



## 'Disempowering': the cashless welfare card alienates those it sets out to help

Dr Hannah McGlade

August 9 is the International Day of the World's Indigenous People

This day acknowledges the struggles Indigenous people have faced worldwide to have their human rights respected.

So how did we mark this day in Western Australia?

By releasing a video highlighting Aboriginal violence and child sexual assault.

The video was commissioned by the Minderoo Foundation and the outgoing Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan, and it was aimed at supporting the use of income management and cashless debit cards in the Pilbara.

They say Aboriginal children's human rights are suffering and "we should listen to the children".

Applying income management on entire communities and towns is no answer to child sexual abuse.

I agree we should listen to the children. And the many Aboriginal leaders, women and elders

who have spoken about the system in recent months.

Aboriginal child sexual assault deserves much more than a paternalistic "add water and mix" solution imposed by powerful non-Aboriginal men over relatively powerless Aboriginal women and children.

The cashless welfare card cannot and does not address the wider social economic problems, including those

underlying and causing sexual abuse, facing Aboriginal communities and children today.

The cashless welfare card is a form of income management applied in predominantly Aboriginal towns and communities to restrict spending on alcohol, drugs and gambling and increase spending on food and necessities to promote the safety and wellbeing of families and children.

Some Aboriginal leaders support the cards being trialled in Kununurra and Ceduna, while others feel the practice is a return to days past where Aboriginal people were discriminated against, shamed and disempowered.



Photo: Michel O'Sullivan

Having worked over the past 30 years to improve women and children's safety and human rights, I have routinely witnessed a lack of awareness and commitment [by non-Aboriginal organisations] to women and children's human rights.

As an Aboriginal woman, human rights advocate and survivor of child sexual assault I know that there is much we could do to end sexual abuse of children.

Our responses need to be framed within human rights and, especially the right of children to be cared for and protected by their family and community.

In Roebourne, community leader Michael Woodley - who has previously taken on Andrew Forrest's attempt to negotiate a less than acceptable financial agreement in

relation to mining on his peoples' traditional lands – has asked why should the entire Aboriginal community of

Roebourne be punished and have their income managed because of the actions of the perpetrators of child abuse?

The community came forward and assisted with the police investigations and supported the prosecutions, and no Aboriginal women were charged with abusing children.

So why should these measures apply to any women and the community as a whole?

I have no problem restricting the income of child sex offenders shown misusing their income to abuse children, but any restrictions must be carefully considered and not imposed carte blanche by non-Aboriginal governments and policy makers on entire Aboriginal communities.

### **"Prevention is always better than cure."**

Child sexual abuse was formed from and within our history, including our quite recent history of colonisation that entailed the widespread removal of Aboriginal children and sexual abuse of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal men.

This has led to high levels of intergenerational trauma, psychological distress and offending and abuse against children today. Inequality and power differential is a key cause of child sexual abuse, and so we should address structural and systemic inequalities that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Aboriginal men and women, children and adults.

Aboriginal child poverty requires serious considered responses, not the blind eye. It is multi-faceted.

We need to talk about child sexual abuse and family violence and prevention is always better than cure.

It's time we got real about ending child sex abuse, and commit to develop responses in a way that respects, not undermines, Aboriginal families and children's human rights.

If Minderoo and the Police Commissioner are truly concerned about Aboriginal children's wellbeing as they claim to be, they need to look closely at the findings of the Gordon Inquiry into Aboriginal family violence and child abuse from well over a decade ago.

The Inquiry did not support "top down" approaches imposed by governments on Aboriginal people. The

police and Aboriginal people should collaborate and set up local action groups to stop offending against children.

To this day, these recommendations, which support Aboriginal self-determination, have not been implemented by the state.

The cashless welfare card campaign launched on International Day of the Worlds Indigenous Peoples arguably erodes Aboriginal human rights.

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