

Our health, our way



Healing circles are helping Aboriginal men, women and children create new opportunities, improve their health and deal with past trauma, as Communications Editor Marian Reid discovered during a recent visit to Western Australia.

"The word is healing ... we need to heal within ourselves."

From the steps of a little community hall Joyce Dimer looks out over the railway track and creek towards the town centre. "Change is when women are taking a stand, and saying, 'we've got something to do. How about you blokes or you young fellas start to think about what you're doing'."

It's Wednesday in the small West Australian town of Narrogin — women's group day. About 15 Nyoongar women and their children are gathered in and around the hall. They come and go, endless cups of tea are made and outside in the sun a pocket of young women talk closely with an Aboriginal social worker. In the kitchen, group members and health workers prepare lunch for everyone.

LEFT: Bunbury, Western Australia: Tiara Thorn and Bianca Garlett are part of a girls' group which aims to strengthen self-esteem and leadership skills. Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS.

RIGHT: Bunbury, Western Australia: Shaun Maher creates a painting about the Stolen Generation at the Bunbury Goomberup Men's Group, which has been running for just a few months. "I love it. I like this here, doing some painting. I'm getting good now." Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS.

Amid the chatter, laughter and excitement is a single purpose — a group of strong Aboriginal women coming together to share, learn, heal and talk about issues that impact them every day.

Two hours away in the tiny coal town of Collie is another women's group. They proudly call themselves the Collie Yorga's, which means strong women.

Diane Barron lived in Collie until a tragic accident in her family changed everything. She moved to Perth, but after several years she came home. And it's the Collie Yorga's that finally helped her find her feet again.

"When I was in Perth I felt very lonely," she remembers. "There wasn't anywhere that I could go. Now, since I've joined this group ... I feel happy. They say it's a healing group, well, it really helped me."

Shirley Hayward has been with the Yorga's since it started more than a year ago. Over 50 years she has seen Collie change from a racist community to a far more accepting place to live. But she believes the healing group bridges more of those racial gaps and helps to heal relationships within the Nyoongar community.

"We share yarns and good times together, and it's a happy, happy group we've got here," Shirley says. "All the ladies are trying to work towards a better understanding ... there's been great achievement in the town among the younger and older ones. The impact from this group is very positive for people, especially for families."

Often health workers from other local organisations come to speak to the group about issues like domestic violence, drugs and alcohol or mental health.

"Everything, everything's changed," group participant Joy Ugle says. "We've never done this in the past. This here is really cool."

She's just finished some beautiful beadwork and shows them off to the group. It's her first attempt. "I might just end up doing these beads permanently, selling them. I can't believe what I just made girl. Unbelievable!"

Joyce Dimer is a Nyoongar social worker with the South West Aboriginal Medical Service (SWAMS), and she profoundly believes healing circles are the best way for Aboriginal people to change their lives.



AT A GLANCE

- » SWAMS provides outreach to individuals of all ages and families across the South West Region of Western Australia, including Bunbury, Collie and Narrogin.
- » They are a Nyoongar Community Controlled Health Organisation, founded on the principles of self-determination, empowerment and freedom of choice.
- » Their mission is to provide healthcare services to Nyoongar people in Nyoongar ways so that their health problems are properly overcome, now and in the future.

"I work as part of a caring team ... with women, men and youth. Here it's a healing space to get the community to stand up and take a strong stance against family violence and child abuse.

"People are doing nothing ... and it brings out drug and alcohol issues, domestic violence and feuding. But since I've set up the groups people are taking a leadership role. They're standing up and doing things for themselves.

"The groups are their space. Some people tell me it's the best thing that ever happened to them."

Back in Bunbury a vibrant girls' group gathers after school. The girls are learning to model locally-made dresses and create their own fabric designs. But, like the women's group, this is just a way in to start bigger conversations.

"The girl's youth group is about self-esteem and it's about them recognising that they're important, that they're our next leaders," Joyce says. "We started off with nothing ... the kids were at risk. They felt they had no hope for their futures."

Imogen was one of the first three girls to join the group. "It's part of what we do, me and my sisters. We come here every Monday and we talk together about stopping violence and everything." One year later and there are 10 to 15 girls who regularly drop in.

"There has been a significant shift in how these young people conduct themselves in the community ... they now have a sense of expectation of a more positive future," Joyce says.

Healing circles are integral to improving the health of Aboriginal people in a culturally-appropriate environment. The bigger picture of healing is better health.

