I wish to acknowledge the Traditional owners of the land on which we stand, I wish to also thank the organisers and sponsors of this Conference for making it possible for me to attend. I am honored and privileged to be here among my peers, the participants of this meeting and, pay respect to the women of this land for allowing me to speak.

I am here today as an indigenous woman from the Aboriginal people of Australia we are proud, strong and intelligent. We are people that managed a society with our own intellectuals, law makers, law holders, healers with their own bush medicines, singers and songwriters, dancers and artists, philosophers and historians who recorded our history, and legends of how we came to be. Our parents told us, our history survived because of our carving of stories and engravings on mountains, rocks, land and trees, and that the spirits of rivers and waters were in most cases sacred. We are hunters, providers and protectors of our families and family structures. We have a culture and a way of life.

But now our social systems of justice, health, education and training, are damaged. I come from one of the oldest living cultures, in the world. But it is a culture being weakened by another culture, with a different system has been placed over the top of our lives. What we now face is assimilation. The message is assimilate and survive. It is important for me to explain this because we are a “people”. We are a minority group with shared values, indigenous languages, belief system, and a common history, we believe we belong to the land we are different, we are happy to be different. We do not want assimilation. We feel we have the right to progress as a people with our identity.

Our identity is essential to our survival, how can we ask our children to respect us if we are not proud of who we are?

I believe we need to understand our history so even though we have been victimized we do not foster a victim’s mentality and that we move on with others. We do not wish to be in front, nor behind, but side by side equal in status not as the illiterate, the homeless or as “survivors.”

The threat of assimilation is at times a covert action, sometimes under the cloak of change for: language only speak English if you wish to fully access a service; change for a job answer a selection criteria that you strive to meet; live by yourself, don’t encourage your family to stay with you; don’t share you only have enough for yourself.

Why do I name this paper, What is Life for an Indigenous Woman, and present it from an Australian Indigenous Woman’s Perspective. I have stated “She is a Survivor she has survived for the last 200 years and more”. We have many powerful women in our regions all we need is more opportunity to speak, listened to and be included in the discussions and decision making processes.
This conference is not only about the negative impacts of mining but also to look at the positive sides of mining and share what is happening on the ground in the communities. This is fine we must also include the truth because there are two histories to tell. We must face and consider what has happened before in order to move forward.

Before we look at the impact of mining on the Indigenous women, we look at the history of Australia to understand the impact of the past, the occupation, and “colonisation” of the people, the consequence of history, and why we are recorded and regarded as the most disadvantaged group in Australia the “lucky country”.

Let’s share what happened. In 1788 The English landed on the east coast of Australia at Botany Bay. In 1829 they established a colony on our homelands, on the south west coast of Western Australia, during my great-great-grandfather’s and great-great-grandmother’s time. On “contact” our way of life on the land was destroyed, the most significant factor of our history is that our land was declared “Terra Nullius” I understand this meant literally there were no people living in Australia. This lie was perpetuated and enforced by legislation until 1992 when a High Court of Australia said “Terra Nullius” was wrong.

However 1992 was too late for some of us to claim rights to our land, it was already taken by laws introduced thus the beginning of our homelessness had already began, please understand for us our land is our home. Other laws were introduced they controlled the people by dictating: where they could live, eat, drink; whom they could marry; where they could work and most importantly who had the right to our children.

These laws which took away the rights of the Indigenous people began in West Australia in 1886, the next was the 1905 West Australian Act. The Act of 1905 was introduced four years after my mother was born. A Chief Protector was appointed as the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children. This Protector also managed their money, approved or denied marriages, and controlled freedom of movement from community to community. In 1936 another Act was introduced, two years before I was born in 1938. This Act was the West Australian Native Administration Amendment Act and gave even greater powers to government, this allowed more children to be taken away from their mothers and fathers, placed under the direct control of a Chief Protector. Mothers and fathers were not the legal guardians of their children. He was also able to control employment by having the power to issue work permits. These laws only targeted the indigenous people. There were other powers that came from these Acts. Because of this Act in particular my parents never stopped living in fear of their children being taken away from them, this fear was passed on to me and my children who were born between the late 1950’s and late 1960’s.

We were not citizens but we were allowed to apply for Citizenship under the Native Citizenship Act of 1944 some of the conditions for a successful application were; only English language was to be spoken; people were to have industrious habits; were encouraged to adopt manner and habits of “civilised” life. Those who were successful in their application were not to associate with those who were not classed as citizens. This
meant you could not associate with members of your family, if they did not qualify as citizens of Australia, in my words we became the first refugees of Australia, refugees in our own country.

