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- Quality of community life

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We hope that this series will open up discussion about some issues of northern development and the inevitable conflicts that arise from change, culture contacts and diversity of values.

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ABSTRACT

The motivating force of traditional Aboriginal women's culture which inspires them to extraordinary efforts in the care of their children, is the focus of this description of a social movement entitled the Aborigines Progress Movement (APM). Although this movement took place during the period 1970-73, I believe it has currency owing to the social problems being experienced by Aboriginal communities in spite of massive government funding in the areas of education, employment and health.

Rowse has recently raised 'some of the essential dilemmas of self-determination policy' which lead to the question 'can we sketch a government policy which would bring about those conditions [culturally appropriate self-sufficiency] without exposing the government to the charge that it was ceasing to "look after" people?' (Rowse 1992, 54). The women who constituted the APM, their motivation for doing so, the effect they had on their families, and their role as a foundation to the Oombulgurri Rehabilitation Project, are, I believe, relevant to Rowse's question. Considering their material conditions of poverty, lack of formal job skills, family violence, and social dislocation, an analysis of their work may have implications for government-funded welfare and employment policies.

The historical factors which spawned the APM were the closure in 1968 of the Anglican Forrest River mission and transportation of the mission Aborigines to the small and unprepared Kimberley township of Wyndham. Most of the families were dumped onto the overcrowded and unhygienic native reserve. The tragic combination of dislocation, poor living conditions and bewilderingly alien environment had disastrous consequences for the Aboriginal families involved. Out of this apparently hopeless situation, the women, nevertheless, formed an organisational tool for the creation of work and social security for their families.

This paper describes the background to these Aboriginal women's struggles for social, political and economic survival, and their formation
of a structure through which to achieve their objectives. My simple message is that, given culturally-appropriate support, Aboriginal women can translate traditional caring and nurturing roles into powerful contemporary structures for self-sufficiency and social support for their families.

Acknowledgments

I should like to thank the women of the Aborigines Progress Movement for the inspiration I received in working with them, and for permission to write their story. The following women deserve special thanks: Thelma Birch, Stella Alberts, Josephine Moore, Suzie Williams, Mary Therese Taylor, Katy Horace, Daisy Horace, Enid Smith, Dorothy Carlton, Sheila Meehan, Leray Mitchell, Molly Gore, Elizabeth Bambra, Mary Carlton. There were many others. Louisa Roberts who, with her husband Robert, trusted Stan and me to support them in their determination to overturn the decision to evict them from their country, was a leader without whom Oombulgurri may never have been reclaimed.

My gratitude to my family is unbounded. My parents Myres and Eric, and my sisters Pete, Jo and Sue sent us food parcels, and supported us morally and financially when our own efforts to be independent failed.

I also wish to thank Rod Dixon, Lyn Riddett, Grant Rodwell and Deborah Rose for helping me reflect on past endeavours, and for educating me in the art of turning thought into the written word.
Notes on contributor

Jan Richardson was the female member of a male/female community development team working for Aboriginal people in remote areas of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. She and her husband Stan Davey gained local employment while they worked for the communities, in line with their philosophy of independence. Their intention in going to Wyndham was to give support to the people evicted from their country along the Forrest River after the mission was closed in 1968. Their field work extended from 1968 for fifteen years, focussing on two major community development projects in Wyndham and Fitzroy Crossing.

In 1985 they returned to Darwin where Jan joined the Aboriginal Task Force at the Darwin Institute of Technology as coordinator of the Certificate in Community Work for Aborigines. She completed a B.Ed in 1991 and is now a Master of Education student at the Northern Territory University and a lecturer at the University's Centre for Aboriginal and Islander Studies.

This paper is written from her perspective as the community worker with the Aboriginal women at Wyndham. The complementary male perspective and the events which culminated in federal funding to support the community's return to their country, under the auspices of the Oombulgurri Rehabilitation Project, are being recorded by Stan Davey for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
Abbreviations

AAL  Aborigines Advancement League
APM  Aborigines Progress Movement
DAA  Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DCW  Department of Community Welfare
NWD  Native Welfare Department
WA   Western Australia
Location map of Oombulgurri
This paper discusses the social structures created between 1970 and 1973 by the Aboriginal women in Wyndham. Through an organisational network entitled by the women the Aborigines Progress Movement (APM), they operated prior to the community's exodus from Wyndham and return to its country at Oombulgurri. The paper briefly describes the historical setting of the APM, including the gathering of Aboriginal people from 1913 onwards into the Forrest River mission, the closure of the mission in 1968 and the removal of the entire population to Wyndham.

The paper shows that, preceding the exodus, the community suffered from policies outside its control, but that the women suffered twofold. Their suffering accrued to them generally as members of the community and specifically as subjects of a social security policy which denied their traditional roles. Had these roles been respected, the women would have been affirmed as the primary providers of food for their families, and housing would have been adequate so that they could care for their children. Compounding these structural impediments to role-fulfilment was the constant fear of alcohol-related domestic violence and ill health.

In response to this situation the women became passive and dependent on welfare services, and could have remained so. Instead, they found a way to renew their traditional roles, albeit in contemporary form, thereby regaining their independence and self-sufficiency. By using their networks to initiate, operate and control a women's workforce which focussed on cooperative care of their children, they raised the level of family health and harmony. Their work substantially contributed to their
community's ability to return to Oombulgurri when the opportunity finally came.

Instrumental in the women's reclaiming of power was a female community worker, who took the position that the women could produce their own leaders and, with support, resolve their own problems.

In the process of developing the APM, a key factor was changing attitudes towards Aborigines by both the outside world and by themselves. Highlighting the potency of positive attitudes, Brady (1992) argues that perceiving only external factors as the 'cause' and therefore the justification of social breakdown, itself perpetuates stereotyping. It then leads to a view of Aborigines as 'helpless victims, overwhelmed by oppressive social circumstances and the power of a dominant society'. An alternative to the perception of hopelessness in the face of external forces is the perception of strong internal resources.

This paper supports the view that people have the ability to transform their conditions through their own efforts given external validation of their capacity to solve their own problems, and their own energy and determination. The Wyndham women's story shows that the vitality of these particular women had not been extinguished despite years of subjugation, and that through their collaborative enterprise they were able to appropriate, from an alien environment, those goods and services needed for the development of survival strategies.

As the community worker involved, I have written this paper from an insider's perspective and have used primary source materials collected as the developments occurred. I commence by briefly describing the historical circumstances which generated the conditions of the women in Wyndham in 1969, then listing the resources available to the women, the choices they made, and the consequences of these choices. I conclude with some reflections on the conjunction of gender and community development.
1913–1968: the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley have no say in where they go

The Aboriginal people who occupied the country west of the Cambridge Gulf in the Kimberley region of Western Australia (WA), were first disturbed on a massive scale by the discovery in 1885 of the Kimberley goldfields. Incoming pastoralists, and infrastructure for economic development, resulted in the establishment of the township of Wyndham in 1886 as a port for the shifting of supplies and gold diggers.

