

Keynote Address

**LEADING WORLD CHANGE - THE INTERSECTION OF
RACISM AND SEXISM**

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This international conference is for all who care passionately about improving women's position in the world, who demand justice and full human rights for women everywhere and who believe that a feminist analysis is essential to defining a fairer globalised world.

Keynote Address

LEADING WORLD CHANGE - THE INTERSECTION OF RACISM AND SEXISM

BY

KERRIE TIM

Introduction

My name is Kerrie Tim, my people are Kalkadoon, west of here, over towards the northern Territory border. I come from a strong and courageous people and am especially influenced by my Mum who placed strong emphasis on “proper respect” for our own, and for everyone. She modelled “proper respect” - that people’s humanness is highly valued and you strive towards a better world because it is in the interests of us all that we have a fair and just society. I liked that about my Mum and my family and my people and these values have obviously influenced my life.

Before flying here I started re-reading Desmond Tutu’s book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. He wrote something that very much reminded me of my Mum’s view of “proper respect” and reminds me often of the humility of all our people who have been damaged by racism. Desmond Tutu writes about *Ubuntu*, and says it means friendly, caring, compassionate. While with the Commission he says he heard so many people’s stories and often asked himself, “What is it that constrained so many to choose to forgive rather than to demand retribution, to be so magnanimous rather than wreaking vengeance.” He says Ubuntu is the reason, and that his people held its concept above all else. He said about Ubuntu that, “It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs.”

I heard this concept described another way by many women throughout the world, “until all of are free, none of us are free.” I think it says a lot about our humanness.

Acknowledgements

So, if I'm going to start today with "proper respect," the first thing I would like to do then is to acknowledge the traditional owners, and their ancestors, on whose lands this beautiful city of Townsville sits, and on whose ancestral lands we come together for this ceremony the Townsville International Women's Conference, "Poverty, Violence and Women's Rights...Setting a Global Agenda."

Let me also acknowledge the elders here today, and especially those elders from my country – as always, it is a privilege to speak before you. I bring you all my greetings, those of the emu people, desert people of north west Queensland, the Kalkadoon. To my sisters from around Australia, those of you who have travelled from across the world to be here today, especially my first nation sisters, it is good to share this ceremony with you and I hope you have a great time.

I would also like to acknowledge Betty McClellan and her immediate team – Joanne, Coralie and Chantal, whose vision and drive for a better world for all women, made this conference a reality.

Finally, let me acknowledge and pay my respects to all who have gone before us, especially those who succeeded against the odds of racism and sexism. May the spirits of our ancestors continue to give us all courage and wisdom to act to "grow up" a world that we are proud to hand over to those who follow.

Treasures of this land

You know, the people of this land on which we meet, the traditional owners, and the many other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live here, are a great bunch of people and I'm sure you already feel warmly welcomed. One of the Murri fellas who grew up here in Townsville is Boori Pryor. He wrote a fantastic book which gives you a

wonderful insight to the courage, wisdom, tears and laughter of Aboriginal people – it's called *Maybe Tomorrow*. One of the things he writes is that “To feel happy about yourself, you must feel happy about the place you live in. To feel happy about the place you live in, you must get to know that place. To get to know that place, you must ask the people who have lived there the longest, the Aboriginal people. We have the key that can open the door to the treasures of this land.” I hope you get to know as many of my people as you can and that while you stay in this country that you too get to ‘enjoy the treasures of this land’.

Introduction

In this presentation I want to make five points. The first is to say something about the intersection of racism and sexism. The second point is to describe the effects of racism and how we can recover from the damage caused by racism. The third point I want to make is about oppression and poverty, the feeding grounds for terrorism, and to hold out that we have the intelligence and resources to end poverty and oppression for everyone everywhere - and we have to work on whatever gets in the way of bringing this certain knowledge to reality. The fourth point I want to make is that the development of policies that are good for everyone everywhere cannot be left to governments alone. The fifth and final point I want to talk about is the importance of figuring out how to build communities, how to build coalitions of people committed to bringing about fair and just conditions for us all and most importantly, figuring out how to do this backing each other. So here goes.

