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**Aboriginal Sexual Violence: An Aboriginal Community
Perspective**

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I first would like to start by giving thanks to my ancestors for allowing me the privilege to talk on Nyoongar Boodja (Nyoongar country) today. I acknowledge my ancestors and I acknowledge that this is Nyoongar Boodja on which we stand. I also acknowledge the graciousness of those that shared their stories with me.

I wanted this paper not to be bogged down with me doing intellectual somersaults about how much I knew – instead I wanted to share with you some of my story and that of others so that you can get a better understanding of some of the issues confronting the Aboriginal community as it relates to the issue of sexual violence.

I grew up on Mt Magnet Reserve in the early sixties. Growing up I knew that there was a deep sense of community that existed. Everyone had each other's back. Women had safe places to go when things were not as they should be within their own homes.

My mother explained that it was important for the community's overall health and well being that women and children felt safe, so it was never questioned when other people were in the home. My mum was a nurse so her services and advice were often sought for an array of issues including those of a domestic nature. I can recall stories where my mother explained that nursing mothers living on the reserve never had to worry when they had to go into town to do shopping because there was a pool of wet nurses to accommodate the needs of the child – child welfare and child rearing was a whole of community approach. Its also important to note that the community was healthy because everyone was productive, we practiced our culture, spoke our language and so had a sense of self worth. My dad worked in the mines and when he wasn't working shift work he was helping my grandfather with an array of odd jobs that generated income. In those days welfare payments were unheard of.

We moved to the city because my parents thought that it was in our best interests as far as opportunities for further education. Our family was torn apart by family tragedy. My father lost his father to an insensitive, brutal system that nabbed my grandfather off the streets for no other reason than for being black and he died in a police holding cell after being roughed up. That roughing up caused his death because of an underlying heart complaint that was not checked and merely passed off as the rantings of a crazy old man. The city took a loved one but gave little in return. The trade off was too great. My father hit the bottle hard after that and cracks started to appear in the home. My father eventually left the family home and my mother did not cope well with the break up. She had a nervous breakdown and she went off the rails with drinking and partying in the home. Her inability to cope meant that the door was left open and predators were allowed in to a previously solid, safe home.

My own sexual abuse took place over a number of years. I was toyed with, manipulated, coerced and set upon by sexual predators that exploited my mother's vulnerability.

The story I tell is not dissimilar to a number of victims within the Aboriginal community. My abuse at the hands of an uncle was not unusual. It wasn't until I was much older that I found out that this man had perpetrated against almost all of my cousins within my dad's family both male and female. A lot of those victims fell into a cycle of alcohol and drug abuse. For them it was a form of escapism to numb the pain.

Many got into violent relationships because they thought that that was all they were good for. One particularly tragic tale was a cousin who's partner would lock her in the garage naked and subject her to repeated violent sexual acts until he had had his fill.

Much of the literature surrounding the problem of systemic violence within Aboriginal communities discuss the same issues I talked about in my life's journey. Displacement from the loss of land and traditional lifestyles has a profound effect on the Aboriginal community. When children were taken away, and I quote, "for their own good", the family unit was disintegrated and for some they would never get that back. Loss of identity can leave indelible scars. An older male relative talked about his experience in one of the missions and he described it like this. He talked very slowly in almost a whisper almost as if he would be scolded if overheard.

He said that he would lie in bed at night and shiver, not from the cold, but from the fear of being the 'next' one. Late at night when the lights went out, the priests would come creeping down the hallways, their shoes making almost a thunderous noise for those lying in wake anticipating the pause.

When the pause came it was as if you could cut the silence with a knife. All the while he would clasp his hands and pray to the powers that be that he wouldn't be next. Then you would hear the tiny pitter patter of little feet and the simpering

that echoed down the hallways some time later. Little boys' bleeding bottoms would soak the sheets that night and the young boys would come away from the experience as broken toys, discarded on the scrap heap left to fend for themselves.

Aboriginal history is littered with stories of brutality and barbarism at the hands of colonists. Reverend Gribble in his book "Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land", wrote extensively of the brutality at the hands of pastoralists that Aboriginal people were exposed to in Western Australia. It was common for Aboriginal people to be rounded up, branded like cattle and kept like domestic animals. Acts of cruelty also included acts of sexual violence. It is common knowledge that Aboriginal women were used as sexual playthings.

An older male member of my family relayed the story of how his mother was violently sexually assaulted at the hands of the welfare officers of the day.

There is a direct causal link with what happened to Aboriginal people in the past and why there exists such widespread dysfunctionality today. Which is why I was mortified that the Premier of the day made the obscene comment of, "stop blaming everything on the past". Psychological literature discusses quite extensively that unless one is able to heal the past one is not able to go forward. My own healing process has taken me years.

You might well ask why I did not seek to pursue the matter through the criminal justice system. My short answer to that was, I was fairly certain that once I revealed my mother would go off the deep end and seek to rely on Aboriginal ways of dealing with it – in the old biblical sense – an eye for an eye. I was pretty certain that my mother would have killed the perpetrators and I saw the need for a mother far outweighing the need for so called justice. Whilst on the subject let's talk about some of the obstacles that confront Aboriginal victims. I can

recall being at an Aboriginal Sexual Health Conference in Alice Springs when I worked with Marr Mooditj Aboriginal Health Worker Program.

