



WIYI YANI U THANGANI INSTITUTE FOR FIRST NATIONS GENDER JUSTICE

SUBMISSION TO THE UN SPECIAL RAPPOREUR ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Project has travelled across the continent and surrounding islands, including the Torres Strait, Tasmania and Tiwi, and has listened to women, girls (inclusive of Sistergirls and trans women) and gender-diverse people from many nations, over many years. The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice gives special acknowledgement to our Matriarchs—the first mothers of this land—we pay our respects to them and all our Elders past and present who watch over us, our kin, our Countries, waters and skies.

About the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute (the Institute), based at the Australian National University, is Australia's first Institute dedicated to advancing the rights, knowledges, and leadership of First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples as catalysts for systemic change. It is founded by June Oscar AO, who led the landmark Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) project as former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Throughout all stages of the Wiyi Yani U Thangani project, women have been clear that this work must be more than a report that sits on the shelf – it must result in lasting change. Across communities, women consistently emphasised the need for a genuine mechanism for the representation of First Nations women that legitimises their diversity, affirms their multiple and vibrant identities and does not conflate their experiences with those of First Nations men or non-Indigenous women. The Institute exists as the answer to that call. It is designed to create space for First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples to come together, share stories, and translate lived experience into evidence — informing policy and decision-making and shifting systems. This acts as a national mechanism and 'third space' where community, policy and systems actors come together to co-create change.

Using the Wiyi Yani U Thangani [Change Agenda](#) as our 'Blakprint' for transformation, the Institute's approach to First Nations gender justice is an evidence-based methodology developed with and for First Nations communities. While deeply rooted in these contexts, its principles and ways of working are responsive to advancing broader gender equality movements, supporting the lives of women, men, children, elders and gender-diverse peoples of all backgrounds. The approach is underpinned by a culturally responsive, intersectional, systems change, human rights and peacebuilding framework. This means the Institute focuses on action that has systemic and structural impacts rather than piecemeal responses, to create sustainable, long-term change, with ripple effects beyond immediate challenges or issues.

About This Submission

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Special Rapporteur's country visit to Australia. This submission focuses on the Institute's peacebuilding approach as a First Nations women-led model that advances the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). It





responds particularly to the areas of self-determination, First Nations women and girls, participation in decision-making, and good practices in community-led systems change.

The Institute operates as a national mechanism grounded in the voices, authority, and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, girls and gender-diverse peoples. Our work demonstrates how peacebuilding, when led by First Nations women, functions as a practical pathway for realising rights across legal, policy, and institutional systems.

This submission is intentionally scoped. The Institute does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of all human rights issues facing First Nations people in Australia. Instead, it offers peacebuilding — as practised and developed by First Nations women — as a model that the Special Rapporteur may wish to examine, document, and recommend. It is offered in the knowledge that other submissions will speak to the wider landscape.

1. Our Conceptual Framework: Peacebuilding

The Institute's conceptual framing of peacebuilding begins from a simple but profound truth: peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is the presence of right relationship — relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with Country. This is not a borrowed framework. It is rooted in the knowledge systems, relational governance, and custodial responsibilities that First Nations women have carried across tens of thousands of years. It names what colonial institutions have consistently failed to understand: that the fracturing of those relationships — through dispossession, removal, silencing, and exclusion — is itself the source of the harms Australia is still reckoning with today. Healing those fractures is not a program. It is a practice, and it takes time.

The Institute takes a peacebuilding approach to everything it does — to how women, communities, and all First Nations people and non-Indigenous people hold one another through change; how trust is rebuilt and relationships repaired; and how the conditions for people to thrive are created together, across all our diversity. This work is guided by three interdependent strategic priorities:

- Support and amplify systems change
 - Navigate and transform conflict through supporting women-led change processes and peacebuilding on the ground
- Strengthen the social and economic fabric with care and healing
 - Centre the holistic work of care and healing led by women and girls as foundational to a healthy existence for people and Country
- Develop research and data approaches for nourishing and applying generational knowledges
 - Form ethical, culturally informed and gender sensitive data tools for self-determination

Together these Strategic Priorities form the tools, relationships and national infrastructure for peacebuilding—grounded in the lived experience of First Nations women and girls.

