

Working with Indigenous men to end family violence

Mick Adams

Research Manager Fineline Consultancy

CDFVR's Indigenous

Family Violence Prevention Forum Windmill Motel and Reception Centre
MacKay 2-3 May 2007

Status of Indigenous People

- Statistically Indigenous people - are the basket-cases of Australia (Dodson 2002).
- Three out of every four deaths among Indigenous people are due to circulatory diseases, accidental injury, respiratory disease, cancer, endocrine and metabolic diseases (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005).
- There is currently a major epidemic of diabetes
- Indigenous people are much more likely than the general population to experience substance abuse, suicidal behaviour; higher than usual rates of tobacco smoking, poor nutrition, reckless and violent behaviour,
- Individual health problems are exacerbated by intergenerational trauma, loss of culture and roles, lack of health education, lack of employment, language barriers and inadequate access to health services

The portrayal of Indigenous males

- The portrayal of Indigenous males have often been negative -

Males Behaving Badly

- we misuse alcohol and other substances at alarming rates
- our health is deplorable
- we are more likely than women to be the perpetrators of family violence and sexual abuse
- we have an average life expectancy of about 57 years, we die 15-20 years earlier than our mainstream Australian counterparts. Our median age is just 18 years of age compared to 33 years for non-Indigenous men
- we suffer high rates of anxiety, depression and suicide
- we are much more likely to be imprisoned
- we are less likely to be employed or to have post-school qualifications; and
- we have lower personal and household incomes

(Dodson 2002)

Family Violence and abuse

- While men are (often) recognised as the perpetrators or main offenders of violence committed against women and children
- We need to (also) acknowledge that family violence and abuse is not only targeted at women and children, but men as well
- Indigenous men (too) have been displaced and are still subjected to abuse, marginalisation and racism within the wider Australian society

Male Victims

- Men have been the victims of rape (and violence), within the community, correctional institutions and other institutions.
- Dissimilar to our women, they (men) are unlikely to come forward to seek help (to address these issues).

Current Research Study (Adams 2007)

- Indigenous males were ten times more likely to be raped than male in the wider Australian population.
- Many stated that child sexual abuse was a common experience for them.
- A higher proportion of these men reported that they were an unwilling partner when they first had intercourse (1.1% versus 6.4%).
- A great majority of sexual abused males (80.4%) said they had never told anyone about this prior to the interview.

Cultural practice

- Using “cultural practice” as an excuse for family violence and child abuse is not within the bounds of our traditional principals
- But clearly, a dysfunctional social problem, that has its roots in dispossession, cultural dislocation and often alcohol and other substance misuse

Conflicting Views

- But we need to determine who is using “cultural practice” as an excuse for family violence and child abuse
- We also need to question those who publicly report that family violence and child abuse is associated with “cultural practice”
- These commentators should be made to provide substantial evidence rather than assumptions or hear say to back their statements

Forms of violence

- There is no denying that many forms of violence and abuse is taking place in Indigenous communities

Face Value

- This is not to say that other Australians, particularly men, do not suffer from these maladies
- However, such statistics are more likely to be used to define Indigenous Australian men, families and communities
- Dodson (2002) states that this in itself is a tragedy because - far from the picture painted - we are not all alcoholic and violent gamblers, wasters, deviants and criminals

The Effects of Colonization

The erosion of the male power-base accelerated through the periods of assimilation and the process of social change left men emasculated and powerless

As a consequence of historical factors many Indigenous men are demoralised and confused about their roles as fathers, grandfathers, brothers, sons and grandsons

Traditional Aboriginal Society

- Indigenous men had meaningful and active roles with authority
- regarded as custodians of knowledge because they were responsible for the management and maintenance of traditional obligations
- determine the kinship system
- young men had a clear passage to manhood through culturally appropriate system of initiation

Traditional Values

The decline in traditional values through the influence of invasion and forced settlement and the continuation of survival in the modern concept of a dominant society has placed enormous expectation on Indigenous people.

The confusion and frustration of coping with the traumas of grief and lost of traditional values, lands, belief and customs has had and continues to have a devastating affect on Indigenous males.

Reconstructing the Male's Position

- For years, many Indigenous men have been trying to overturn this negative stereotype by taking a lead role to reconstruct their roles and positions within the context of the family and community surroundings as:
- leaders, providers, educators, partners, and positive family and community members

Male Support Programs

While they struggle to establish men support programs with the objective of enhancing the health, wellbeing and security of their communities – They are not often recognized for their efforts

For many (men) the passage imposes a lot of challenges, as they have not had the opportunity or wanted to take the responsibilities to modify their behaviours, in order to bring about social change (Adams 2005)

Summary

- While it is fashionable for government and other commentators to comment and write about the censure of Indigenous men
- They provide no suggestions or specific programs to enable men to operate accordingly to address their needs
- Nor do they offer any resources or engage men to establish strategies suitable to combat self-harm, violence and suicide tendencies in their communities.

Conclusion

- We need to acknowledge that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are perpetrators or offenders of violence committed against women and children
- Dodson (2002).....The blow dealt to us (men) has been crushing but it need not be fatal – in some instinct we have gone from warriors to victims.
- This has to change..
We must acknowledge our problems and do something about them.....

Indicators for Change

- We must..... Observe the views of Indigenous men by paying particular attention to the factors that are weighing them down
- We must..... Incorporate appropriate measures in the intervention process by providing access and culturally appropriate methods of dealing with gender specific issues
- We must..... Investigate all possible ways and means of assisting Indigenous males to reconnect with their country, culture and spirituality
- Most of all we must encourage our brothers, fathers, uncles, sons and nephews to have a better outlook in life and being responsible for their action and behaviour as a process to end family violence and child abuse in our communities

PHILOSOPHY

- Aboriginal men are leaders of health for their own people.
- If the man is unwell, he can not provide for his family, therefore, the family suffers. If the family suffers, then they draw on resources from the community, the over use or dependence of the community causes it to dysfunction, which becomes unhealthy.
- If the man is well, he can provide for the family, therefore if the family is provided for, they will be nourished. If the family is satisfied then they need not draw on resources from the community, therefore the community stays healthy and all will function to its fullest potential (Adams 1997)