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Lived Experience Research and Policy Unit

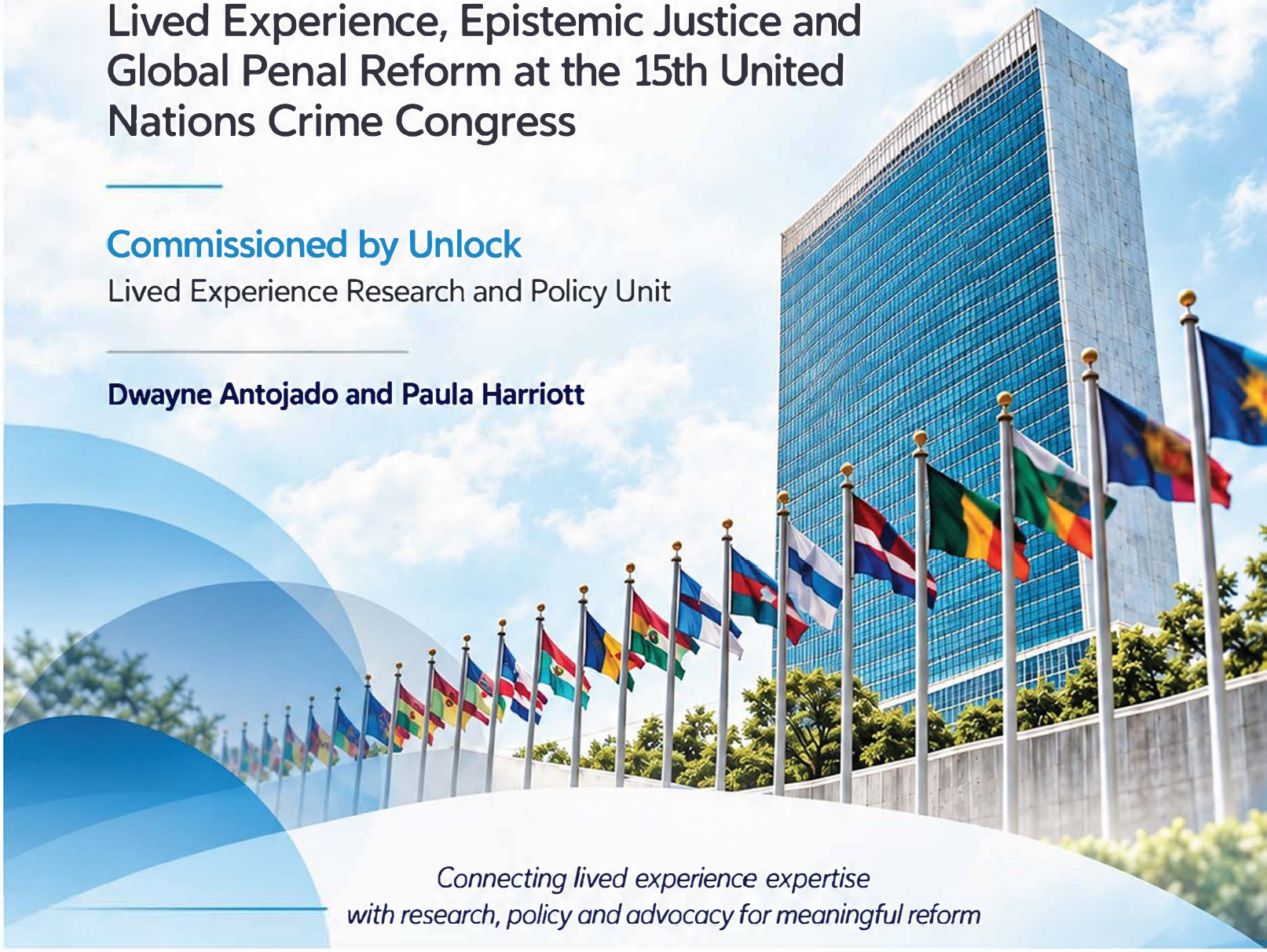
From Participation to Influence

Lived Experience, Epistemic Justice and Global Penal Reform at the 15th United Nations Crime Congress

Commissioned by Unlock

Lived Experience Research and Policy Unit

Dwayne Antojado and Paula Harriott



Connecting lived experience expertise with research, policy and advocacy for meaningful reform

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Dwayne Antojado & Paula Harriott

October 2026

Report on the ancillary event "Lived Experience, Co-Production and Global Penal Reform: Embedding Ethical Lived Experience Knowledges in Criminal Justice Systems"

15th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates | 30 September 2026



STRATEGIC FIT

CHANGE SYSTEMS	SHIFT POWER	LEAD WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE
Use rigorous evidence and lived reality to develop practical routes to reform.	Move people affected by criminal justice from engagement to genuine influence.	Recognise affected people as experts, leaders and decision-makers, not simply participants.