Prior to 1885 there were four main tribes in the Forrest River area (Elkin 1932, Kaberry 1935). Though they had previously encountered members of alien societies, the meetings did not result in a permanent intrusion into their country nor substantial dislocation to their way of life. Indonesian fishermen, for instance, are known to have visited the northwest regularly since the eighteenth century. King's exploration party in 1818 brought the first Europeans into the area. Crawford (1981, 30) comments that the Aborigines were not overawed by these newcomers but treated occupation of their lands as an invasion to be resisted. They obtained a 'fearsome reputation as aggressive tribesmen' which existed even in 1948 (Green 1981, 113). In 1886 the Victoria Pastoral Company delivered 2000 sheep to a camp near the present mission site, but local Aboriginal tribes were strong enough to force the abandonment of this first pastoral holding just two years later (Green 1988, 12).

In 1897 the Anglican Church entered the area, establishing a native mission at the abandoned sheep station. Two years later they, too, were forced by the hostile tribes to abandon camp (Gribble 1930, 170); but in 1913 the Anglican missionaries came again, this time to stay.

In 1911 the WA government had set aside 1.6 million ha of land for Aborigines naming it the Marndoc Reserve. Of this, 270,000 ha were resumed after World War I and allocated to ex-servicemen for economic enterprises, while 40,500 ha were given by the WA Aborigines Department and the Aborigines Protection Board to the Church of England for a native reserve. The founding missionary, the Reverend
Ernest Gribble, arrived to re-open the previously abandoned mission in 1913. But his ideal that the mission be a 'self-supporting and self-respecting native community' (Biskup 1965, 201) was only partially fulfilled. When he left in 1928, Gribble wrote:

the settlement consisted of 24 buildings, including a church, store, dormitories, missionaries' quarters, butcher's shop and married people's home ... 57 native pupils in the school and a permanent population of 170. Over 30 children had been born on the place and 45 had been confirmed. The school children had made rapid progress, and could read and write in English (Gribble 1930, 176).

Many incidents affecting the Aboriginal and European people at the mission have been recorded (Shaw 1981; Kaberry 1935), the most infamous of which was the massacre carried out by police at Onmaleri in June 1926 (Green 1988, 79). According to Stannage, this was 'the last and best publicised incident of its kind in WA' (1981, 142). Shaw notes Rowley's claim that the Onmaleri massacres were 'a turning point in Aboriginal-European relations' because they focussed Perth's attention on the excessive violence against Aborigines in the north-west (Shaw 1979, 267).

The missionaries established themselves, ironically as it later transpired, in an effort to provide 'a kind of sanctuary where Aborigines could pursue their traditional pattern of existence away from the influences of white society' (Stannage 1981, 141). The mission appears to have been successful economically, producing vegetables, fruit, corn, cotton, cattle, donkeys and goats. Culturally, it appears to have been a disaster. Following her field work with the Forrest River tribes in 1934-36, Kaberry commented that 'much of the social organisation of the tribes surrounding the Forrest River Mission ... has been broken down' (1935, 408). In 1946 Elkin visited the mission and found that of the total population of 205, those in the 'protected enclave' of the mission were not using their mother tongue and had become 'ignorant' of their tribal culture. By the mid 1940s even the Australian Board of Missions was concerned that the mission Aborigines had 'degenerated'. Elkin concluded that their listlessness was due to 'apathy, not physical degeneracy' (Elkin 1979, 301).
The institutionalised life-style at Forrest River was reinforced by the use of bells to indicate a change in mission-dictated routines during the day. Green writes that 'food and work training were inseparable during the early years. The rule was "no work, no food"' (1988, 71). Later, in 1957, a minor reform allowed people to exercise a degree of autonomy. Wages were introduced, and a small store not only made available some items for purchase but offered the first opportunity for people to make their own decisions in relation to the imposed life-style.

The mission was located far from the township of Wyndham, the best access route being by boat trip across the treacherous Cambridge Gulf, thence up the equally treacherous Forrest River. The transportation system was extremely hazardous and expensive. By 1965 the mission was badly in debt, owing $30,000. In the opinion of a former superintendent, John Best, the low morale of the mission population and the condition of the mission were also causes for concern. Best believed 'the mission had ceased to serve any useful purpose and he recommended that the church close it and transfer the people to Wyndham or Kununurra' (Green 1988, 110). This is exactly what happened.

**Transported to the Wyndham native reserve**

In July 1968 the mission was formally closed. The majority of the people who had lived inside the mission compound were brought by barge to Wyndham and relocated on the native reserve. Very few of the families got the houses and jobs that had been promised. The people existed as refugees in conditions which were described by Wyndham's Anglican minister, the Reverend David McDougall (in a report prepared for the WA Anglican Missionary Council in March 1970) as follows:

The shift from Forrest River Mission has forced them to readjust themselves to live in what has been described by an overseas traveller as one of the worst slums he has seen anywhere in the world ... As there are not enough homes on the reserve for all the natives to live in, a number of them have had to try to make for themselves tents and lean-to type hovels in which to try to raise their families. There is little incentive when living in these sort of conditions, and knowing how hopeless it is to
try to obtain decent living quarters, to save money or spend it on anything worthwhile ... who can blame them for their apathy and despair?

The reserve is always filthy, with garbage lying about everywhere. The toilets and ablution blocks are about 50 yards away from the galvanised iron houses ... At the Mission, they were housed in reasonably good homes ... which had their own water supply, toilet and bathing facilities, as well as being a lot cooler than the galvanised sheds they now live in.

The Mission natives are all quite disillusioned with the Church because they tell me that they were promised before leaving the Mission that a new place to live would be built for them either at the Four Mile or the Nine Mile. Many of them have told me that if they knew they were leaving the Mission to live in the Wyndham Reserve they would never have come here. They most certainly believe they have been badly deceived (McDougall 1970, 2).

A report in The Independent of 17 March 1970 confirmed this view: 'Living in the local reserve has seriously demoralised the native peoples and some of them almost despair of ever lifting themselves'. An article written in the West Australian almost twelve months later indicated that conditions had not improved:

Wyndham's Aboriginal reserve at the three-mile townsite is something like many reserves that have been largely abolished in the southern part of the State. It is dirty, uncomfortable and disgraceful. The rock-strewn compound contains a series of corrugated iron buildings with poor ventilation and few amenities to make a 'home' comfortable. Built for 96 people, the reserve has housed up to 150 since the Forrest River Mission closed two years ago. In the words of Mr Alan Ridge, Member of the Legislative Assembly for Kimberley, 'It is totally unfair to dump Aborigines on a reserve and demand that from those conditions they drag themselves towards a style of life they either don't understand or don't want. It may be true that it works for some people but it is obvious that its failure rate is immense and its injustice huge' (Ryan, West Australian, 2 January 1971).

