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Stop Abuse Project

by

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On speaking about this project I wish to acknowledge the Samoan Advisory Council (Wellington) for their leadership of the project; The Family Centre for their facilitation of the project; the trainers for their dedication and hard work in the project; and all the participants for their will to end violence in our families and communities.

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One of the crucial issues that each of our countries is having to work with is family violence. The difficulty in talking about these issues is that within our countries the dominant cultures have a presupposition that family violence only exists in marginalised communities, and that if there are any programs to deal with this issue that they are to be located only within marginalised communities. The need for such programs within the dominant culture itself is not highlighted. The inference is of course very clear - that those within marginalised cultures are violent. We know, however, that families within marginalised communities exist within a context of socio-economic and political marginalisation. How can we ensure that, in talking about this violence, it is always seen in the broader context of the violence of ongoing colonisation?

For marginalised communities, addressing these issues also involves a constant dilemma in relation to resources. For marginalised communities, life often involves an everyday struggle for survival. In this context, the use of time and resources is precious and the dilemmas as to where to put one's energy are never-ending. Even when we find our way through these dilemmas, how can we then create ways of working that are respectful of issues of gender and culture? I start with a presupposition that each culture has its own gender arrangement. And yet elements of these arrangements have been changed by historical forces. For example, in some countries the position of women has been taken away by Christian teachings, Christian institutions and Christian assumptions about men and women. Dominant cultures have so influenced the cultures of marginalised groups that this raises many dilemmas in trying to do this work. How can we delineate what are the host culture's gender arrangements and what are marginalised culture's gender arrangements? Even where we can make these delineations we are left with dilemmas. If the gender arrangements of the marginalised culture have been so distorted, how can we look for the liberative elements? How can we look for the elements within our own culture that support the respect and dignity of women and children? How can we graft these from the past into the present? Within the actual work on family violence there is for me one over-riding concern. Within the work, how can we find an equitable space for women - a place of respect and a place of safety? How can we do this without buying into dominant western cultural notions?

In 1992 we began a project called 'Stop Abuse' in Wellington, New Zealand. There was an incident in the media in which Jenny Shipley, the now Prime Minister of New Zealand, erroneously made a link between the growth in incidence of child abuse in New Zealand to the growth of Pacific Islander immigration to New Zealand. In this way she implied that the Pacific Island community is abusive and violent. Not surprisingly we took offence at this.

We organised a number of meetings of the Samoan community and invited Jenny Shipley to come along. The community asked her to acknowledge her own mistakes and apologise to the community, and she did this. The community also said that they shared her concerns about addressing violent behaviours. They said, 'You were wrong in stating that there is a predominance of violence in our relationships, but there is violence in some relationships and we want to address this'. As a result, she funded a project called 'Stop Abuse'.

The project started out in ten or twelve locations in the Wellington area. We held separate training for older men and older women, younger men and younger women. The groups would come together at the end of two day periods to share their conversations. In our experience, holding separate gender and age groups has been very important.

For us, as Samoan people, where there is a matter of importance, an issue that touches the whole life of our people, it is important that we discuss it not only as a collective – at the village level – but also that we discuss it in gendered collectives – as a group of women and a group of men. There is a feeling that there are boundaries of discussion between the genders particularly around matters of sexuality. The only way that matters related to sexuality can be talked about in depth is to have separate gender groups. Within the separate groups there is some degree of common experience, there will be differences too, but there will be common ground. The group of women need to come to a consensus on their views of the issue, as do the men. The only way this can be done equitably is through single gender groups. Having separate age groups means that the voices of young women and young men can also be heard and honoured.

Within the 'Stop Abuse' Project all of the groups began by building a sense of belonging and strength to deal with the issue of violence. We then looked at the definition of violence and how it is lived out. We set about establishing a community consensus on what is violent and what is not. By doing this it meant that we had to rely very little on workers' judgements. The

community came up with their own definitions of what is violent and what is not. Great care was taken in the ways in which we did this. We called the exercise 'Drawing the Line'.

We asked the members of the community to identify behaviours that they considered to be examples of physical, economic, spiritual, psychological and sexual violence. We asked for five examples of each type of violence. The examples ranged from overt assault to less dramatic examples of harassment.

We then asked the participants to 'draw the line' as to what violence they wanted stopped in the community. A lot of negotiations would then take place as we tried to facilitate a consensus. Importantly within these discussions the final judgement of what behaviour is okay and what is not okay is always decided by those who have suffered from it. We ask people throughout the discussions to put themselves in the places of those who have experienced the particular example of violence. We ask questions like, 'Would the people who experience this think it is okay? If not, why not? Do you still think it is okay?'

This principle of the right for those people who have been subject to violence to determine where the line should be drawn is also structured into the program. At the end of the separate training day sessions the different groups (older men, older women, younger women, younger men) all come together. As a community we then come up with a consensus of where we wish to draw the line. As facilitators we are clear that at the end of the day the 'drawing of the line' needs to satisfy the group that are most hurt by the violence, that are most affected. As sexual abuse is mostly experienced by women and young women, we are clear that where the line is drawn must satisfy the women. What is also important is that, by the end of the exercise, the men must be able to see the importance of this and the reasons behind it.

Having established a community consensus on what is violent behaviour and what is not, we then explore different ways of stopping violence. As most violence is perpetrated by men, we look at ways of ensuring a restitution of the place of respect for women within the family, within organisations, within the churches, and within the culture itself.

One of the direct outcomes of this work was that the community named a Sunday of each year as 'Stop Abuse Sunday'. The community wanted to see a particular Sunday to focus on these issues, and to remember those who have suffered. It is also a day of recommitment to non-violent behaviour. Many of the

men who attended the training days continue to work to live lives free of violence, and also to run groups to help other men do likewise.

Another direct result of the Project is that participants have identified that they have come to know more about the gender arrangements that were a part of Samoan culture before the Christian missionaries arrived. This knowledge had dispersed. Participants said they came to learn of the gender arrangements of partnerships, and the positions of respect that women had within Samoan culture. And they reconnected with the culture's deep commitment to its own futures – the children.