

Monash University – 25 November 2015 – Dr Ken Lay

Acknowledgement of Country

Thank you to those who made today possible.

I'm not going to open today with the statistics.

I'm not being dismissive.

As a former police officer, I dealt with numbers.

Data.

I believed our policies needed to be guided by evidence – not suspicion, prejudice or habit.

But there are personal stories behind those statistics – and attitudes and cultural complacency.

That's what this research tells us.

In the decades I spent at Victoria Police, I encountered stories of obscene cruelty.

Stories of abuse ... violence... and neglect.

Stories I'll never forget.

But when I was presented this research, I was surprised at how much it affected me emotionally.

In this study, the surveyed children and young adults already possess some dispiriting ideas about themselves and about gender.

I heard with sadness about 10-year-old girls already diminishing the abuse they received from boys.

Girls saying about boys harassing them, things like: "It's not that bad, it's not like he punched her" and boys saying of each other's harassment of girls that they just want to be heard – that it's harmless.

And for all the stories I've heard in my many years at Victoria Police, this important evidence of the origins of gendered violence ... and our complacency to it ...brought me to tears.

I felt embarrassed.

It got me thinking – the State isn't enough.

When I was chief commissioner of Victoria Police, I led an organisation of around 17,000 people – the vast majority sworn officers.

An organisation of men and women of enormous powers, talents and responsibility.

A police force is one of the most powerful and obvious manifestations of state power.

I led forensic teams and detectives; the Special Operations Group and water police and hundreds and hundreds of men and women patrolling our streets and our communities.

Victoria Police patrols the streets, the skies, the waterways. I had men and women trained in counter-terrorism, negotiating hostage sieges and intelligently interviewing killers.

In other words, men and women of great training who had each been empowered by the State.

But here's what I thought when I saw this research: for all of the training, the equipment, the power to investigate and arrest – none of this can touch the attitudes we impress on our children.

None of this can enter our homes, our minds, our families.

None of this can alter the way we think about ourselves, or our children.

The State's power – is mostly executed at the very end.

It's when the ideas and values adopted as children have grown destructively.

The police operate at one end of the spectrum – this research speaks to us about the start.

And at the start of that spectrum – this research tells us – are some rotten and deeply entrenched ideas about gender.

I'll explain some of them soon – but I want to suggest to you today that it is not the State's role to modify or refine our shared values.

That's a job for all of us.

And we've done it before.

Take child abuse. It offers a powerful example.

We forget child protection legislation is a relatively new development.

For centuries, children were considered property. Exploited for sex, for labour, for the rough depositing of our own values.

Historically, we had a casual contempt for children.

Casual in that the contempt was buried deeply, practiced often, but rarely thought about.

Attitudes can be very difficult to change because after a while they become invisible ... they're as natural as breathing.

The royal commission into institutionalised child abuse has exposed decades of squalid and systematic abuse of children.

Elsewhere, high-profile convictions of pedophiles show that recent decades were filled with men who winked happily about their preferences for schoolgirls.

Their behaviour wasn't seen as criminal, but harmlessly roguish.

Just another example of *boys being boys*.

Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris were singularly manipulative men, but they were also helped by a complacent culture.

In 2015, our culture is possessed of similarly destructive attitudes.

This research says as much.

Attitudes that are so embedded that we don't challenge them. We *can't* challenge them, because we can't often see them.

This research confirms what I've long suspected – that the abuse of women is encouraged from a very early age.

The research confirms that adults are harmfully shaping children's destinies because of unchallenged and unfair assumptions about gender.

What this research emphasises – and its findings are repeated in countless other studies – is that we develop male privilege early.

Knowingly or not, we give boys licence to act abusively ... and we develop in our girls deference to that behaviour.

Boys will be boys ... and it's up to our girls to adjust accordingly.

But this confuses cultural values with biological ones – this isn't nature, but nurture.

I'll explain.

The research reveals stark patterns in our parenting and mentoring of children.

This isn't theory. This is the voice of those surveyed.

It's our voice.

We make excuses for boys, and subtly encourage girls to do the same.

