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‘They throw the rule book away’

Sexual assault in Aboriginal communities

It would be impossible to provide any comprehensive account of the nature and incidence of rape in Australia today without including a discussion of the particular difficulties faced by Aboriginal communities. It should be no surprise that in the same way sexual violence is shrouded in secrecy by the non-Aboriginal community, it is even more difficult to estimate with any accuracy the extent and experience of Aboriginal victims of rape.

Strained relationships with the non-Aboriginal community and a lack of culturally appropriate services, leads not only to bitterness by victims whose plight is largely ignored, but also a lack of research that is compounded by dramatic under-reporting.

As in all analyses of sexual violence, it is important to place rape in a social context that allows discussion of the complexity of the situation. For Aboriginal people, this analyses must be based on a clear understanding of the impact of colonisation on a nation of people whose cultural and spiritual values were radically different to the colonisers. This chapter will discuss and analyse the Aboriginal experience of sexual violence and outline the recent steps taken to deal with the problem.

THE IMPACT OF COLONISATION

It would seem that in traditional communities sexual assault was practically unknown (Atkinson 1990), Aboriginal people had a clear guide about good and bad behaviour, with discipline being strictly maintained by tribal elders. However, the colonisation of Australia by the British in 1788 caused significant changes in gender relationships amongst Aboriginal men, women and children and inflicted a standard of violence that has gradually increased with time.
Breaking New Ground

With the European influence on the Aboriginal society, many strong beliefs were weakened by the effects of alcohol and the denial by the colonisers of an Aboriginal culture. White men massacred, raped and abducted Aboriginal women whilst characterising these very women as 'sexually predatory and a menace to white men' (Goodall 1990, p.9). This construction was prominent in the 1912 Royal Commission into Neglected and Delinquent and Mentally-Deficient Children. Commissioner Mackellar himself referred to the 'moral feebleness' of all Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal women, calling for their segregation from townships (Goodall 1990).

Not surprisingly, such a stereotype underpinned the development of social policy and community attitudes of the times. The Aboriginal Protection Board gained total power ('loco-parents') over Aboriginal children in 1915, when the Aboriginal Protection Act (1909) was amended. Aboriginal children were removed from their families under the apprenticeship scheme, never to return to their communities. Children from these 'lost generations' were themselves subjected to sexual exploitation and rape. Goodall (1990, p.8) states that 'as a minimal indication of this, the rate of pregnancies recorded in the Board's records was at least 7 per cent'.

The removal of children was a very powerful way of attacking Aboriginal culture. Such intervention in Aboriginal gender relations was seen by the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association as far back as the 1920s as an attempt 'to exterminate the noble and ancient race of Australia' (Maynard cited in Goodall 1990, p.8). Colonisation had resulted in the displacement of Aboriginal people from traditional communities and lands as well as attempting to destroy their cultural values and customs.

Atkinson (1990a) outlines the historical use of rape and abduction as a means of oppression of both Aboriginal women and men and further points to the consequent challenge made to traditional gender relationships resulting from the events in 1788. Whilst acknowledging the 'rape of the soul' that Aboriginal men suffer as a result of the dispossession of their land, Atkinson links the manifestation of violence towards Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men as being the product of the dominant relationship that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men. In her statement 'the oppressor have become the oppressors while continuing their own oppression' (1990a, p.23), she has encapsulated the difficulty of dealing with sexual violence in Aboriginal communities.

They Throw the Rule Book Away

serious assault statistics over the three-year period 1978-1981. He found that the homicide rate was 39.6 per 100,000 people amongst Aboriginals, compared to 3.28 per 100,000 people in the non-Aboriginal community. Similarly, the figures for serious assault showed 226.05 reports per 100,000 people amongst Aboriginals and 43.85 reports per 100,000 in the general community (Wilson 1982).

