

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY FUNDRAISING DINNER
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
THE HUTCHINS SCHOOL AUDITORIUM SANDY BAY, TUESDAY 9 MARCH 2021

Good evening everyone. My husband Dick and I are very pleased to be with you at this dinner, hosted by the Year 12 cohorts of The Hutchins School, St Michael's Collegiate School and Fahan School, to mark International Women's Day and to raise funds for the Sexual Assault Support Service, a worthy cause and one I have had an association with for some 35 years.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land—the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

For 2021, the campaign theme for International Women's Day is 'Choose to Challenge'. I will come to that theme shortly, but given that this dinner is raising funds for the Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS), it would be fitting to acknowledge some of their very important work.

For 35 years SASS has provided a free and confidential support service for southern Tasmanian people of all ages who have been affected by any form of sexual violence.

Services which are provided include counselling, advocacy and support services for Southern Tasmanian survivors of sexual violence. SASS works with anyone else affected within this region, including family, friends and support people.

SASS also has a statewide 24-hour crisis response service will automatically direct callers to the nearest support service,¹ and provides Redress Scheme Support Services across Tasmania.

¹ <https://www.sass.org.au/our-services> accessed 4 Mar 21

SASS also has a primary prevention team which offers training programs and workshops about consent and respectful relationships including for children and young adults and it funds public awareness activities. This fits with the vision of SASS to work towards a community free from sexual assault.

I am delighted to learn that The Hutchins School has taken advantage of this and uses SASS to deliver workshops and discussions about consent and intimacy from Junior School and throughout every boy's education.

The work SASS does is vitally important work and I congratulate the year 12s for supporting SASS by holding this fundraising dinner. However, given that the theme of International Women's Day this year is Choose to Challenge, I want to challenge you to do more than supporting SASS.

In the last few weeks there have been disturbing revelations from a campaign exposing the prevalence of teenage sexual assault in elite private schools in Sydney launched by a former Kambala student, Chanel Contos, who is studying a masters degree in gender and education at University College London. (Kambala is an elite Anglican girls' school at Sydney's Rose Bay). The petition demands that more be taught about consent in schools and calling for testimonials from Sydney private school girls who had been raped by private schools boys. Chanel is currently

It is reported that the petition and campaign was inspired during a conversation Chanel Contos had with her friends about rape and consent. She discovered that one of her friends was a victim of assault by a man who had also assaulted Contos years ago when she was a schoolgirl and she reflected that if she had reported it then she could have prevented her friend being assaulted.

However, she said that *at the time* she had not recognised that she had been raped and the boy probably did not understand that he had raped her. This is because of differences between the 'legal' and the 'cultural' meaning of rape. The law embraces (and has done for some years now) a communicative model of consent – meaning that there is no consent to sexual intimacy unless consent is clearly communicated by words or actions. Passivity is not consent, there must be some positive communication of consent. However, this is not how rape is always understood. Too many people think that it is not really rape unless a girl or woman resists or struggles or says no and they do not understand that consent must be demonstrated by some positive action.

This cultural meaning of consent is evidenced by a 2017 study by *Our Watch* of attitudes of parents and children which found that almost 60% of 12-20 year-olds agree with the statement, 'If a guy wants to have sex with a girl, it is up to the girl to make it very clear that she doesn't want to.'²

Chanel Contos's petition has been opened up to the rest of Australia, and by Saturday 28,376 people had signed the petition and more than 4,000 testimonies added from all around Australia, sharing their experiences of rape, assault and harassment and naming the school and year of graduation of the victim and the perpetrator. When I looked at the website, 2,056 of these testimonies could be viewed.

