training this year, with upcoming dates:

Frankston 17th & 24th April

Metro/CBD 6th & 13th June

If you or someone you know would like to get involved, please contact us for more information: volunteer@womenandmentoring.org.au

Referrals

So far this year we have received 23 referrals from a range of services including Court Services, Corrections, private psychologists, Drug Court, community agencies and some self-referrals.

The Intake & Assessment team take the time to get to know each woman accessing the program, understanding her support needs and what goals she would like to achieve in order to make a sustainable mentoring match.

Referrals can be received at any time, but if you would like to know more please register for our next **Stakeholder Info session** to be held in late May. Email: intake@womenandmentoring.org.au

Farewell to Mary

In the almost 10 years that Mary has been a part of the *WAMily*, we have been privileged to benefit from her generosity, expertise and leadership.

Mary was employed as WAM's first Executive Officer in April 2014, and as is the way in grass roots not-for-profit organisations, Mary wore many hats. Over the following three and a half years Mary successfully sourced new premises for WAM, built relationships with the community, developed WAM's profile within government, secured philanthropic funding to expand the local Yarra program to the Western suburbs, and oversaw the rebranding. These are just some of Mary's achievements; and she also sowed the seeds for WAM's continued growth.

In 2017 Mary was successful in attaining four years of funding from the VLSB which led to the expansion of the service delivery footprint and the team. Moving into the Operations Manager role from 2018, Mary spent the next six years building the strong governance foundations and underpinning systems on which WAM now proudly stands. Our capacity to acquire government funding has

come from a team effort reinforced by Mary's financial acumen and strengthening WAM's capabilities. Mary has often cited that WAM punches above its weight and has always presented itself professionally despite its size and minimal resources. Without a doubt, we owe this reputation to Mary's efforts and we are grateful and appreciative of her contributions over the years.

We all wish Mary the very best on her retirement but look forward to her visits (and her accompanying baked goods).





Empowering Young Women and Girls with Early Intervention

Mia* was referred to the Young Women's Program (YWP) by the Student Support Coordinator at school. The referral indicated that Mia had been having difficulties with transitioning to Year 7 and was using social media as an outlet to discuss the problems she was experiencing with her friends at school and had also been utilising self-harm as a coping strategy.

Mia lives with her father and her paternal grandparents, and her mother has not been a part of her life since she was 18 months old. Child Protection were involved for intermittent periods and worked with the family to improve the living conditions. However, with criminogenic risk factors present in Mia's life, she was deemed a suitable referral in a preventive capacity.

During intake Mia spoke about the difficulties of having no maternal figure in her life throughout childhood. Although she felt she had a close relationship with her dad, she said that for them to connect in a meaningful way, she needed to participate in activities that were of interest to him, like football. She said that she had never formally been charged by police for anything but had been given a warning before; she couldn't really remember why.

Mia reported managing her overwhelm and stress through non-suicidal self-injury and had not sought mental health support. Mia spoke of wanting to connect with a mentor to have someone to turn to for help when things were hard at home or at school. She said that she felt isolated, and life was confusing to navigate when she had no female presence in her life to help guide her.

The YWP Coordinator made a referral to a youth mental health service, and worked with Mia to develop a harm minimization plan. Soon after Mia was matched with Lauren*, a 21-year-old social work student. They built rapport easily for the first month of their match. However, Mia was unwell for weeks, preventing them from catching up. Engagement levels in the match decreased and Lauren became concerned that Mia did not wish to see her and was unsure how to proceed.

Lauren raised her concerns during peer supervision, in which her fellow mentors and the program coordinator encouraged Lauren to remain consistent in her approach with Mia and not take the lack of engagement personally. The Coordinator liaised with the secondary school and Mia's father to allow Mia to leave school early once a week to connect with Lauren. Lauren and Mia went to

local gardens featuring a hedge maze. During this outing Mia and Lauren discussed challenges Mia faced in meeting Lauren and solutions were developed. This was both reassuring for Lauren and a moment of growth for Mia as she felt comfortable in the relationship.

At the goal-setting meeting, it was clear how comfortable the mentor and participant were. Also apparent was how much more expressive and self-assured Mia was. Mia said she felt like having Lauren as a mentor had allowed her self-confidence to grow. Mia said she now had someone in her life who she could turn to and discuss problems that she previously had to navigate through by herself which would make her feel overwhelmed.

The school wellbeing team has reported that Mia has made friendships that appear to be positive and well sustained. They noted, *"We have noticed some positive changes with Mia, she smiles often and is willing to share how her mentorship program is going which is a big deal as Mia has refused to engage with Wellbeing in the past, rapport building has been slow but positive"*.

Mia and Lauren continue to catch up on a regular basis both during the school term and in school holidays. They go on outings together which has been made possible due to recent grants for match activities. The Coordinator has been overjoyed to see not only the growth in Mia throughout this match but also the growth in Lauren's confidence as a mentor as well.

Lauren has often spoken about how this has helped her to learn and better understand the content of her studies on a different level as she is seeing firsthand the powerful impact that positive connection can have.

Recruiting younger mentors and providing these experiences also helps build sector capacity as they will be the workforce of the future, working with young women at risk of criminalisation. This match represents the growth that occurs in both the participants and mentors throughout the YWP matches.



**names changed for privacy reasons*