



Australian  
Human Rights  
Commission

2020



# Community Guide

## Wiyi Yani U Thangani

Women's Voices  
SECURING OUR RIGHTS  
SECURING OUR FUTURE



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#### **Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future—Community Guide**

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**Warning:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* community guide contains images, names and voices of people who may be deceased.

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# Commissioner's introduction to the community guide

As the first woman to be appointed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, I began my term wanting to champion the needs and aspirations of First Nations women and girls.

I want to promote the importance of strengths-based, community-driven approaches to addressing the inequalities experienced by First Nations peoples.

*Wiyi Yani U Thangani*, meaning Women's Voices in my Bunuba language, is a multi-year project which aims to elevate the voices of First Nations women and girls. It is the first engagement project of its kind since the *Women's Business Report* in 1986.

Throughout 2018, my team and I travelled to 50 locations in urban, regional and remote areas across every state and territory. We conducted 106 engagements and met with 2,294 women of all ages, including our senior elders, girls from 12 to 17 years of age, women in prison and our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Sistergirl and Brotherboy (LGBTQIA+SB) communities. We also received over 100 submissions and 300 survey responses.

I approached each engagement with no set agenda or imposed framework. A central aim was to look beyond cycles of crisis that have come to characterise First Nations lives, and to make the space for our women and girls to determine the conversation and define their lives in their own terms. I asked women and girls about their strengths, the challenges they face and their solutions.

The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* report holds the voices of our women and girls on every page.

Their stories taken together paint the big picture of history—of a remarkable cultural vibrancy spanning millennia that has been heavily impacted by colonisation and an ongoing growth in inequalities which has caused our women and girls to be one of the most vulnerable groups in contemporary Australian society.

Against this backdrop, the report tells of the extraordinary ability of our women and girls to survive and triumph despite persistent trauma and marginalisation.

This report and community guide reflects their fierce resilience and has been shaped by their unyielding determination and their belief that who they are, and what they know, will pave the way towards a better future.

This community guide sets out the major findings and cross-cutting themes that are explored in detail in the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* report. It also presents the 'Way Forward'—a comprehensive plan for structural reform. It includes principles, overarching recommendations, and pathways forward which correspond with the four thematic areas of the report.

In this community guide are voices full of hope and possibility. Listen to them. Read them. First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous people working together can use this guide as a tool to support our women and girls as agents of change and to advocate for the enabling conditions needed for all Australian society to thrive.

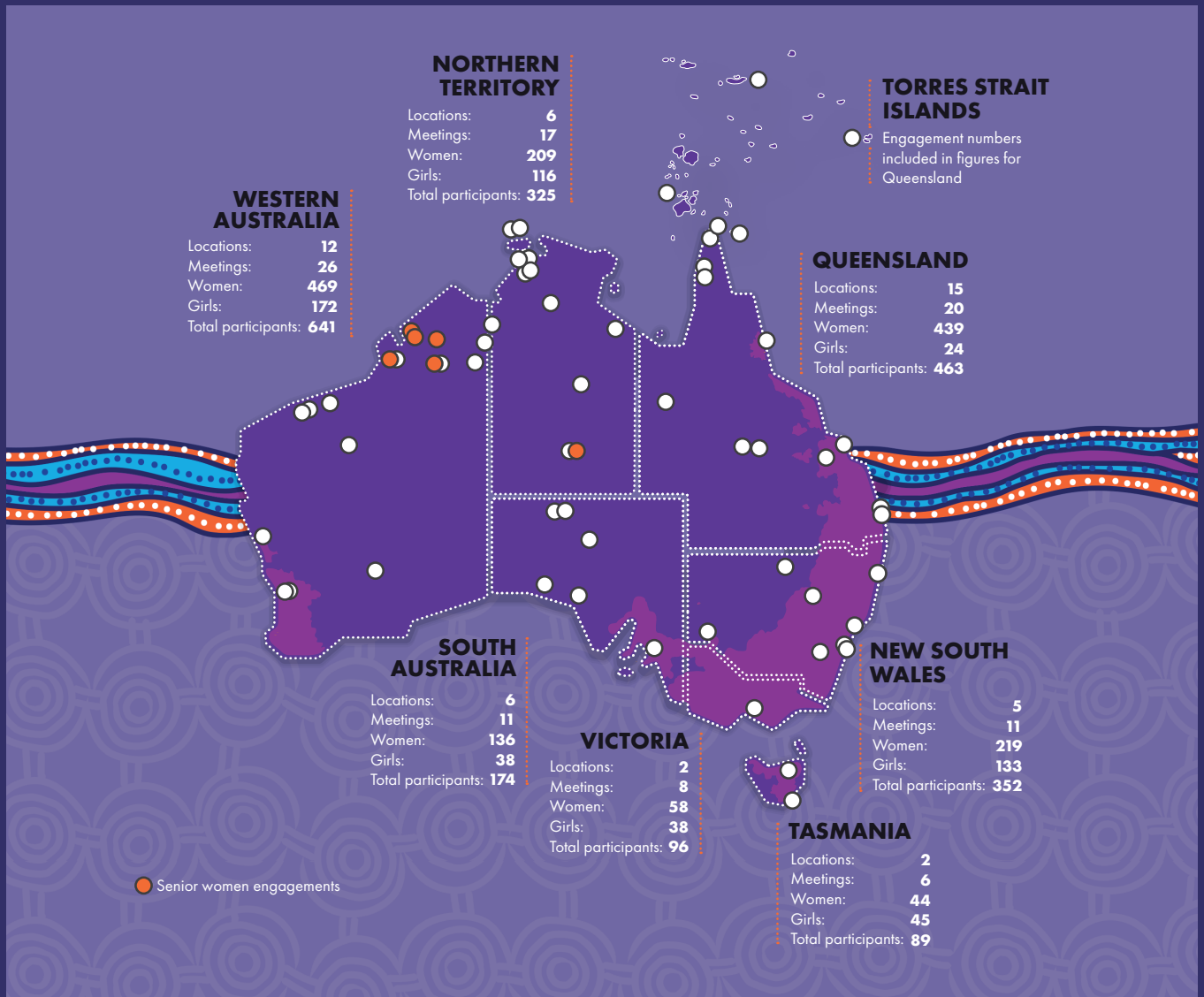


June Oscar AO is a proud Bunuba woman from the remote town of Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia's Kimberley region. She has held a raft of influential positions including Deputy Director of the Kimberley Land Council and was CEO of Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre.

She led a successful community driven campaign for alcohol restrictions in Fitzroy Crossing, and is an international advocate on the impacts of trauma and FASD.

In 2016, she was the recipient of the Desmond Tutu Global Reconciliation Award and was named NAIDOC person of the year in 2018.

June began her five-year term as Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner on 3 April 2017.



