



WIYI YANI U THANGANI INSTITUTE

FOR FIRST NATIONS GENDER JUSTICE

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into Racism, Hate and Violence Directed at Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander People

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About the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice (the Institute) is Australia’s first institute dedicated to advancing the rights, knowledges and leadership of First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse people, inclusive of trans women and Sistergirls as catalysts for systemic change. Wiyi Yani U Thangani means women’s voices in Bunuba. The Institute’s mission is to reweave the social fabric by elevating the voices and lived experience of First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse people, and building collaborations with all system actors to actively pursue the realisation of First Nations gender justice and equality.

This submission draws on eight years of Wiyi Yani U Thangani engagements with thousands of women, girls and gender-diverse people across this continent and its surrounding islands. The foundational *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report 2020* (the 2020 Report) captured the voices of 2,294 women and girls across 50 locations in every state and territory, including the Torres Strait, informed by 106 community engagements, over 100 submissions and 300 survey responses. A survey conducted in April 2026, prior to the Women Deliver 2026 conference in Narm/Melbourne, to which the Institute brought a delegation of 150 women, girls, Sistergirls and gender-diverse people (including women from all states and territories), reaffirms many of the findings from that time. What women told us in 2018 they are still telling us in 2026. The structural conditions that produce harm remain entrenched. In several dimensions, the situation has worsened.

Systemic racism was named as a serious concern across every engagement. This submission draws on that evidence in response to the terms of reference.

Racism is gendered, and its harms are compounded

The 2020 Report took an intersectional approach, recognising that First Nations women and girls experience their human rights, including violations of those rights, in ways shaped by the





combination of their race, gender, age, sexuality, (dis)abilities and location. This reflects what women told us directly and consistently across every engagement.

As the 2020 Report observed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls have an embodied understanding of intersectional discrimination, by virtue of who they are, of the various markers: gender, race, culture, class, living with disability, identifying as LGBTQIA and Sistergirls and many others, which form their identity. No one aspect of identity defines who our women and girls are, but brought together they are the markers of both intersectional strengths and intersecting oppressions. As Kimberlé Crenshaw observed, and as the 2020 Report drew on: *'it is not simply that there is a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things'* (Kimberlé Crenshaw cited in the 2020 Report).

For First Nations women, racism is inseparable from sexism. Together they produce what women name as sexualised racism: a specific and compounding form of harm that shapes safety, access to services, treatment within institutions, and the ability to participate in public and economic life, as well as resulting in many devastating institutional outcomes.

For instance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are incarcerated at approximately 25 times the rate of non-Indigenous women. This figure has worsened significantly since the 2020 Report, which cited 21.2 times. The system that incarcerates women at that rate also frequently fails to protect them (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Prisoners in Australia, 2025).

The *Women Deliver 2026 Delegation Call for Action*, representing 150 women, girls, Sistergirls and gender-diverse people from across this continent, states it plainly:

"Entrenched sexualised racism perpetuates gendered violence, it is the reason women are missing and murdered, it steals our children, diminishes self-worth and drives suicide, it locks us out of wealth and into poverty, and criminalises us for it. Our burden is the trauma inflicted by these structures. We live this reality. It is not abstract."

The 2026 survey confirms this picture has not changed. Women named racism in maternity settings, including being denied cultural birthing practices and pushed into procedures without consent. They named racist treatment within child protection systems that treat First Nations mothers as threats rather than as primary carers. They named racism in health services, in education, in the justice system. They named the exhaustion of navigating systems not built for them, described consistently as a burden on top of the care work they are already carrying.

The 2020 Report described this clearly: the lives of so many women and girls are immeasurably diminished by widespread physical and mental illness, premature death, endemic suffering from physical and lateral violence and constant interventions by government through justice and child protection services. Women and girls throughout the engagements described many forms of prejudice and what they termed casual racism and sexism, and how these motivate violent actions including direct racial and sexual taunts, stalking, attacks, bullying, sexual assault, rape and murder.





Structural racism and its consequences

This intersectional discrimination is born from and remains intact due to structural conditions. Australia lives in the aftermath of frontier wars, the first wars of this nation-state, never formally recognised and never reckoned with. When that happens, the real work of peacebuilding and reconstruction is never done. Colonial structures are left intact because they are never understood as perpetrators, and an insidious continuation of that original violence persists. This country has not learnt to substantively reconcile, or to co-exist with different worldviews, practices, governance and law. Division remains embedded in structures, with racism and sexism and their many intersecting forms holding it in place. First Nations peoples remain the most marginalised, the most harmed by violence, the most impoverished. This is a consequence of unresolved colonial conflict.

Closing the Gap, Treaty processes and ongoing calls for a national Voice exist alongside government policies still determined by those with no knowledge of the lives they affect. This is structural racism. It is not the behaviour of isolated individuals. It is the architecture of the state. These are the intersecting issues that underpin the following.