AT A GLANCE

Executive summary

On 30 September 2026, during the 15th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in Abu Dhabi, a coalition led by Penal Reform International convened a dedicated ancillary event on lived experience, co-production and global penal reform. Supported by Australia, Canada, Unlock, the Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ), Ateneo de Manila University, Adelaide University, the University of Chester, the University of Sheffield and other partners, the event brought together Dwayne Antojado, Olivia Rope, Gillian Buck, Danica Darley, Paula Harriott and Chontit Chuenurah. For the organisers, it represented a first dedicated lived experience panel at a UN Crime Congress and a significant moment in the effort to move experiential knowledge from the margins of penal reform into the architecture of international criminal justice policy.

The significance of the event, however, should not be reduced to novelty or visibility. People who have experienced imprisonment, criminalisation, victimisation and justice-system contact have long organised, produced knowledge, supported peers and shaped reform. What made the Abu Dhabi event important was that lived experience itself became the substantive question: not simply whether affected people should be heard, but what status their knowledge should have, when they should enter policy processes, what power they should possess, and what ethical conditions are required for participation to become influence.

This report argues that the panel can be understood as an intervention in epistemic justice. Criminal justice institutions are unusually powerful producers of knowledge about people: they classify, assess, diagnose, sentence, supervise, monitor and research. Yet the people most intensively known by these systems have often been denied equivalent standing as knowers of those systems. Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice is useful here: injustice can occur when a person is given an unfair credibility deficit, or when dominant interpretive frameworks make important aspects of experience difficult to articulate or recognise. In criminal justice, this problem is intensified by stigma and institutional power. A person may be treated as highly knowable for purposes of risk, punishment or case management while remaining insufficiently credible as a source of knowledge about how the system actually operates.

The contributions in Abu Dhabi collectively challenged that asymmetry. Olivia Rope located participation within a human-rights framework of dignity, equality, accountability and agency. Gillian Buck demonstrated that criminalised people have long generated reform knowledge and argued for institutional memory so that their contributions are preserved, connected and carried forward. Danica Darley exposed the gendered politics of whose lived experience becomes visible, warning that tokenism, extraction and repeated trauma disclosure can reproduce the harms participation is meant to address. Chontit Chuenurah used the Bangkok Rules to show how attention to women's situated realities can reshape international standards and their implementation. Paula Harriott traced a movement from being the object of penal decision-making to consultation, co-production, employment, civic participation and leadership. Dwayne Antojado drew these strands together into a multilateral proposition: meaningful participation is not presence; it is the ability to influence how problems are defined, what evidence is valued and what solutions become possible.

For Unlock, this report sits directly within its 2026–2031 commitment to change systems that hold people back and to shift power through lived experience leadership. The Abu Dhabi event shows what that

ambition can mean in a multilateral setting: people affected by criminal justice entering not only as speakers or consultees, but as experts, researchers, leaders and decision-makers whose knowledge can shape the agenda itself.

> **The central shift is from asking, "What happened to you?" to asking, "What do you know because of what happened to you, and how should that knowledge inform what we do next?"**

Six conclusions emerge from the analysis:

01 **POWER** Participation is fundamentally a question of power, not attendance.	**02** **EXPERTISE** Experience is distinctive without being automatically representative or infallible; expertise develops through reflection, collective interpretation, research and practice.	**03** **PLURALITY** Representation must be plural and intersectional; a single "lived experience voice" can reproduce exclusion.
04 **ETHICS** Participation can become extractive unless it is resourced, remunerated, consent-based and linked to real decision pathways.	**05** **INFRASTRUCTURE** Institutions need mechanisms that preserve contributions, record responses and make experiential knowledge cumulative rather than episodic.	**06** **INFLUENCE** The test is whether lived experience changes agendas, decisions and implementation, not simply whether it is visible.