Part of the assimilation philosophy of the period involved the phasing out of reserves while encouraging the residents to move into local towns. This was clearly articulated by a local Native Welfare Department (NWD) officer and reported by Davey: 'The policy of the phasing-out plan for reserves should be taken into consideration and reserves shouldn't be made too attractive as residents would be reluctant to leave when this plan is completed' (Davey, unpublished report, 1970). Gale and Brookman (1975, 62) highlight an unintended outcome of this philosophy:
Alcohol was another factor contributing to the manic life of the reserve. As May Smith observed, 'In the past it was terrible living in the reserve. Men used to come home drunk, bashing their wives and children, waking them out of their sleep screaming. I know this because I live in the reserve' (Smith M 1972, pers comm, July). The 1966 Amendment to the WA Licensing Act 1911–1964 had lifted restrictions on all areas except the Kimberley and the East Goldfields. Restrictions on the supply or consumption of alcohol by Aborigines in the Kimberley area were deproclaimed in July 1971 (Long 1979, 362). Ryan argued:

Alcohol is said to be the great curse of Aboriginal people and the reserve situation is made for alcoholism. Aborigines are uprooted from their background and cast into a society they cannot understand or accept ... Not surprisingly the effect on many of them is traumatic. They are emotionally and mentally confused, frightened and despairing — the seed and womb of alcoholism ... The sense of despair, that nothing matters anymore, disturbs many. Wyndham residents, including the Shire president, Mr Bill Grandison who often sits on the Bench as a JP, despair of finding a solution to the problem [my emphasis] (Ryan, West Australian, 2 January 1971).

In addition, in 1971 the Aboriginal (Citizenship Rights) Act was repealed, thus making it easier for despairing people to move closer to assimilation. As Bolger (1991, 3) has pointed out, it was most likely that women would be the victims of this freedom to drink.

Resources for change in 1969

The families transported to Wyndham were given little time to adapt to the new expectations of town life, and little help in resolving the conflicts which arose from the contrast with their previous living conditions. Where their earlier contact with European society had trained them to either fear authority or obey it, they were now expected to act independently. Where the mission trained them in a high standard of housekeeping and cleanliness, they were now placed in overcrowded and badly serviced reserve huts or tin dwellings in the town. Where the rule
had once applied that work equalled food, there was now little work available. Where a token economy had been introduced to men and women workers, the families were now expected to view the husband as the head of the household who would carefully budget his unemployment cheque for the family's fortnightly provisions.

The resources available to the women to bring about radical change in their situation appeared to be very limited. The women themselves were unable to compete on the open labour market owing to their limited language skills, limited literacy, limited formal training, lack of child care facilities, lack of household conveniences, ill health, and lack of transport. There were, in any case, few jobs in a small town such as Wyndham. The women were therefore dependent on their husbands for the financial resources needed to feed their families. Most of their husbands' income was derived from unemployment benefits. The Department of Social Security did not, at this time, permit split cheques, (ie the forwarding to a wife of a portion of the family's social security entitlement). With the barrier of alcohol often coming between a wife and her husband, and the prevailing notion that if the government put the man's name on the cheque, the cheque must be totally for him, the women's ability to fulfil their role as providers of food for their families was often severely limited.

However, as future events were to prove, the women were not bereft of resources. A significant one was their traditional knowledge, a second was their missionary training in European ways, and a third was the presence of a female/male community worker team.

**Resource 1 — indigenous knowledge**

The cultural traumatisation which occurred during the years of early settlement was partly offset by the structures set in place by the mission. The mission's history has been recorded by Gribble (1930) and Green (1988) and, like the reserve, it can be viewed as both prison and sanctuary. The women's bonding to their relations was not broken, so
that their responsibilities of care for biological and classificatory kin encompassed every individual in their community. Kaberry's 1934–1936 study of the Kimberley tribes shows that one of a woman's prime tasks was to obtain food for her family, and that 'in actual quantity, the woman probably provides more over a fixed period than the man'. In particular, the women's attention was focussed on 'economic exchanges, the rearing of children, and the acquiring of a knowledge of the environment and its resources' (Kaberry 1939).

In a more recent study of Aboriginal society in the Northern Territory, Coombs et al., observe that:

among Aborigines, when changing material circumstances and social conditions pressured traditional kinship bonds, the maternal-child relationship (in both its actual and classificatory forms) emerged as stronger than any other, and resulted in the fairly widely found matrifocal family group (Coombs et al. 1983, 46).

This perception matches the Wyndham experience, and helps the outsider to appreciate the power of the women's motivation to overcome their oppressive conditions.

**Resource 2 — training in European ways**

Training by the missionaries in European ways became a resource for the adults to develop survival strategies in Wyndham. Some of the skills the women learned were articulated in personal profiles collected by Green (1988): Susan Clark, for instance, reported that in the 1930s the old people made porridge for everybody's breakfast; Gladys Birch reported that when the girls left school they got domestic jobs, working 'in the missionaries house, like cleaning up, clean the dishes and washing their clothes'; in 1967 school lunches were made by the married women, with the children paying 20 cents a day for their lunch.

In the 55 years of the mission's existence, the women were educated and trained in many domestic competencies required by European society. The APM structures appear to have been unconsciously modelled on
these systems, with the major difference that the adult women controlled and directed them.

Resource 3 — presence of male/female community worker team

In November 1969 my husband Stan Davey and I travelled to Wyndham from Melbourne with the express intention of working with the ex-Forrest River mission people. We worked as a team and were honorary field officers for the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) in Melbourne, and, having been advised of the closure of the mission, offered our services to the people. Stan hypothesised that people undergoing intensive social dislocation would be able to make use of outsiders in their quest for re-creation of a meaningful life. More specifically, Stan's objectives were to:

- offer an alternative to the NWD policy of assimilation, to assist Aborigines to establish themselves in economically viable and independent enterprises, and to gather information and conduct campaigns on specific areas of concern such as land rights, health, housing, education, wages and employment etc (Davey report, 30 December 1969).

At that time we were not the only people whose sympathies lay with the Forrest River mob. The Anglican and Catholic church representatives and various individual officers of the NWD and medical departments were active in helping the local Aborigines assimilate into life in Wyndham. However, our values rejected forced assimilation in favour of self-determination, and our single-minded purpose to assist the community gave us a focus and energy uncluttered by other considerations.

It is significant that we worked as a team, as most field workers at that time were men.
Out of desperation comes inspiration

The sudden transition from the known life of the mission to a hostile and bewildering world on the reserve was catastrophic to family relationships and community spirit. In March 1970 Stan Davey wrote a report to the AAL in which he commented:

In common with similarly displaced communities, there is a general lack of motivation and aspiration, a sense of overwhelming hopelessness at being caught in circumstances beyond their control, a resignation to the loss of inherited values and social patterns, a lack of enthusiasm about adapting European-Australian values and social mores; the women and girls are exploited by paramours both white and black; six nights a week drunken brawling on the reserve keeps the community sleepless; a high percentage of their young men are frequently in Wyndham lockup and Broome jail (Davey 1970).