## A STRENGTHS-BASED HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH

*Wiyi Yani U Thangani* has been guided by the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the following foundational principles. First Nations women and girls have the right to:

**Self-determination:** to shape their own lives, including their economic, social, cultural and political futures.

**Participation in decision-making:** in matters that affect their rights and through representatives they choose.

**Respect for and protection of culture:** to maintain, protect and practise their cultural traditions and cultural heritage. This includes protecting their integrity as distinct cultural peoples, their cultural values, intellectual property and Indigenous languages.

**Equality and non-discrimination:** to enjoy their human rights without discrimination from individuals, governments and/or external stakeholders.

*Wiyi Yani U Thangani* has taken an intersectional approach that recognises that Indigenous women and girls experience their human rights, including violations of their rights, in ways that are very different to Indigenous men and boys. A specific and gendered human rights-based approach must therefore form the basis of how governments respond to this report, and how they seek to address the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls into the future.

# A statistical snapshot

The following statistical snapshot identifies key data relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their experiences, focusing on women and girls where data is available.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls ...

Make up **half** the Indigenous population (400,000)



**85%** watch or participate in cultural activities



**2 out of 3**

children have a woman caring for them



Report **higher rates** of anxiety and depression than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men



**Almost half** hold a certificate, diploma or degree



**21x**

Australia's fastest growing prison population – **21 times** more likely than non-Indigenous women to be incarcerated



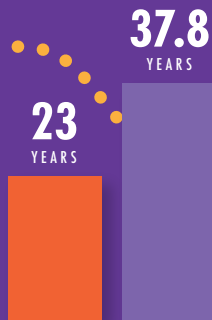
Life expectancy **almost 8 years shorter** than the rest of the female population (75.6 years)



# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ...



speak a First Nations language



Child mortality is almost **double** that of other Australian children



10x

Out-of-home care more than **10 times** higher than the rest of the population



82%

92%

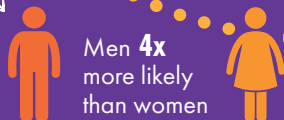
45% live with disability

82% attend school compared to 92% non-Indigenous



Less than half are employed

1 in 10 aged 15 years or older have been incarcerated



A quarter of Australia's homeless are Indigenous (2011) yet account for just 3.3% of the population



Almost half (46%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have at least one chronic health condition



# Women and girls' voices: major findings

Common themes are identified across the report extending across all areas of life. Whether women and girls were discussing issues relating to health, employment, culture or learning, similar challenges, barriers and solutions were often raised.

These cross-cutting themes are the major findings of *Wiyi Yani U Thangani*. They are fundamental to understanding all the issues raised by women and girls.

## First Nations women and girls have diverse strengths that support all aspects of life.

*Women are the social fabric of communities and the glue that holds everything together. Mount Isa women*

Women and girls spoke about occupying diverse roles and fulfilling cultural obligations which provide the care, supports and leadership necessary to maintaining societal health, safety and cohesiveness. They spoke of deriving these strengths and responsibilities from our culture and Law. Within these systems are the knowledges and cultural practices which form the basis of our identity, and protect, nurture and help us to heal and adapt.

*My true strength is my identity, where I'm from and whatever I use from my culture to keep me strong. Thursday Island women*

Women are social and economic innovators, primary carers in aged, disability and child care, they lead trauma recovery work and run organisations and businesses. Every day, First Nations women and girls make extraordinary contributions to the social, spiritual, economic and political life of their communities and all of Australia.

## Investing in First Nations women and girls is an investment in society.

Women and girls bring to their life and work ways of knowing, being and doing that are key to overcoming economic, social and environmental injustices; structural inequality; and healing from centuries of transmitted trauma. Much of this work and the knowledge women carry is unseen and undervalued.

*We are the nurturers and in a lot of cases the breadwinners. You are also the family bank ... We carry so much and so much is expected of us. We don't mind doing it, that is what we do, but how do you offset that? ... all the women in our community are dealing with these same issues and we've got nothing to offset what is happening or to support us. Rockhampton women*

Our women exist in a system where they are overworked in paid employment, and they are doing the majority of unpaid labour at home and in communities. Where services and supports are lacking, women and girls are always filling the gaps, while juggling multiple responsibilities. They are holding up society, while their actions are barely being counted. This lack of recognition means that the structures needed to create enabling conditions are largely absent, and instead are trapping far too many of our women and girls in conditions of poverty.

Acknowledgement of, and investment into, our women's labour and the vast skill set they carry is crucial to improving life-outcomes for everyone—children, families and communities. Alongside this, their knowledges can provide the innovations across sciences, health, land management and education, to form a stronger, more equitable and resilient Australian nation, now and into the future.

## It is structural forces, not individual behaviours alone, which overwhelmingly determine our life outcomes.

Discrimination and social, economic and political marginalisation have trapped many women and girls in powerlessness and poverty for generations. Women have described how these structural forces—beyond their control—make them vulnerable to harm and entrench intergenerational trauma and inequality.

The experience of trauma is universal and has become generationally endemic. As our societies are increasingly harmed by cumulative traumas, women—as the primary carers—have taken the lead in trauma recovery work.

This burden of recovery is too great for our women to carry alone while structural forces continue to perpetuate trauma. They have said that for our families and communities to truly heal, the nation must embark on truth-telling. Without truth of how the systemic issues of today have their origins in the structures laid down at colonisation, the problems our peoples experience are seen as their fault alone, isolated in the present.



*We [Australia] don't own our history—Other colonised countries who have experienced genocide have had Truth Telling Commissions ... we want the truth told so you can understand ... We have a lot of healing to do as well ... if you're faced with day to day struggle, you can't heal—it needs to be collective healing. **Sydney women***

The power of truth-telling lies in its potential to heal national divisions and restore positive relationships and protective factors of cultural connectedness to family and country.

### **First Nations women and girls want systems and services to be preventative, place-based, culturally safe, healing-oriented and trauma-informed.**

The lack of effective services that currently exists means that homelessness, early life trauma, family violence and cognitive disabilities such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), are increasingly becoming the causal pathway to punitive interventions. It contributes to the over-representation of our children in care and protection and juvenile detention, and of our women in prisons.

*Don't you think that there is something drastically wrong when we're in the year 2018 and the deterioration of our people has just tripled? We're missing something somewhere along the line ... [we need to be] putting preventative measures in place and really educating our people with empowerment to be able to lend to their own understanding of directing their own futures. **Brewarrina women***

Women and girls have said that punitive interventions must end and be replaced by systems and services that are community-controlled and provide integrated wrap-around supports across diverse sectors, from housing to disability. They want services to be grounded in their self-determination and expertise and underpinned by individual and community healing and cultural and societal restoration.

### **We need to support First Nations women and girls' leadership and participation in all decisions that impact their lives.**

It is clear, without women and girls informing the design of policy and programs their needs, rights and aspirations are not being met across all parts of life.

*I felt like I lost my self-determination. And we all fall back, we fall back on family and our culture that is intrinsic in our family ... And I think part of our challenge is making sure our country understands how hard it is. They just want us to live their way, but we don't want to just live their way. We want to be able to participate, because we are part of this country, but we still have to maintain who we are, we need to be who we are and not lose ourselves in the process. **Karratha women***

Our women and girls are calling for mechanisms and institutional arrangements to guarantee that their voices are heard and responded to on all matters that affect them. Ensuring the effective representation of our women and girls embraces their leadership, which is essential for this nation to enter into genuine processes of truth-telling, healing and agreement-making.