"Healing circles have given people an opportunity to talk about how they feel," SWAMS Chief Executive Officer Glenda Humes explains. "It also gives [SWAMS] an opportunity to give good healthy messages about different things. Back-up is there if people need some clinical support like a doctor, health worker. If they are feeling down, we've got social and emotional wellbeing.

"SWAMS do a lot of work around trans-generational trauma. It's about the people who were taken to the missions or separated from their families."

Before SWAMS and healing groups there was no outlet for Nyoongar people to deal with this trauma. "It was going absolutely nowhere," Glenda says. "And healing circles are not just about the people that attend, there's a ripple effect. It reaches out to their families and their children as well."

Men are also becoming involved. "The men are starting to recognise that the women are doing something," Joyce says, "and there's a cry for help here at the moment to get more men's groups started.

Joyce has recently started a men's group in Bunbury — it's just been a few months but word is spreading and there are big plans.

"With depression men usually keep it within themselves, but here they are open to let it out," Joyce says. "We'll get our veggie garden up and running in line with our healthy cooking groups that we are planning ... so what they plant they can eat also.

"Our people were dying younger than non-Indigenous people. But if we can change a little bit of the lifestyle, like healthy eating, outdoor activities, health programs, but keep our culture, bush gardens, look after our rivers, then we'll be able to get up and look forward to a better way of life."

Collie, Western Australia: SWAMS Social and Emotional Wellbeing Worker Joyce Dimer talks with Joy Ugle as she tries her hand at beadwork at Collie Yorgas Women's Group. Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS.



**FIND OUT
MORE**

Read more about how SWAMS works with Aboriginal men, women and children in the Nyoongar community by visiting www.oxfam.org.au/australia



Dimbulla 2, Sri Lanka: Alagaiah Sundaradevi holds a basket of rice grown using the System of Rice Intensification method, learned through Oxfam partner JSSK. Oxfam helped Sundaradevi secure title to her land. Photo: Tom Greenwood/OxfamAUS.

GROWING HOPE AGAINST HUNGER



TO FEED THEIR FAMILIES, WOMEN FARMERS IN SRI LANKA FACE DEBT, FLOODS, DROUGHT, LACK OF LAND, HIGH FOOD PRICES AND DISCRIMINATION. COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR MARIAN REID MET SOME INSPIRING WOMEN WHO ARE MAKING POWERFUL CHANGES IN THEIR LIVES.

"It was my father-in-law who mortgaged the land," says single mother and farmer Alagaiah Sundaradevi. "I went to work for a daily wage. I didn't mind what I did ... so I used to go fishing and work on other people's land to help with the harvest. I used to cut bricks. I worked in the stone quarry. I would do anything for the money."

We are seated around a table outside the home of Sundaradevi's friend in the small village of Dimbulla 2 in eastern Sri Lanka. The air is thick and steamy — it's the beginning of the monsoon season.

AT A GLANCE

Women farmers are one of the most marginalised groups in Sri Lanka, having to contend not only with droughts, floods and high food prices, but also lack of equality regarding decision-making, access to land and other farming resources.

Oxfam is providing training in eco-friendly home-gardening and rice-growing, helping communities build irrigation schemes, and supporting women to start businesses, strengthen leadership skills and increase awareness of rights.

A community marketing network has been set up which enables farmers to sell their produce at a fair price to our community-based partners, who then sell the items at a reduced rate to families in other communities.

Sundaradevi is a small-scale rice farmer who understands how crippling debt can be.

"I have two kids who are going to school so I have to give them a meal in the morning," she says. "I also have an old mother at home who I look after. There were some days I didn't have anything because sometimes I couldn't find work."

Women farmers are some of the most vulnerable people in Sri Lanka. Many have lived through 30 years of civil war, and ongoing natural disasters like the 2004 tsunami and the devastating floods in January 2011. But they often face more subtle challenges when it comes to having enough food to eat and saving enough money to live a normal life — one of the main ones being having land title in their name.

"[Our land] was mortgaged for around five years. And it was through [Oxfam partner] JSSK that I was able to get the land back. They gave me the money to pay the mortgage," Sundaradevi explains.

"My father-in-law passed away two years ago and now I am the one who is making decisions. I was given [part] of the land when he passed away ... [That] land belongs to me ... I make all the decisions and consult with my group. It makes me feel very happy."

