

Paper prepared for the

National NAIDOC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's
Conference

"Because of Her, We Can"

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PLEASE NOTE: Ms Anderson spoke to the conference on 12 July, delivering a different address.

Good morning sisters,

I'd like to acknowledge the Eora nation, traditional owners and custodians of the land upon which we are meeting today.

I'd also like to thank the organisers of this conference for inviting me to speak to you, and the Lowitja Institute of which I am Chairperson, for their support.

I want to congratulate the organisers on the wonderful theme for this conference: "*Because of her, we can!*".

This recognises the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman have made – and continue to make – to our families, our communities, and to the struggle for justice and sovereignty of our Nations.

I would like to share with you today my memories of some remarkable Aboriginal women – the Stolen Generations women who grew up in Kahlin Compound in Darwin.

I would also like to share with you some thoughts on the role of women in our ongoing struggle against colonisation.

But to begin, I was asked, like the other speakers here, to share with you a story of a woman who was a major influence in my life.

In thinking about this, I realised that I wanted to pay my respects to a group of women – the women of Kahlin Compound, who were ever-present in my childhood in 1950s Darwin.

My mother was one of these women, one of the Stolen Generations.

She was stolen from her family on Lake Nash Station, west of Mount Isa, sometime in the 1930s.

She was taken on horseback to Doomadgee, then by steamer to Darwin.

There she was placed in Kahlin Compound, with other stolen Aboriginal children from all over the Northern Territory and beyond.

After growing up at Kahlin, she was sent to work as a young teenager on a farm on the other side of the Darwin harbour, near Belyuen.

Later, she met my dad, a Swedish merchant seaman who had jumped ship in Fremantle, and made his way to Darwin.

They settled at Parap Camp in Darwin which was home to many Aboriginal and some Torres Strait Islander families in those harsh post-War years.

Here, my mother was re-united with many of the girls with whom she grew up in the Compound – though like her, they were now young women with families of their own.

For me as a young girl, Parap Camp was a world of women.

Not only did I have five sisters, but in addition the aunties from the Compound were ever present.

I can still see them now – they seemed so beautiful to my child's eye, the height of glamour – always well-dressed, always capable, always there.

I particularly remember Auntie Judy, who rode a pushbike, wore linen shorts and carried a quiet air of determination and independence with her as she pedalled through the Camp.

Even from my earliest days, I was fascinated by these women.

I watched them carefully: how they dressed, how they spoke, how they walked, how they presented themselves to and acted in the world.

And even though as a child I did not know the details about Kahlin Compound, I was aware of the strong bond between these women and the sense of the collective they carried with them.

Previously, in the Compound, deprived of their own families, they had to be mothers, aunts, and sisters to each other.

Now, on Parap Camp, they had that same sense of togetherness.

They were mothers to us all, each one taking responsibility not just for their own children but for all the children in that community.

They lived lives of hardship and poverty with very few material goods and little money.

But they were tireless workers, often taking in laundry from all the "bank-johnnies" in town – and washing and ironing in the build-up in Darwin was no joke!

They were tough, but they were good mothers, and they looked out for each other.

Their solidarity extended to protecting each other from family violence.

I can remember what used to happen to men who beat up their spouses: next morning all the women would come out to the doors of the houses and when the man appeared they'd bang pots and pans and shout abuse at him.

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

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

Despite the deprivations, their collective resilience, strength and courage shone through – it was inseparable from who they were.

They were great role models for me and the other young girls, and I have carried their example with me through my life.

There will be many of you with similar stories, who know from your own personal histories what I am describing.

Because this is a profoundly common experience for our peoples: the resilience and determination of our women in the face of attempts to destroy our families, communities and Nations.

But despite the attempts of the colonisers, women's role in Aboriginal life still remains strong.

We have adapted to the challenges of colonisation because our families, children and communities have depended on us to do so.

Our very survival has depended on women like those I grew up with on Parap Camp and of course my mother.

Women have formed a stable centre within many communities, all the while growing up their own kids and now often their grandkids because the parents aren't able to do so.

As well, women have been instrumental in establishing the contemporary Aboriginal political and service delivery landscape.

For example, when I look at the Aboriginal health sector, where I have spent much of my working life, women have been central to establishing many of our Aboriginal community controlled health services.

In doing so, they transferred their skills from running large extended families to running organisations.

This is also true for the Lowitja Institute, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Institute of which I am Chair.