# The way forward



*Wiyi Yani U Thangani* sets out a comprehensive plan to respond to these major findings raised by First Nations women and girls. It consists of a series of principles to guide action, seven overarching recommendations and four pathways forward. These set out the actions required to transform the ways in which policy, services and programs respond to First Nations women and girls.

The success of these recommendations depends on governments entering into genuine partnerships with our women and girls which upholds our right to speak in a representative capacity and provides us with effective mechanisms to hold governments to account. This should be advanced in conjunction with consideration of new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative structures at the national and regional level.

Implementation of *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* recommendations and actions will ensure First Nations women and girls' issues and needs are always accounted for, and that their knowledges and aspirations are seen as essential to the success of all policy frameworks.

Photo by Wayne Quilliam



# Level 1

## Principles

- Embedding culture and respect for identity:** Women and girls learn and practice their culture, knowledge and languages, and their diverse identities are respected
- Truth-telling:** All Australians recognise past and present injustices and their ongoing impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Equity in leadership:** Women and girls are respected and equally represented in leadership
- A rights-based approach:** Human Rights are built into policy and decision-making processes
- A place-based approach:** Governments acknowledge the efficacy of place-based initiatives
- Understanding intersectional discrimination:** The experiences of First Nations women and girls are informed by a complex mix of race, gender, age and other attributes
- Lifting women lifts the whole community:** Measures designed to enhance the enjoyment of human rights by First Nations women and girls are of benefit to their entire communities
- Inclusion and participation:** Women and girls are supported to participate in decision-making that affects their lives
- Accountability and transparency:** Government actions and decisions are transparent and there is accountability for outcomes

# Level 2

## Overarching Recommendations

1. A National Action Plan on advancing the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls
2. Conduct a National Summit and establish a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls Advisory Body
3. Empowering women's leadership on the ground
4. Protecting, supporting, and reviving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices and knowledge systems
5. An urgent focus on healing from intergenerational trauma
6. National action to eradicate racism
7. Local and regional focused engagement

# Level 3

## Key pathways forward—priority actions in thematic areas

- Supporting strong families and communities
- Living and belonging
- Healthy and engaged lives
- Thriving communities and sustainable economies

## Overarching recommendations

The seven overarching recommendations set out key structural reforms to address cross-cutting systemic issues of marginalisation, trauma and intersectional discrimination, and to fundamentally shift how Australian Governments engage with First Nations women and girls.

See Chapter 4 of the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* report for the full text of the recommendations.

01

### A National Action Plan on advancing the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls

All Australian Governments commit to the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women and Girls Action Plan to address the challenges, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls.

02

### Conduct a National Summit and establish a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women and Girls Advisory Body

The Australian Government fund a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Summit to design the key elements of the National Plan and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women and Girls Advisory Body to lead and implement the National Action Plan and retain a monitoring role to hold all governments to account.

03

### Empowering women's leadership on the ground

All Australian Governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations, as well as business, NGO and education sectors to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls' leadership. This includes embedding gender equality as a key principle and targets to increase the representation of First Nations women across workplaces and in decision-making roles.

04

### Protecting, supporting, and reviving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices and knowledge systems

All Australian Governments urgently invest in community-led approaches to enable women and girls to exercise their cultural rights to practise, transmit and preserve our Law and ceremony, languages, knowledges and cultural practices.

05

### An urgent focus on healing from intergenerational trauma

The Australian Government recognise the importance of understanding and addressing intergenerational trauma to closing the gap across all socio-economic and cultural indicators of wellbeing. This includes by investment in community-led healing initiatives and a national healing and trauma-informed workforce development strategy.

06

### National action to eradicate racism

The Australian Government commit to action to address racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including women and girls. This includes developing a national anti-racism framework with targets and accountability measures, data collection and public awareness raising activities.

07

### Local and regional focused engagement

The Australian Government focus its engagement and service delivery practices with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls and their communities at the local and regional level. This requires 'needs mapping', directing funds to target the root causes of inequality, evaluating the impacts of funding decisions on women, supporting capacity-building and the full involvement of communities in research and evaluation.

# Pathways forward—priority actions in thematic areas

Wiyi Yani U Thangani reports the views of women and girls in four thematic areas, each containing a number of chapters.

The importance of cultural practices and knowledges to the formation of strong individual and collective identities and healthy societies forms the basis of all chapters of the report. Each chapter explores different ways in which imposed systems have interrupted and eroded these strengths and the various solutions to counteract cultural loss and form more enabling and inclusive systems and institutions.

This community guide presents an overview of the thematic areas of the report and each of the pathways forward containing the priority actions necessary to address the issues and implement the many solutions identified by women and girls.



## Supporting strong families and communities

This section of the report focuses on:

- Community safety (chapter 5)
- Law and justice (chapter 6)
- Child protection (chapter 7)

It considers the impacts of generations of disadvantage and punitive interventions of child protection and the criminal justice systems. It describes what is needed to address intergenerational trauma and divert away from damaging interventions.

### COMMUNITY SAFETY

First Nations women and girls courageously discussed the prevalence of harmful behaviours in their lives, including family violence, substance misuse, sexual assault and abuse.

These behaviours—both cause and consequence of one another—disproportionately impact First Nations women and girls and trap families and communities in cycles of crisis.

Women and girls said that the major driving factors of these harms are intergenerational trauma and the conditions of poverty. Without adequate supports, trauma increases and eventually outweighs our inherent protective factors.

First Nations women and girls are critical to keeping our communities safe. Women have a long history of driving community-led responses to harms. This work must be sustained and supported by wrap-around programs, safe houses, and alcohol and drug rehabilitation services.

Women and particularly mothers emphasised there are simply not enough supports addressing their specific alcohol and drug-related needs.

*Women are the backbone of our families. They've got a men's drug and alcohol place here. But if our women want to get off the drugs because of the history and circumstances forced them there, they've got to go to hospitals and things where they're treated with such disrespect. **Brewarrina women***

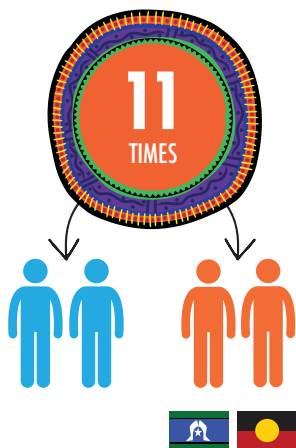
Supports need to keep our women and their children safe in the immediate, as well as prevent these harms before they occur.



Adaptation of original image from the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association  
Source: National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2004–05.