Across Sri Lanka, Oxfam is supporting community-based organisations who are working closely with women like Sundaradevi to access farmland and learn new cultivation techniques to make farming more viable and less prone to weather extremes. A common model is to work with a small group of about five women, providing training in agriculture,

starting small businesses, women's rights and land access, resulting in the women making powerful changes in their lives.

JSSK trained Sundaradevi and her group in the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) — an organic method of rice-growing that produces higher yields than the traditional method and is more resistant to flood and drought.

"Before SRI I got 10 bags, but after the introduction of SRI I got 30 bags," Sundaradevi says.

"I can get a good price in the market. I was promised that this season they could pay 100 rupees per kilo ... For non-SRI rice it is about 55-60 rupees per kilo.

"After adopting SRI I did not have any shortages of food."

Diversification of income is also important to ensure there is always something to fall back on if rice crops fail. Oxfam provides training, small loans, seeds and support to form savings groups so the women can develop alternative livelihoods such as raising chickens, growing vegetables to sell or starting small businesses.

After the 2011 floods wiped out her small vegetable garden, Nasara Beevi — who lives in Batticaloa with her husband and two children — received training and support from Oxfam partner SSDF to start a new home garden.

"Oxfam gave us seeds and saplings of different varieties of plants," Nasara says. "They told us how to use locally-available materials to ward off various diseases and





Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka: Chandrani, and her husband Premachandra, pick spinach in their home garden, developed with training and support from Oxfam. The couple can now live debt-free, thanks to their farming efforts. Photo: Tom Greenwood/OxfamAUS.

2,713 FAMILIES IN SRI LANKA ESTABLISHED HOME GARDENS IN 2011 WITH OXFAM'S SUPPORT.

pests. I grow okra, eggplants, spinach, green chillies and some green leaves.

"I get produce from my home garden for cooking and the rest, what is in excess, I sell ... This has increased my confidence because now we have money ... [Selling vegetables] relieves my difficulty.

"Before I started the home garden I was totally dependent on my husband's income ... his income was not enough. So we had to borrow money. After Oxfam's support we could live without borrowing money. We could manage our daily expenses."

To help ensure farmers have a market to sell their produce, Oxfam's community-based partners have formed a marketing network called the Community Coalition for Alternative Marketing Program (CCAMP). Each partner organisation who participates in CCAMP buys produce, such as rice, tea, spices, curry powder and dried fish, from local farmer members for a fair price, then sells them at a lower rate to members in other communities.

Currently, 238 producers and 3,058 consumers benefit from the program, which helps them avoid being exploited by middlemen.

Farmer Nelum Kumari Obadakumbura, of Anuradhapura — who grows SRI rice and other varieties not often found in local markets — says CCAMP provides a way for her to sell her rice.

"I sell to [CCAMP] because there are no other traders who will buy the local rice," Nelum says. "When we sell our rice through CCAMP we get more money and we get all the money at once."

Oxfam's work in Sri Lanka is about long-term change — beginning with the creation of community groups and discussion, which leads to the women seeking training in gardening and assistance with irrigation and marketing. They then train other women and men in these sustainable agricultural practices.

"Before women were very much marginalised. They did not make any contribution to production. They just used to cook whatever was given to them by their husbands," RGNK Central Committee President Manel Muthunayake says.

"Now it's different. They are coming forward and playing a significant role in the production aspect of the family. They can stand on their own feet. They have become empowered.

Chandrani has been working with Oxfam partner RGNK in Anuradhapura district for almost 10 years and in that time has helped implement a small-scale irrigation scheme, developed a home garden, learned how to make organic compost and fertiliser, formed an organic vegetable production co-operative with 21 fellow women and learnt about the importance of savings.

"Before we had a problem of accessing water; we could not cultivate paddy fields (rice) and vegetables," Chandrani says. "Now we have enough water so we can cultivate paddy, we can cultivate vegetables ... Now we have some permanent crops like coconut and bananas ... and that way I have been able to provide myself and my family with a very good nutritious meal.

"The most important thing I have received from Oxfam is new knowledge ... through the program I have my self confidence and I can do anything ... Oxfam has helped us to go forward; to develop our future. They have shown us a path, and it is up to us now."

**WHAT
CAN
I DO?**

**YOU CAN HELP FAMILIES IN SRI LANKA HAVE ENOUGH FOOD TO EAT
BY DONATING TO OUR STOP HUNGER APPEAL. CALL 1800 088 110
OR DONATE SECURELY ONLINE AT WWW.OXFAM.ORG.AU/STOPHUNGER**