In 1967 a national Referendum was called to ask the “citizens of Australia” if we should be allowed to vote and if we should also be allowed to become citizens of this country automatically. The answer was “Yes”.

Past injustices are being addressed as best they can however what happened in the past has a huge impact on today’s generations. The removal of the rights to our land, our children, our control over our lives, rights to work, and rights to be a recognised race of people. The subsequent assimilation and destruction of our family roles and the responsibility for the care of our families we feel are the ingredients of today’s troubles.

Against this background of legislation and issues today we have the introduction of policies of self-determination, self management and governance; Native Title Act for return of our land; the Stolen Generation Report which looked at the impact of the taking away of the children, and tabled the effect on the children and the parents; the creation of a Council for Reconciliation to recreate an environment for change between the indigenous people and others; the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody why so many indigenous people die in prison; and now to the most recent report carried out in Western Australia the Gordon Inquiry which looked at child sexual abuse in Western Australia. This latest document described the abuse within the Aboriginal community child sexual abuse. We have survived our oppression and now face the internalised oppression and abuse of our own children.

We wait for recognition of those past traumas, and our Government to recognize it was they who first abused us by removing our rights. Subsequently, this has led to a vacuum of poverty, ill health, homelessness and illiteracy as well as underlying issues such as racism and uncontrolled violence.

Thus when mining was introduced there were already issues to be dealt with in the Aboriginal nation, mining and development against such disorder was disastrous. Mines were introduced on the land.
As an introduction to the history of mining in Australia I have chosen a novel written by author Jan Roberts and called Massacres to Mining: A Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia. 1981. She wrote a summary of mining since 1953.

This paper has provided a brief summation according to the novel. In 1953 Rum Jungle a uranium mine south of Darwin was established.
1957 on the Aboriginal reserve lands of North-Eastern Australia bauxite was mined in Weipa, Mapoon, and Aurukun all three Aboriginal Reserves. As well as taking mining rights the companies paid no compensation and also took timber, cattle and water rights.
1965 an adjacent bauxite mining lease was taken on more land on the Mapoon Aboriginal Reserve.
1965-1975 Iron ore mining began in the North-West of Australia the Pilbara region. Initially mining companies did employ local Aborigines by developing work programs. One company however employed a small number of local Aborigines later they disbanded the idea and said, “they had six or seven Aborigines working there, but none from the local community for they wouldn’t last five minutes.” He said they had no training program for Aborigines, that would be racist.”

In 1966 a one hundred year mining lease for manganese deposits was taken out on Groote Eylandt Reserve a major Aboriginal island reserve in the Northern Territory. Compensation was paid to Aborigines in mining royalties plus a small percentage paid into an Aboriginal Benefits Fund held by the Northern Territory.

Also during the 1960’s further mining was established on Aboriginal Reserves:

1967 a silica sand mine was established in North Queensland in Hopevale, on Aborigines land, no consultation with Aborigines and no royalties to the Aborigines.

1968 a bauxite mining lease was established on the largest Aboriginal Reserve Arnhemland of the Yirrakala people in northern Australia no fishing could be carried out within thirty miles of the refinery because of pollution.

1975 in the Aurakun Reserve, another company another mining lease on more land, no payment to the people but there was payment given to the Director of Aboriginal Advancement in Brisbane the capital city of Queensland. There was strong opposition to the mine from the Aurakun people.

1976 a diamond mining exploration rights was secured over one of the largest Aboriginal reserves in Western Australia in the Kimberley region.

1977 in the Northern Territory on the Mac Arthur River, a mining company prevented the return of ancestral land to Aborigines because of the large deposits of lead, zinc and silver, Aborigines were against mining because it would mean the re-routing of a river which had important sacred places along the river.

1978 The Federal government gave permission for three planned uranium mines on Aboriginal Reserve land to go ahead.
1979 near Lake Argyle in the Kimberley’s Region in Western Australian diamonds were mined on what was a very sacred site.

During the 1980’s the Federal government intervened on mining companies behalf when Aborigines protested against trespassing on their land in places like Oenpelli because of uranium mining, in Portland in Victoria and Western Australian police escorted a drilling rig over Nookanbah land in the Kimberleys region Western Australia.

From what, the author Jan Roberts has described; no consultation with the landholders; racist attitudes; no compensation or very little; pollution of rivers; desecration of sacred sites and so on.
Since those days things have changed in some towns mining companies are sitting down with Aborigines to set up projects of training and employment. But is it too little too late, and are they setting up strategies to ensure women are included in meetings. Are there enough of their own women employed to increase appropriate liaison with Aboriginal women.