## LAW AND JUSTICE

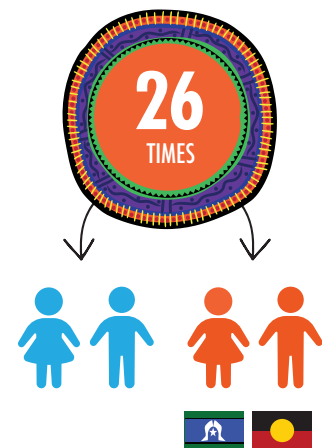
The fact that First Nations Australians are one of the most incarcerated populations in the world is evidence of entrenched generational discrimination. Incarceration is compounding the very socio-economic issues that it seeks to address.



First Nations men are imprisoned **11 times** the rate of non-Indigenous men



First Nations women are imprisoned **21.2 times** the rate of non-Indigenous women



First Nations children and young people are imprisoned at **26 times** the rate of non-Indigenous children and young people

Incarcerated women and girls are our mothers, sisters and daughters. We must address the underlying social issues that drive their contact with the justice system.

In interactions with the police, the courts, being in prison and on parole, women and girls reported discriminatory treatment including targeting, stereotyping, harassment, abuse and neglect. At worst this can lead to deaths in custody.

*I think they test us in here [prison], you know, how far they can push us and then they wonder why they find us trying to end it all hanging off the door [speaking about suicide attempt].*  
**Darwin women's prison engagement**

Justice reinvestment and restorative approaches are the key measures highlighted by women and girls to address over-incarceration. These approaches seek to invest in preventative community support programs, such as rehabilitation or supporting our young people to get driving licenses. The Maranguka Project has demonstrated that justice reinvestment would also deliver a better use of government resources.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison are more likely to:

- be survivors of family violence (70-90% of women incarcerated have experienced violence or a form of abuse in childhood and adulthood)
- be the primary caregiver for their own children and that of extended family
- have mental, cognitive or physical disabilities (65% of all women in incarceration report a history of a mental health condition)
- be homeless or unemployed.



Our women are more likely to be charged and convicted for minor, non-violent offences and receive harsher sentences than non-Indigenous women. Ongoing contact with the justice system drives cycles of re-offending.

## CHILD PROTECTION

At all decision-making points—from notifications, investigations, substantiations, placement on protection orders and removal into out-of-home care—First Nations children continue to be significantly overrepresented in the child protection system.

First Nations children and young people in out-of-home care is projected to double in the next 10 years, without significant change to the current approach.

*They just came in one day without any warning. They took them all in one fell swoop ... they were sitting there on the ground screaming and crying for their families, handcuffed. And this young woman just threw a piece of paper at them and said 'here's your papers'. No more explanation, no care about how much trauma they were causing. This is another Stolen Generation.*

### **De-identified engagement**

Removal of our children devastates our communities and severs ties to country, kin and culture. It contributes to poor health, education and employment outcomes, and creates an intergenerational pipeline into the criminal justice system.

Young women expressed sorrow of how this impacted on their identity, sense of self and fragmented their connections to their family and culture.

The system requires total reform to stop the repetition of history. We must keep children safe and with their families and communities.



First Nations children and young people are removed into out-of-home care at **10.2 times** the rate of non-Indigenous children and young people

In 2017–18 **over \$5.8bn** was spent on child protection services, **less than \$1bn** of this was directed to family support and intensive family supports. Women and girls ask: **If money can be found to remove children, why can it not be found to invest in the supports families need to keep children and families together?**

## PATHWAYS FORWARD: SUPPORTING STRONG FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* report identifies the following key pathways forward to address the issues raised across these areas. See the end of Part Two in the report for the full text of this pathways forward. The report recommends the following:

1. **prevention and early intervention supports** including addressing the systemic issues of poverty, disadvantage and intergenerational trauma
2. **investment in diversionary pathways away from the criminal justice system and child protection** through sufficient provision of community-led safe houses, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, alternative sentencing options, and improved cultural representation in the justice system
3. **the implementation of mechanisms to keep women and children safe and families together** through implementing a Child Protection Notification Referral System, increasing accessibility to legal services, and expanding the role of peak bodies to advocate for the safety and protection of women and children
4. **culturally safe and responsive systems** through investing in community-controlled supports, ensuring protection of family violence victims, establishing police misconduct reporting mechanisms, mechanisms for compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, and implementing recommendations from inquiries, inquests and reports.



This section of the report focuses on:

- Service delivery (chapter 8)
- Housing and homelessness (chapter 9)
- Disability (chapter 10)
- Land and country (chapter 11)

It reflects our interconnected relationship with our environments and how surrounding structures can enhance or diminish our strengths and capabilities. It considers the need for culturally safe service delivery across all sectors, access to safe and affordable housing, and access to, management over, and development of economic opportunities on our ancestral country.

## SERVICE DELIVERY

From health to housing and education, women and girls had serious concerns for how services are delivered in their communities, including:

- investments focused on crisis instead of prevention
- reduction in Indigenous-specific funding and the mainstreaming of services
- poor accountability for mainstream organisations receiving Indigenous funds
- over-complicated and disempowering funding and tender applications
- insecure and unreliable funding, regardless of proven results or effectiveness
- fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) arrangements, especially in remote regions
- siloing and duplication of services
- unavailability, inaccessibility and cultural inappropriateness of services, in particular education, employment and health
- expectation that women will do unpaid work to fill gaps in service delivery.



The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector is best placed to ensure effective inclusion of women and girls in governance, funding decisions and the design, delivery and evaluation of services in their communities.

Women talked enthusiastically about early intervention initiatives that do exist, such as culture-based activities, subsidised fresh food, community gatherings, family centres, education and youth programs, and therapeutic economic models.



## HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

The unaffordability of housing, including utility bills, a chronic housing shortage, and discrimination as a barrier to access housing is causing many women, their children and families to live in permanent housing insecurity.

There is also a shortage of larger-sized houses in social housing and in the private rental market that reflect First Nation households—comprised often of multiple generations, extended families, elders and those with complex needs.

These factors lead to homelessness and extreme overcrowding both of which increase women and children's vulnerability to harms such as violence, drug and alcohol problems, poor health, education and employment outcomes, and interventions by child protection and the justice systems.



Family homelessness is a significant problem in Australia—experienced at higher rates by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

*The majority of our homeless is elderly—a lot of our housing has 15–20 people per night every night. A lot of housing doesn't feel safe. A lot of food security issues with that many people, toilets not working, things being broken. Katherine women*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely than non-Indigenous people to:



BE STAYING IN IMPROVED DWELLINGS, TENTS OR SLEEPING ROUGH

LIVE IN A HOUSE WITH SIX, SEVEN OR EIGHT PEOPLE



BE HOMELESS—MAKING UP 25% OF HOMELESS POPULATION



## DISABILITY

The intersection of race, gender and disability places women and girls at an even greater risk of experiencing discrimination, poorer health and wellbeing outcomes, violence, substance misuse, suicidal behaviour, lower life expectancy, insecure housing and employment, disengagement with education and increased contact with child protection and criminal justice systems.

