



WIYI YANI U THANGANI INSTITUTE
FOR FIRST NATIONS GENDER JUSTICE

SUBMISSION TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY

December 2025

Office of Gender Equity and Diversity, Northern Territory Government



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 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. Women everywhere emphasised the need for a genuine mechanism for the representation of First Nations women that legitimises their diversity and affirms their multiple and vibrant identities, and does not conflate them with those of First Nations men or non-Indigenous women.

The Institute's approach to First Nations gender justice is an evidence-based methodology that although developed with and for First Nations communities, the principles and ways of working employed are responsive to gender equality generally and caring for women, girls and gender-diverse peoples of all backgrounds. It is grounded in the voices of women and girls, and is a systems change, intersectional, human rights and peacebuilding framework, meaning that when addressing the needs of women and girls, the Institute advocates and supports action that has systemic and structural impacts rather than ones that are piecemeal. This will create sustainable changes with ripple effects beyond immediate challenges or issues. It also deeply values and actively engages with First Nations women, communities and organisations ensuring their voices are central and ongoing to the development of Institute works.

About this submission

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice (the Institute) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a Gender Equality Strategy (the Strategy) for the Northern Territory (NT). The Institute acknowledges the NT Government's commitment to re-shaping its Gender Equality Statement of Commitment and Action Plan with a broader, long-term gender equality strategy, and emphasise that it must be shaped by the values and needs of community members, in particular First Nations women who experience increased vulnerability and inequality. The Institute, through almost a decade of engagement with First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples across the country, including in the NT, offers our support in shaping the Strategy into one which responds to and strengthens the rights and wellbeing of women and gender-diverse peoples.

The Institute strongly encourages the Office of Gender Equity and Diversity (the Office) to engage in Wiyi Yani U Thangani's resources, particularly the [Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice](#) (2024) as





a framework for meaningful action on gender equality; the [Implementation Framework \(2022\)](#) the [Wiyi Yani U Thangani First Nations Women's Safety Policy Forum Outcomes Report \(2022\)](#) for evidence of what system shifts are needed to ensure women's safety, health and wellbeing for a thriving life, communities and Countries; and the [Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report: Securing our Rights, Securing our Future \(2020\)](#) for extensive evidence of the lived experiences and calls to actions asked by First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples across Australia and in the NT.

This Submission draws on the above resources to respond to the key focus areas as well as highlights systemic elements that are critical to the success of the Strategy. In Part 1 of this submission, we describe the frameworks in which the Strategy must be grounded in—an intersectional gender-lens, systems change approach, and the Institute's measurement, evaluation and learning (MEL) framework. It also discusses community engagement and leadership as a foundational process to ensure the values and lived experiences of women, girls and gender-diverse peoples are reflected in the Strategy and its implementation.

In Part 2, the Submission dives into three focus areas described in the Consultation Paper: Health and Wellbeing, Safety, and Economic Justice providing a critical First Nations gender justice lens. The Submission also addresses a missing focus area of gender and climate change, reflecting the vital importance of addressing this intersection and the opportunity for the NT government to be a leader in responding to the impacts of climate change on women and girls.

Part 1: Framing the Gender Equality Strategy

1. Applying an intersectional gender-lens and systems change approach

The Institute commends the Office for recognising the importance of an intersectional approach in developing the Gender Equality Strategy, as outlined in the Consultation Paper. This principle is central to the Wiyi Yani U Thangani project and the Institute's work to uphold the rights, needs, and values of First Nations women, girls, and gender-diverse peoples.

Throughout Wiyi Yani U Thangani, women in all their diversity have consistently highlighted that business-as-usual approaches fail to meet their needs. Piecemeal and disjointed governmental decisions that impact their lives are part of broader societal structures that have entrenched and perpetuated intersectional discriminations including racialised sexism, gender and wealth inequalities, intergenerational trauma, and harms and violence against women and children.

The Strategy, its actions and initiatives must recognise the intersectional needs of First Nations women, and adopt a systems change approach—shifting from siloed, short-term actions to coordinated, structural reforms that enable long-term transformation.

As outlined in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani [Implementation Framework](#) and [Change Agenda](#), systems change involves understanding how relationships, behaviours and attitudes, and laws and policies holistically influence people's lives. Systems thinking enables us to move away from operating solely at the surface level—or responding only to symptoms of deep-rooted issues—to operating within the roots of the system to identify entrenched structural problems, and design interventions and initiatives that target these issues and drive systemic change. Part Three of the [Change Agenda](#) provides a roadmap for implementing this methodology.