Today we have even more mines in Western Australia, we are a resource rich State. The Mineral and Petroleum Digest published by the Department of Industry and Resource, The Western Australian Government PERTH.W.A. 2000 – 2002 published the following information, it reported, exploration and expenditure experienced a downturn in recent years, but exploration continues. The following is a brief description.

Exploration in Western Australia accounts for 59% of Australia ‘s exploration market and 10% of the world’s exploration. Western Australia ‘off shore’ exploration totalled 28 new field “wild cats” drilled also a total of 9 “on shore” wild cats drilled; Western Australia also has a heavy Mineral Sands production mainly concentrated in the South West of Western Australia.

In Western Australia iron ore accounted for 17% of the world’s production market and 97% of Australia’s national production.

LNG or Liquified Natural Gas is West Australia’s second most valuable product. LNG sales are increasing, and in 2001-2002 99% of Western Australia’s gas was exported.

Crude Oil was produced in W.A this production represented 50% of Australia ‘s national total and this is expected to increase.

Alumina, Australia is the largest producer in the world, four refineries are located in Western Australia.

Gold from Western Australia represents 67% of Australia’s production.

Nickel in Western Australia has eleven nickel project sites, these account for all of Australia’s national production. Nationally Australia produces 18% of the world’s nickel.

Mineral Sands the heavy mineral sands industry in Western Australia is mainly concentrated in the south west of the State. Mineral sands contains other minerals such as ilmenite, rutile, leucoxene, tantalum, and synthetic rutile. Plus others such as zircon, garnet, staurolite and monazite.
Diamonds, Western Australia is a prominent producer on a global scale. Argyle Diamonds in the Kimberley account for approximately 22% of the world’s total production.

Metals such as zinc, copper, coal, salt, cobalt manganese and tantalum are produced. Tantalum represents the sixth largest mineral commodity in Western Australia and produces almost 50% of the world market.

You may wonder why I have methodically listed the mining products of the State Western Australia, it is because I live there it is my home my children also live there we will probably stay there all our lives. Mining and development is an intrusion on our lives. When we observe what is happening to our rivers, wetlands and land. When we travel, we are overtaken by the heavy semi-trailers who are supposed to share the roads with. We are made aware of the large notices saying “prohibited area” do not enter. Our air is polluted by the smoke stacks in our beautiful forests. Mining is a disruption to our daily lives. Our seas hold huge ships as we see the land, the earth being taken away overseas we wonder what is happening to the world, to the little animals such as the spiders, the frogs, the insects, the birds and their nests. Our question is can the land sustain this “development”? Can our water system of lakes and pools survive?

According to Western Australia’s Mineral and Petroleum Statistics Digest, a decision by a High Court on a Native Title claim between the Miriuwung and Gajerrong people. It was found the people had significant rights over a large area of land in the Kimberley’s but, they did not have any rights over minerals or petroleum under the ground. The court also found that the grant of a mining title did not fully extinguish native title but it did extinguish the right for the people to be asked permission or to have access in relation to the whole area of the lease.

What does this mean to the people? Does it mean Traditional owners cannot negotiate with the companies in their own right for royalties that it is the right of the Government. YES the Government believes they have the right and the land belongs to them.

We have a policy of self determination this means we are now to use our status as equal citizens of Australia to determine our own future, this is fine but we still do not have the right to our own land. Why? Where is our power? Where is our land based economy?

Why are conditions for the indigenous still distressing, poor or worse than ever before. The Social Justice Report of 2002 Measuring Indigenous Disadvantage, supplies some answers, the report stated, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in contemporary Australian society. The disadvantage represents a failure to provide in full measure the human rights which Australian Indigenous people are entitled. Colonisation, and the consequent dispossession, disruption and dislocation have impacted heavily on Indigenous individuals and communities.
The extent of Indigenous disadvantage in Australia in statistics showing significant health problems, unemployment, low attainment in the formal education sector, unsatisfactory housing and infrastructure and arrest, incarceration and deaths in custody. Indigenous despair and distress is exemplified by serious domestic violence, suicide and generally signs of social dysfunction which has not improved, but that it has in some respects worsened. There other reports which point to our inability to exercise our own rights successfully.”

The Report on The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found that: “The single significant contributing factor to incarceration is the disadvantaged and unequal position of Aboriginal people in Australia society in every way, whether socially, economically or culturally.

It linked the symptoms of Indigenous distress, such as high rates of incarceration to ‘Attempts to remedy the disadvantage of Indigenous Australians have been, partial, inadequate, and without clear objectives and targets.”

From this point we survey our families, what is happening to them, there is violence in our communities, an uncontrolled violence which officials cannot seem to solve, and it is up to us to solve this. We have faced an oppressive system and still survived now we face an even more oppressive issue, we have turned upon ourselves.