The opportunity now is to use the five-year cycle following the 15th Crime Congress to convert visibility into durable influence across UNODC, the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ), Member States and civil society. The measure of progress by the next Crime Congress should not be how many people with lived experience were placed on panels. It should be whether they helped define agendas, draft standards, shape implementation, evaluate outcomes and exercise leadership - and whether their participation can be shown to have altered decisions.

THE REPORT

About this report

This report was commissioned through Unlock's Lived Experience Research and Policy Unit and authored by Dwayne Antojado and Paula Harriott. The Unit connects lived experience expertise with research, policy and advocacy and sits within Unlock's wider commitment to changing systems that hold people back and shifting power through lived experience leadership. It is an analytical reflection on the significance of the 30 September 2026 ancillary event, drawing on the speakers' intervention scripts, official materials from Penal Reform International, TIJ and the 15th UN Crime Congress, and academic scholarship on participation, co-production, democratic governance, feminist standpoint theory, epistemic injustice and lived experience criminology. It is not an independent impact evaluation of the Congress. The term "milestone" describes the coalition's first dedicated panel and the wider institutional moment at the 15th Congress; it does not claim that no person with direct experience of criminal justice had ever spoken at an earlier Crime Congress.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO UNLOCK

Unlock's strategy is explicit that people with criminal records are not passive recipients of support: they are experts, leaders and decision-makers. This report asks what it would take for the same principle to become normal practice in international criminal justice.

THE MILESTONE

1. A milestone in global penal reform

The 15th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice took place in Abu Dhabi from 26 September to 1 October 2026. Crime Congresses occupy an unusual position in the international criminal justice system. Held every five years, they bring Member States, United Nations entities, practitioners, scholars and civil society into a common policy space and help establish the themes, concepts and priorities that continue through the CCPCJ and UNODC over the years that follow. The significance of a Congress therefore lies not only in its formal declaration but in the ideas that gain legitimacy within its programme and surrounding multilateral conversations.

On 30 September, the ancillary event "Lived Experience, Co-Production and Global Penal Reform: Embedding Ethical Lived Experience Knowledges in Criminal Justice Systems" made lived experience the organising subject of an international penal reform discussion. The event was organised by Penal Reform International with support from Australia, Canada, Ateneo de Manila University, Adelaide University, the University of Chester, the University of Sheffield, Unlock, TIJ, Stichting Sileo, Ask the Network and Imagining Possible Futures. Its panel brought together lived experience leadership, human-rights advocacy, criminological and social-work scholarship, feminist analysis and international standard-setting.

OLIVIA ROPE **Dignity & rights** Participation as a human-rights and accountability question.	GILLIAN BUCK **Institutional memory** Lived experience knowledge must be preserved and connected over time.	DANICA DARLEY **Plurality & gender** Representation must confront gendered and intersectional exclusions.
CHONTIT CHUENURAH **Bangkok Rules** Substantive equality depends on knowledge of situated realities.	PAULA HARRIOTT **Citizenship & leadership** Move from engagement to influence through work, civic participation and leadership.	DWAYNE ANTOJADO **Influence** Shift from presence to agenda-setting, problem-definition and decision power.

The event occurred in a wider Congress environment in which participation was becoming more visible. A formal Congress workshop on 27 September included a panel titled "Lived Experiences to Agents of Transformative Change", while the subsequent Committee I summary recorded calls to move from consultation to co-creation by meaningfully involving women, children, young people, survivors and people with lived experience in the development of crime-prevention and criminal-justice policies and programmes. This convergence matters. It suggests that lived experience was beginning to move from the status of a civil-society concern into the vocabulary of the Congress itself.

What changed in Abu Dhabi was therefore not simply who occupied a chair on a panel. The deeper shift concerned epistemic standing. Criminal justice systems have historically positioned affected people as defendants, prisoners, offenders, victims, clients, service users, research participants or case files. Each category permits institutions to know something about the person. The lived experience proposition adds

another role: the affected person as an author of knowledge about the institution itself. That move is politically and epistemologically significant because it unsettles the traditional one-way direction of penal expertise.