A systems change approach will also ensure the Strategy's key focus area—such as safety, health, wellbeing and economic justice—are addressed holistically, as interdependent areas of life. Women have continuously emphasised that they do not live their lives in siloes, and actions and responses must be interconnected across all areas of life.

Further, the Strategy must commit significant efforts towards structural and systemic shifts alongside programmatic actions. As identified in the Change Agenda as 'System Shift Outcomes' these include collaborative decision-making, systems that centre care, and long-term, secure funding structures. These reforms are essential to create enabling conditions for long-term change and to dismantle the structural drivers of inequality.

2. Collaborative decision-making and investing in First Nations women's leadership

Whilst also a focus area, community engagement and women's leadership is integral to developing a successful and meaningful Strategy that reflects the lived experiences and values of women, girls and gender-diverse peoples. To do so, it must be an ongoing process that is embedded across implementation of the Strategy as well actions across key focus areas.

The Institute works closely with First Nations women, girls, gender-diverse peoples and their communities across the country, ensuring that their voices continually shape the agenda and priorities of the Institute. This grounded approach values and acknowledges that women are the experts of their lives, and hold the solutions to the challenges they face. In addition to extensive engagements and creating spaces for First Nations women to have their say, the Institute has built trusted relationships with First Nations women's organisations, groups and collectives. These include for example, the Kimberly Aboriginal Women's Collective (KAWC), South West Aboriginal Women's Collective (SWAWC), and Thamarrur Development Corporation Women's Centre—which act as mechanisms for collective decision-making and priorities for First Nations women across regions.

These collectives are key mechanisms for the Institute to ensure we are deeply listening to the needs and experiences of First Nations women and their communities, on the ground. The relationship also provides a platform for women to be heard and for the Institute to work in partnership with them to address key issues. Women have shared that these relationships are vital to their wellbeing as they can feel confident and safe knowing that their voices are being listened and responded to, and changes are emerging over time.

Case Study – establishing relationships with First Nations women's group to address violence against First Nations Women in the NT

Recently, First Nations women from Thamarrur Development Corporation in Wadeye, contacted the Institute to raise serious issues around the safety of their women and children in their communities. They emphasised the lack of effective responses from services to devastating levels of violence, and challenges communicating with governments directly. The Institute supported Thamarrur to engage the federal government for an urgent response.

This case study exemplifies the lack of safe and culturally-secure mechanisms and channels that connect First Nations women with decision-makers across key priorities. It also emphasises that these mechanisms are critical when considering the ongoing levels of violence many First Nations



women and their communities face, and that governments must work with women to address this present and future harm.

The Institute encourages the Office to embed meaningful community engagement processes and mechanisms, as foundational to the success of the Strategy's design, implementation and outcomes. This includes co-designing with First Nations women and girls—with the Institute as a key supporting partner—approaches that enable women to work directly with policymakers on their priorities and those of the Strategy. These processes and mechanisms must go beyond advisory groups and commentary, but be designed to enable sustained and meaningful engagement ensuring First Nations women can inform policy development and implementation for reform to be substantive rather than symbolic. In doing so, the Office must be prepared to be accountable and responsive to how communities want support or change to take place, and actively work with communities in shaping implementation of programs and supports, ensuring they continually meet communities' expectations.

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani ways of working are helpful guides to the values and actions that can be taken in engaging with communities.

Further, First Nations women's leadership must be invested in and their collective efforts must be properly resourced. While there are growing efforts to resource community-led organisations and services that respond to the needs of First Nations women, including health, safety and economic development, the Strategy must also invest, support and create spaces for women's leadership and collective advocacy. Valuable insights from KAWC and SWAWC have been that women want to engage in these spaces, but backbone support for their formalisation, such as funding for resources, events and travel bringing women across the region together and staffing have been the biggest inhibitors of collective engagement. First Nations women are doing the backbone work of their families and communities and are at the forefront of driving social change—we must invest in them.

The Institute encourages the Office to engage with existing women's groups in the NT—such as Thamarrur Development Corporation Women's Centre, Galiwinku Women's Space, and the Djakamirr Birthing on Country Project—and support the emergence of new collectives where they are not yet formalised across the region. The success of the Strategy hinges on the commitment of the NT Government in working with women across the NT to establish robust community engagement mechanisms to ensure women always have an avenue for their voices to be heard.

3. Embedding effective measurement, evaluation and learning (MEL) across all stages of the Strategy

For the Strategy to succeed, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) must be at its core—not just in shaping its focus areas and actions, but in driving implementation. A strong MEL framework is essential to ensure the Strategy adapts to the needs of communities, learns from what is working and what is not, and fosters continuous reflection for growth and innovation. Without it, the Strategy risks becoming static, missing opportunities to evolve and deliver meaningful impact for communities.