Of the many issues in the community the one that causes the most damage is the high rates of Aboriginal Family Violence and child sexual abuse.

So what do we do, Aboriginal people ourselves? How do we as an organisation tackle the issues that are destroying our people? We take one step at a time. We deliver programs that aim at sustaining and healing the Aboriginal family; we deal with abuse within families we fight assimilation by upholding our identity and promoting our culture. Yorgum has created, The Aboriginal Family Violence Program.

Yorgum Aboriginal Family Counseling Service is situated in the capital city of Perth. It is an Aboriginal non government organisation, we have a governing committee of Aboriginal people, eight staff and one volunteer. The service covers the metropolitan area, other regions such as the South West of Western Australia, sometimes to other parts of the State our target population represents approximately 25% of indigenous population of the State.

Yorgum has three sections a small administration section, two field community development workers, who deliver workshops on raising awareness of Aboriginal Family Violence. Plus a counseling service for children who have been sexually abused, this is an innovative program carried out by art therapy counselling and healing, we are funded by the government.

Recently we have secured funding for a community development worker from Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, this is one of the few organisations who not only look at other countries they also look in their own backyard. Similar to other small NGO’s we are
cramped, under resourced but we are dedicated workers and we are there for the community.

Our Family Violence program is based on raising awareness of the rights of people, we work using processes that do not further dis-empower an already dis-empowered group of people. We recognise and make aware to the people the impact of “colonisation”. We raise awareness of the history of their families’ lives and try to take away the “guilt” of being who we are, we do not foster a ‘blame the victim’ sentiment, we feel if people have a true understanding of rights they will in turn recognize the rights of others. To deliver our program we use various overheads, Yorgum staff intellectually developed their own workshop themes on how to deal with violence within the community, the family and the individual. The program has had a great response.

We work using principles of community development and in an Aboriginal Way. This means:

We uphold the process of empowerment we listen, we wait, we depend on being invited, we acknowledge the skills of the people within the community, encourage participants to speak for themselves, ensure there is an exchange of skills, we work at the pace of the people. Local Elders are acknowledged, respected and invited to participate and share their words of wisdom.

The program is usually a two day course, an extra day to meet the people.

The sequence of modules are: A description of who we are as a society; our history; the impact and outcomes; the rights and needs of the people as a race, community and as individuals; identifying violence and its many forms; identify resources in the community; how do we look after ourselves as workers; and the development of individual work plans.

Recently a group of men and women requested we teach them how to deliver workshops because they wish to do workshops themselves. This request will be answered by an ongoing process.

We feel the program is successful because Aboriginal women affirmed a key component of our program they have said at many meetings around the towns and in the bush, “talk to the men let them deal with the violence and end it”. Now we see the men in our region taking the lead in dealing with the violence.

Our program for Aboriginal family counseling is also successful. We have four counselors who work in an Aboriginal way using art therapy to promote healing in the children who come through our doors. This program is also successful.

Other communities have expressed a desire to develop a program such as ours we would like to do this but only in a way that will allow the people in the community to take charge themselves. Yorgum organisation was developed over ten years by a small group
of indigenous people who wished to heal themselves. Today they are helping to heal themselves and others.

In conclusion The Australian Indigenous Women’s message to both mining companies and governments is: changes must take place, the women are saying let us decide what programs should be financed. Acknowledge our ability to make our own decisions within our own discrete areas. Make it possible for us to meet under our own terms to discuss our own issues and to develop our own programs. We need to look at our families and how we keep our children safe, healthy, to grow them up in a loving environment, to foster their own ambition and aspirations. Support us, the women, to keep and retain our “power” our strength.

Author of this paper also states that if the disadvantage faced by the indigenous people of Australia was addressed “properly”, perhaps when mining companies do sit down with the people there would be greater improvement. But – there needs to be more mining officials prepared to do what others are already doing. And - whoever does sit down must leave enough space for the women, to fully participate in any decision making to be done.

More specifically women have said they wish to meet regularly within their own regions to address their own agenda and to prioritise their own issues. Funding is needed to allow this to happen because family issues in their communities need to be addressed. Lastly, they wish to speak for themselves.

Australia is now facing the consequence of their actions, by destruction of our laws, culture and land, the destruction of our families and the roles of our mothers, fathers, grandparents. We ask the Government and the mining companies to recognise the full potential of the women as well as the men when decisions must be made, to negotiate within the local and regional areas of this country. Women are ready and fully capable of determining their own future.

“LET US PRAY THE ENVIRONMENT CAN STAND THE DEVELOPMENT”

Source:
