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Address to the

International Women's Day Dinner

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Darwin

Good evening sisters and brothers,

I acknowledge and pay respects to the Larrakia Nation, traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we are meeting.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you tonight – it is good to be back in Darwin and to see once again so many of my friends and family in the town where I was born and grew up.

Many of my relationships here go back to my birth on Parap camp, a few kilometres south-east of here, during the Second World War.

Tonight I want to reflect on how things have changed for women in the Northern Territory not just since I was growing up here in 50s and 60s, but even before that, to when my mother was a girl.

I want to talk about some of the barriers that existed during these times for Aboriginal women and girls in Darwin: barriers that I believe are still with us, despite many changes.

While the common view is that Darwin is a “multi-cultural melting-pot” where all the different races accept each other and get on just fine, my experience is that there were, and are still, significant boundaries that are difficult to cross.

Relationships across those boundaries – for example between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women and families – were, and remain, complex and ambiguous, even where marked with mutual respect and regard.

I also want to reflect in talking to you this evening on the theme for this year's International Women's Day: women and men united to end violence against women and girls.

But let me start with my mother.

My mother was one of the Stolen Generations, taken as a young girl by white men on horseback from her Alywarre family in the country north-east of Alice Springs, sometime in the early 1920s.

Like so many other Aboriginal boys and girls, she was brought here to Darwin, a thousand miles from home and family, and grew up in the Kahlin compound, near where Cullen Bay now stands.

If you want to learn more about life in Kahlin compound, I highly recommend the *Bringing them Home* report about the Stolen Generations, and the book by Barbara Cummings called '*Take this child*'.¹

If you read these documents – or if you could have spoken to my mother – you would quickly see through the mythology that Aboriginal children were taken away from their families for their own good, to provide them with the education and training that would help them “better themselves” (as it was put back then).

The training my mother received rarely went beyond needlework and the kind of jobs needed to keep the compound clean and tidy.

She was not taught to read and write.

¹ Cummings, Barbara, *Take This Child...From Kahlin Compound to the Retta Dixon Children's Home*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990

Instead, she was being prepared for domestic work, and this is what she, like the majority of her fellow inmates, ended up doing.

When she was old enough, my mother was lined up by the Superintendent with the other girls of the Compound, and non-Aboriginal women came from Darwin and the surrounding areas to choose the ones they wanted to work for them as domestic servants in return for board and lodging.

My mother was chosen by a woman called May Grigo, and went to work for her on Delissaville Station on the Cox Peninsula.

There she stayed for several years, working not just in the homestead itself but also doing maintenance and even fencing and other jobs on the station.

Now, May Grigo was quite an exceptional woman herself.

She came from a well-to-do Catholic family from Perth – she was an educated, well-brought up woman, who even in the fierce heat and humidity of the “build-up” would always wear gloves, hat, stout walking shoes, and even stays.

Over time, Grigo (as we later called her) and my mother developed a complex relationship: difficult and tense in many ways but also marked by considerable respect for each other and for each other’s capacities.

The mistress / servant relationship became blurred in a time and place where there were few women: Grigo, like many other station-owners’ wives, sought female companionship with those like my mother who were their servants.

This relationship was deep, profound even: but it was not easy.

At any moment, the barrier between mistress and servant may have needed to be reasserted.

I remember an incident from my childhood that seemed to say a lot about this complex relationship.

This was many years after my mother had left Delissaville and was living on Parap camp with my father (who was a Swedish sailor who had ended up in the Territory) and a young family, including me.

One day Grigo, then an elderly lady but still with the obligatory hat, gloves, stays and all, came looking for my mother.

My mother welcomed her, sat her down and began preparing tea.

At one point, my mother did something that Grigo disapproved of – I can't remember what it was, something to do with the wrong cup, or putting the milk into the tea instead of vice versa – and Grigo said: "Oh, Molly: you know better than that!"

My mother wasn't going to put up with this: "Now listen, May Grigo, you're in my house now!" she said sharply.

And Grigo recognised the justice of this and backed down: but she wasn't pleased!

So I think you might get the sense of that deep but fraught relationship.

For my mother, that relationship was further complicated by a particular bitterness she always carried.

May Grigo was a trained school teacher, but just like those in Kahlin compound, she never taught my mother to read and write.

And my mother never learned to read and write.

Later, that became a barrier between us, because unlike her, I did have the opportunity to go to school.

And I remember when I was 5 or so, in my first year, coming home to Parap camp in Darwin on the bus and beginning to read the shop signs as we went past.

I tried to put myself in my mother's place and to think what it would be like not to understand these signs.

I even tried to stop the process of understanding.

But I couldn't.

At some level I knew that by learning to read and write – by getting a western education – I was putting a barrier between me and my mother, opening up a gap which somehow could never be crossed.

But although things had changed, it was still not easy for us Aboriginal girls and young women growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Darwin.

It seemed that – despite the fact that many of us had received at least a basic education – the actual jobs available for me and my mates on Parap camp were still limited to two basic options.

We could go and get jobs as domestic servants with non-Aboriginal families in town, continuing in many cases in our mothers' footsteps – and like them, putting ourselves at risk of harassment from the men in these families who believed it was “open season on coloured girls”.