Racism directed at children and young people

The 2020 Report documented specific experiences of racism reported by First Nations girls and young women. Women and girls described how racism manifests as bullying, derogatory jokes, online hate, over-surveillance from police and shop owners and the public. The mainstream media was identified as playing a significant role in reinforcing false and damaging stereotypes that have no basis in truth, and which feed racial profiling across everyday settings. As the Report noted, racial stereotypes gain legitimacy in the mainstream consciousness when they are reinforced through an authoritative combination of legal mechanisms, government policy and news coverage.

Women and girls spoke directly to this in their own words:

“Bullying and social media, Facebook in this town is horrible. There is so much racism on those pages, I can’t believe it’s possible. Things about killing our kids, running them over, shooting them.” — South Hedland women

“Security follow Aboriginal people around the shops thinking that we’re going to steal.” — Dubbo girls

“We have a long way to go when you look at the entrenched racism in the media.” — Broome women

“Australia doesn’t really know our rights and issues. They only know what government and media tells them.” — Cairns women

The 2026 survey reflects the same experiences:

“Racism continues to shape how we are treated, heard, and protected, both inside systems and in everyday life. Young people are often sidelined or pushed out of community spaces, which deeply impacts identity, belonging and confidence.”





“I want to see racism and anti-Aboriginalism named honestly, especially where it shows up as policy, policing, and silence.”

Racism, trans Women, Sistergirls and gender-diverse people

For trans women, Sistergirls and gender-diverse people, racism compounds with transphobia and homophobia. Women with these intersecting identities face racism within mainstream LGBTIQ+ spaces and transphobia and homophobia within First Nations communities. The compounding of these forms of discrimination is particular and serious, and it is insufficiently recognised in policy and in service design.

Women and gender-diverse people told us:

“What it’s like to live as a transgender person in our community, the racism and violence towards us in our everyday living. We are not hiding anymore.”

“I want to see a future where First Nations people, including women, Sistergirls, Brotherboys, and all gender-diverse people, are safe, respected, and able to thrive without fear, discrimination, or barriers.”

Missing and murdered First Nations women and girls, and gendered violence

The 2020 Report documented the connection between sexualised racism and the disappearance and murder of First Nations women and girls. First Nations women also make up 10 per cent of unsolved missing persons cases. Women in Alice Springs, Kalgoorlie and Coober Pedy spoke directly about unsolved disappearances and murders in their communities and the failure of adequate police investigation. One woman from Alice Springs told the engagement:

“I brought my niece over for a holiday and 2 hours after she got here, she disappeared and never been seen since. I done investigations myself ... several Aboriginal women and men have disappeared from Alice Springs without a trace and the police have hardly done any investigations ... there really should be an investigation about the disappearing, missing and murdering of women in Alice Springs.” — Alice Springs women

Women in Kalgoorlie raised the same concern, noting that a significant number of murders of Black women in their town remained unsolved. The 2020 Report concluded that police inaction in relation to missing and murdered women is a serious and ongoing pattern, undermining the protection and safety of First Nations women and girls.

The statistics are stark and have worsened since the 2020 Report. According to the Australian Institute of Criminology’s Homicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women (Statistical Bulletin no. 46, 2024), which draws on 34 years of National Homicide Monitoring Program data, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women comprised an average of 16 per cent of adult female homicide victims each year between 1989 and 2023, despite representing approximately three per cent of the adult female population. Their homicide victimisation rate was up to seven times the national average. In terms of family violence hospitalisations, the 2020 Report recorded that First Nations women were approximately 35 times more likely to be





hospitalised than non-Indigenous women. By 2023–24, that figure had shifted to 27 times the rate of non-Indigenous females, a change that reflects improvements in data methodology and reporting rather than a reduction in harm (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2025). Deaths in custody have reached a record high: in 2024–25, 33 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people died in custody, the highest yearly toll since records began in 1980, and up from 153 recorded deaths in the period 2008–2019 cited in the 2020 Report. The total since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 now stands at 617 (Australian Institute of Criminology, Deaths in Custody in Australia 2024–25, Statistical Report no. 57, 2025).

Lives are the reality of these numbers. The response when First Nations women disappear is slower. The media coverage when they are harmed is less. Accountability is rare. This reflects a pattern of structural racism that renders First Nations women’s lives less visible and less valued within the systems meant to protect them.

Gendered violence against First Nations women is not incidental to racism. It is produced by it. The 2020 Report documented the heightened vulnerability of First Nations women to harm as a result of intergenerational poverty and intersectional discrimination, and the multiple barriers they face in securing and realising their rights. Women told the 2020 engagements about family violence, sexual assault and abuse as both a cause and consequence of the structural conditions imposed on their lives, and about a system that incarcerates them at rates more than 21 times their non-Indigenous counterparts while simultaneously failing to protect them.