The women at the forum all had tales to tell about sexual violence in their communities. One woman talked about how her children were sexually violated and the major stumbling block was the fact that the perpetrator was a respected member of the community (bit like the Churches cover ups over many centuries) – it appears we've learnt well from our previous masters. This woman wasn't able to give a voice to her children's suffering for fear of being ostracised within the community. Prior to European colonization sexual impropriety was dealt with severely – punishable by spearing. Now we have a system of concealment and a shroud of secrecy that makes it very difficult for people to voice their pain. Being ostracised within a community is like doing time, its as if you are being punished for speaking out. Family members have pursued the avenue of redress through the court systems and found it a very formidable playing field indeed. Many talk of the struggle to get heard and acknowledged. One of the major stumbling blocks is the fact that the support services were not culturally appropriate. It wasn't until the Gordon Inquiry that services established to assist victims of crime made a move to engage Aboriginal support workers, to provide a cultural framework for Aboriginal victims of crime.

An Aboriginal woman who is assisting some Aboriginal women who were the subject of sexual violence and other violence relayed the story that these women were being persecuted by their own families and members of the perpetrators families set upon them outside the court proceedings. Nothing was being done by support agencies and the police to create a safe environment for these women to tell their stories. I had an older female member of my family who made the comment that as a black woman she would find it uncomfortable exposing her story because of a genuine and well founded fear that she would be labelled as her mother was previous to her. She said and I quote, "It would be hard enough to talk to a white women about my sensitive issues, and then have

to expose my private parts for her to examine would be like adding insult to injury". The old native welfare files are littered with comments made about an Aboriginal women's lack of integrity. My own grandmother was labelled as being, and I quote, "a little too friendly with the boys", "troublesome" and "promiscuous". That labeling is still very much evident in the way that Aboriginal women get processed through the system.

I read in Henry Reynold's book entitled, 'Why weren't we told', where he retells the story of an Aboriginal woman being violently set upon. When the police were notified to come and render assistance the question asked by the officer was, "Is she Aboriginal?", at which point the caller responded in the affirmative and the response time was less than favourable.

In some cases there are situations where cases involving Aboriginal women complainants are not even prosecuted. I understand that decisions not to prosecute certain cases are based on an evaluation of the evidentiary materials before the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and am aware that it's a judgment call. Some members of the Aboriginal community see it in black and white and see a lack of response as one driven by other motivating factors, such as race.

To exclude race and race issues from the picture is looking at the problem through rose colored glasses. Institutionalised and structural racism exists. The State Coroner's report in November 2001 on the death of a teenage Aboriginal girl at the Swan Valley Nyoongar Community is a chilling account of a young person's tragic life.

The coroner in the Susan Taylor case found that sexual abuse of young Aboriginal persons to be an 'enormous problem' in Western Australia. 'This case has highlighted the fact that sexual abuse of young Aboriginal persons

throughout Western Australia is common. It is clear that only a very small proportion of these cases are reported to the appropriate authorities.' (p.30)

Aboriginal children under the age of 4 years are subject of gonorrhoea and chlamydia notifications in 'significant numbers.'(p. 26)

Department of Health rates in the ages 10-14 years indicates a ratio 186:1 for Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal notifications for gonorrhoea and 124:1 chlamydia.

The Coroner found that Susan Taylor was sexually abused possibly from a young age. Susan made a complaint of indecent assault to police six weeks before she was found dead at Lockridge campsite. The police did not follow basic police procedure in investigating Susan's death.

In the aftermath of the Coronial Inquest the Government moved quickly to establish a formal inquiry to provide advice on how best the Government should deal with widespread sexual abuse and violence within Western Australia's Aboriginal community. The report by the Inquiry, headed by Magistrate Sue Gordon, ran to over 640 pages and made 197 findings and recommendations. Sadly there are many within the Aboriginal community who see the response as only a tempered approach to the problems that exist.

Much like the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADC), a wonderfully comprehensive document with a number of recommendations. And yet years after the RCIADC very few of the recommendations have been implemented in any meaningful way and now we have an increase in the numbers of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Is it to be anticipated that the problem is set to worsen, one would hope not.

I remain eternally optimistic that the Aboriginal community will find a way through this. The Gordon Inquiry did alert governments to the fact that child abuse and

family violence cannot be addressed in isolation from a range of other issues that affect Aboriginal communities, such as alcohol and substance abuse, youth suicide, mental illness, depression and despair.

The Aboriginal community need to be equipped both with the resources and adequate capacity building to deal with the problem. Of course the community cannot act in isolation the Aboriginal community needs to have strong working relationships with other stakeholders within the community. At the end of the day Aboriginal people need to drive the solutions and be included in the consultative process as well as at the implementation level.

The Aboriginal community cannot afford to have a Native Welfare approach of old where we were told what was in our best interests, with little or no consultation and it was left to the 'white experts' to find solutions. Aboriginal people need to be at the bargaining table and be included.