My journals refer constantly to the people's efforts to battle despair, ill health, hunger, violence, drunkenness, heat, overcrowded living conditions, unresolved community problems, and savage injuries. The women mostly ignored or denied physical pain. 'Nothing's wrong, I've just got a broken ankle', replied one woman to my enquiry as to why she was dragging one leg (the break caused by a bashing from her husband during a drunken brawl the previous evening). There was no disaffection from the family on account of this violence, and no self-pity.

Stan and I had no mandate from the government to help the people. We did, however, have authority from other Aboriginal people, and our introduction was through one of the Pilbara Aboriginal leaders. Jacob Oberdoo, a leader of Don McLeod's Nomads mob, had originally accompanied us to Fitzroy Crossing, introduced us and confirmed our credentials to leaders of Aboriginal communities between Broome and Fitzroy Crossing.

In Wyndham, Stan was perceived by the local white population as a threat to the status quo. He was banned by NWD from entering the reserve to talk to the people, and found it difficult to get a job to support himself, but eventually obtained several labouring jobs. Our determination to be economically self-sufficient while working for the people was an
important part of our methodology. We believed that by job-hunting in Wyndham and choosing to live in rudimentary conditions our identification with the people would be reinforced. Accommodation was just as difficult to obtain as work. The oppressive heat and Kimberley dust, the poverty, and the hostility of the non-Aboriginal townspeople helped to keep us sensitive to the Aboriginal community's experience.

We observed the ban from entering the reserve and met with the people down by the creek instead. At our first meeting people spoke movingly of their yearning to return to their country at Forrest River. There was no WA or Commonwealth legislation enabling such a move, but we offered them our support if they wanted to do it themselves. Although having very little other than a conviction that the people had a right to their country, we were quite clear about the fundamental human need to do things for oneself as an antidote to despair. Rowley in fact framed his 'slogan for a national policy' as 'Aboriginal initiative, and assistance on request' (1971a, 433), echoing J.S. Furnivall's view that 'the essence of welfare is the freedom to decide what one wants, and to organise to get it' (Rowley 1971b, 349). Similarly Strehlow emphasised a way of helping people which contributes to self-respect:

We should remember at all times that, no matter how much assistance is given to any human being, only that human being can take the final steps necessary for his own rehabilitation. All that other men can do is to help his efforts by example, by precept and by financial assistance (Strehlow 1961, 36-7).

In conversations with the Wyndham adults, the talk inevitably turned to their country. In fact the only topic which stimulated light in the eyes of the old people was their 'country', the place they called Oombulgurri, and government called Forrest River. The desire to see it again became increasingly urgent. At the suggestion of two of the men leaders, we hired a plane on 27 March 1970 to take us to the abandoned mission for a couple of days. The area was like a ghost town, overgrown and deserted, stripped of everything moveable. However, as Stan observed, 'That it was life and home to the two men was indisputable' (Davey 1992, 15).
Despite the unreality of the project, we encouraged the people to continue to pursue their aspirations to return to their country at the abandoned mission. The possibility of return became one of the few positive topics for discussion. All other conversations were almost uniformly negative, emphasizing the hardships and injustices already enumerated. However, no-one had the means to solve the problem of transport across the eleven miles of Cambridge Gulf and along the thirty four miles of winding Forrest River. The trip across the water was dangerous because of the swift tidal changes which produced treacherous whirlpools around the hidden mudbanks. A trip across land was equally difficult as there were few passable tracks along the 250 km land route. The airstrip was so damaged and charter planes so expensive that flying was not a viable option. Fortuitously, however, during a trip to visit family in Melbourne, Stan was invited to talk to the Harold Blair Aboriginal Children’s Holiday Scheme committee about Wyndham. They offered to help. We asked them for a boat.

Back in Wyndham, we informed the people that the Harold Blair organisation had agreed to donate $1500 for the purchase of a 16' dinghy and 18 hp outboard motor. This little dinghy could be used to take families back to their country if that was their real desire. About 34 community members had a meeting with Stan on 4 October 1970 and decided to form an Association which they called the Umbulgurri Committee. Its objective was 'to return to Forrest River Mission'. They started to raise money, performing three corroborees for tourists and raising $30. On 27 October, the dinghy and outboard motor arrived in Wyndham on one of the State Ships. The ex-Forrest River mob were down at the wharf to help unload it and take it down to the launching ramp.

Robert and Louisa Roberts, two of the ex-mission elders, were the first to take advantage of the dinghy. On 16 November they loaded stores and their dogs (shaded during the journey by an umbrella held over them by Louisa), and with Eddie Gerard as pilot departed from Wyndham. It took about 6 hours to negotiate both gulf and river, but the landing was
achieved and the first camp site established. Robert and Louisa decided to stay after the end of the wet season, and Stan and I agreed to bring them stores every fortnight by dinghy. That year many trips were made, and several families went back and forth between Wyndham and Forrest River. It is ironical that despite the total lack of facilities in the abandoned mission, the squatters had a healthier lifestyle than was possible on the government reserve. Gradually the determination grew to leave the horrors of life in Wyndham and return permanently to their country, despite the lack of material resources.

The women articulate their aspirations

In between operating a dinghy service for the first couple of families who had decided to camp either at Oombulgurri or their other special place, Oondaguri, Stan and I continued supporting the reserve mob as they tried to maintain dignity and purposefulness in the place where the government had put them. From my contact with the women grew my conviction that their innate strength, derived from their commitment to their children, could enable them to transcend the most hopeless of conditions. A project was needed to galvanize the women in a manner non-threatening to the men. One of the young women expressed a long-suppressed desire to field an Aboriginal women's basketball team and play in the local competitions. Her courageous declaration became the catalyst for the women's network.

Talented basketballers had been encouraged by the Basketball Association to join various teams, but the women had felt unable to participate due to their perception of their own inferiority. Their lack of self-esteem and of group organisational skills were offset by the security of an all-Aboriginal team supported by an extensive network of adults. With encouragement, therefore, and the use of my vehicle to pick up the players for practice, a team was formed amongst the young women living in the 'transitional housing'. (This housing formed part of the NWD housing program for Aborigines. Tin dwellings known as Type III housing were built on the reserve and slightly bigger ones known as Type...
5 were built off the reserve as a 'step up' for families who demonstrated they were able to live in a State Housing Commission home.) Gloria Clark was appointed the basketball captain. She named the team 'Bluejays'.

Members of the Basketball Association expressed scepticism about their ongoing ability to field a team, but this was effectively countered by the unending faith and energy of Gloria and her family. These few women could always muster a practice team even though our pick-ups often had to do the rounds of the pubs. Ironically this was turned to their advantage when the team captain called for her players, as everyone at the pub was made acutely aware of the new activity! After the first game (which they won), the Bluejays could always field a full team despite ongoing competition from the pub.