To a Criminal Lawyer and Criminologist, the number of testimonies is not so surprising – victim surveys have long revealed a high figure of unreported sexual assault. The National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health published in 2019 reported that 28% of sexually active students (in Years 10, 11 and 12) reported unwanted sex at least once (almost half of the sample of more than 6000 students were sexually active).³

Publication of the graphic details of the testimonies has stimulated a conversation about teenage rape culture and the disrespect of women and girls that allows this culture to flourish. It has exposed a culture of entitlement, privilege and toxic masculinity, which as suggested by Professor Rasmussen from ANU, an expert in gender, sexuality and education, is particularly prevalent in all boys' schools where boys are commonly rewarded by their peers for being a 'stud'.⁴ For me what is confronting about all of this is the attitude of teenage boys to sexual conquest and their view of girls as another dash on their hook-up tally, rather than as a human being with whom you can have a real friendship.

² Saraya Musovic, 'Most young people believe stopping unwanted sex is 'up to the girl', new research shows, 6 December 2017, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/most-young-people-believe-stopping-unwanted-sex-is-up-to-the-girl-new-research-shows/> accessed 8 March 2021

³ Fisher, C. M., Waling, A., Kerr, L., Bellamy, R., Ezer, P., Mikolajczak, G., Brown, G., Carman, M. & Lucke, J. 2019. 6th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018, (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 113), Bundoora: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.

⁴ *Daily Mail* 26 February 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9298675/Former-student-Chanel-Contos-reveals-theory-Australias-sexual-assault-crisis-schools.html>

I applaud the call for better age-appropriate sex education. But we should not leave it only to schools. International Women's Day with its theme of 'Choose to Challenge' has a message for us all. We all need to call out and challenge behaviour and language which is disrespectful to women and girls.

I am calling on you all of you here, boys and girls to Choose to Challenge sexist and disrespectful behaviour.

Sexual double standards are evidenced by the fact that negative terms associated with a male's sexual reputation are far less common than terms for a female's sexual reputation. One count identified 220 words for a sexually promiscuous female and only 20 for a sexually promiscuous male.⁵ Interestingly all of the terms for females tend to be derogatory (for example, slut, scrubber, tart) whereas some of the male terms, like 'stallion', 'stud' and 'legend' are complimentary. In the case of women these terms serve to police and punish the sexual practices of females but there is little evidence that young men use negative terms to similarly police and punish the heterosexual practices of their male peers.⁶

Girls and boys need to call out and challenge slut shaming and victim blaming; to call out and challenge sexist jokes and talk of how many girls a boy 'got with'. And can I add, the 'send nudes' text, the norm for teenagers apparently, is an inappropriate way to communicate.

Choosing to challenge is something that takes courage – and you need to support those who do call it out. Not all disrespect leads to violence but all violence to women start with disrespect.

Almost six years ago now, I gave the Webber Lecture at Hutchins School – my topic was Toward Ethical Relationships: addressing sexual and family violence. I finished it with these words which are just as relevant today:

Tackling and dismantling traditional gender stereotypes and roles so that healthy, equal and respectful relationships – ethical relationships – between men and women can flourish is key to tackling the problem of violence against women. Relationship training and attitudinal change is part of this – but at the same time we need to address the structural conditions and social practices that support violence at multiple levels, the individual, institutional and societal.

⁵ Flood, n 11.

⁶ Flood, above n 11, 98.

I think it is unlikely to happen until we have a country where there are many more women CEOs than there are male CEOs named Peter; where a man is referred to in derogatory terms as a slut as often as a woman is; and when the husband of Governor not called Denis or handbag.

I appreciate that many young people may not really heed their respectful relationships education – may dismiss the testimonies published by Chanel Contos as the exaggerations of a bunch of hysterical girls. So, it's up to you to follow the example of Asher Learmonth, Head Prefect of Cranbrook Senior School, who condemned the toxic masculinity he has witnessed at his school in a powerful talk to his schoolmates – a talk published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which I commend you to read.⁷

And I urge you to Choose to Challenge!

Thank you.

⁷ Asher Learmonth, 'Our boys' treatment of girls has been disgusting: Cranbrook prefect pleads for respect' 25 February 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/education/our-boys-treatment-of-girls-has-been-disgusting-cranbrook-prefect-pleads-for-respect-20210225-p575us.html>