> **The milestone was not merely the presence of lived experience at the United Nations. It was the attempt to move lived experience from testimony to epistemic authority — from being evidence about a person to becoming evidence about a system.**

THE PANEL

2. What the panel established

2.1 Participation as a human-rights and dignity question

Olivia Rope's intervention began with an important act of legal precision: there is no single universal treaty provision establishing a general "right to lived experience involvement" in criminal justice. But the absence of that phrase does not place participation outside human-rights reasoning. Dignity, equality and non-discrimination, accountability, empowerment and participation are mutually reinforcing principles within a human-rights-based approach. Article 10 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Rule 1 of the Nelson Mandela Rules establish the inherent dignity of people deprived of liberty. Starting from dignity changes the institutional question. A person in prison is not merely the object of a sentence or recipient of a service; they remain a rights-holder whose experience is relevant to determining whether rights are realised in practice.

Closed institutions make this especially important. Formal compliance can conceal experiential failure: a complaints mechanism may exist but be experienced as unsafe; healthcare may be formally available but practically inaccessible; a policy may be facially neutral yet operate unequally. Experiential knowledge is therefore not ornamental to monitoring. It is one of the means through which the gap between rights on paper and rights in practice becomes knowable.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) offers a particularly instructive analogy. Article 4(3) requires States Parties to closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities through their representative organisations in decisions concerning them, and General Comment No. 7 emphasises meaningful and timely participation across planning, implementation and monitoring. The CRPD does not automatically create an equivalent treaty obligation for all people affected by criminal justice. Its relevance is conceptual and institutional: it demonstrates that the United Nations system already recognises that people directly affected by policy can possess a legitimate participatory claim to shaping it, rather than merely commenting after decisions have been formed.

2.2 Participation needs memory: lived experience as cumulative knowledge

Gillian Buck challenged another misconception: that lived experience participation is a new innovation. Her historical work shows that people affected by punishment have identified problems, organised mutual aid, documented conditions, advocated for reform and generated solutions for centuries. The point is not to

romanticise all experience or assume every affected person is a reformer. It is to recognise that criminalised people have long acted as producers of knowledge, even where institutions failed to preserve or credit that knowledge.

Buck's intervention introduced a crucial institutional idea: participation without memory becomes serial consultation. If each inquiry, prison review, policy team or international process begins by asking affected people the same questions, but does not preserve what was said, record what was accepted or rejected, and connect new contributions to previous ones, institutions may repeatedly "discover" the same problems. The ethical cost is borne by participants, who are asked to repeat difficult experiences; the policy cost is borne by institutions, which fail to accumulate learning.

This suggests that meaningful participation requires an epistemic infrastructure. Such an infrastructure would not necessarily mean creating another advisory body. It would mean preserving recommendations, tracing institutional responses, connecting knowledge across time and jurisdictions, and building feedback loops through which participants can see what changed. In this sense, institutional memory is part of epistemic justice: knowledge is not fully recognised if it disappears once the consultation closes.

2.3 Whose lived experience? Gender, intersectionality and representational power

Danica Darley's contribution complicated any simple celebration of "voice". Criminal justice systems have historically been designed around male populations, and lived experience movements can reproduce that male norm if they do not attend to who is visible, resourced and safe enough to participate. Women may experience shorter sentences, family separation, caring responsibilities, poverty, histories of abuse, stigma and practical barriers that make sustained advocacy less accessible. A participation model that is formally open can therefore remain substantively unequal.

This is an intersectional problem. Crenshaw's work demonstrates how single-axis frameworks can render people invisible when their experiences are formed at the intersection of multiple structures of power. Darley's intervention applied that insight to lived experience participation: women are not a singular category, and mothers, racialised women, disabled women, migrant women, women with histories of exploitation and young women leaving care may possess differently situated knowledge and face different participation risks. Representation therefore requires plurality rather than the assumption that one participant can stand for a population.

Darley also identified a more troubling possibility: participation can reproduce the violence of the system if institutions value people primarily for the disclosure of pain. Repeatedly asking women to narrate trauma can turn experience into a credential that must be continually performed. This is the point at which inclusion becomes extraction. The ethical response is not to avoid lived experience but to separate epistemic value from compulsory disclosure: people should be able to contribute analysis, expertise and recommendations without repeatedly exposing the most difficult parts of their lives.