We are automatically sympathetic to boys' behaviour and more suspicious of our girls'.

We dismiss boys' sexual aggression as a function of their masculinity.

We minimise the behaviour.

We rationalise it.

Boys will be boys.

But it's different for girls.

Boys are taught to blame circumstance for their aggression – girls to contemplate how they might have provoked it.

Boys learn by acting out – girls by simply enduring their experiences.

Boys are told it's appropriate to defend yourself against a girl – but there isn't a reciprocal lesson.

This leads to boys externalising their behaviour – when things go bad, it's because of other people or other things.

But we encourage girls to *internalise* their experiences – to imagine that the fault lay inside them.

This research reveals mothers asking their boys: “What did the girl do?” because they hope that it isn’t their son’s fault.

Can we see what we’re doing here? The deck is stacked against women.

We’re encouraging our girls to feel complicit in their own abuse.

We’re asking them to blame themselves.

This internalisation, once started in childhood, can become lifelong.

The vulnerability of children includes their deep suggestibility.

During early development, children are like blotting paper – and dubious lessons can become permanent.

But not only do we encourage girls to blame themselves – we’ll blame them too.

Only a few weeks ago, Detective Snr. Sgt. Jason Walsh from Victoria Police went on local radio to discuss an alleged case of rape.

The alleged crime is brutal and grievous.

The radio host then read out a few texts messages from listeners, messages that asked what a young girl was doing in a park at 4 a.m.

I thought these questions were callous and misguided, and evidently Detective Walsh did too.

This was his response: “I find it amazing, without getting into politics, that we question girls and we question their behaviour when we don't even ask, 'what's four blokes out doing, allegedly sexually assaulting a young girl?’

Walsh went on: “You know, that's my take on that sort of question and I've been in this sexual assault field for many years, and I find it amazing that people straight away question females for their actions, and they're not questioning the males. I mean, what are four males doing allegedly gang raping a young girl? That's the question I'd ask.

That's the question we should all ask.

I'd find those questions amazing too, if I wasn't so aware of what we teach our children.

If I wasn't so aware of how casually we accept male bravado and entitlement, and how easily we teach our girls to simply avoid it.

What are we doing when we hear of an alleged gang rape and think only of why the victim was out?

What are we doing when *that's* our first question?

What is that?

Let's pause on this – because I need your help.

Together, we need to talk about this.

We need to talk about what unseen expectations we have for our children because of their gender.

Because I think we ask women to define themselves relative to men.

And if we dismiss behavior as being simply *boys being boys* we aren't holding them personally accountable – we aren't addressing the pre-conditions of sexism and abuse.

I'm grateful Victoria Police has such dedicated and thoughtful officers like Jason Walsh. And I'm grateful for his comments – they're important and they're wise.

Politicians ... business leaders ... all of us should take note of Jason Walsh's words.

But the text messages he was responding to are just the tip of the iceberg.

Those messages are proof of an expansive system of thought we are casually giving to our children.

If this upsets you – *fine*.

If it offends you, I've started something.

Your job – *our* job – is to move beyond that defensiveness.

Your job is to view your discomfort as a beginning, not an end.

If you need help, let me give you a hard example of our double-standards.

It comes from a story I heard from a detective.

Years ago, a young woman came into a police station in the early morning.

She was seriously distressed.

She told officers that she had just been sexually assaulted in a laneway.

She had come straight to the station from the site of the attack.

She said she had been surprised from behind, when her assailant gripped her and placed a strip of electrical tape over her mouth.

Horrific – but her claims were met with suspicion.

Some officers weren't as responsive as they should have been.

But there was one investigator – a thorough and credulous man. He took the victim into a room, consoled her and took a statement.

And then later that day he went to the scene when others thought it was nothing more than exaggeration.

He paced the laneway, turning clumps of leaves over with his shoe.

And then he saw it: a piece of electrical tape.

It was silver.

He crouched beside it and saw a print of lipstick of on it.

Here's something I've noticed.

Claims of sexual assault inspire a level of suspicion that isn't generated by claims of theft, fraud or street assaults.