Women in the 2026 survey named this reality:

“Australia and the world need to understand that gender justice for First Nations peoples cannot be separated from justice for our lands, our cultures, and our right to self-determination. The violence our women experience is not isolated. It is connected to colonisation, racism, poverty, housing insecurity and systems that continue to exclude us.”

“Systems built with us, not imposed on us. Funding that trusts community leadership. Safety for our women and children. Respect for our sovereignty and cultural authority. Because when First Nations women thrive this country will thrive.”

“I want to see our Aboriginal women stop losing their lives to family violence. A reduction in incarceration rates for our mob. And the recognition that our women are leaders, not just survivors.”

Out-of-home care and the child protection system

The 2020 Report documented in detail the relationship between structural racism, gendered violence and the child protection system. These are not separate issues. They are connected expressions of the same failure: a system that surveils and removes rather than supports and invests, and that treats First Nations mothers as the problem rather than as the solution.

According to the Closing the Gap data, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care was 50.3 per 1,000 children in 2024, up from 47.3 per 1,000 in 2019, with the target assessed as worsening. Around 20,000 First Nations children are currently in out-of-home care. Only 7.3 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care were reunified with family in 2023–24, and 37.6 per cent exited care to other



circumstances including homelessness and detention (Family Matters Report 2025). First Nations women are firm that we are witnessing a second Stolen Generation. For every child removed into care, there is a family that did not receive the support it needed, whether in relation to poverty, adequate and safe housing, or family violence response.

Family violence is a leading cause of homelessness. Homelessness is a leading cause of women's criminalisation and child removal. The system responds to each of these as if they are unrelated, targeting individual failure rather than confronting the structural conditions that produce them. As the 2020 Report stated, punitive interventions such as child protection and incarceration continue to fracture families and kinship networks. Interventions that remove women and children from the lives of their families and communities damage identities and erode strengths, causing further trauma.

Women in the 2026 survey named this directly:

"The biggest issues for community right now would be the overrepresentation in care systems, and the silencing of the family voice in the needs for change. Community-led is the answer."

"I want to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children staying with family and community, and an end to all criminalisation of children."

"I spent three years in a court battle after my daughter and three other First Nations girls were targeted and bullied by their high school principal, which caused lasting harm. It shows the urgent need for culturally safe schools and stronger protections for First Nations girls."

The child protection system, as it currently operates, is a manifestation of structural racism. Reform must be co-designed with First Nations women, grounded in cultural authority, and oriented toward keeping families together rather than separating them.

Police and the justice system

The 2020 Report documented women and girls' experiences of the justice system in detail, including mistrust and fear of police, police inaction, discrimination and targeting. Throughout the engagements, women felt our people are treated as second-class citizens by police. They described a persistent paternalistic racism, reflecting historic police roles, with police speaking down to them or treating them as though they were children. The Report noted that racial bias manifests in two simultaneous and contradictory ways: in the over-policing and targeting of First Nations people, and in police inaction and neglect when First Nations people need protection.

The 2020 Report stated clearly that many behaviours within the justice system are a manifestation of the failures of the criminal justice system and police force to effectively address a historically ingrained culture of racism and sexism. When this plays out in the behaviour of those wielding the power and authority of law enforcement, it is dangerous. For First Nations women and children, the discriminatory attitudes of those in authority replicate the control and abuse of family violence.

Women and girls told us directly:





“The police just walk in and out of our homes, to search for our kids even when they are sleeping. The police just walk in and wake them up, there is no respect and it’s disgraceful. Our kids face racism daily, they are not criminals but they get treated that way. They can get locked up for months when they are just walking around town with friends. It breaks our hearts, our youth should be given a chance.” — Children’s Ground submission

The 2026 survey reflects the same experience:

“The criminalisation of our young people, especially those aged 18–24 who are still recognised internationally as young people, yet treated as fully formed adults in punitive systems.”

“Representation without structural reform does not create gender justice. The change I want to see is governance systems redesigned to embed women’s authority, cultural law and relational accountability at their core. Australia needs to understand that lasting reform in First Nations communities will not come from more programs — it will come from stronger institutions designed and led by our own people. The world needs to know that Indigenous women are not just advocates for change — we are system architects.”

Online racism, ideologically motivated extremism and physical threat

The 2020 Report documented the harm caused by online racism directed at First Nations women and girls, including targeted harassment, the spread of deficit narratives, and the use of social media platforms to amplify racist content. In the years since, this has escalated. The 2023 Voice referendum was a visible inflection point, with a sharp rise in online racism directed at First Nations people, communities and public figures. That pattern has not abated.