Aboriginal women such as Lowitja O'Donahue, Marcia Langton, and Stephanie Bell played important roles in establishing the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health in the 1990s.

The CRC evolved into the Lowitja Institute.

The Institute is of course was named after Lowitja O'Donahue in recognition of her exemplary leadership and the pivotal role she has played in the struggle over her long life.

But it hasn't always been easy to follow in the courageous footsteps of the Aboriginal women amongst whom I grew up.

For one thing, trying to adopt both a gender-equality perspective and an anti-colonial one has sometimes been a challenge.

I am sure many of you here have struggled with reconciling these two perspectives, which don't always seem to point in the same direction.

As First Nations women, we have had to carry on both these struggles at the same time.

This has meant tackling sexism and misogyny within the Aboriginal movement.

In thinking about this event today, I have re-read Marcia Langton's great paper "The end of 'big men' politics", published ten years ago.

Reflecting on the role of Aboriginal men and women in the struggle for self-determination, Marcia attacked 'big men politics' which she defined as

the endemic pattern of lateral violence that plagues Aboriginal family and community life, ... It also encapsulates the dysfunctional response of mainstream Australian political institutions to the accelerating crisis in the Aboriginal world.

She also described the tactics Aboriginal women used to circumvent this corrosive influence of male bullying and entitlement: for example, by scheduling meetings at times when they were likely to be at the pub or the TAB, or early in the morning.

Any Aboriginal woman who was part of the struggle during the 1970s and 1980s and into the 1990s will recognise this pattern.

How, for example, we would team up with our Aboriginal male friends to get them to bring up issues on our behalf in forums where we knew that women's voices were not welcome.

But at the same time as this was happening, we also needed to work with our men to fight for our rights to self-determination.

Sometimes, this caused some difficulties with our non-Aboriginal feminist sisters.

Particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, there were a lot of non-Aboriginal women who were important allies for us.

But there were times when their focus on our rights as women ignored our struggle for our rights as colonised First Nations, Nations who had never ceded sovereignty of our lands.

That anti-colonial struggle has always needed to be undertaken together, by our women and our men, on a basis of equality and respect.

This was a contradiction for many of us.

However today, there is a new generation of young, Aboriginal women has emerged, better educated than my generation and determined not to take a back seat to anyone.

I applaud them and their efforts.

But the level of violence against women and children is still a serious challenge that continues to plague us today.

Solutions, I think though, are found by men and women working together

Us women can't do it ourselves.

It should not be left to women to address the violence that has become inseparable in some places from the colonial experience.

Men have to take responsibility.

To this end, I think in particular of the statement made by the participants at the Ross River Male Health Summit in Central Australia ten years ago.

Gathering from all over the country, they said in part [quote]:

“We acknowledge and say sorry for the hurt, pain and suffering caused by Aboriginal males to our wives, to our children, to our mothers, to our grandmothers, to our granddaughters, to our aunties, to our nieces and to our sisters.

“We also acknowledge that we need the love and support of our Aboriginal women to help us move forward.”

[unquote]

In the ten years since this statement, I see more and more Aboriginal men – particularly young men – willing to question violence against women in their communities and to commit to respectful and equal relationships with the women in their lives.

So there has been progress, but we need to keep working to ensure that the struggle for gender equality and for self-determination and justice go hand in hand.

This is something we need to keep a strong focus on.

We need to continue to work to ensure that our women are empowered, that they are able to live their lives free of the threat of violence, and that their voices are heard.

I think this is a crucial time in terms of the relationship between our First Nations and the non-Indigenous peoples who have come after us, either the European colonisers from 1788 and after or more recently those who have come here fleeing persecution and seeking a better life.

It is a crucial time because of the ongoing crisis in many of our communities.

But is also crucial because there are important opportunities emerging.

There is the Uluru Statement which provides a compelling vision of the future and a roadmap for positive change in the relationship between us and mainstream Australia.

There is still the possibility – the necessity I would say – for genuine constitutional reform.

There are treaty processes underway in Victoria and the Northern Territory.

In all of these processes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women of all political persuasions must have their voices heard, and must be able to participate freely in determining our future.

In doing so, we need to rely on all of us gathered here today.

It's our job keep the spirit of our women from the those earlier days alive and well into the future.

This includes all those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women whose names may not be spoken during this week, but who nevertheless have played such important roles in the lives of our families, communities and organisations.

They made us who we are today.

This is what women do.

And for me in particular, it includes those Kahlin Compound women who have been such an example to me through my life.

Thank you.