2.4 The Bangkok Rules: substantive equality requires situated knowledge

Chontit Chuenurah's contribution connected these questions to one of the most important gender-responsive instruments in international criminal justice: the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders, or Bangkok Rules. Her intervention drew attention to the role of lived realities in the development and continuing implementation of the Rules and to the importance of centring women directly affected by imprisonment in policy design.

The drafting history published by TIJ shows that the Rules emerged through a sustained Thai initiative involving research, the Kamlangjai and Enhancing Lives of Female Inmates (ELFI) projects, NGOs, international experts, UNODC and intergovernmental negotiations. The Rules themselves institutionalise an important epistemic shift. Rule 1 rejects the assumption that identical treatment necessarily produces equality: the distinctive needs of women must be taken into account to achieve substantive gender equality. Rule 54 goes further by requiring culturally relevant programmes and services for women from different religious and cultural backgrounds to be developed "in consultation with women prisoners themselves and the relevant groups".

The theoretical significance is easy to miss. Substantive equality is not only a legal principle; it also has an epistemological requirement. Decision-makers cannot know what equal treatment requires if the institutional baseline has been constructed around a different population and the experience of difference is excluded from the knowledge base. The Bangkok Rules therefore offer a proof of concept for the broader lived experience argument: the adequacy of a standard can depend upon whether the knowledge of those living its consequences enters the process through which needs, harms and remedies are understood.

At the same time, the Bangkok Rules also reveal the unfinished agenda. They contain important requirements for consultation in specific contexts, but they do not establish a comprehensive framework for women with lived experience to participate in the design, implementation, monitoring and revision of the Rules as a whole. The task now is to move from standards that recognise situated needs toward governance arrangements that also recognise situated knowers.

2.5 From service user to citizen, worker and leader

Paula Harriott's intervention shifted the lens from consultation to social and civic status. Her account of developments in the United Kingdom traced a gradual movement: people with experience of imprisonment and probation have moved from being subjects of systems, to being consulted by those systems, to designing services, producing knowledge, contributing to national policy, entering employment and occupying leadership roles. User Voice prison and probation councils and the Prisoner Policy Network illustrate that people affected by penal institutions can contribute not only accounts of conditions but solutions, priorities and policy analysis. In Unlock's strategic language, this is the movement from engagement to influence: participation becomes meaningful when it creates routes into authority rather than a permanent advisory margin.

The democratic importance of this move is supported by research on prison councils. Schmidt's work on User Voice describes participatory governance in prisons as a form of civic enfranchisement organised around inclusion, deliberation and legitimacy. Weaver similarly finds that co-produced prison governance can build trust, improve relationships and enhance institutional legitimacy, even where its effects remain more ameliorative than transformative. The conceptual point is important: participation is not only an instrument for producing better services. It is a practice of citizenship in settings where people are commonly defined through exclusion.

Harriott also made the distinction that protects lived experience from romanticisation: lived experience alone is not automatically expertise. A single biography cannot represent every person, establish prevalence or replace legal, professional or research knowledge. But experience can become expertise when it is critically reflected upon, connected to evidence, tested in collective dialogue, developed through practice and given opportunities to influence decisions. That proposition aligns with feminist standpoint theory: marginal social location can provide a distinctive starting point for knowledge, but it does not guarantee an

infallible standpoint. The strength lies in what becomes visible from a position that dominant institutions routinely fail to occupy (Collins, 1986; Harding, 1996).

This distinction is essential because epistemic justice is not epistemic exceptionalism. The case for lived experience does not depend on claiming it is superior to every other form of knowledge. The stronger claim is that a criminal justice knowledge system that excludes experiential knowledge is systematically incomplete.

2.6 From presence to influence in multilateral spaces

Dwayne Antojado's closing intervention brought the panel's arguments to the multilateral level. International criminal justice spaces negotiate standards, declarations, technical assistance frameworks and policy priorities that later travel into national systems. If lived experience is absent when those instruments are framed, affected people are not merely absent from a meeting: their knowledge may be absent from the categories through which problems become internationally intelligible.

This is why timing matters. Inviting someone after an agenda is fixed can diversify testimony without redistributing agenda-setting power. Meaningful participation begins earlier: when institutions decide what the problem is, what questions should be asked, what evidence counts, which outcomes matter and how success will be judged. Participation becomes influence when experiential knowledge can alter those choices.

