

## **Indigenous Family Violence Prevention: Which Way Now?**

Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research

Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Month Forum

Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> May 2004

9.15am

Keynote Speech

Prof. Mick Dodson

ANUIIA

Ladies and Gentlemen

My first duty is to acknowledge the Yuibera people the Traditional Owners of this place. I also want to warmly thank Philip Kemp for his welcome to country. It is good to be on your ancestral lands.

I would also like to thank Heather Nancarrow for inviting me here today to participate in this very important forum.

Today I would like to talk to you about Indigenous men and violence. I will start with a quote that caught my attention recently in a Report on the 48<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.<sup>1</sup>

This report quotes Dr Rose Magiro, Minister of Community Development in Tanzania talking on the theme - the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.

*'Masculinity is too often associated with power and leadership and femininity associated with subordination. Education is needed at the early education levels to overcome tradition and culturally ingrained inequality and to broaden the definition of masculinity for men and boys.'*

This quote struck a cord with me. In Indigenous Australia, the same can be said to be true. Masculinity is all too often associated with power, where bullying, domination and intimidation allow for the emergence of community power brokers, mistaking their positions for leaders in their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> International Federation of University Women 2004 Report on the 48<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 1-2 March 2004. p.2

Leadership however, is not about power and brutality, it's about legitimate authority, it's about the 'way structures of governance are created and leaders chosen, and the extent of constituents' confidence in, and support of them.'<sup>2</sup>

In the past, Indigenous Australians walked together with mutual respect, where legitimate authority was culturally sanctioned and leadership earned.

Current, research about older Aboriginal men's relationships with younger men shows how mission life and colonial structures radically affected

'not only the authority of older men but also the experience of nurturance by younger men. Young men cannot simply replicate the relationship their fathers once experienced with older men. Colonial and mission contact radically altered men's roles, authority and leadership, as it also shaped gender relationships.....arguably, what some young men are experiencing today is both personal and inherited'<sup>3</sup>

Such brutal experiences with colonial forces have left us with deep emotional scars.

Today, more tragically than this, Indigenous men's violence against other Indigenous men, women and children are leaving deeper scars.

Here, in this forum, I don't need to rattle off the terrible statistics of violence. We all know that these don't reveal enough of the horror endured by those experiencing, witnessing and fearing violence.

Today, Indigenous men and women must move forward again together, and guide our children toward mutual respect and gender equity.

Together we must redefine masculinity for Indigenous men and boys.

This process must not only play a major part in the way we educate our children, but it will be dependent on our own role modelling of appropriate, respectful and non-abusive behaviours.

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<sup>2</sup> Dodson, M. and Smith, D.E. 2003 Governance for sustainable development: Strategic issues and principles for Indigenous Australian communities, CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 250, ANU, Canberra, p.2

<sup>3</sup> McCoy, B.F., 2003 'If we come together our health will be happy'-Aboriginal men seeking ways to better health, AIATSIS Seminar Series – health and society, Canberra p.1 and p. 13

Across the country, in many small and humble ways, individual men and women are working together in this way. We must all aspire to this.

Unfortunately at a national level, we are not supporting these small individual and local initiatives enough. There remains no national strategic framework to combat violence that has been endorsed by governments in partnership with Indigenous Australians, and my co-Keynote speaker and good friend, Jackie Huggins I understand will be speaking about this shortly.

Consequently, many local initiatives emerge and sometimes fail without the lessons learnt, the stories told and the wisdom shared with other individuals and communities.

And more tragically, the violence perpetuates violence and our futures continue to shatter.

Local initiatives to help men overcome violence have taken many forms. Some of these have included individual and group counselling and therapy sessions, men's bush trips and support groups.

Some of the programs developed to help incarcerated men understand and manage their violence are also looking promising.

Other initiatives focus on the training of community counsellors. For instance I understand that in Far North Queensland there have been significant developments with a community counselling program that emerged out of a successful prison program for Indigenous men run by the Cairns Men's Group.

A partnership with the Office of Status of Women led to the broadening of the men's group into a training program to build supportive networks for counsellors coming from a number of local Indigenous groups.<sup>4</sup>

Other work has focused on the role of addictions in the manifestations of violent behaviours. Of interest here are the critical studies by Indigenous researchers Gregory Phillips who has recently published 'Addictions and Healing in Aboriginal Country',<sup>5</sup> and of Prof. Judy Atkinson's ground breaking research into trans generational trauma.

