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Challenges from  
within  
the culture

by

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For fourteen years I have been working with men who are violent – in the Maori community and in prisons. It was Maori women who first challenged us to look at men's violence. They were challenging to us. Three groups grew from there: the Maori men's group, the Pakeha men's group, and the Samoan men's group. We still have contact. As Maori men, we went out looking at all the men's groups operating at the time but we could find none that were of our culture. We turned to our elders and they said, 'Everything is around you. You didn't need to go anywhere.' Our ancestors are our professors.

And so we have been developing our own ways of working. Our ways are often different than other people's ways. We have different understandings. We understand that when a man hits a partner then he is hitting her ancestors. We understand that, within the Maori community, 'Your children are my children. If you hurt them, you hurt me. We are Maori.'

Our different understandings affect the ways in which we work. As men we speak of our connections to the land and of how we are connected to woman – how we are born from both. We speak of how, if we are able as men to acknowledge mother Earth, then we ought to be able to acknowledge the significance of women – the other side of life. We speak of the importance of challenging men's violence to women because women are the bearers of the next generation. If we break the bearers then we will not have another generation. All these ways of speaking and understanding come from within our culture, and that is so important.

Sometimes I cry when I speak of these topics because I know the hurt of the men. But I know deeper the hurt of the partners they are married to. I have seen them bruised. I've seen them nearly killed. I'll be in this job for as long as my two feet can walk because, as a priest, I do not like to take the body of the partner onto the *marae* [the Maori term for community/spiritual meeting place] when I have had the opportunity to stop the violence. The men I work with know that I do not want them to leave their actions on my conscience. As an elder, they know the significance of this. They know that challenging from within our culture will continue.