Point 1: Intersection of racism and sexism

If you read the abstract I provided for the conference you will know that one of my passionate interests lies in world change, especially the elimination of racism. From my work in this area I understand that the elimination of racism and sexism is necessary for humankind to progress. You and I and many others are committed to ending sexism and racism and many of us actively support the efforts of other groups to accomplish this

goal. My efforts over the past ten years have been to show the damage done to individuals by oppression and to undo this damage on an individual basis. The result of this work is a strengthening of people's abilities to interrupt racism and sexism in their daily lives, to free themselves from its effects, to take leadership, to form deep relationships across racial lines, to remove racism and sexism from our societies' institutions, and to support the work of other individuals and organizations in ending racism and sexism.

Racism is a key factor dividing women world-wide. I can't tell you the number of times throughout my life that a white woman has wanted me to pretend racism doesn't exist so we can all be the same under the banner of "woman," as if sexism cancels out racism, as if black women have not had to deal with daily doses of racism, at the hands of white men and white women. For us black women, or women of colour, sexism merely compounds the racism we face daily. Of course oppression plays an effective role in keeping us apart – it's supposed to. For those of us who have developed relationships across racial lines, we have worked hard to get this. Gender plays a major role within racism. Racism and sexism work together to perpetrate economic oppression. No one of us grows up in this society without personally suffering and internalising the distortions of racism and sexism.

Aboriginal woman

Let me tell you an extraordinary story of an Aboriginal woman. She grew up at a time when just about every aspect of the lives of Aboriginal people was controlled by the laws and policies of this state. You may not be aware but South Africa's apartheid laws were modelled on them. Anyway, this woman was born on the bank of a river to parents who were married against Aboriginal lore - a direct result of the round ups and forced control of her people. After the roundups of her people, where Aboriginal people were forced into barbed-wire compounds or on to properties or on to the fringes of town, her and her mother were controlled by the police, the local agent of the "protector" of Aborigines. Her early life included violence at home as well as in the world around her. At five years old her father died and her mother continued working as a domestic, trained and

controlled by the state. If you take the time to build relationships and ask, you will hear story after story of Aboriginal women under the forced control of the state being sent out as domestic servants to white women and against their will becoming sexual objects to white men. By the time our young girl was nine years of age she was sent out to work and by eleven was droving, fencing, cutting cattle and sheep, gardening and doing the domestics. Three things happened during this time that affected her greatly – (i) she gained nine months worth of education, (ii) she was taken from her mother, and (iii) while out droving found a book blown against the fence that taught you how to read and write – and she used it.

She eventually left the property she was sent to work on by joining the Red Cross and assisting Australia in its war efforts. She was a liaison between black troops from the United States and Australia – our white Australia policy meant that Australian white women could not work with black men, so Aboriginal women were recruited to do this liaison. Surprisingly, this woman loved the war-time experience, meeting black doctors and other soldiers, meeting General Douglas MacArthur and Eleanor Roosevelt (wife of the then President of the United States – “No one can make you feel inferior without your permission” – Eleanor Roosevelt). She got to see, and imagine, a life bigger than what she was led to believe was possible. After the war she returned home to her mother and never left her side until her mother’s death.

This woman raised eleven kids of her own plus ten others. She tried to get them all educated and was strict about needing to know where they were every minute of the day. She took in scores of other people, Aboriginal and others (including many migrants from Europe). She ran a community organisation. She worked with the police, the local council, the hospital, government departments. She worked with legal aid, the health service, with Aboriginal people in town, Aboriginal people on the fringes of town and the many Aboriginal people who travelled through the region during regular ceremonies. She ensured wherever possible that people were treated well and that Aboriginal people got to participate in services for themselves. She encouraged other leaders and took a keen interest in housing and young people. As the president of her organisation she went to

work each day for twenty years and never received a salary, but she fought hard for the salary of the workers.

She knew who was related to who in the region, she knew the times and circumstances for ceremonies and other business, she was called on often to help heal rifts and heal people – especially when their spirit was low. When they went bush for food, she was the best shot and the gun was always passed to her to take down a ‘roo or a turkey.

She didn’t escape the poverty or the racism.

I remember asking her just before she died, what had been her greatest success. After all she achieved in her lifetime, do you know what she said - that she got to keep her kids.

She was an exceptional woman and an exceptional leader.