The multilateral opportunity is particularly significant because international standards have legitimating effects. They do not automatically transform domestic systems, but they can expand what governments, civil society organisations and reformers can plausibly demand. Recognition of lived experience participation in future resolutions, standards, guidance and technical-assistance practice could therefore strengthen national actors who are already doing this work, while giving governments a clearer normative basis for institutionalising it.

THE ANALYSIS

3. From participation to epistemic justice

3.1 Participation is a distribution of power

The participation literature has long warned against treating inclusion as self-validating. Arnstein's (1969) classic "ladder of citizen participation" distinguished forms of participation by the degree of power citizens possess, not simply by whether they are present. Later work similarly asks who participates, how deliberation occurs, and how participation connects to authoritative decisions (Fung, 2006). Cornwall (2008) cautions that "participation" can conceal radically different practices unless institutions specify who is participating, in what, on whose terms and to what effect. Cooke and Kothari (2001) go further, showing that participatory processes can legitimise existing power relations when they are presented as empowerment but structured by those who already control the agenda.

These critiques map directly onto the Abu Dhabi panel. A lived experience speaker may be highly visible while possessing almost no decision authority. Conversely, a person may never tell a personal story publicly yet exercise substantial influence as an adviser, drafter, researcher, employee, commissioner or leader.

Visibility and power are therefore not the same variable. This is why the appropriate metric is not "Was lived experience represented?" but "What could participants change?"

Fraser's concept of participatory parity sharpens the point. Justice requires more than formal inclusion; people must be able to participate as peers. Applied to criminal justice, parity has at least three dimensions: recognition, because criminalised people are commonly marked by status stigma; redistribution, because participation requires money, time, travel, digital access, childcare and other material resources; and representation, because affected people need access to the political spaces where priorities are framed. Participation that addresses only representation — a seat in the room — while ignoring status and resources can remain structurally unequal.

3.2 Criminal justice and the credibility economy

Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice as a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice produces an unfair credibility deficit; hermeneutical injustice arises when unequal participation in meaning-making leaves groups disadvantaged in interpreting or communicating important parts of their experience. Criminal justice provides unusually fertile conditions for both. Stigma attaches credibility judgments to categories such as prisoner, offender, addict, gang member or "non-compliant" service user. At the same time, institutional vocabularies — risk, security, rehabilitation, compliance, recidivism — can organise how experiences become legible in ways that do not fully capture what affected people themselves identify as harm, safety, dignity or change.

The carceral state is also an intensive knowledge apparatus. Foucault's analysis of disciplinary institutions showed how examination, classification and normalisation produce individuals as objects of knowledge. Lived experience participation creates a partial reversal of that gaze. The person who has been assessed becomes an assessor of the institution; the person who has been researched becomes a producer of research questions; the person whose conduct has been interpreted through official categories becomes an interpreter of the categories themselves. This reversal does not eliminate institutional power, but it changes the direction in which knowledge is permitted to travel.

Dotson's (2011) account of epistemic violence is useful because it emphasises that silencing is not only about whether a person speaks; it also concerns whether hearers possess the willingness and interpretive competence to receive what is said. In multilateral criminal justice, this means that inviting affected people is insufficient if institutional procedures recognise only forms of speech that reproduce professional assumptions. Epistemic justice requires uptake, not merely utterance.

3.3 From testimony to expertise — without romanticisation

The panel repeatedly resisted a false choice between professional expertise and lived experience. Co-production does not require the displacement of lawyers, researchers, prison staff, policymakers or statisticians. Bovaird (2007) conceptualises co-production as a reconfiguration of public-service relationships in which users and communities contribute to planning and delivery rather than remaining passive recipients. In criminal justice, the strongest model is therefore epistemic pluralism: different knowledge positions are brought into structured dialogue because each can identify things the others cannot.

Feminist standpoint theory helps explain why this is more than diversity for its own sake. Collins's "outsider within" demonstrates how marginal social positions can reveal features of institutions that are less visible from dominant locations. Harding's "strong objectivity" similarly argues that inquiry can become more robust when it begins from lives systematically excluded from conventional knowledge production. Neither

account entails that marginality mechanically produces truth. A standpoint is cultivated through critical reflection and collective interpretation. That distinction is particularly important for lived experience, because it protects two propositions at once: experience has epistemic value, and no individual should be burdened with representing an entire population.