**Almost half (45%)** of First Nations people live with one or more disability or restrictive long-term health conditions.

*[Indigenous] people with profound or severe disabilities are twice as likely as their Indigenous counterparts without a disability to be unemployed and half as likely to participate in the employment market. Anecdotal evidence from research undertaken by the First Peoples Disability Network [FPDN] ... reported negative experiences [from Indigenous peoples with disability] in securing and maintaining employment and received feedback from potential employers that they did not 'fit' their brand. **University of Technology Sydney submission***

Women and girls, especially those who are carers, emphasised the failures of services and supports for First Nations people with disability, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Women and girls with disability want the barriers blocking their equal participation in all aspects of life to be dismantled and to be living in a just and inclusive society. Critical to this is recognising and valuing the knowledge and expertise of our communities in providing culturally safe and responsive disability supports.

*[Being a carer] is so hard. What are you going to do as a single mum, who do you ring? ... I jeopardise my job. Workplace tells me I have to get my act together... there is no understanding ... I feel it when I'm five minutes late because it took me longer to get my kid to take his medication in the morning. I feel like saying, 'have your white job, I will go on carers pension', but we would struggle even more. We not well off. **Canberra women***

**14%** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over are providing unpaid assistance to a person with disability, of which **62%** are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.





## LAND AND COUNTRY

Whether we live in urban areas or remote locations, our connection to Country informs our identity, and is a source of strength and often a place of healing.

*When country is unwell, we become unwell, our spirits become unwell. So, we have to be out on the country visiting that country regularly. And if we see something that is worrying, then we gotta do something as the human relatives to that country. **Fitzroy Valley, senior women's engagements***

Women and girls spoke mournfully of the ongoing loss of cultural knowledge since colonisation. They spoke of the many contemporary barriers to access their country, including financial costs and living away from country. Development—extensive mining and pastoral leases—and environmental degradation caused by climate change, droughts and water pollution such as Perfluorooctanesulphonic acid (PFAS) contamination was a cause of serious concern in stopping women from accessing, caring for and protecting country including cultural heritage sites.

Recent research on the social outcomes of the Working on Country (WOC) and Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) programs have demonstrated that there are beneficial social outcomes for individuals and communities that engage with these programs, including increased confidence and emotional wellbeing.

Research by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) on four IPAs found that IPA with WOC Rangers delivered an average social return on investment of \$2.35 and up to \$3.40 on every dollar spent.

*[In] 50 years down the track, if the sea levels keep on rising, we can't [rely] on building the sea walls ... Like people will have to be relocated eventually, which means losing your connectedness to land. What are we going to do? Our loved ones are buried here. So, it will be like a dispossession. **Saibai Island women***

*[W]e can't drink out of the tap—too many infections. Need to buy filters. Drought is contributing to this situation. The water table is not filling up. **Dubbo girls***

Women and girls identified the importance of on-country initiatives including land management, cultural tourism and country-based healing and education programs; of women being supported to take up leadership and decision-making roles in the governance of their native title organisations; and opportunities for women and girls to reconnect to country, and to live and work on country—including through heritage and Indigenous ranger programs— and for economic development.

Women placed enormous value on on-country gatherings and creating opportunities to rebuild and maintain connections to our country, Law and customs—a view which was shared across the generations of those I spoke to:

*One way we know how to heal is telling our own stories and showing all the children and all the women and young women what's their country and their role in the family and within our traditional kinship, and the roles and responsibilities to the country. It brings back, as you can see in some places, dignity and respect. **Arrernte senior women's engagements***

For women who fought their entire lives for recognition of our connection to country, the Mabo decision and resulting *Native Title Act* was a critical step forward.

Recognition has, however, come at a high cost for many. Some women expressed how native title process were traumatic and divisive and that native title had not delivered on expectations such as improving economic opportunities.

*Native title is a monster in its own billion-dollar economy, and who benefits? No one from this country. **Roebourne women and girls***

## PATHWAYS FORWARD: LIVING AND BELONGING

The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* report identifies the following key pathways forward to address the issues raised across these areas. See the end of Part Three in the report for the full text of this pathways forward. The report recommends the following:

1. **fundamental reform to the way services are delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples** through increasing investments to community-controlled service sectors; cultural responsiveness key performance indicators for mainstream services; representation of First Nations women at all levels of decision-making; a review of accessibility and availability of services
2. **early diagnosis and multidisciplinary disability supports, and carer respite supports** through investment in culturally safe and responsive disability assessments and supports; support services and respite for carers; and implementation of the FPDN ten-point plan
3. **prioritisation of safety for women and children** by investing in housing models that meet the needs of women experiencing domestic and family violence
4. **accessible, affordable, and appropriately designed housing** by addressing housing shortages; increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 30% and reviewing eligibility criteria; and investing in home ownership initiatives
5. **significant investments into country-based programs and economic opportunities** through land management, cultural tourism, art and design, country-based healing, education programs, diversionary and reconnection programs for young people, bush food and health product development
6. **urgent action on climate change** by developing mechanisms for First Nations peoples to participate in climate change policy and mitigation
7. **increased access to services, education and employment opportunities for those living in remote and very remote locations** through investment in digital infrastructure and services including, health, dialysis, disability and aged care
8. **expansion of land management programs** by increasing annual funding and establishing long-term targets for women working on country through the Ranger Program and the Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) program
9. **reform to the native title system to ensure greater control over and decision-making powers for country** through ensuring the principle of free, prior, and informed consent is incorporated into the Native Title Act 1993; supporting native title holders to understand their rights; a greater focus on female professionals at all stages of the native title process; and identification of options to support fungibility of title.



This section of the report focuses on:

- Health (chapter 12)
- Social and emotional wellbeing (chapter 13)
- Learning and education (chapter 14)

This section considers the need for a shift in the way healthcare and education systems operate to move away from a dependence on Western measures of success and towards embracing First Nations cultures and knowledges. Culturally responsive, accessible and affordable healthcare services and educational institutions are fundamental to improving life outcomes, and to closing the gap.

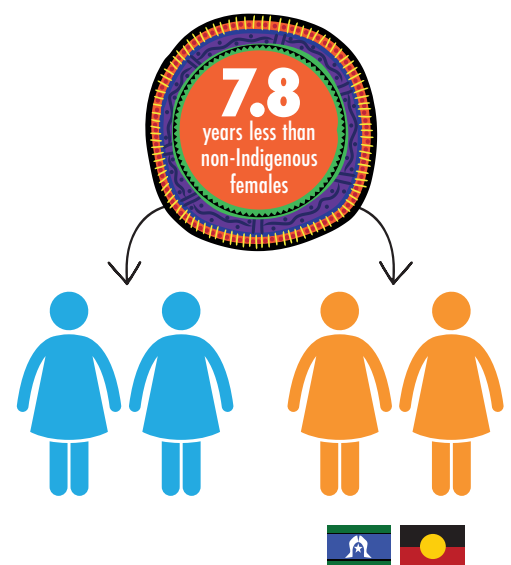
## HEALTH

Australia has one of the highest life expectancies in the world. However, this standard of health is not shared equally. The life expectancy gap between First Nations peoples and other Australians is widening, not closing.