As the women's movement grew, the Bluejays came to symbolise public Aboriginal achievement, and there were more supporters to back up this than any other team. They won the premiership, and even carried off prizes for top goal scorer and best and fairest! This demonstration of Aboriginal women's athletic and organisational skills greatly enhanced their public image.

At that time my ability to support the women was limited by my own need to find employment and the opposition of the NWD to our presence in Wyndham. An unlikely form of assistance arose from the Homemaker Program which was conducted by the NWD itself. Its objectives were, in part, to

- promote the welfare of allocated families by advising them on personal problems, home management, child care, employment, career training etc;
- make every endeavour to uplift the social standards of these families;
- make regular visits to the homes of these families, also to schools, and hospitals as necessary, and to maintain a proper family contact and interest; and
• give these families every encouragement to participate in community affairs, and to assist them in this way by personal involvement with them (extract from Instructions to Homemakers written by NWD Commissioner Frank Gare).

The Homemaker Program became a mechanism which I was able to use in my strategy to support the women. I applied for a position as a Homemaker and was accepted, commencing work on 4 March 1971. I was thus permitted official contact with the families. I now also had access to material resources, even if the standard Homemaker kit of Kleenex tissues and mop and bucket were viewed as somewhat inadequate for the task at hand! The Homemaker system provided for fifteen contact hours per week and an allocation of six client families per Homemaker. I was able to use these hours to assist individual families and to work unobtrusively with them in developing a cooperative approach towards the structural problems which appeared so overwhelming. Such community-based activities were not only not supported by NWD, but were rejected as legitimate Homemaking. The first seven weeks of my reports were returned as 'unacceptable'. They were re-written in an individualistic style with all references to coordination and cooperation omitted, and promptly accepted.

Shortly after my elevation to government worker, a vacancy for an Employment Officer in Wyndham was advertised by NWD. Stan applied and was appointed owing, we presume, to a change of government in Western Australia and a consequent change in policies. From this position he also was equipped and permitted to visit stations officially for the purpose of assessing the welfare of Aboriginal families. Later, in July 1972, when the NWD amalgamated with the Child Welfare Department to become the Department of Community Welfare (DCW) under the Directorship of Keith Maine, Stan was given two days a week to concentrate on community development programs. From that time we encountered little official hostility and received some support from DCW and several business people in Wyndham.
The women began to assert their desire for better conditions. I helped one woman write to the local Member of the Legislative Assembly in Perth on 14 September 1971 asking his assistance in getting a house. In part of her letter she said:

My situation is not exactly desperate, but rather pressing. I am divorced, and me and my 7 children (all going to school or younger) live with my sister and her husband and their 7 children, my other sister and her 2 children, and our father. We are squashed into a Type 5 Welfare transitional house since there is no other accommodation available.

Then on 31 May 1971, the O'Reeri family moved from the reserve to one of the transitional houses under my Homemaker jurisdiction. Mary O'Reeri was greatly distressed by the reserve conditions — the noise, the drunkenness, the brawling, the overcrowding. She spoke of her relief at being able to move into another house, and related the horrors of community life on the reserve. I was appalled by Mary’s stories and discussed the problems with Thelma Birch, an Aboriginal woman of exceptional leadership ability, seeking her advice on how to help the residents improve their lifestyle. Her family had been off the reserve for several years and were distressed at the continuing deterioration of conditions and the increasing violence.

One of the features of the reserve was the noise from drunken brawling. When the police car did its rounds the noise reduced instantly, as if someone had turned down the volume control on a radio. When the police disappeared, the noise returned to its former level and thenceforth increased according to the topic under discussion, frequently culminating in the return of the police to remove one or two people. Often my first task the next morning was to take the victims of the brawling to hospital.

Studies have shown that 'where violence increases in Aboriginal communities ... women may be disproportionately victims of the increase' (Bolger 1991, 3). Burbank quotes women as remarking that 'When men drink they come back and bash their wives' (Bolger 1991, 3). Bolger concludes that 'in the final analysis, the problem of violence against Aboriginal women will only be solved by Aboriginal people themselves'.
In Wyndham in 1971, women had few options to protect themselves from jealous husbands and alcoholic violence. My offer of support appeared absurdly inadequate, but I believed that with back up the women could produce their own leaders and resolve the problem themselves.

In response to my plea for help, Thelma related how she and her husband Donald had been head-councillors on the reserve about four years previously, when it had been possible to maintain law and order within the community. After consideration of the problem, she called a meeting of all persons on the reserve and asked if they wished to re-introduce law and order through a Reserve Council, as understood from previous experience. The families unanimously agreed to do so, the women expressing prime concern for their children's safety. They particularly wanted peace and quiet at night times so the children could get sufficient sleep before school. One of the women, May Smith, described what happened at the meeting:

So we women talked to ourself without any white help. One day we asked Thelma to come. She ask Jan. She told us women Jan will help and she understands and we told her our problem how to stop this terrible nights we are putting up with. We talked about it. On the third of June we had our first meeting talked about liquor coming on the reserve. We all agreed that we should make a law. These are the laws: no liquor on the Reserve, no fighting, no gambling, no car to enter without permit, children not to play in the toilet, rubbish to be picked up and put in the bin. You could see we want clean and peaceful reserve but men that live on the reserve said that these laws were no good. Women would not listen to that women not all, but few fighting for this law to be strong (Jaberoo, July 1972).

The Council itself was formed but did not last long. However, the first surge of purpose and excitement awakened a community spirit which resulted in a desire among the women to buy a vehicle to transport women to places for picnics, fishing and other business. Collections were taken up, the group officially adopted their chosen name of Aborigines Progress Movement (APM), and a bank account was opened on 23 June 1971. By 7 July there was $99.62 in the account.
Aborigines Progress Movement 1971–1973

The APM became an instrument of power for the women by creating an umbrella under which they could work. Because it was an all-women organisation, it provided protection from jealous husbands. Its cooperative structure absorbed fluctuations in the physical condition of its individual members, and was naturally and easily organised around the need to care for the very young children. The women provided the energy and labour force while I or DCW provided the resources. Its system was simple: meet, discuss needs, plan, act.

The objective of feeding the children was conditional upon the acquisition of money to purchase food. To obtain money the women had to earn it themselves, and this required finding jobs. As previously indicated, there were few jobs available in Wyndham, and even fewer for which the women were formally qualified. They therefore assigned to me the responsibility of finding work for them. I door-knocked private citizens and businesses in town and was offered several jobs which the women agreed to undertake. All the decisions were taken by the women at the weekly APM meetings.

Initially the meetings took place at my home, which by this time was the government house provided to Stan as a District Officer with DCW. There the women could shower in warm water, wash their clothes in my washing machine, make cups of tea, and cook cakes. At the meeting the able-bodied members selected the work they felt able to undertake that day, and I was assigned the job of driving the work-gangs to the work site. One work-gang stayed at my place and made smoko for the others. At the appointed hour I was asked to collect the cooks and deliver the smoko to the other work-gangs. At the end of the day I was asked to collect all the workers and deliver them home. Gradually I encouraged the meetings to be held in one of the other women's homes so that we could all share the responsibilities and pleasures of being host. The conviviality engendered in these meetings helped some individuals
overcome their shame at their own living quarters, and contributed to a strong sense of camaraderie.