Online racism has real-world consequences. The murder of Cassius Turvey in 2022 exposed the racially motivated violence that First Nations young people face. The attempted bombing of an Invasion Day rally in Boorloo/Perth in January 2026, in which a device was thrown into a crowd of thousands, predominantly First Nations people and their supporters, is part of the same pattern. These are not isolated incidents. They reflect the emboldening of extremism in an environment where online racism has gone unaddressed.

Women on the 2026 delegation named this directly:

“I want justice for my people when it comes to racial discrimination as an attendee of the Boorloo rally that ended in an attempted bombing. We need justice, we need treaty and we need truth telling.”

What First Nations women are building

Alongside documenting the harms of racism, eight years of engagement also documents the substantial change work being led by First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse people across this continent. We are the carers, leaders and backbone of families and communities. The colonial structures of government decision-making, policies made without us, and intergenerational exclusion from economic prosperity are the perpetrators of harm. In the face of that, women are building from the ground up.

The 2026 delegation Call for Action captures what this looks like in practice: forming matriarchal governance collectives; creating youth hubs grounded in culture to keep children





out of the child protection and justice systems; grandmothers fighting to shut down detention that incarcerates children as young as ten; reclaiming birthing practices on Country; building two-way language and Country-based education; social enterprises where women heal through artistic creation; therapeutic programmes connecting young people to animals and nature; cooperative businesses reinvesting in community and Country health.

This is the work of decolonisation. It is the active rebuilding of authority over knowledge systems, governance, data and futures. And it is being done with minimal structural support.

“The solutions to many of our most urgent challenges already exist within First Nations communities.”

“Gender equality cannot be achieved without First Nations justice. Stop viewing First Nations communities through the lens of gaps to be closed and start seeing them as repositories of ancient wisdom and modern solutions.”

Women in the 2026 survey were equally clear about what structural support is needed:

“Right now, the big issues impacting me, my family and my community are ongoing violence, housing stress, and the exhaustion that comes from constantly navigating systems that were not built for us. Too often, women are forced to choose between safety and staying connected to family, culture and Country because there are not enough culturally safe housing and support options.”

“I have experienced so much sexism and racism that has led to lifelong chronic illness which I still get no support for, refused yearly health check-ups, questioned at length about my Aboriginality, pushed into procedures I did not consent to and removed from my ability to practise culture in relation to birthing. I know my story is one of many.”

Recommendations

We set out the following recommendations, drawn from eight years of evidence:

1. Name sexualised racism and its link to gendered violence.

Any national response must name the specific and compounding harm of sexualised racism and its direct connection to missing and murdered First Nations women and girls. This must be reflected in legislation, policy and accountability frameworks, not treated as a subset of general racism.

2. Address online racism and ideologically motivated extremism.

Platform regulation must be strengthened to address the targeting of First Nations women, Sistergirls and public figures. The pattern of escalation from the Voice referendum through to the Boorloo attempted bombing requires a coordinated national response. Online racism is not separate from physical threat.

3. Invest in First Nations women’s movements.

The change work being led by First Nations women on the ground is effective anti-racism and community-healing work, as it challenges and reforms the structures which have



racism entrenched. Long-term, flexible funding must flow directly to these movements. Governments must come to communities, not require communities to navigate competitive grant processes and short-term reporting cycles that replicate structural exclusion.

4. Reform child protection and justice systems.

The surveillance of First Nations children in public spaces, the over-policing of First Nations young people, the incarceration of children as young as ten, and the overrepresentation of First Nations children in out-of-home care are expressions of structural racism. Reform must be co-designed with First Nations women and communities, grounded in cultural authority and oriented toward keeping families together.

5. Recognise the compounding discrimination facing trans women, Sistergirls and gender-diverse people.

These communities face racism compounded with transphobia and homophobia. Culturally safe services, dedicated spaces, and structural recognition of these specific vulnerabilities are required.

6. Commit to truth-telling.

Structural racism cannot be meaningfully addressed without a formal national process of truth-telling and reckoning with this country's colonial history. This is foundational. Women have been calling for it consistently across eight years of engagement.

Conclusion

What women and girls told us in 2018 they are still telling us in 2026. The structural barriers that produce racism, and the compounding harms that flow from it, remain deeply entrenched. In several dimensions the situation has worsened. The Institute recommends the Committee respond to what women have been saying, consistently and clearly, for the better part of a decade.

As the Women Deliver 2026 Delegation Call for Action states:

“We are doing the work of change. Unlock finance and channel it to our movements. Bring decision-makers to the ground and meet us at our tables. We are not your recipients. We are holding society up. Recognise this. Respect us. Join us in our movement of restoration.” “We are doing the work of change. Unlock finance and channel it to our movements. Bring decision-makers to the ground and meet us at our tables. We are not your recipients. We are holding society up. Recognise this. Respect us. Join us in our movement of restoration.”