Women

I tell you this story because while both groups, women of colour and white women, are oppressed as women, our experiences of this oppression have differed. Black women have been, and are, oppressed by both sexism and racism. Like black men, we were treated in the most inhumane way, sometimes sanctioned by laws and policies. As women, we were subject to additional mistreatment. We were used as sexual objects by white men. The reproductive lives and lives of our families were controlled by white people. Many were forced to work as servants, taking care of children and homes of white women and men. While white women have experienced gender oppression, in relation to people of colour, white women carry the status and privilege of race that are connected to “your” husbands or your fathers. A white woman might be beaten at home and have few rights, but she still has status and other privileges in relation to women of colour. In fact the “privileges” that you accrue as white people have often been used to mask your oppression as women. You have been encouraged to rehearse your patterns of servitude (in the oppressor role) at women of colour instead of allying yourselves with all women against oppression. Today, as in the past, there is a hierarchy of oppression

among women based on the kind of work women perform. This hierarchy deeply affects our relationships with each other.

Point 2: Racism affects us humans in three ways

(i) For People of Colour

It is not possible for an Indigenous person, or someone of African or Asian or Chicano or Mestizos or Arab heritage, or, for want of a better word, a person of colour, to escape the impact of racism. We make up the majority of the world's population, something like 80% or more, as well as the majority of the world's poor.

We have to deal with racism on a daily basis - the hurts from being treated as inferior, denied basic material needs, denied a fair share of resources, demeaned, attacked, threatened with destruction, and much more.

Institutionalised racism has spread world-wide, facilitated by colonialism, imperialism, and some aspects of globalisation. When one country takes over another country, subjugates its people, and extracts its resources, racism may be used to justify these actions. The enslavement of entire populations has been justified by portraying a group of people as less than human on the basis of their race. Race has been the excuse for the extermination and attempted extermination of whole populations – both openly, through violent acts, and gradually, by taking away the natural resources on which we rely. In every form, racism aids and abets the expropriation of human labour and natural resources for the profit of a few. Racism has become a part of every society and its institutions.

For all of us people of colour, access to resources needed to survive and thrive – water, food, housing, education, jobs, medical and legal services, and so on – is severely limited by the operations of racism.

Our institutions that are supposedly established to protect and inform us, such as government agencies, the police, the criminal justice system, the media, educational institutions – often end up being agents of racism. Our peoples are targeted on the basis of race by these institutions in many ways: stereotyped as law breakers, as dangerous, as less intelligent. Schools portray a censored history of white society, omitting the history of racism and the history of peoples targeted by racism. This distorts everyone's picture of the world and history. The tobacco, drug (legal and illegal), and alcohol industries make deliberate efforts to keep vulnerable people addicted to these substances. They prey on people's feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness that result from racism.

Finally, white people, all of whom are conditioned to behave as agents of racism, knowingly or unknowingly act out racism daily. Our peoples are threatened with bodily harm, injured, and killed. Slurs and insults are frequent experiences. These overt racist behaviours are reinforced by the daily wear and tear of more subtle, but just as damaging, behaviours and attitudes. We are demeaned, excluded, ignored, and generally disrespected. A few of the many examples are: being ignored when trying to get service, being followed in shops, being harassed by police, being assumed to be troublemakers and wrongdoers. We are patronised and treated as less competent and less intelligent. These daily acts serve to keep institutionalised racism in place.

(ii) Internalised racism

If that isn't enough, perhaps one of the insidious effects of racism is when we start to believe the racist messages and begin harming both ourselves and our peoples – we internalise the racism. What does this look like? Some examples of internalised racism include where:

- racism has made us think of ourselves or each other as stupid, lazy, unimportant or inferior;
- it has made us criticise or verbally attack each other;
- it has made us physically attack or kill each other, playing out our rage about racism at one another;

- it has made us put our individual well-being last. Racism has made us unable to think about our physical and emotional health, making us vulnerable to heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, ulcers, and more
- it has made us criticise and beat our children in misguided efforts to “discipline” them and keep them from openly displaying pride or pleasure in themselves (attempting to make them less vulnerable to racism, but instead leaving them more beaten down and enraged)
- it has made us feel hopeless, despairing, and angry, which can make us vulnerable to the lure of alcohol and other drugs for “relief” from those feelings, even though we know that this does additional harm to ourselves and our families.