Women and girls spoke of the fundamental importance of a First Nations' holistic view of life, which understands that good health is dependent on the interconnection of social, cultural and economic determinants. Senior women talked of how culture and Law contains knowledge on healing, maternal health, child development, nutrition and medicinal plants.

*After the rain, before cold weather time, we have all the fruits. And we get the fruit then ... we turn for [konkerberry wood] for the babies, to make them strong, help the mother's breast so we can have them with a lot of milk for the little babies. And it's used for keeping us well.* **Fitzroy Valley senior women's engagements**

Throughout *Wiyi Yani U Thangani*, it was identified that the lack of culturally safe services, poor access and coverage of mainstream health services and issues of affordability are significant drivers of health inequality.



Women raised that when they do access health services including hospitals, they can receive poor and discriminatory treatment.

*Another issue is discrimination against Aboriginal people at the hospital. Someone came with chest pain and [hospital staff] gave them Panadol. Then had a heart attack later.* **Coober Pedy women**

Women emphasised the need to invest in the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce, including within mainstream services. Such a system includes:

- prioritising cultural determinants and responding to their interconnectivity
- acknowledging the impact of racism and systemic discrimination
- First Nations peoples leading in the design and delivery of health services.

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) is a term used to encompass the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and cultural wellbeing of a person. Poor SEWB is strongly associated with emotional distress, poor mental health, clinically diagnosable mental illnesses and suicidal behaviours and ideation.

**32.8%** of First Nations people reported high or very high rates of psychological distress, compared to 13% of other Australians. Rates of high and very high psychological distress were significantly higher for First Nations women (**38.6%**) compared to men (**26.3%**). From 2014 to 2018 suicide deaths for First Nations people was almost double that of other Australians (**23.7** and **12.3** per **100,000** population respectively).

Women and girls identified the common stressors that impact their SEWB as: discrimination; loss of culture and disempowerment; constant Sorry Business; worrying about family; inability to find work; inadequate housing; and trauma.

*One of the things is constantly being in Sorry Business, constantly dealing with grief... That accumulation of trauma from high impact deaths, suicide, incarceration, health. **Brisbane women WOW session***

These factors are compounded by a lack of access to culturally responsive mental health prevention, assessment and diagnostic supports. In regional and remote locations women spoke of infrequent fly-in fly-out services leaving people in need of diagnosis and medication on lengthy waiting lists.

These same issues are impacting young people at vulnerable stages of development. Girls have said that they are internalising deficit narratives and feelings of hopelessness. Sistergirls have also said the lack of services impacts severely on their mental health.

*We have no counsellors on the island, no mental health available here, we just stick to ourselves ... We have had some elder Sistergirls pass on because they went through a hard life of leaving their land, took their own life because of the discrimination. **Tiwi Islands, sistergirls engagement***

Poor cultural competence and discriminatory behaviours by mental health practitioners have caused cultural beliefs to be misdiagnosed as mental illnesses.

*The Western way of treating mental illness is overshadowing cultural beliefs. If someone says they see their ancestors, they're deemed as delusional and possibly locked up. **Melbourne women***

In 2014, The Healing Foundation presented a cost-benefit analysis of healing centres, which found that healing centres and therapeutic communities return an average benefit to cost ratio of 4:1, based primarily on reduced justice system costs. The analysis also found improved education, employment and family violence outcomes, and a strengthening of cultural and community connections.

There is great concern that all these issues are contributing to the normalisation of suicide.

*Wiyi Yani U Thangani* shows that the under-diagnosis of mental illness means that services are not being provided to meet need. Women are doing what they can to fill the gaps, which they report is causing increased stress and vicarious trauma. A broken system is deepening the crisis of poor SEWB across our communities.

Providing trauma-informed training is seen as essential to equip communities in need with resilience skill sets and to support women to lead healing work. Healing programs, which include restoring connection to culture and country, are the basis of a holistic approach to improving individual and community-wide SEWB.

## LEARNING AND EDUCATION

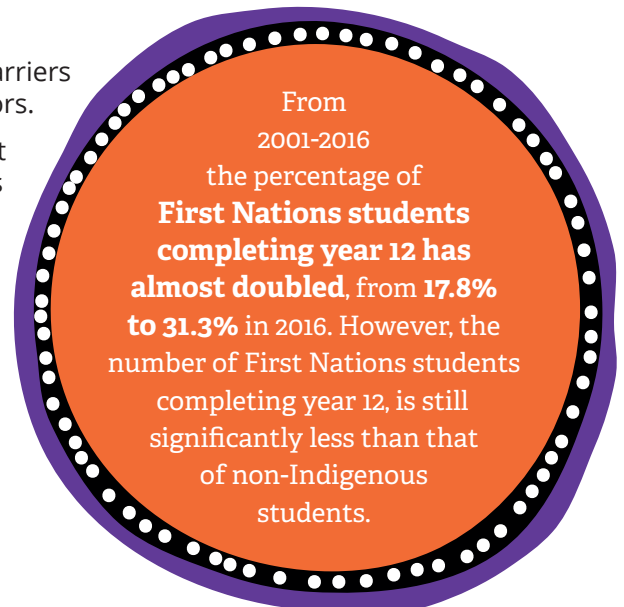
Learning is at the centre of First Nations society—gaining knowledge dictates how we progress and succeed in life. Today, good cultural and Western forms of education, from early childhood onwards, are valued highly by women and girls. They see education as pivotal to overcoming disadvantage, developing confidence and accessing employment opportunities, and pursuing leadership in social change.

Women and girls were clear that they are unwilling to see their formal education come at the cost of their cultural identity and knowledge.

Women and girls discussed a large number of structural barriers to accessing education including trauma and family stressors.

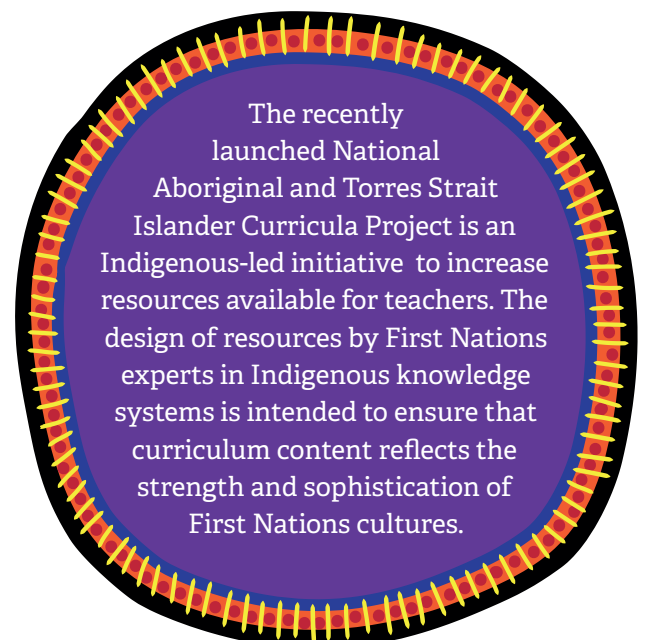
A message girls and women delivered consistently was that First Nations histories, cultures, languages and knowledges need to be embedded more comprehensively within the Australian education system and standard curriculum. They also discussed the importance of the need for truth-telling within schools about the impact of colonisation and discriminatory policies and legislation. Alongside this, women and girls have stated the importance of improving cultural competence of teachers and educational leaders—the deliverers of the curriculum.