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<sup>4</sup> ATSIC Media Press Release, Cairns ATSIC Chair Terry O'Shane, Cairns Mens' Group, Cairns, April 2004

<sup>5</sup> Phillips, G. 2003 Addictions and Healing in Aboriginal Country, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra

The role that alcohol and drug abuse play in fuelling violent episodes within families and communities is of course pivotal, where the actions of a few devastate entire communities particularly the children. Men can no longer hide behind the common excuse of “it’s the grog talking”.

Men who become violent under the influence of drugs and alcohol can no longer cry victim to the grog. Men have to stand up and be responsible for these behaviours while intoxicated, and seek support through the many alcohol and drug services emerging through the networks of community controlled services or government services, however these are not enough.

We must demand more support for these at the local level. Indigenous men need help.

Disturbing evidence is now showing that a young mans rite of passage is now through alcohol and drug abuse, sexual and family violence and ultimately passage into the criminal justice system.

Local initiatives aimed at redressing these disturbing trends for our young men must be sought and ongoing resources demanded.

I have recently become aware of a ground breaking approach to engaging young Indigenous men involving the Gap Youth Centre and NT Health in Alice Springs.

State of the art interactive technologies are inspiring some of these young men at risk of dropping out of community life and withdrawing through drugs and crime. In particular, these interactive technologies, which include animated photographed caricatures of themselves and their lives, are ensuring sexual health messages engage their peer groups and allow for dialogue between older and younger men. These animated characters and graphics remove the requirement for literacy in health education.

Products can be transformed instantly to posters, t-shirts, temporary tattoos and TV commercials developed locally by locals. While evaluations of the effectiveness of the health messages are along way off, the possibilities for engaging the most disengaged is enormous.

While I am certainly hopeful that some of these local initiatives will support many of our young men, there remains a silence about what it means to be an Indigenous man in contemporary Australia, how to be a good role model and how to redefine Indigenous masculinity.

The absence of positive, nurturing Indigenous men, absent through premature death, drug and alcohol abuse and powerlessness, in family and community life, may be making room for other destructive role modelling in gender relationships to emerge. Indeed many young Indigenous boys may experience much of their gender relationship role modelling through a young lifetime of accessing pornography via various unchecked technologies readily available in their communities.

In fact, the most revealing discourses about Indigenous masculinity come not from men but from women, in particular young women and their early experiences and expectations of relationships with Indigenous men.

Researcher, Kate Senior has been working with young women in Ngukurr talking about their expectations of relationships with men. This research reveals disturbing information about the position of women in this community, and I fear, in many communities around the country. She says that;

‘Relationships between the sexes are distinguished by quite marked differences in power, and women, particularly young women are expected to be submissive and subservient to men. Women who attempt to redress this inequality – and they quite frequently do – are often put at risk of male anger and ....not infrequently, violence.’

She goes on to say that:

‘[the] cost of holding onto a boy is the acknowledgement that boys could be violent and that girls had to be very careful not to provoke his jealousy.....[one girl was quoted saying] that’s how they get a bit jealous and start bashing their girlfriend.’<sup>6</sup>

While stories like this are certainly supported by statistical and anecdotal evidence of high levels of sexual violence experienced by young women in adolescence, they are not new, and they are certainly not acceptable.

Clearly while there are many causal factors implicated for the high levels of violence within Indigenous communities, these fundamental early interactions between young men and young women can determine pathways through life.

For this to change, boys will need to grow up in a culture that values respectful, equality and legitimate authority within relationships, within families and from Indigenous leaders.

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<sup>6</sup> Senior, K. 2003 WalkinPage about at Night, Young women and their relationship in a Remote Aboriginal Community, Seminar presented at AIATSIS Health and Wellbeing Seminar Series.

Indigenous men are certainly in crisis and many Indigenous young men and boys will simply be lost, meanwhile, as Indigenous men, collectively we are mute.

However I believe we are capable of moving past our insecurities and collective identity crises for our futures sake.

I am also enormously inspired by many of the young and not so young Indigenous men and women that I have met through the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre in Canberra, as well as the many Indigenous students moving into University's, some drawing on all their strengths to complete their studies and sit along side their non-indigenous student friends.

We have unlimited strengths collectively.

I am hoping that from this forum, we can reignite dialogue between Indigenous men and women and that we men can talk to each other, and redirect our frustrations into gaining more resources nationally, regionally and locally to support our initiatives.

We have no choice.

Thankyou