Or we could go and work at the hospital – as cleaners, kitchen-hands, cooks, or laundry-workers.

Many of my friends and family had done these kind of jobs.

But, it was the beginning of the 1960s, and I think that my generation of young women were the first ones to say – perhaps the first ones able to say – “actually, no, we don't want to do that!”

Not that we saw anything wrong with those domestic and manual jobs: far from it, because those jobs were part of the everyday lives of our friends, sisters, and mothers.

But we wanted other options.

I was lucky.

At some point in the early 1960s, Fred Walker (then the Clerk of the legislative Council) and Harold Garner (who had been active in the early days of education in the NT) put forward a plan: instead of “importing” young women from “down South” to be Darwin's secretaries and stenographers, why not train local women to do these jobs?

A radical proposal for the times.

They approached Vic Stone, a commercial teacher at the Darwin High School, and a scheme was set up to train young local women for these jobs.

Along with a number of other young women, I sat an entrance test, and then soon afterwards, found myself learning shorthand and typing and other office skills.

And after I finished my training, I got a job in the Northern Territory Administration as a secretary, if I remember correctly, £4 per fortnight.

And for me, that was the beginning of a road that eventually lead out of Darwin ... I had escaped from the necessity of manual work, and that opened up a vast array of possibilities and pathways for me.

I became part of the Aboriginal movement for health and justice and self-determination – not just as a supporter or unpaid community activist, but I had the privilege to play my part as a paid worker in Aboriginal organisations.

It led to me getting a degree in English from the University of Western Australia in the late 1970s - and when I graduated, May Grigo was there in the audience, looking as proud as any mother.

Eventually my path led – after Tasmania and Western Australia, Melbourne and Geneva and New Mexico – back to Darwin when in the mid 1990s I returned here to become CEO of Danila Dilba Aboriginal Medical Service.

Much had changed since I had left.

There seemed to be many more opportunities for Aboriginal women for training, for education, and for jobs than there had been in the 50s and 60s.

But there still didn't seem to be many of us employed in the mainstream workforce.

I still find that today: despite the fact that 30% of the Territory's population is Aboriginal, and that disproportionate numbers of them are young, I see very few young Aboriginal school teachers, nurses, shop assistants, secretaries, lawyers, or doctors in town.

Those that I do see tend to work in Aboriginal organisations, or perhaps government.

All this tells me that the barriers between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are still there, still difficult to cross, and that crossing those boundaries though possibly easier than it used to be, is still a difficult and sometimes fraught process.

We still need to keep working on this: working to get our education system right, working to ensure that Aboriginal girls (and all young people) are encouraged and prepared for participation in our global, inter-connected world.

This is not the only thing, but it is the foundation upon which we can build for ourselves a job or a career that allows us a degree of independence and life-control.

I want to end with some reflections on this idea, and its link to this year's theme of International Women's Day: women and men united to end violence against women and girls.

For my mother's generation, and even as I was growing up, women who worked as domestic servants were exposed to harassment and the threat of violence in their workplace as a matter of course, generally by men who believed that domestic servants were their possessions in more ways than one.

Legally and socially, much has changed and women are more able to protect themselves today from this kind of behaviour.

However, for Aboriginal women, it is the enormous eruption of violence within the community and within the family that has become the issue of major concern.

This was not always the case.

I can remember when I was a girl growing up on Parap camp in Darwin, what used to happen to men who beat up their women: next morning all the women would come out to the doors of the houses and when the man appeared they'd beat pots and pans and shout abuse at him.

It was a shaming mechanism – and it worked, men really were shamed.

Women's solidarity was a powerful deterrent to violence against women.

But now, in many places that doesn't happen anymore – it seems the social controls have been removed and that in some seriously troubled places violence against women has become an accepted part of community life.

During my work for the Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, which led to the *Little Children are Sacred* report, I had the opportunity to travel to many of these communities and to talk with many of the Aboriginal women and men who live in them.

We heard stories that were terrible and distressing.

But, there was also a positive side to what people told us.

In particular, what struck me in talks with Aboriginal community members was their attitude.

They had suffered much as a result of the historical processes in this country, and many of them had suffered violence and abuse themselves.

Many were sad, distressed and shamed by what was happening in their communities and in their families.

But they were owning the problem, they were not turning away and saying it was too hard.

They wanted to work with the professionals, they wanted to work with the government and with the service delivery organisations, they wanted to be part of the solution.

And what was highly significant to me, this applied to the men as well, because in those communities where we held our consultations, a high proportion of men participated.

Despite the stereotyping of Aboriginal men in much of the public debate as 'the problem' our experience was much more complex; and despite these complexities, it seemed to us that overwhelmingly Aboriginal men wanted to be part of the solution with Aboriginal women.

Amongst much that was dispiriting, this fact was grounds for some hope, some foundation upon which solutions could be built.

So, to conclude.

I think there is often a temptation, when looking back at the past, to try and say that things are 'better' or 'worse' now than they used to be.

But of course life is more complex than that.

I hope the story I have been telling this evening shows the complexity of those relationships: between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, between women and men.

Women's right to an education, women's right to pursue a career, women's right to freedom from violence: these things stay the same.

But each generation has to work to make these things real.

Each generation has to continue to recognise and then to overcome the barriers that divide us.

Thank you.



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