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## Inside Australia's Broken Women's Prison: Locked Down Daily

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Ashleigh Chapman's experience in solitary confinement at Melbourne's Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (DPFC) paints a troubling picture of the current state of Victoria's women's prisons. Chapman, a former inmate who spent four years behind bars, describes prolonged lockdowns driven by chronic staff shortages that severely restrict prisoner movement and access to basic needs. The impact on mental health and safety is alarming, with reports of frequent self-harm incidents and near-fatal suicide attempts. This crisis reveals systemic failings that must be urgently addressed to protect both inmates and correctional staff.

Chapman, standing nearly six feet tall, recalls pacing her small cell repeatedly, trapped for up to 24 hours a day. The water in her cell was reportedly contaminated, turning green and even blackening her kettle after boiling. Weight loss and untreated allergies compounded her suffering. Basic rights like proper meals and hygiene were routinely compromised, with prison officers ignoring allergy warnings and often serving unsuitable food. She labels her confinement as “psychological torment and torture,” emphasizing the profound isolation and despair experienced by many women locked down for extended periods.

Kelly Flanagan, another former inmate, confirms that lockdowns—meant for emergencies like riots—have become nearly daily occurrences due to staff shortages. In February alone, the prison was locked down more than a dozen times. Flanagan’s diary details seven suicide attempts in a single month, disproportionately affecting Indigenous women. One inmate near her cell tried to quietly take her own life after expressing that the lockdowns were unbearable. Flanagan’s documentation, compiled from prisoners, lawyers, and insiders, exposes a disturbing pattern of neglect within the facility.

Victoria’s Corrections Minister, Enver Erdogan, acknowledged these challenges in Parliament but maintained that lockdowns are necessary for safety and security. The Department of Corrections claims prisoners retain access to meals, healthcare, and legal services during lockdowns and is actively recruiting new staff to ease the burden. However, reports of contaminated water and extended isolation raise serious questions about the facility’s conditions.

Shadow Corrections Minister David Southwick described Victoria’s prison system as “overcrowded, understaffed, and unsafe,” condemning the current reliance on lockdowns as a symptom of systemic failure rather than a solution. He warns that the crisis jeopardizes not only inmates’ wellbeing but also correctional officers’ morale and safety, leading to a dangerous cycle of staff departures and worsening conditions.

The evidence from DPFC underscores a prison system in distress—where the government’s inability to maintain adequate staffing and infrastructure is causing preventable harm. Authorities must prioritize the health, safety, and dignity of all prisoners, while supporting correctional staff to restore order and humanity to these institutions. Without swift action, the situation risks further deterioration, with tragic consequences for vulnerable women and those tasked with their care.