2. Main Human Rights Issues

Self-Determination and Indigenous Governance

The Institute's peacebuilding approach centres self-determination as a lived, collective practice. It supports First Nations women and girls to define priorities, shape policy, and influence systems, consistent with UNDRIP Articles 3, 4 and 5. Self-determination for First Nations women and girls is not merely a legal principle — it is enacted through the daily work of rebuilding governance structures that reflect their values, their relationships, and their responsibilities to Country and kin.





First Nations women have always governed. They have governed families, Country, ceremony, and knowledge across tens of thousands of years. What Australia's institutions have lacked is not the leadership of First Nations women — it is the humility to recognise it. The Institute calls on decision-makers at every level to move beyond acknowledgement toward the structural redistribution of authority and resources that genuine self-determination requires, consistent with UNDRIP Articles 3, 4, and 5.

Indigenous Women and Girls

First Nations women are central to community wellbeing, yet continue to face systemic exclusion from decision-making and disproportionate levels of violence. Australia's record on protecting and advancing the rights of First Nations women and girls, in alignment with UNDRIP Article 22, remains inadequate.

The Institute responds to this gap by:

- Elevating women's leadership at all levels of community, policy and governance;
- Creating culturally safe spaces for truth-telling and healing;
- Advancing solutions designed by women for women and communities.

Violence Against First Nations Women

Violence against First Nations women is not incidental, it is structural. The intersecting forces of colonisation, racism and sexism have systematically undermined and dismantled the governance roles, ceremonial authority, and relational power that First Nations women have long held. The violence that persists today is inseparable from this ongoing legacy of dispossession and disruption. Any response that fails to acknowledge and address this history risks reinforcing the very conditions it seeks to change.

Australia's current policy frameworks continue to treat violence against First Nations women as a law-and-order issue rather than a structural one. The result is interventions that further displace women from decision-making, increase surveillance of communities, and reproduce the conditions that enable violence. As delegates of the Wiyi Yani U Thangani First Nations Women's Safety Policy Forum stated, this violence originates at colonisation and is a result of systemic exclusion, inequalities, and intersecting discriminations — it does not come from Indigenous cultures, which hold women's Law and have sustained healthy and safe existences for tens of thousands of years. First Nations women must not only be consulted — they must lead the design, governance, and evaluation of every response that affects them.

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report (2020) found that it is structural forces, not individual behaviours alone, that overwhelmingly determine life outcomes for First Nations women and girls. Rates of violence against First Nations women remain among the highest recorded anywhere in the world. This is not a community failing — it is a policy failure, and it demands structural remedy.

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Peacebuilding cannot be separated from the material conditions of peoples' lives. For First Nations women and girls, the denial of economic, social and cultural rights is not a secondary concern — it is the terrain on which their safety, identity, and self-determination are won or lost. The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report (2020) affirmed that First Nations women and girls want systems and services to be preventative, place-based, culturally safe, healing-oriented, and trauma-informed — a standard that Australia's current institutional responses consistently fail to meet. Access to culturally grounded health care,





language, education, and economic participation are rights under UNDRIP Articles 21, 24, and 31, and Australia remains in breach of its obligations to uphold them.

The Report (2020) called for urgent action to eradicate racism, embed truth-telling, and ensure cultural safety and trauma-informed practice across all services and sectors — and to increase investment in community-based programs that support healing from intergenerational trauma, and sustain and revive knowledge systems, Law, and languages. Funding siloed programs that address one dimension while ignoring others produces fragmented outcomes that serve institutional reporting requirements more than they serve communities.

The Special Rapporteur should examine the persistent funding inequities that undermine community-controlled organisations. The Report (2020) was clear that genuine progress depends on governments entering into real partnerships with effective accountability mechanisms, and upholding the right of First Nations women and girls to speak in a representative capacity. Short-term, competitive grant cycles that bypass First Nations women-led bodies represent a structural barrier to rights realisation that must be urgently addressed.

Climate Justice and Care for Country

Country is not a resource. It is a relationship — one that First Nations women have tended, read, and been responsible to across generations. First Nations women are not simply stakeholders in climate conversations; they are knowledge holders whose custodial authority and ecological expertise represent some of the most sophisticated and enduring systems of land and water management on the planet. Their exclusion from climate policy is not only a rights violation — it is a practical failure that diminishes the quality of Australia's response to the climate crisis.