Antojado's work on lived experience criminology makes a related claim within criminology: experiential narratives can extend the discipline's knowledge base when they are treated as sources of inquiry rather than illustrative anecdotes. The implication for policy is similar. Lived experience should not be recruited only to humanise a report after the analytical architecture has been built. It can help construct the architecture.

3.4 Epistemic exploitation: when participation consumes the participant

Meaningful participation also requires attention to epistemic labour. Berenstain (2016) describes "epistemic exploitation" as the unrecognised, uncompensated and emotionally costly labour imposed when marginalised people are expected to educate more privileged groups about oppression. Lived experience work can reproduce this dynamic when institutions repeatedly request personal disclosure, expect participants to convert trauma into institutional learning, and then retain control over the interpretation, publication and benefits that follow.

Buck, Tomczak and Quinn's (2022) research in the penal voluntary sector shows the ambivalence of lived experience work. It can create belonging, purpose and recognition, while simultaneously being precarious, shame-provoking and structurally unequal. This empirical finding closely mirrors Darley's intervention: the same process can empower and harm, sometimes on the same day. Ethical participation therefore cannot be defined only by the good intentions of the convenor. It has to be judged by the distribution of control, resources, recognition, risk and benefit.

A non-extractive model would never require disclosure as the price of epistemic legitimacy. It would remunerate expertise, support participants before and after difficult work, give people control over how their stories are used, and create opportunities to contribute analysis that is not reducible to autobiography. Most importantly, it would connect the labour of participation to visible institutional consequences.

THE FRAMEWORK

4. The conceptual contribution of the Abu Dhabi event

Taken together, the panel's interventions suggest that lived experience participation should be understood through three linked transformations.

From	To	What changes
Object of knowledge	**Subject of knowledge**	Affected people are recognised as capable of interpreting institutions, not only being interpreted by them.
Consultation	**Co-production and influence**	Participation begins at problem definition and is linked to decisions, implementation and evaluation.

From	To	What changes
Exceptional testimony	**Epistemic infrastructure**	Experiential knowledge is preserved, resourced, connected across time and embedded in ordinary governance.

The first transformation is epistemic. It contests the asymmetry through which criminal justice institutions produce authoritative knowledge about affected people while discounting their knowledge of the institution. The second is democratic. It shifts participation from invitation to shared problem-definition and from consultation to influence. The third is organisational. It asks institutions to stop treating lived experience as an exceptional intervention and instead build routine structures through which experiential knowledge can be retained, challenged, combined with other evidence and acted upon.

This framework also clarifies what meaningful participation is not. It is not the claim that every personal experience is generalisable. It is not the replacement of research with narrative. It is not the assumption that one participant can represent all affected people. It is not compelled disclosure. It is not a symbolic seat without resources or decision pathways. And it is not a one-off event whose insights disappear from institutional memory once the panel ends.

THE PRINCIPLES

5. Seven principles for meaningful lived experience participation

The panel and the literature together support seven principles that can guide multilateral and national criminal justice institutions.

1. Begin with problem definition, not post-hoc validation.

People with relevant lived experience should be involved when priorities, questions, evidence needs and success criteria are being established. Consultation after the scope is fixed can improve detail but rarely redistributes agenda-setting power.

2. Recognise epistemic status, not only narrative value.

Participants should be invited for what they know, not merely for the emotional force of what happened to them. Personal narrative can be valuable, but it should not be the compulsory form through which expertise is made credible.

3. Design for plurality rather than symbolic representation.

No individual can represent "the lived experience". Participation strategies should reflect gender, race, disability, age, migration, sexuality, geography, offence type, victimisation, sentence status and other relevant differences, while allowing collective organisations to build positions beyond individual biography.

4. Redistribute the material conditions of participation.

Fees, travel, visas, accommodation, accessible formats, digital access, childcare, interpretation, safeguarding and preparation are not administrative extras. They determine who can participate and therefore whose knowledge becomes visible.

5. Make participation consent-based and non-extractive.

No one should be required to disclose trauma to demonstrate legitimacy. Participants should retain meaningful control over how personal information is used, have access to support, and be able to contribute through analysis, research, facilitation, drafting and leadership as well as testimony.

