

## HER PLACE WOMEN'S MUSEUM

EDUCATION/SECONDARY/PAOLA BALLA

# Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (1997)

Autobiographical accounts by Indigenous Australians who were removed from their families as children.

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### **Institutional conditions**

The living conditions in children's institutions were often very harsh.

**There was no food, nothing. We was all huddled up in a room... like a little puppy-dog... on the floor... Sometimes at night time we'd cry with hunger, no food... We had to scrounge in the town dump, eating old bread, smashing tomato sauce bottles, licking them. Half the time the food we got was from the rubbish dump.**

*Confidential evidence 549, Northern Territory: man removed to Kahlin Compound at 3 years in the 1930s; subsequently placed at The Bungalow.*

**I've seen girls naked, strapped to chairs and whipped. We've all been through the locking up period, locked**

**in dark rooms. I had a problem of fainting when I was growing up and I got belted every time I fainted and this is belted, not just on the hands or nothing. I've seen my sister dragged by the hair into these block rooms and belted because she's trying to protect me... How could this be for my own good? Please tell me.**

*Confidential evidence 8, New South Wales: woman removed to Cootamundra Girls' Home in the 1940s.*

### **Sexual abuse**

Children in every placement were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation. It should be noted that witnesses were not asked whether they had this experience and that there are many reasons, personal and procedural, for deciding against volunteering the information.

**When I was at Castledare I was badly interfered with by one of those brothers. I still know the room [in the church]. I was taken, selectively taken, and I was interfered by one of those brothers. And if you didn't respond in a way, then you were hit, you were hit. I never told anyone that.**

*Confidential evidence 679, Western Australia: man removed at birth in the 1940s.*

I led a very lost, confused, sad, empty childhood, as my foster father molested me. He would masturbate in front of me, touch my private parts, and get me to touch his. I remember once having a bath with my clothes on cause I was too scared to take them off. I was scared of the dark cause my foster father would often come at night. I was scared to go to the outside toilet as he would often stop me on the way back from the toilet. So I would often wet the bed cause I didn't want to get out of bed. I was scared to tell anyone cause I once attempted to tell the local Priest at the Catholic Church and he told me to say ten Hail Mary's for telling lies. So I thought this was how 'normal' non-Aboriginal families were. I was taken to various doctors diagnosed me as 'uncontrollable' or 'lacking in intelligence'.

*Confidential submission 788, New South Wales: woman removed at 3 years in 1946; experienced two foster placements and a number of institutional placements.*

One in ten girls allege they were sexually abused in a work placement organised by the Protection Board or institution. Other exploitation was known and condemned, but not prevented. By 1940

the NSW Board's record with respect to Aboriginal girls placed in the service was well known and even condemned in Parliament.

### **Education**

Witnesses to the Inquiry removed to missions and institutions told of receiving little or no education, and certainly little of any value.

**I finished school in fifth grade. I think I was 17. I did alright at school but they wouldn't allow us to go on. I would have liked to be a nurse or something but when I finished school they sent me to work as a domestic on stations.**

*Confidential submission 277, Queensland: woman removed at 7 years in 1934 to the dormitory on Palm Island.*

I was the best in the class, I came first in all the subjects. I was 15 when I got into 2ns year and I wanted to... continue in school, but I wasn't allowed to, because they didn't think I had the brains, so I was taken out of school and that's when I was sent out to farms just to do housework.

*Woman removed to Cootamundra, NSW, quoted by Hankins 1982 on page 4.2.5.*

### **Work and wages**

Although Aboriginal children were expected to take on responsibilities of work at a very young age, they were not trusted with their own wages. In NSW regulations provided that they were only entitled to retain a small proportion of their meagre earnings as pocket money.

Fraud on wards' accounts was common from the early days of the apprenticing system. In Queensland in 1904 an

official inquiry found that the Protectrice of Aboriginal girls in service had been defrauding their savings accounts. She was forced to resign and a system of thumbprints was introduced for endorsement of withdrawals in an effort to overcome the problem (Kidd, 1994 p.98)

**They send me when I was 16 from Parramatta Girls' Home out to M, a property 137 miles from Nyngan. We never had a holiday. We weren't allowed to go to town with them. If you did go anywhere and you saw any Aboriginal people, you weren't allowed to speak to them. So you had to live that isolated life. We never, ever got our wages or anything like that. It was banked for us. And when we were 21 we were supposed to get this money, you see. We never got any of that money ever. And that's what I wonder: where could that money have went? Or why didn't we get it?**

*Confidential evidence 11, Queensland: NSW woman removed to Cootamundra at 2 or 3 years in the 1940s, spending the ages 13-16 in Parramatta Girls' Home.*

**I was sent out when I was eleven years old to [pastoral station]. I worked there for seven and a half years. Never got paid anything all that time. [Even] Aboriginal people I was working with used to get 39 bob. Yet we didn't get nothing. I used to say, 'Where's my money?' 'Oh, they put it into the trust account.' So I worked there for them. Oh rough, hardly any food or anything, put out in remote area, on me own, drawing water and that, looking after cattle... no holiday, no pay. I never received one pay that seven and a half years I was there.**

Confidential evidence 549, Northern Territory: man removed to Kahlin Compound at 3 years in the 1920s: subsequently placed at Pine Creek and The Bungalow.



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