The Institute encourages the Office to engage with the Institute's 'ways of working' and MEL framework described in the [Change Agenda](#) in developing and implementing the Strategy. This approach may provide learnings for how to measure success at all levels. The Institute holds nine interconnected ways of working: (re)Learning, Lateral Love, Respect and Relationality, Embracing all our identities, Deep Listening, Self-reflective and aware, Intergenerational action, Shaping and keeping balance, and



Sense-making. These are embodied practices that are used to pursue systemic change work, engaging in communities and implementing MEL activities. They serve as values, principles and actions that frame the work, ensuring that action reflects how First Nations communities want to be engaged with.

The Institute's MEL framework shifts away from mainstream practices in that it is a continuous and dynamic process across the life of Institute work, programs and projects. It is purposely designed in this way to enable learnings to rapidly integrate into the agenda rather than learnings being understood at the end or at certain intervals, thereby delaying improvements. As a key data metric, the framework principally utilises 'signals' that are collected and heard from communities, stakeholders and our surroundings. The [Change Agenda](#) defines signals as: *the things we see, hear, feel or sense that tell us that we are making progress towards our outcomes. Use of signals is a purposeful shift away from numerical rigid indicators that dictate process of change, and towards paying close and sustained attention to our surrounding environments and systems. Each set of outcome signals has been formed through our voices and speaks to the changes we would expect to see as we progress the outcome. This goes beyond conventional metrics to include cultural vitality, community wellbeing and intergenerational knowledge transfer.*

Signals may also indicate negative outcomes (no changes over time or increased harm), reflecting the need for urgent change. Collecting signals regularly enables opportunity for urgent action to take place and shifting delivery of services, resources and support. It will also strengthen trust by communities in that policymakers and service providers are deeply listening and responding timely to their needs, rather than following a linear strategy or programmatic approach. The Institute strongly recommends using this MEL framework in the Strategy, and in how the Office more broadly actions and responds to the Strategy and community needs across the NT.

In practice, signals can only be gathered through ongoing engagement with communities and stakeholders, and by projects/program teams engaging in the ways of working, particularly Deep Listening and Sense-making to be able to listen and be attuned to the changes that are or are not taking place. An example of signals in context of health is described in Part 2 of this submission.

Part 2: A First Nations Gender Justice lens to select Focus Areas

The five focus areas described in the Consultation Paper: Community Engagement; Health and Wellbeing; Safety; Economic Security; and Leadership and participation are vital areas needed to be addressed in creating the conditions for gender equality. First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples across Wiyi Yani U Thangani resources have described their experiences and needs across these areas providing valuable insight into their lived experience and the systems and structures that create barriers to a life well lived. Within these resources, women have emphasised that these areas are not distinct from one another, as this is not reflective of how life takes place. While the Submission highlights these focus areas separately, it is important to consider their intersections and address them interdependently and holistically.

The Submission addresses the focus areas of Health and Wellbeing; Safety; and Economic Security; below, while Community Engagement and Leadership are addressed above as critical structural components of Strategy. The additional discussion of climate change presents a missing interconnection that highlights the need for systemic action to create the conditions for safe, healthy and thriving lives for everyone.





1. Health and Wellbeing

Descriptions of what health and wellbeing means to First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples, and how to create the conditions for healthy lives are described across the Institute's resources in explicit sections, actions and recommendations. In particular, Chapter 12 (Health) and Chapter 13 (Social & Emotional Wellbeing) in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report (2020).

Throughout these chapters, 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. Women also 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 also spoke of the urgent need to respond to and heal from trauma as fundamental to their health and wellbeing, and the interconnectedness of healing programs with positive outcomes across education, employment, reduced family violence, and stronger cultural and community connections.

The intersection of health and wellbeing with key life outcomes are reflected in the following signals—which may be clear and direct, such as 'women accessing health services more regularly when needed' or 'lower rates of illness and disease' or more indirect such as:

- Children laughing and playing more in communities – reflecting they have energy and strong wellbeing to socialise with others, and feel safe in their communities
- Access to traditional foods and medicines – reflecting a growing economy for cultural foods and medicines, and people going out on Country to collect these goods where they can care for Country and share knowledges with others, including younger generations. A common saying in First Nations communities is 'healthy country, healthy community'.
- Women in leadership and decision-making roles – reflecting women's confidence advocating for their needs and communities, having time available outside of caring responsibilities to take on these roles, and strong wellbeing and safety to participate.
- Less overcrowding in houses – reflecting less safety and health risks, particularly for women and children as resources within houses are not stretched to accommodate too many people living there, and stronger economic and financial security by way of access to housing.