Somehow — despite the awesome and verifiable prevalence — claims of sexual abuse are considered more dubious than reports of other crimes.

Our threshold for doubt is much lower for women.

It's as if we assume women have less credibility.

So I can tell you that false claims of sexual assault occur — but just as it occurs for theft, fraud and street assaults.

And I can tell you that the *vast* majority of sexual assault claims are legitimate.

So to those men who fixate on the bogus claims, I say that you are being intellectually dishonest.

You are emotionally cherry-picking data to make a case that women fundamentally lack credibility.

The data doesn't agree, and nor do I.

We possess double standards. We receive these claims with a cynicism that's rarely applied to other crimes.

This is a real and damaging outcome of our attitudes — and another is the common victim blaming that Detective Walsh recognised.

What Detective Walsh was talking about is evident in the countless women I've spoken with, or whose stories have been passed to me by colleagues.

Women who felt an intense, silencing guilt about their own abuse or alienation.

So we need leadership, but before that leadership can happen we require some self-reflection.

Self-reflection is something that this research suggests is both vital and in short supply.

It's vital in that it helps refine our collective values ... but it's in deficit because humans are naturally resistant to criticism.

So let this speech be a firm jolt to your assumptions and complacency.

It's not enough to consider yourselves good men because you don't bash women.

This sets the bar so low, that we congratulate ourselves for not being monsters.

That's not useful.

I'm asking you to think about *yourselves*, about your assumptions, about what lessons you are unwittingly passing to your children. We need to set the bar much higher than we are.

In public life, I've noticed a sort of blokey pomposity – a desire to be *seen* as a community elder, but little desire to properly function as one.

The result is a thousand empty gestures, each removed from self-reflection and real influence.

Leaders must acknowledge their own role in these attitudes before they offer themselves as role models.

Your public status is not enough.

Ask yourself: are you flattering your ego, or engaging in humble self-reflection?

Because we need self-reflection before we need insincere mutterings about the next dead woman or child.

Self-reflection is not vague or indulgent.

It's courageous and necessary – and it's something that can be achieved by talking to the women in your life.

What do they experience?

Self-reflection is key to how we speak to our children – how we mentor our young adults.

Our youth are bright and attentive – and they are watchful for inconsistency.

They have advanced radars for hypocrisy.

One of the boys interviewed for this research said: “It has to be consistent... if I hear one thing, but everyone else is doing something else, it means nothing.”

Lectures aren't enough.

Our public statements must match our private behaviour.

If we believe that the destinies of our girls are as bright as our boys, we need to meet that desire with this something other than vague commitments on one day a year.

It needs to be matched with our lessons, both spoken and lived.

How often do we tell our daughters what to wear – and how often do we tell our sons what respectful sexual relations are?

How often do we warn our daughters about provocation – and how often do we talk to our boys about consent?

How often do we justify the cruelty of boys – and how often do we ask women to simply avoid it?

How often do we thoughtlessly accept that *boys will be boys* and teach our daughters to just deal with it?

The answer is: every day.

We do this as easily as breathing.

We don't even know we're doing it.

To me, it's the same as the long, dark decades where we tolerated – or subtly encouraged – child abuse.

We failed to protect them. *Collectively*.

And that word – “collectively” – will make some of you uncomfortable.

“I didn't abuse children,” you might think, and you'll put a full stop on your reflection.

But visit the thousands of pages of royal commission transcripts.

Look at the transcript of the Rolf Harris trial.

Read the testimony of Jimmy Savile's colleagues.

You'll see that it isn't just vile, manipulative men that can be singled out and condemned.

They were supported by indulgent and unaccountable cultures.

They were supported by a society that encourages its female victims to blame themselves and stay quiet in shame.

They were supported by our complacency, by our lack of courage to examine our lifelong attitudes.

When a girl can be allegedly gang raped and our *first* question is: “Why was she in a park at 4 a.m.?” Well... I ask you if our anger is frustration is placed where it should be?

When we ask that question, we put the victim on the hook.

But ... sadly she's already there.

My question is not about what she is doing ... but...

What are *we* doing?

Thank you.