The women later wrote about this development:

**Helping One Another:** We native people of Wyndham have started working to build a Community Centre. The women have started an Aboriginal Progress Movement. Twelve Councillors have been elected to keep law and order on the Reserve. We have our own Council meetings and sent our own representative to the Derby meeting to speak for our people here. He spoke for such things as getting Forrest River back and starting a garden at the 10 Mile Springs. (Later we hope to start a riding school there). Since the people came from Forrest River nothing has been done for them. Since the women started their meetings the Native Reserve has improved one hundred percent. We are handling our own problems without Welfare. That's how things get along well, because we understand one another (Jaberoo, 7 August 1971).

As already noted, the strongest motivation of the women was to improve the living conditions of their children, in particular to allow them peaceful sleep and good nutrition. The jobs which the women were offered required skill and physical energy. They were accepted if they either allowed the mothers to take their young children along with them or if the women could arrange safe care elsewhere. Gradually suitable employment in the form of short-term contracts was generated, and the workforce allocated caretakers to supervise the young children while their mothers worked.

The women were often hungry, tired and wounded from the nightly disturbances on the reserve, yet they willingly used picks and shovels to clean up tall cane grass and rubbish, scissors to trim lawns, and wheelbarrows to shift rocks. Despite their frequent handicaps of injury or ill-health, they performed any hard labouring jobs which local people found in response to my canvassing for work. They never knocked back a job offer, and gradually their image amongst the townspeople began to change to one of admiration and respect.

These experiences helped to shape the nature of work which the women found compatible with their cultural systems and family responsibilities. The men, being more accustomed to individual employment or its
alternative, 'sit-down' money, were not able to form similar work gangs where the proceeds were used for their families, communally administered according to need. The women's employment patterns became established as follows:

**Car washing service**

Permission was gained from DCW to make use of a cement block behind our residence. The women bought a bucket, hose, soap, window cleaning fluid etc. A notice advertising the service was painted and erected in a prominent position. Soon the local taxi drivers and a nearby garage developed a regular small patronage. Visiting tourists provided a further source of work, and any townspeople who offered to 'help' the APM were asked to get their car washed. Upon hearing of this self-help project, one Aboriginal family which had been living in Halls Creek returned to Wyndham to join in.

The car wash functioned in a culturally appropriate manner because it was organised and supervised by the leading women, allowed those who were able to work at any particular time to do so, and depended on teamwork rather than individual enterprise. It provided a gathering centre for women and children, and served well the need for individual women to earn a little bit of money in times of crisis instead of going to Welfare to ask for relief rations. In addition, financial recompense for work done was immediate, unlike most conventional wages and Social Security benefits.

**Clothes washing and ironing**

With the donation of an old washing machine, the women decided to develop a clothes washing and ironing business. The Managing Secretary of the District Hospital generously arranged for laundry facilities to be made available at the Native Hospital near the reserve. The women advertised on the local outdoor picture gardens for washing and ironing jobs, or simply did their own. Growing opposition from some of the
husbands, who were 'jealous', and the ever present destructive tendencies of the children twice sabotaged the service. The women did not give up.

**Yard and house cleaning**

The teenage boys at this stage were creating nightly disturbances. Thelma Birch got them together, told them they were to work for their people instead of 'pulling them down', and put them onto yard cleaning. The women also did house cleaning, and gardening. In both cases the principle of working together instead of individually, and working at their own pace in their own way, proved most acceptable.

**School children's lunches**

Much thought was given to the school children, the majority of whom went off to school with perhaps a cup of tea for breakfast, and returned at lunch time for another cup of tea and a piece of bread if they were lucky. Frequently they did not make it to school in the afternoon. On 22 July 1971 the women decided they would make lunches for all the reserve children, and others if their parents wished, by preparing lunches and delivering them to school. They asked me to take them shopping for supplies and commenced next day in DCW's community hall, charging 30c per child.

Despite all kinds of problems and emergencies, the women made lunches for up to 61 children every day of the school week for the rest of the school year. They were punctual and kept the kitchen in excellent condition. Their keenest advocate was the headmaster who told the women it was the first time he had high attendances for the whole day. The children not only gained in education but also in socialisation as instead of walking home during the lunch hour they had free time to play with their class mates. The school teachers were most cooperative and very anxious for the scheme to continue.

The APM women, who were all classificatory mothers, aunties or grannies to these children, were very satisfied to be able to provide good
food and help their children grow strong. Under conditions in which most experiences were depressing, this opportunity to feel positively about themselves was very beneficial to the women's individual self-esteem and to the well-being of the community. Their role as nurturers was significantly enhanced. As a male leader of an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory told anthropologist Rose: 'Mother gives life ... Women [are] good to have babies, [to] give life' (Rose 1992, 61).

The women themselves wrote:

We are providing lunches for fifty seven children. But we are also having trouble with the lunches. The mothers are willing to pay for the lunches but the father do not agree. We are sending out letters to the fathers to see if they will agree or not. But meat for lunches is very dear so DB and WG went out to catch some fish. VC is drawing boab nuts to raise money, some of it to go to the children's lunch costs (Jaberoo, 7 August 1971).

**Finance**

During the first three weeks most families made contributions. The organisers had calculated they could prepare the lunches for 30c per child each day. However, though all families signified endorsement of the service at the Council meetings, few met their financial responsibilities. Supplementary income was derived from four other sources: donations of food, use of school milk, 50% of proceeds from dances the APM was running, and a self-imposed levy on card games. I commented in my journal:

While we are hopeful some payments will be forthcoming next week, they are most likely to be too small to enable the project to continue. It will become another victim of the breakdown in the social responsibility system of the community. We believe this is related to the sense of powerlessness evident in the collapse of the Reserve Council. We have been full of admiration at the resilience of the 'lunch women' who have carried on regardless of the pressures to which they have been subjected. There are few people who would have enthusiasm left for a community project after a night of turmoil on the reserve with the possibility of being one who was beaten up or stoned by one of the drunken rioters.
**Lunches for pre-school children**

The workers involved in preparation of school lunches, and others who were detailed to do yard cleaning or gardening jobs, were required by the nature of the work to leave their children behind. The APM therefore decided to operate a pre-school play centre and to provide lunches. Lunches for the pre-schoolers were consequently commenced the last week of second term. They were a natural outcome of the women's need to maintain their mothering responsibilities whilst at the same time doing other work. The women's cooperative network had no difficulty in designing a system to permit all needs to be catered for at the same time.

**Meals for husbands**

It wasn't long before the husbands began lining up outside the kitchen asking for their rations. The women felt no incongruity in the situation. Thereafter all the adults were also fed, and the drinkers' health improved.