The figures for sexual violence are equally alarming. Whilst it appears that 32 per cent of Aboriginal men who are in prison are there for sexual offences (Muirhead 1989), it has also been estimated that 88 per cent of rape and assault cases go unreported (Atkinson 1990a, p.23). Atkinson continues by emphasising that incest is another considerable problem within Aboriginal communities—again largely unreported. One state claims that almost 50 per cent of Aboriginal children within the court system have been victims of incest—often by a step-father. Some estimates place the general rate of sexual abuse of young Aboriginal girls in the criminal justice system at around 80 per cent (Atkinson 1990a, p.23).

In a report titled 'Aboriginal Women Speak Out' (cited in Atkinson 1990b, p.11), it was shown that 90 per cent of rape victims were women and girls, and almost 20 per cent were raped. In cases of reported rape, the offenders were Aboriginal in 41 per cent of cases and non-Aboriginal in 42 per cent of cases (Atkinson 1990b, p.11).

When the perpetrator was Aboriginal, he most often knew the victim intimately or by sight. In the case of non-Aboriginal perpetrators, the victim was most often a stranger.

Clearly the introduction of physical and sexual violence as a means of social control of the Aboriginal community has had a significant impact on relationships within this community. The devastating effects of sexual violence by white settlers towards women and children, and the consequent perpetration of sexual violence by many black men, is expressed in the following poem by Bobbi Sykes:

Fallin' 

The Sister has been raped, they said
I squeezed my eyes tight shut—in horror,
though I knew, knew, knew, that the horror had just begun;
In shock, but not in disbelief, heard,
by the Brothers

And I thought
Brother, flesh of my flesh
You have watched/while we your sisters
cried, gave birth, died; went insane, tore out our own hair,
spat on our own bodies, screamed the soundless scream, sweated blood—in agonies which white men caused, damn them and their lives

Yet you have still learned from them
and turn your new craft to us, Rape, Bash, Kill.
BREAKING NEW GROUND

We, your Sisters, newly learnt
that protection is possible,
that with you by our side we are safe,
that together, we are all safe,
must learn again...

Must learn to defend ourselves
from those who stand so close,
eat of our table, of food which we prepared,
must learn again to recognize the mad-dog disease
which is again the white man’s legacy.

Bobbi Sykes (1988)

OBSTACLES TO INTERVENTION

As with all non-urban victims of sexual assault, service provision is sparse and mostly inaccessible. Kate Baxter (chapter 15) believes this to be a general problem for rural dwellers: ‘the effects of rural geography can create isolation and restrict the availability of transport’. Rural Aboriginal communities are usually located at a greater distance from regional facilities. This not only affects direct services provision but most importantly limits opportunities for community education aimed at prevention.

As with many migrant communities, Aboriginal communities are usually smaller than their Anglo communities and members know one another well. ‘Because of the child welfare systems, the stolen generations and adverse treatment in the past, the community can be very protective’ (Greer & Thomas 1990). Child sexual assault and adult rape may be kept under wraps.

Particularly given past relationships with the police, it can often be seen as a betrayal to report sexual violence—only adding to the racism and prejudices which are rife in country towns and the wider community. Police continue to be racist and judgemental towards Aboriginal people. This is especially true in rural areas where some police are still guilty of raping Aboriginal women (Racist Violence Report 1991). Police have been known to say ‘once you get over the mountains you throw the rule book away’.

Alternatively, when Aboriginal women do report rape there is a feeling that nothing is done anyway—particularly when the offender is white. This problem was clearly expressed in a Kowanyama workshop:

If a white woman gets bashed and raped up here, something is done. The police come, everybody runs around and charges are laid. It’s very serious. If we get bashed or raped nobody cares. The police don’t care and won’t do anything and the person who committed the rape continues to walk around the community. Everybody knows. But the police do nothing.