Climate change is already devastating Country and compounding the vulnerabilities faced by First Nations communities, particularly those in remote areas. The loss of Country to flood, fire, and drought is not experienced by First Nations women as an environmental statistic — it is experienced as the loss of family, identity, and the very foundation of governance. Climate justice, for First Nations women, requires the restoration of decision-making authority over Country, not merely inclusion in national climate frameworks designed without them.

The Institute calls on Australia to formally recognise First Nations women's leadership in climate and environmental governance and to resource it accordingly. This means moving beyond symbolic recognition toward binding co-governance arrangements that give First Nations women real authority over Country — consistent with UNDRIP Articles 25, 26, and 29, and with Australia's stated commitments to both reconciliation and climate action.

3. Good Practices

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute offers a leading, evidence-informed model of First Nations women-led peacebuilding that is already demonstrating impact at community, policy, and systems levels. What distinguishes this model is not only what it does, but how it does it — through place-based engagement, relational practice, and a sustained commitment to collective voice over time. These are not soft process considerations; they are the enabling conditions that make meaningful, structural change possible.

The work of our partners Visual Dreaming in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, offers a powerful example of what genuine government partnership with First Nations women-led organisations can produce. Every day, girls and boys come to their hub to engage in culture, eat, play sport, work with healers, and connect



with Elders. It is run with love, nurture, and care — and it works because it was designed by women who understand their community from the inside.

What policymakers rarely witness is the full reality of what women leaders like those in Visual Dreaming carry to make this possible. They are responding to suicidality and severe depression in the early hours of the morning. Making late night visits to hospitals and police stations. Supporting children who woke with no food. Going to work. Writing grants. Battling funders over data requirements to prove need for services that are keeping people alive. Distributing income across families in poverty. Attending court as family advocates. This is the uncoded, unrecognised infrastructure that holds communities together — and it is overwhelmingly carried by First Nations women.

And yet, what the Visual Dreaming model demonstrates is that when government chooses to show up differently, the outcomes change. Through sustained advocacy, Visual Dreaming has built a partnership with New South Wales Department of Justice grounded in trust. Together they designed flexible funding arrangements that allow them to respond to children in real time — without the burden of lengthy approval processes. Uniforms, meals, haircuts, cinema tickets — the everyday things that enable children to show up, feel good in themselves and hold a sense of dignity. Small in cost, but transformative in effect.

Sitting together on the banks of the Murrumbidgee — women leaders, policymakers, and the Institute — was possible because those policymakers chose to show up, challenge the system, and invest in care and trust. That is the model. That is what the Special Rapporteur should ask of Australia: not more consultation, but more of this. Relationships built on trust, self-determined funding designed for real life, and decision-makers willing to witness and be changed by what they see.

Peacebuilding works when it is owned by the people it is for. Governments and institutions serious about implementing UNDRIP should look to models like this one, not to replicate them as a one size fits all, but to understand the principles that make them effective, and to properly resource First Nations women-led organisations to lead this work in their own communities and on their own terms. This model demonstrates how peacebuilding can function as an enabling mechanism for the implementation of UNDRIP across sectors.

4. Visit Planning and Engagement

Suggested Areas of Focus

The Institute encourages the Special Rapporteur to examine the role of First Nations women in governance and peacebuilding — not as a niche concern, but as a central to how power is structured, exercised and sustained in Australia. First Nations women have always governed and held authority within family, across Country, through ceremony, and knowledge systems. The question before the Special Rapporteur is not whether that leadership exists, but whether Australia's institutions are structured to recognise, resource, and be accountable to it.

The effectiveness of current engagement and consultation processes warrants particular attention. First Nations women consistently report that consultations are extractive — their knowledge and experience are drawn upon to legitimate decisions that have already been made, without any redistribution of decision-making power or resources. The Special Rapporteur should ask not only whether engagement is occurring, but whether it is producing any meaningful change in who holds power, how decisions are made, and who benefits from them.