From childhood our peoples have fought as long and as hard as we dare to maintain a sense of ourselves as good, smart, strong, important and powerful. We should not blame ourselves for any of these attitudes or behaviours, but we can increasingly understand them and take steps to end them and to heal the damage done to us by racism.

(iii) Agents of racism

The third form of damage is the corruption of the minds and spirits of whitefellas, those people conditioned by society to act as agents of racism. No one is born an agent of racism but it is not possible to be born white in the world today and escape the messages of racism. Anyone with a racist attitude has first been mistreated and misinformed. He or she has been conditioned to play that role.

Although individuals of the oppressor group, whitefellas, are accorded more rights and better material lives than people targeted by racism, their lives and minds are corrupted by racism. Racism damages everyone. It is no one’s real human interest.

All three forms of damage can be healed

Even under the most severe racist oppression, people are able to move forward by sheer force of their own thinking and determination. But unless we all recover from the emotional damage caused by racism our thinking and behaviour will remain affected by

racism. Even if racist behaviour stopped today and racist policies were removed, unless we are able to let go of the hurts caused by racism we will at some point begin building the bricks of racism until the institutions are back in place.

Healing from mistreatment is not easy work. Many of us resist it, even though without this healing, the rage, grief and terror from the past continue to affect us. From opportunities to tell their life stories I have seen Aboriginal people, and others targeted by racism, laugh and cry and rage their way through recounting experiences of racism and I have seen these people reach heights they didn't believe were possible. I have seen people cry and rage through feelings of "being dumb," to overcome feelings of despair to apply and get into university. I have seen white people recount stories about their earliest memories of first noticing someone else with skin colour different to theirs and I have seen them cry and rage about being led to believe one group of people are superior to another group of people. I have seen these people act to change this and begin to lead other whitefellas, to build close alliances so they are not doing this work alone.

From the work I have been involved in over the past ten years (and more recently as part of an NGO, United to End Racism, delegation to the world conference in Durban) I know that it is possible for us to get completely free of the damage done by racism. We also know that all of us are capable of freeing ourselves.

Point 3: We can End Poverty and Oppression

I remember in September last year when our government, along with the US and other governments throughout the world, and the media, were making statements aimed at getting support for policies of revenge. You know, at the time I thought that this was to be expected in the circumstances but at the same time I knew that such an approach should be opposed if we are to end, throughout the world, the likelihood of such attacks continuing to happen.

The destruction of the persons responsible for the terrorist acts will not make us safe. The military punishment of small countries with any connection to the terrorists will not make us safe. We can easily understand the feelings that lead in these directions and in fact we might have some of those feelings ourselves. We know though, that these feelings must not be acted upon. Instead, we must find intelligent policies and solutions that will actually move us and the world forward.

Desperate, destructive, irrational acts of terrorism are done by people who have been terribly hurt by the conditions in which they have had to exist. The conditions of life for a large fraction of the world's population remain so very desperate, as they have been for generations, that some of the minds of those who endure those conditions simply lose their sense of humanity.

As long as desperate poor, dangerously unhealthy and oppressive conditions exist for any people in the world, we all will be in danger of someone's irrational acts of violence. Finding and killing those who have committed terrorist acts will stop those individuals but it will not stop more people from the suffering that creates such individuals.

The attacks on Afghanistan will not bring peace and safety to the world or the United States. They do nothing to solve the problems that cause terrorism. They are merely attempts to crush not only those who carried out or supported the attacks in September, but also to crush anyone who is opposed to the policies of the multinational corporations who functioning has helped to create and continue to enforce the poverty and oppression that exists in a large portion of the world. But no matter how brutal and overpowering these attacks are, they cannot destroy the longing present everywhere in the world for our children to have a life of justice, free from poverty and oppression

Point 4: Developing policies that are good for everyone everywhere

We must develop policies that end poverty and oppression everywhere and for everyone. We have both the intelligence to develop these policies and the resources to carry them

out. We, together, must actively develop and pursue policies that will value every person, no matter where they live, no matter what their religion, race or nationality is. This is something we are capable of, but we must give up the well-established pattern of life that has had sections of the world's populations benefiting from the enforced poverty of others. We humans have developed enough resources so that no one needs to live in poverty. That can never provide security. There is enough for all of us.