(Cited in Atkinson 1990b, p.7)

This fear and mistrust extends further into the criminal justice system, creating concern about court procedures and possible imprisonment of offenders. Traditionally, contact with courts has resulted in children being removed and Aboriginal people experiencing the highest rate of imprisonment in both juvenile and adult detention centres. The number of black deaths in custody, has heightened fears that if sexual violence by Aboriginal men is reported, then the alleged offender will suffer the next death in custody. Many communities are torn apart by the secrecy that is inherent in this attitude, which protects offenders and allows the cycle of sexual violence to continue.

THE WAY FORWARD

There is, however, hope for the future. In addition to advocating a community-based holistic approach to the general problem of violence, Atkinson (1990a, p.23) maintains that in the case of rape, ‘if it is true that only the oppressed can free themselves, Aboriginal women must start the process, for in essence, they are the most oppressed’.

Aboriginal women throughout Australia have begun the process of speaking out against sexual violence imposed upon and occurring within their community. In 1990, the first Aboriginal Women’s Conference was held in Dubbo, New South Wales. Identified as a need by the International Indigenous Women’s Conference in Adelaide (Greer & Thomas 1990, p.8) the New South Wales Conference aimed at re-defining Aboriginal women’s roles and position both within their communities and in the society at large. Of critical importance was the open discussion of domestic and sexual violence imposed on Aboriginal women and children. These discussions were part of an education process that would allow the women in attendance to go back and discuss these issues in their own communities, encouraging members to speak out. In addition, a wide ranging number of recommendations were made, encompassing areas such as legal reforms, extension of service provision, training of workers and the need for further research into this area. These recommendations were then taken to the Premier of New South Wales by delegates from the New South Wales Women’s Corporation.

Whilst awaiting a response to these recommendations, Aboriginal women have continued to organise at a national level. In 1991 the National Aboriginal Women’s Business Conference in Cape York formed a National Women’s Congress. With representatives elected from each state, the Congress plans to take up issues (in particular sexual violence) at a national level.

In terms of service provision for Aboriginal victims of sexual violence, change is occurring more slowly. Whilst Aboriginal women’s
issues workers are employed in most states, their responsibilities are wide reaching and their numbers inadequate for the problem at hand. Only two states have employed Aboriginal workers in mainstream sexual assault services—the Adelaide and Sydney Rape Crisis Centres. Adelaide has employed two workers in their mainstream service and Sydney has established ‘Balan-Gundi’—an Aboriginal women’s crisis centre associated with the Rape Crisis Centre. Balan-Gundi was established so that ‘Aboriginal women can feel they have their own service with Koori women workers who are employed to meet their specific and individual needs, needs which differ because of culture’, (Greer & Thomas 1990, p.26). Aboriginal child sexual assault is also being further recognised in New South Wales with the establishment of a specialist worker at the Sydney Aboriginal Medical Service.

Non-Aboriginal workers in mainstream services also have an important part to play. It is crucial that these workers remember that because of previous adverse treatment it is hard for Aboriginal people to trust government workers, doctors, social workers, etc. In essence, it is important for them to recognise the effects of institutionalised racism and their own internalised racism. Where possible, these workers should know locally-based Aboriginal workers who can act as resource people and sources of further education. Aboriginal community members are willing to take on these roles. As outlined by Bobbi Sykes (1988, p.66):

white rape crisis workers, nurses, doctors and police are unlikely to have cross-racial or cross-cultural skills. They will need to be educated and monitored throughout their dealings with the rape victim, to ensure they gain sensitivity to the circumstances of the Black community, as well as to this particular instance of rape. It may take special efforts to assist them to reach this sensitivity...

This willingness to communicate must be matched by a non-Aboriginal willingness to listen and learn what would constitute culturally appropriate intervention.

CONCLUSION

Sexual violence is not an Aboriginal-only problem, but unless it is more effectively dealt with, Aboriginal women and children will continue to be victims of sexual violence and communities will suffer. The silence has been broken, and tentative but encouraging steps forward have been taken. This process must continue as the future of Aboriginal people depends on the success we achieve in putting a stop to the violence.

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