Finally, the Special Rapporteur should examine community-led models of healing, safety, and justice — such as Visual Dreaming in Wagga Wagga — that are already demonstrating what is possible when First Nations women are resourced and trusted to design and lead responses to their communities' needs. These models exist. They are working. The barrier is not evidence — it is the political will to fund and scale them on terms set by communities, not governments.

Engagement Recommendations

The Special Rapporteur should prioritise direct, unhurried engagement with First Nations women's organisations and leaders — not through formal delegations alone, but through the kinds of relational, place-based conversations that allow women to speak on their own terms. This means going to where women are: in communities, on Country, in the spaces they have built. It means listening without an agenda, and engaging deeply in ways that centre accountability and reciprocity.

Engagement must span urban, regional, and remote contexts. The experiences of First Nations women are diverse, and approaches that do not account for this diversity risk reinforcing existing inequities. The Special Rapporteur should be especially attentive to the voices of women in remote communities who are among the most affected by government policy and among the least visible in national conversations about it. This includes the distinct voices of First Nations women from the Torres Strait Islands.

The Special Rapporteur should engage directly with national mechanisms such as the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice — organisations that have invested years in building the evidence base, the relationships, and the policy frameworks necessary for genuine systems change. These are not just stakeholders to be consulted, but established partners whose expertise should inform both the process and outcomes of this visit.

Finally, engagement should be conducted in culturally appropriate ways that create space for collective dialogue. Formal meetings alone are insufficient. The Special Rapporteur should seek out the conversations that happen on Country, and within community — because that is where the truth of First Nations women's lives, and the full scope of Australia's obligations, becomes visible.

6. Key Recommendations

The Institute recommends that the Special Rapporteur call on Australia to:

- 1. Recognise, resource and embed First Nations women-led peacebuilding as essential national infrastructure;**
 - Acknowledge First Nations women-led mechanisms as essential to governance, justice, social cohesion and ensure they are sustainably funded, embedded within policy architecture, and supported to operate on their own self-determined terms.
- 2. Invest in First Nations-led gender justice initiatives as a systems change priority;**
 - Move beyond short-term, program-based funding to sustainable, long-term, flexible investment in First Nations gender justice initiatives, collectives and movements.
- 3. Resource community-led approaches to healing, safety, and wellbeing;**
 - Redirect investment toward place-based, culturally grounded responses designed and led by First Nations women, including models that address the structural drivers of violence and support intergenerational healing.
- 4. Strengthen accountability to UNDRIP through enforceable mechanisms across all levels of Australian government;**
 - Establish clear, transparent and enforceable accountability frameworks across all levels of government to ensure alignment with the UNDRIP, particularly the rights to self-determination, participation in decision-making, and the maintenance of distinct



governance systems. This includes measuring not only policy intent, but outcomes experienced by First Nations women.

5. Recognise and invest in First Nations women's leadership in climate justice and care for Country.

- Support First Nations women as key leaders in climate responses, land and water governance, and intergenerational knowledge systems, ensuring their expertise informs national and international climate policy and practice.

6. Reform engagement and decision-making structures to enable shared authority;

- Transition from extractive consultation to models of co-design, co-governance and decision-making that redistribute power and resources, ensuring First Nations women's leadership is reflected in how decisions are made and implemented.

7. Conclusion

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute's peacebuilding approach demonstrates that First Nations women's leadership is critical to achieving systemic change and realising the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Peacebuilding, as practised by First Nations women, is not peripheral to these efforts — it is foundational to justice, governance, and the full implementation of UNDRIP in Australia.

8. Invitation to Meet

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice extends a formal invitation to the Special Rapporteur to meet directly during the course of the Australian visit.

We invite the Special Rapporteur to sit with us, our Chair June Oscar AO, and the women whose voices and experiences have built this work, and with the communities who have entrusted us to carry it forward. We are prepared to share our evidence, our model, and our vision for what genuine implementation of UNDRIP looks like in practice in this country.

We do not make this invitation as a formality. We make it because we believe that direct engagement between the Special Rapporteur and First Nations women-led institutions is itself an act of accountability — a signal that this visit is not only about documenting failure, but about witnessing and supporting the leadership that is already building the future Australia needs.

The Institute stands ready to contribute to this process and welcomes the opportunity to meet in person.

For further information or to arrange a meeting, please contact the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice directly.

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