To achieve this many women and girls suggested that First Nations studies and cultural safety should be mandatory modules in teacher training at university.



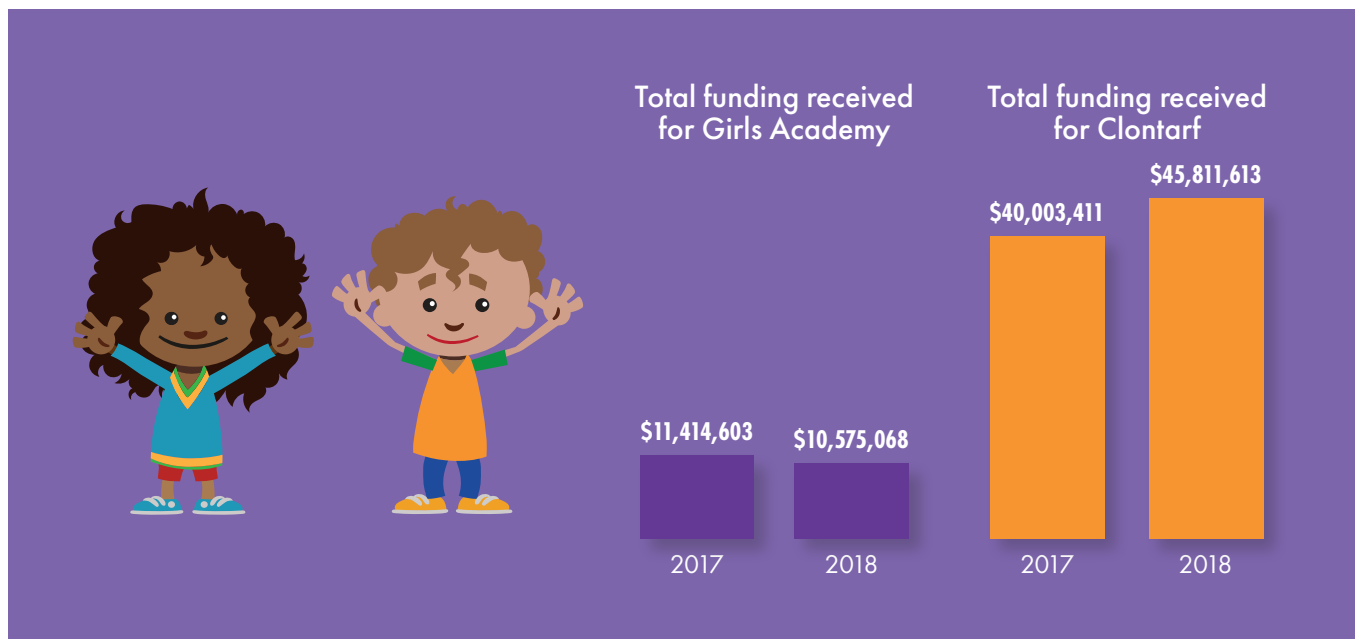
Without improved educational environments First Nations students will continue to feel disengaged. Women and girls felt that the lack of inclusion has led to poor cultural awareness, which has contributed to racism within schools.

*Feeling unsafe at school because of racism ... You want to go to school, have fun with your friends, learn about things and feel safe—not be worried that you are going to have racist things said in your ears. **Hobart girls***



Girls spoke highly about school-based engagement and mentoring programs as empowering, culturally safe and providing essential items such as food, clothing and sanitary products, and offering academic support. However, the disparity of financial support between girls' and boys' programs was keenly felt at almost every location running separate boys' and girls' academies.

*The Clontarf program is working really well with our men. But our girls are leaving school. With the Koori Girls Academy, our girls are saying to us, 'what have we done wrong? Why are the boys getting to do stuff?' We want to see good programs for the girls. **Mildura women***



## PATHWAYS FORWARD: HEALTHY AND ENGAGED LIVES

The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* report identifies the following key pathways forward to address the issues raised across these areas. See the end of Part Four in the report for the full text of this pathways forward. The report recommends the following:

1. **culturally responsive service delivery models** through mandatory cultural training; national targets to increase First Nations women health practitioners; commitment to the priorities of the National Health Leadership Forum; and integration of traditional knowledges and healing into healthcare models
2. **holistic and wrap-around services** to respond to the economic and social determinants that contribute to negative health and wellbeing outcomes
3. **sexual, maternal and infant health supports** by investing in programs that focus on healthy relationships and sexual health; improving access to maternal and infant health programs; and supporting First Nations models of care
4. **suicide prevention** through developing a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy Implementation Plan
5. **support for community-led and community-controlled health services** through adequate resourcing and funding of ACCHSs
6. **the survival of Indigenous knowledge and languages** through resourcing schools to integrate cultural learning and practices; ensuring access to technology; and supporting traditional knowledge and languages
7. **Indigenous culture embedded in our curriculums** through incorporating Indigenous languages at all levels in the school curriculum
8. **culturally safe and inclusive environments** through mandatory university units on First Nations knowledges; and investment in early childhood services and community-controlled child and family centres.





This section of the report focuses on:

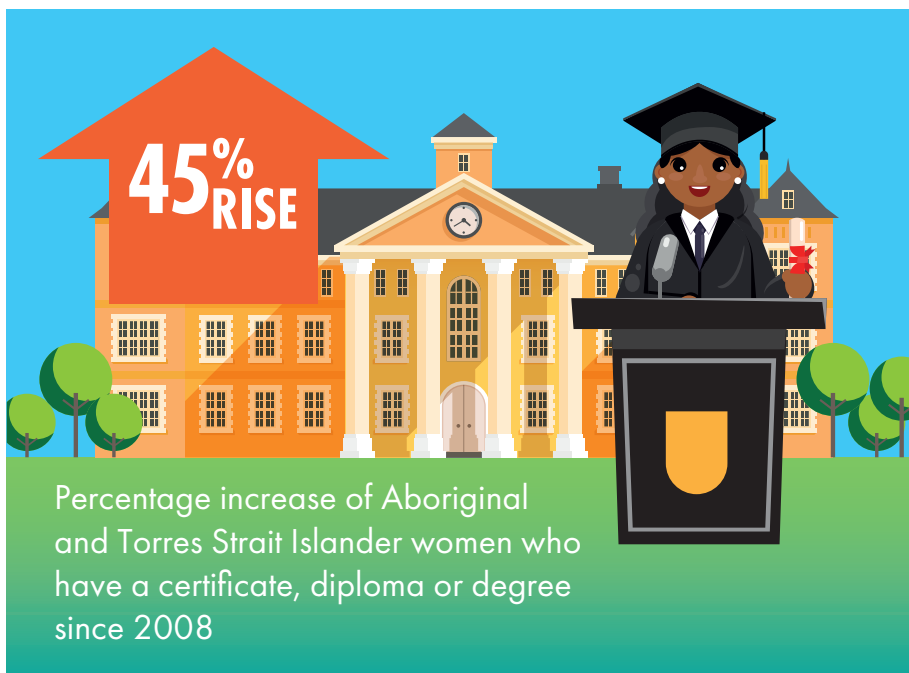
- Pathways to employment and empowerment (chapter 15)
- Economic participation (chapter 16)

This section reflects First Nations women and girls' education, employment and economic marginalisation. It considers the need to develop a foundation of economic security to keep communities out of poverty and to enhance education and training opportunities and improve pathways into employment.

## PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

Education, training, and employment are vehicles for our women and girls to gain new learnings and skills to access opportunities and fully participate in all of society.

Whilst there has been a substantial increase in training and further education attainment, significant barriers continue to exist, including affordability, local availability, inadequate supports and lack of cultural representation and inclusivity.



Women and girls described how job insecurity, relocation requirements, and lack of paid employment opportunities matching their skill sets—particularly in remote areas—limits their employment opportunities and career progression.

*In a predominantly favoured 'man's world' we don't only face the gender battle in the workplace, but we also have to combat challenges that systematically come with being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. **The Centre of Excellence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics submission***

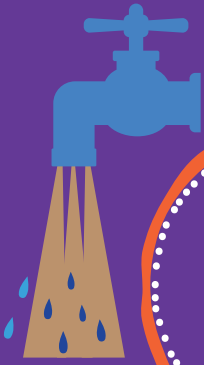
**Cultural safety training:** valuing and embedding our cultures in our learning institutions, workplaces and social settings enhances the lives and wellbeing of First Nations women and girls while also creating a more inclusive society. Cultural awareness training brings about positive transformative effects, not only on individuals, but also on organisations who have the power to shift cultural change in our workplaces and institutions.

## ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Many First Nations women are trapped in poverty and financial insecurity exacerbated by discrimination and a disproportionate burden of care.

As such, the unemployment rate for First Nations women is particularly pronounced, leaving many unable to meet the costs of basic essentials such as housing, utilities, food, childcare, education and transport.

### Economic participation: barriers and inequalities



40% of First Nations peoples live without two or more essentials for a decent standard of living including housing, clean water and food



Over 40% of First Nations people are excluded from participating in economic and social activities

31% of First Nations peoples, and more than 50% in remote areas, were earning income less than 50% of the median



### For our women and girls, life can be even harder...

Women are more likely to take time out of paid work to care for family

30% of our women care for someone in need (with a disability, a long-term health condition or old age)

61% of our women provide support to someone living outside of their household and 61% of these women live in a household with dependent children



Women and girls everywhere described how social welfare frameworks like the Community Development Program (CDP), ParentsNext and the Cashless Debit Card are incapable of meeting their needs, while limiting their agency and perpetuating poverty and dependence.

*All this stuff disempowers us so people think it is okay to include things like the cashless card, because they see us as 'the poor Aboriginal person that can't sort their own shit out, so let's introduce the cashless card'.  
**South Hedland women***

Women were clear that they do not want punitive welfare measures but supports that will meaningfully enhance their participation in the economy. Women are calling for welfare reform and for a holistic approach that starts from our strengths, helps our people heal and facilitates educational engagement and entry into employment.

Women and girls want support for First Nations-led economic development with dedicated strategies for female-owned businesses as a vehicle for community-wide positive change.



**First Nations female-led culture-based economies and businesses**

Women and girls highlighted cultural arts, knowledge, tourism and land management ventures as key channels for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to make a living while keeping their culture alive and sharing their unique and vibrant cultures.



## PATHWAYS FORWARD: THRIVING COMMUNITIES AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIES

The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* report identifies the following key pathways forward to address the issues raised across these areas. See the end of Part Five in the report for the full text of this pathways forward. The report recommends the following:

1. **economic safety and security for all First Nations women and girls** through sufficient welfare payments to meet the cost of living; ending punitive income management; and co-designing a new approach to community development
2. **investments into local job creation and to address the scarcity of job opportunities in regional and remote areas** through funding to Indigenous organisations to train and employ women, and funding to stimulate the growth of culture and country-based economies in regional and remote Australia
3. **enhance Indigenous-led economic development and employment opportunities through the establishment and growth of Indigenous organisations** through increasing seed funding and support to Indigenous-led business models including those led by First Nations women
4. **create accessible and affordable education and training for First Nations women and girls** through increasing scholarships and financial assistance to higher education and training; ensuring cultural safety across institutions through increased representation of Indigenous students, staff and culture
5. **address the intersectional barriers impeding the employment of First Nations women and girls** through adopting special measures and identified positions in the workforce; implementing proactive measures to ensure First Nations women are safe, respected and that their cultural obligations and protocols are recognised through cultural awareness training and investing in activities promoting workplace rights for First Nations women and girls.

Photo by Wayne Quilliam



## Next Steps

*Wiyi Yani U Thangani* is a multi-year project committed to pursuing systemic change. The second stage of work is focused on responding to the key findings and implementing the recommendations from the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* report.

*Wiyi Yani U Thangani* plainly shows that the current system—the business as usual approach—cannot meaningfully meet the needs and aspirations of First Nations women and girls. Alternative models and approaches are needed to support the work and life of First Nations women and girls, which respect and enhance their strengths, knowledges and potential.

In pursuing this aim *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* Stage Two will:

- identify, and consider how to design and invest in the alternative models and approaches to enhance the lives of First Nation women and girls
- consider the structural, policy and legislative changes necessary to embed and sustain alternative approaches over the long-term.

Stage Two is about devoting attention—in a practical and applied way—to the steps that must be taken to achieve the outcomes laid-out in the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* recommendations. Identifying alternative approaches and how to implement reforms will involve a series of engagements and roundtable discussions with community members, peak bodies, relevant stakeholders and Australian governments. These engagements will consider the different mechanisms necessary for reforms to take effect such as innovative policy, financial mechanisms and new institutional arrangements.

Increasingly, people from all walks of life are questioning how to address our most complex systemic challenges in society. We know there is no easy solution or quick fix. Significant shifts have happened throughout history and they can happen again. Today, there is a growing collective momentum for a more equal, just and sustainable future.

Tools like this community guide are necessary to bring many minds around the table in starting to construct the systems that we all want to live and thrive within.



## Stay up to date with the work of *Wiyi Yani U Thangani*


For the latest news and updates about the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* project, including access to the online version of this community guide and the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing our Rights Securing Our Future* 2020 Report, please visit:


 <https://wiyiyaniuthangani.humanrights.gov.au/>


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## Further Information

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