**Dances**

One of the concerns expressed at the meetings was how to occupy the teenage boys' time in the evenings and 'block off' the drinking practices. Dances were instituted on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Guitars were lent by the Welfare Officer and ourselves, a set of drums by the local convent sisters, and an amplifier by the Anglican minister. A broom handle laid twelve inches from the musicians marked the line beyond which the energetic dancers could not go, and one or two of the families provided supper of sandwiches and cakes and buckets of cordial, which were sold to the dancers. A singer, two guitarists and a drummer (using an upturned tea chest) constituted the band which played regularly for around sixty to eighty children and twenty to forty adults. The women's capacity to include all age-groups in each enterprise again made organising easy. It was agreed that funds raised through the dances should be divided between the school lunches and a music fund to acquire instruments for the band.
Money

All monies raised from these jobs were paid into the APM bank account. The boys articulated the same inspiration as the women in the group: they were ‘working for their colour’. Thelma ensured that families in the group had food each evening and that the boys had cigarette and picture money. Through the communal caring structures, people’s individual needs were acknowledged and catered for.

News sheet

Early in the development of the APM, Thelma Birch wrote two or three forceful paragraphs on her feelings concerning the behaviour of some of the people on the reserve. The idea of a news sheet caught on and over several weeks people prepared stories about the APM’s activities, also airing their disapproval of people who broke Council rules. Thelma and two of her assistants would write up the material which I typed and duplicated until one of the young women was trained to take over. The production was called the Jaberoo Newsreel (the jabiru is the totem of the Oombulgurri tribe). It ceased production shortly after the collapse of the Reserve Council following a particularly sharp attack by one of the women upon one of the senior men leaders whom they claimed was ‘working against his colour’. In one of the first editions, Thelma wrote:

When we first started the APM nearly all the native people on the reserve agreed to help one another and got a Council meeting. We elected twelve members to uphold Law and Orders in the Reserve. Our reason for doing this is to better the living conditions of our people, especially the younger ones. We are trying to raise money for a truck, so that women will have transport. So they can move around and do things for themselves and help older people (Jaberoo, July 1971).

The Jaberoo was a powerful medium for social control. We understood it to emulate one of the women's traditional public shaming strategies. For instance, Enid Smith, writing about a bad weekend, noted:

This has been the worst weekend. Friday night X came back drunk into the Reserve, kicking up a stink and throwing off at the Councillors. Same thing happened Saturday night, Y and Z took four whitemen down to the reserve. With a cheek they told the four whitemen to walk into Q's compound to chase P out of his camp. He went to get the Council women. When they told the whitemen to go P
threw back at them and said the Council got no backing from the Welfare or the police. Same thing happened in the day time Saturday. Y and Z don't live on the Reserve and we don't want them bringing dirt back on the Reserve, R is also working against his colour.

The Jaberoo gave details on each week's activities. On 7 August 1971 it reported:

This week we had our own boys entertaining, with our own audience dancing. Supper was arranged by our women. The work for the week included: one yard cleaning job, three clothes ironing jobs and three car washes. We had no orders for firewood. On Wednesday the four teenage boys cleaned up the reserve. There are six boys in the group but not many jobs for them. Last weekend there was much noise and many disturbances which spoilt the week. The young girls never change. They are carrying on as usual not helping in any way. These girls have not anyone to support them and never do one day's stroke of work.

On 17 August it reported:

The Week's Activities: Basketball: Bluejays defeated Mods 32-20. The team — (5 names). Car Washing: 5 cars were attended to. Workers — (4 names). School Lunches: the number of children receiving lunches has again risen to 61. Workers — (9 names). Laundry: 7 jobs were done. Workers — (2 names). Firewood: 6 bags were cut and sold. Workers — (5 boys). Yard Cleaning: 2 jobs were handled by (1 woman, 1 man, 1 boy). Dance: about 120 people attended. $4 was raised towards musical instruments and $4 for school lunches. Musicians and workers — (9 men and women). The Arts Centre: the old people from Fork Creek have painted a large sign which will soon be hung outside the old hospital to let tourists and other people know they can see and buy boab nuts, boomerangs, coolamons, didgeridoos and other things straight from our people.

These records show that the women's influence was not only in their own particular sphere but spread across all age groups. By using their kinship networks they could reach all people in their community and work in with all interest groups. Their concept of care for their families extended across all sections of the community, including the by now constituted Umbulgurri Association. The Association had been active since its inception, endeavouring to start economic enterprises for the men preparatory to the hoped-for return to Forrest River. Many projects were started. Some of the men were keen and excellent workers but on the whole the influence of alcohol on the men was destructive of sustained effort.
The APM activities attracted attention both within Wyndham and from further afield. A Perth woman sent this message after reading the Perth newspaper:

I have just finished reading Athol Thomas' article in today's *West Australian* about your Aborigines Progress Movement in Wyndham ... I am sure there are hundreds if not thousands of people in WA today who will be saying with me 'Good on you Thelma, keep it up'. This is what is needed a few more Kath Walkers and Thelma Birches, to lead your own people along the self-help path to make them feel self-reliant and independent.

However, at times community problems became insurmountable and totally undermined the women's ability to sustain their enterprising activities.

**APM in the doldrums**

Several months after these energetic and exciting reports were made, the APM women, overwhelmed by social problems on the reserve, found themselves less able to maintain the progress they had begun. Only six or so were able to keep on with the lunches while many of the other services went into decline. Stan records that 'we saw the collapse of the APM as being due to the leaders being overwhelmed with their sense of powerlessness, the low regard for the way of life of their community, and the overcrowded squalid conditions' (Davey 1992). He commented that one factor continuously depressing the women was their living conditions. My journals contrasted their current with their previous status:

Most of the reserve residents are ex-Forrest River residents who were accustomed to houses with several rooms and attached facilities. They were all capable of maintaining a high standard of house routine and hygiene. The overcrowded primary transitional communal facilities on the reserve have degraded this capacity.

The condition of the APM was like a barometer of the wellbeing of the people: when things were good, the APM was dynamic; when things went bad, the APM struggled valiantly and then gradually declined. In 1972 it picked up again. This time the women wrote their stories in the form of a newsreel.
Newsreel No 1 reported:

This week was the eighth week that the Progress Movement has been operating this year. Every day lunch has been made for the school children. Sometimes there were forty five children fed at school, twenty pre-schoolers and fifteen workers. The workers have brought in enough money to pay for the lunches. The following people have worked hard (twenty three names of women and men were listed).

The next edition reported:

This week about thirty children have been fed every day at school because their mother or father worked for the Progress Movement. The following jobs and workers (names listed) have brought in enough money to pay for the lunches: Weed Pulling (four) Ironing (one) Lunches (three) House Cleaning (two) Forrest River (four) For the first time this year there is money in the bank instead of having to borrow. The accounts book registers the following since school started: Debit (food) $243.00. Credit (jobs) $249.50. Balance: $6.50. Typed by Doreen Evans, 14 April 1972.