6. Create feedback and institutional memory.

Institutions should record recommendations, publish or communicate what was accepted, modified or rejected and why, and connect new processes to earlier contributions. Without this, consultation becomes repetitive rather than cumulative.

7. Build pathways from participation to authority.

Meaningful inclusion should create routes into paid employment, expert groups, research, commissioning, governance, authorship, chairing, evaluation and leadership. A permanent "lived experience slot" can become another form of containment if people are never able to move beyond it.

THE FIVE-YEAR WINDOW

6. Recommendations: using the five-year window after Abu Dhabi

The 15th Crime Congress creates a five-year policy window in which the ideas articulated in Abu Dhabi can be converted into institutional practice. The aim should not be another layer of consultation. It should be to change how criminal justice institutions work: who defines problems, whose evidence counts, who is resourced to participate, how contributions are recorded and how they travel into decisions. In that sense, the task is to move from engagement to influence and from symbolic participation to power that is genuinely shared. As Buck argued, this does not necessarily require a new standalone mechanism; it requires participation and institutional memory to be embedded within existing structures so that experiential knowledge becomes part of ordinary governance.

01	02	03	04
AGENDA-SETTING	**DRAFTING**	**IMPLEMENTATION**	**LEADERSHIP**
Define problems, priorities and questions with affected people from the outset.	Bring lived expertise into standards, policy options and technical design.	Use experiential knowledge to test how reform operates in practice.	Create sustained routes into authority, review and accountability.



MEASURING INFLUENCE

7. How should progress be measured?

If participation is measured only by attendance, institutions will optimise for attendance. A more credible framework would measure influence. By the 16th Crime Congress, partners should be able to

ask not only how many people with lived experience participated, but how participation changed governance.

Weak indicator	Stronger indicator
Number of lived experience speakers	**Proportion of relevant processes in which lived experience participants entered before the agenda or terms of reference were finalised**
Number of consultations held	**Percentage of recommendations receiving a documented response and proportion adopted, modified or rejected with reasons**
Diversity of panel composition	**Whether multiple affected groups and representative organisations had the resources and conditions required to participate as peers**
Stories collected	**Evidence of co-authorship, analysis, drafting, evaluation or decision-making roles**
Participant satisfaction alone	**Participant assessment of safety and respect combined with evidence of actual institutional influence**
One-off visibility	**Sustained participation across policy cycles, including implementation and review**

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Conclusion: from visibility to epistemic authority

The Abu Dhabi panel matters because it named a problem that criminal justice reform has often left implicit. Penal institutions have historically been comfortable making knowledge about people: measuring risk, producing files, assessing behaviour, recording compliance, diagnosing needs and evaluating outcomes. They have been less consistent in recognising the people subjected to those processes as legitimate producers of knowledge about the institutions themselves. The milestone was therefore not simply that lived experience became visible at a United Nations Crime Congress. It was that the authority of lived experience knowledge itself became a question for global penal reform.

Lived experience participation is therefore not simply an inclusion agenda. At its most ambitious, it redistributes epistemic and democratic authority. It asks institutions to recognise that people closest to the operation of a policy may see harms, contradictions, incentives and possibilities that are not visible from professional, legal or academic positions alone. For Unlock, this is where changing systems and shifting power become inseparable: people affected by criminal justice must be able to move from participation to influence as researchers, workers, advisers, citizens, organisers, experts and leaders.

The panel also made clear that this agenda carries risks. Lived experience can be tokenised, individualised, professionalised into harmlessness or extracted through repeated disclosure. It can reproduce gendered and racialised exclusions. It can create the appearance of participation while preserving decision-making power elsewhere. The response is not less participation but more rigorous participation: clear standards, material resourcing, plural representation, ethical safeguards, feedback, institutional memory and measurable

influence. Effective reform must be evidence-led and principled, but it must also be grounded in lived reality and designed so that power is genuinely shared rather than symbolically displayed.

The most important legacy of the event will therefore not be that lived experience appeared on a United Nations programme. It will be whether international criminal justice becomes capable of learning differently, making decisions differently and sharing authority differently because it did.

By the next Crime Congress, the test should not be whether lived experience was present, but whether it changed the agenda, the evidence, the standards and the decisions.



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