What is the message here

We need policies that are in the interest of all people. Devising such policies cannot be left to governments alone. Such policies will not develop and persist without the active thought and participation of all of us.

How do we begin?

We can create the conditions under which people can consider, develop, and adopt policies that will value every person. Each of us can take initiatives to create these conditions.

What has kept us from active participation?

Many of us know that some of the policies put forward by others are unjust and incorrect, but we have been made to feel incapable of thinking well enough to help develop good, just policies. The belittlement of our thinking abilities begins in our childhoods and continues through school years and our work lives. Our thinking has been belittled so relentlessly that we even belittle each other. Similarly, we are made to feel insignificant and powerless. None of this accurately represents the reality of any of us, although we often end up acting and feeling as if it does, because of the mistreatment we have faced.

What will change that?

No matter what has happened to us, we are still capable. We are capable of understanding the world, of being courageous, and of contributing our thoughts, understanding, and effort to the development and implementation of good policies – for ourselves and the world.

Given the belittlement we have suffered, how do we start? First, we must stop belittling each other, no matter how ingrained the habit may have become. We must support each other's efforts to overcome the disempowering treatment we have received. We must encourage each other's efforts to play a full role in thought and action.

We must listen to each other, and listen well. We must listen to each other's thoughts about what should happen. We also need times to listen to each other about the mistreatment we have received, mistreatment that has sometimes made thinking and acting difficult for us. Just doing this will make a significant difference to our ability to think and act together.

Point 5: Building communities backing each other

I think we can end racism this century. As we provide opportunities to tell our stories, and if we are encouraged to laugh and cry and rage as we recount these stories, we will notice that we are better able to:

- interrupt racism in our daily lives;
- free ourselves from all of racism's effects;
- take leadership;
- form deep relationships across racial lines;
- remove racism from our societies' institutions; and
- support the work of other individuals and organisations in ending racism.

I think we can end poverty and oppression. I think we have both the intelligence to figure this out and the resources to be able to do it.

As a start, I want to do this very important world change work with you – with each and every one of you – remember, “until all of us are free, none of us are free”?

Telling Others About Ourselves

We need to be telling others about ourselves:

Who are our people

What does our liberation mean

What are our contributions to all peoples

What is our oppression

What are the main elements and historical background to the rise of our oppression

What are the features of the oppression that have been internalised individually and that have been internalised by our communities

We need to be telling others the story of our lives, often.

Some of the challenges

Most of us struggle with internalised oppression. Our attention to our individual gains is often at the expense of fighting for the good and freedom of us all. Some of the challenges we face in bringing about a broader picture of liberation and transformation include:

- ⇒ how do we do our work with courage and integrity?
- ⇒ what do we need to do to be honest with each other?
- ⇒ how do we build groups and communities?
- ⇒ how do we get group members and community members to think about each other and back each other?
- ⇒ how do we challenge each other to not settle for less than everything?
- ⇒ how do we move our individual re-emergence forward and at the same time support the re-emergence of all humans?
- ⇒ how do we make the elimination of racism meaningful to us?
- ⇒ how do we make the elimination of sexism meaningful to us?
- ⇒ how do we move things forward in our lives, in our Communities, in our state, and in our country?

We need to find those opportunities to tell our stories, and laugh and cry and rage and shake in the process – it's a good way of helping us notice reality instead of being

confused by the hurtful feelings and misleading perspectives and impressions which the damage from oppression inflicts on us. We can no longer accept feeling numb about racism or sexism in our everyday lives. We can no longer pretend it doesn't exist or that we are lucky because it is not the main issue for us, or because it is not as bad as it has been, or as bad as it is in other countries. We can no longer accept this, for ourselves or for other humans. It will take courage to go for bigger lives, and our experiences demonstrate that we can do this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to remind you that this kind of change is possible. In a book called *The Wisdom of Teams*, by Katzenbach and Smith, they write that “the wisdom of teams is in the team itself. It is in a small group of people so committed they will not be denied.” One obvious example of the power of a few is the making of this International Women’s Conference. There are many other examples and I hope over the next couple of days you find someone to share your story with.