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Speech at Reclaim the Night

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Firstly I would like to acknowledge all those women who have come before us who have fought for the rights of women & children.

Sexual violence is a political issue, not a mental illness. A society that manifests the prevalence of sexual assault that ours does surely has a responsibility to respond to those who are offended against in ways that promote their recovery. It also has a responsibility to work towards the elimination of violence through education and the deconstruction of the values, attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate and encourage sexual violence. Further to this is the need for education that assists friends and whanau to support those who have been violated so that they are not further damaged by the myths that encourage blaming of those violated, which seem so entrenched in our world. We only have to watch TV to see these played out, as in the recent advertisement for ALAC that implies we are responsible for being attacked if we become intoxicated. Or the poster that implies that we must stay with our friends if we are to prevent ourselves from being attacked on a night out. What a strange world we live in when it is somehow okay to have a poster up in public which acknowledges that women can expect to be attacked when they are out for a social evening. I have yet to see an equivalent message addressed to men.

When I was asked to make a speech, I was reminded that I had spoken at this event about 15 years ago & had cause to reflect on what had changed since then & what had stayed the same. To be honest it was difficult to find significant progress & not being much of a Pollyana I had to go with the reality of my own assessment. To my mind one of the most concerning moves has been away from the political analysis that had informed ways of working with sexual violence towards the pathologising & medicalisation of this issue. This means that women & children who have been sexually assaulted have become increasingly viewed as individuals with some sort of mental unwellness that needs treatment, rather than as victims of a horrendous crime, which has naturally caused trauma & serious damage to their physical, mental, emotional & spiritual wellbeing as well as damage to their whanau & their family & social relationships. Myths, such as if we stay home we'll be safe from this, when we know most sexual violence occurs in the homes of the perpetrators or our own homes, and it only happens to women & children who put themselves at risk, when most sexual violence is perpetrated against women & children by people they know & trust, continue to infiltrate the thinking of contemporary society. This thinking is extremely dangerous as it keeps the focus away from the perpetrators & their responsibility to address their behaviour & keeps it firmly on the view that somehow women & children are responsible for keeping themselves safe from this violence. It also encourages many women & children to develop self blame as a result of sexual assault. In fact these myths & messages prime us to take the blame on ourselves as a matter of course.

I am also extremely concerned about the changes that ACC have made recently to their processes which are proving to confirm our fears that women & children would stop accessing sexual abuse counselling through ACC. I believe that this as a direct result of the medicalisation & pathologising nature of the new processes. The MWA research, aptly named restoring soul has identified the importance of women & children experiencing belief, acceptance & validation as essential in their healing journey. The ACC changes are in complete contradiction to this in that their stories of assault

are subject to professional scrutiny & they are put in a position of having to prove just how badly they have been affected so that they can be labelled mentally unwell. And at the end of which they may be told that they don't qualify & are, therefore not entitled to funded counselling. I am still reeling from this nightmare as I am sure many others are. I believe we must continue to lobby for this unethical and, potentially, very damaging process to be turned around. If indeed ACC do need to save money, what about withdrawing treatment for rugby injuries. After all, they cost ACC much more & anybody with a brain knows the potential dangers associated with running on to a rugby field.

For Maori, these changes are experienced as a continuation of an ongoing process of colonisation, an abuse of our cultural heritage, knowledge & world view. Further to this our people have historically been under resourced in accessing support that is appropriate to our needs & these new processes exacerbate our situation. It is the mana of our women, children & men that we want to see restored, but that we know will only be further denigrated in a medicalised process perpetuated by an institution that remains blind, deaf & dumb to it's responsibilities to Maori affected by sexual violence.

Having focussed initially on what hasn't changed or has changed for the worst, I am pleased to be able to identify the positive moves that have been made in the sexual violence education prevention work to change attitudes, values & beliefs around sexual behaviour in our society and the growing body of research we are developing in the context of Aotearoa. I only hope that we continue to be resourced to implement programmes & that the research is put into action. I believe there has also been an ongoing increase in women & children disclosing about their experiences of sexual assault & see this as progress in breaking the silence that has historically surrounded this crime. And, even though, many may now choose not to disclose via the ACC process my sense is that we will continue to see this happen in other contexts where it seems safe & supportive to do so.

I would also like to acknowledge the many women who have put energy into bringing up girls with far more assertiveness, education about themselves & freedom of choice in their lives than we had in the past, & boys with more respect for women, more education about themselves & more awareness of others. I know that there are mothers here tonight who are continuing or will continue to do this very important work. Don't think for a minute that I am saying it is yet another responsibility for women to carry. If there were men in the audience I would be challenging their participation in the parenting of our sons & daughters.

In conclusion we must continue to challenge processes that would have us remain powerless and controlled by archaic & denigrating attitudes towards women & children. I encourage all women to continue the fight for all of us to live in a world where we are free from the fear of sexual violence & where we have the freedom to live our lives to our full potential.