This focus of the APM is no surprise in the context of the customary responsibilities of Aboriginal women. Bell, for instance, describes the roles of women in Central Australia:

In both the traditional and the semi-traditional ways, the women are the ones responsible for children and for the family's welfare: arranging for shelter, food, placement of children whose parents have died or are unable to care for them for short or long periods (Bell & Ditton 1980, 132).

The focus of the APM also fitted naturally into what Catherine Berndt described as women's domestic work:

In Aboriginal society ... women's domestic work was not only that. It was also breadwinning. As long as they were physically active and healthy, women were the most consistent supporters of their families. Their food-supplying role was equivalent to full-time employment. At the same time, it went along with bearing and rearing or looking after children. ... And as a rule, most or all of these tasks could be done in company with other women who were doing more or less the same thing (1983, 14).

On 22 February 1973 the Oombulgurri Association sent a submission to the Commonwealth Government for a grant to subsidise the community's return to Forrest River. On 16 July 1973, a grant of $192,000 was approved for the Oombulgurri Association 'to enable its members to be
repatriated from Wyndham to Oombulgurri. Between September 1973 and September 1974, community members gradually shifted back to the old Forrest River mission area, growing in number from thirty to 220. When the government grant arrived, the Association employed a team of professionals from the Ecumenical Institute (an American community development organisation) to work with the community. In April 1974 the Review Committee of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) stated:

The Review Committee considers that the repatriation of the Oombulgurri people from Wyndham to Forrest River Mission is a success, at least in the initial stages. Community spirit is very high and the responsibility of the Mawaba (the elders who formed the Executive) in decision making and management responsibility is encouraging.

From the time that the movement to return to their country started gathering energy, the APM worked closely with Robert and Louisa Roberts, the elders who were preparing the way for the community's return home.

Role of resource person

During the development of the APM social programs, my role as a resource person was continuous. The women accepted my offers of help. They knew exactly what they wanted, and did not feel it necessary to explain to me the reasons for their decisions. Their practical orientation required that I also be practical, ie that I find out how to obtain equipment; that I pick up and deliver workers or basketball players or musicians or whoever needed transportation; that I teach skills as and when they requested and that in turn I be taught by them whatever they wanted me to know. This relationship of learner/teacher is congruent with that described by Rose:

The result is that much of what I have learned from men can be stated verbally with a sense of confidence about verifiability. In contrast, much of what women have taught me I have had to translate from actions, events, and experience into words (1992, 28).
In addition, the women told me that I was acceptable because I was a 'woman' not a girl. Their definition of a woman was that I was adult, married, and had a child. This status as a 'woman' gave me a form of entree into their female structures of power.

**Conclusion**

Missionaries, with the best of intentions, and with minimal government assistance, attempted to enable the Forrest River people to become independent and self-reliant in a non-traditional environment. However they operated from a model of colonisation and evangelisation which largely disregarded the people's culture. Seeking to civilise and Christianise from an ethno-centric European perspective, they set out to achieve this objective by educating and drilling the Aboriginal people to abandon their own culture and to adopt the practices and beliefs of the dominant society. Their work was, nevertheless, not all negative. Jack Davis, for instance, believed that 'there is very little doubt that, if it had not been for the early missionaries, the genocidal programs inflicted upon Aborigines would have succeeded' (Davis 1979, 58).

However, by the time the Forrest River missionaries abandoned their chosen task, three generations of children had grown up under their control, ill prepared to stand alone in European society. Transferred to Wyndham to be subjected to the full impact of the government's assimilation policy, located in some of the most degrading living conditions in Australia, the Oombulgurri community suffered massive social collapse. Despite this, as I have tried to show, many of the women still found within themselves the strength to create a social action movement which ultimately assisted in the rehabilitation of their community.

Such social action within a community by community members themselves, has recently been re-advocated by a Health Department of Western Australia doctor as an alternative to imposed external programs for the benefit of Aboriginal people. Commenting on the 'substandard
hygiene ... evident in most Aboriginal communities within the Halls Creek Shire', he writes:

The Government fell into the trap of thinking an immediate solution could be produced by legislation and funding. No consideration was given to the problems of cultural change ... Until Aborigines see for themselves their own plight and want to improve their own health, until they are prepared to allot priorities and alter their own lifestyle to achieve these goals, no change can be expected ... Far too great an emphasis has been placed on pharmaceutical intervention to remedy disease. This in my view should be replaced by the concept of positive public health — preventative measures and self-determination — so that Aboriginal people themselves can improve their own environmental conditions (Saddler 1992, 556).

The APM women, working twenty years ago with limited resources and from a baseline of hopelessness, provide an example of just the kind of self-help programs recently advocated by Dr Saddler. They had, within a couple of years, transformed their material conditions and created a safety net for their children which they then extended to the adult members of their community. Their programs were initiated and sustained with minimal support and even less government acknowledgment or assistance.

Support offered within a community development framework, which advocated as its basic tenet that oppressed people can find within themselves the solutions to their own problems, stimulated the release of energy and vision for a different future. In the provision of support an essential element was the same-gender characteristic of the support person.

These two and a half years of work are an exception to the common experience of Aboriginal women, that 'women's solidarity and autonomy are being eroded and devalued' (Bell 1983, 249). They demonstrate that Aboriginal women with a strong cultural base have a powerful tool for the social reconstruction of their communities. They provide evidence that these women's connection to their children is such a strong motivator it energises them to perform at a level beyond reasonable expectation. They show that a gender-separated society requires gender-separated relationships with the outside society, if the relationships are to be used
constructively for the social benefit of their community. And they suggest that women can find a sense of direction despite near total destruction of their lifelines if they are supported in their decision-making and social action processes.

Merlan, in her review of gender in Aboriginal social life, concludes that 'so much of the literature on gender has been about the nature of traditional sociocultural systems rather than about the current situation, and the specific nature of continuity and change' (1988, 63). The APM story contributes to the literature on social change. It demonstrates that despite years of oppression, traditionally-oriented Aboriginal women remained the key to their families' health and well-being. Extrapolating from this account, it is possible to suggest that, with support through culturally appropriate networks, such women are able to appropriate contemporary structures for their own empowerment. In turn, this empowerment is used to ameliorate the material and social conditions of their families, thus creating an alternative to institutionalised welfare and an affirmation of self-sufficiency.

Postscript

Since becoming established and more recently ATSIC-funded, Oombulgurri has experienced cycles both of despair and optimism. Management crises have caused turmoil culminating in external intervention in 1992 from which the community is now recovering. Alcohol abuse has been a significant factor in the cycles of despair. Oombulgurri's current population of between 300 and 450 comprises permanent residents at the settlement, the 'floating' populations of eight outstations, and visitors from Wyndham. The women have recently formed their own organisation, the Yumbubala Women's Resource Centre, to continue their cooperative work in looking after the community's children. Despite continuing tensions produced by last year's problems, their mood is positive.
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