Whilst these signals may not conventionally be considered 'health and wellbeing' outcomes, they all contribute to health and wellbeing across one's life in that they illustrate conditions conducive to it. These signals enable us to expand definitions of what health and wellbeing may look like or be defined as to incorporate elements and meanings that reflect what communities value.

2. Safety

First Nations literature and voices have continuously emphasised that safety and violence must be understood through social, cultural and political contexts, and by examining historical, contemporary and intergenerational issues that perpetrate cycles of harm. It must also be understood more broadly than just the absence of violence and harm. In the *Change Agenda*, it is defined as: *integral to wellbeing and health. We use it as a holistic concept that requires balance, harmony and empowerment to be felt and experienced across all areas of life, beyond a physical feeling, to be sensed in cultural, spiritual, and deeply personal ways.*





This definition cuts across all areas of life, providing a deep reflection on the systems that make this a reality. As such, safety must be responded to across all systems and structures—from housing to employment, economic security, health, healing, and justice—to drive actions to create the enabling conditions to realise gender justice as critical to safety.

In the Wiyi Yani U Thangani 2022 Policy Forum on First Nations Women's Safety, women outlined a range of key reforms across the system to support prevention and responses to violence. These include: legislative reforms, economic independence, secure housing, holistic prevention programs, transformation of the child protection system and criminal justice system, and understanding the connection between violence, trauma, drug and alcohol addiction. At a structural level, women emphasised the need for systemic reforms, including: long-term sustainable investment in community-led solutions, program design in partnership with First Nations women, centring the voices of First Nations children, and human rights-based approaches.

First Nations women also emphasised that the unique experiences of each community must have their own processes of engagement so that they are not further marginalised and silenced either by being incorporated into a broad intersectional group, or unrecognised and not engaged with or heard at all. It is fundamental for this Strategy, that communities are engaged with directly to co-design solutions grounded in systems change to drive safety as foundational to gender equality.

This discussion on safety and pathways forward is explored in detailed in the [First Nations Women's Safety Policy Forum Outcomes Report](#) and [Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report: Securing our Rights, Securing our Future](#), particularly chapters in Part 2.

3. Economic Justice

Economic justice is fundamental to progressing gender justice. Women have shared in Wiyi Yani U Thangani engagements that economic justice is realised when they are supported and resourced to care for their families and communities, and have access to the services and supports they need.

First Nations women and girls are doing the backbone work of society—caring for children, family and Country. Women described the care that they provide for their families and communities as a source of strength that should be invested in. As described in the [Caring about Care report](#) (2024), authored by researchers at the Australian National University of University of Queensland, in collaboration with the Institute, 'care is an essential part of life; it grows peoples, nourishes peoples, and no one can live without it'. However, First Nations women also describe their overwhelming care loads that have been exacerbated by historic and ongoing colonisation and inequality, and present significant barriers to their economic security and empowerment.

As the [Caring About Care report](#) uncovers, 'mainstream' definitions of care do not include the broad ways in which care is defined by First Nations women, and therefore it is unrecognised, unsupported and unremunerated in systems and structures. The report estimates the market value for women's care work as equivalent to an annual salary (without loadings and pre-tax) of between \$81,175.64 and \$118,921.40 (at time of publication in 2024). Noting that majority of this work is unremunerated, women are missing out on a living wage—likely being engaged in little to no formal employment as their time and resources are spent on unpaid care work.



Recognising this economy of care, which is largely invisible and unpaid, and investing in the services, goods and resources to ensure women are supported, healthy and self-determined, is vital to advancing gender equality. Where women are not supported, their health, wellbeing and safety are compromised. Addressing this context within the Strategy will enable better policy responses and actions that support the needs of women and girls towards the realisations of systems and support structures that respond to their lived realities.

4. A missing focus area: the need to respond to the intersection of climate change and gender equality

The Institute urges the Strategy to make climate change a core element in advancing gender equality. Throughout Wiyi Yani U Thangani engagements, women have consistently highlighted climate action as vital to their health, wellbeing, safety, and human rights. Yet, despite clear evidence that First Nations women, girls, and gender-diverse people are disproportionately affected, Australia lacks policy frameworks addressing this intersection. Embedding climate change as a key focus would enable the Strategy to drive coordinated territory-wide action, and be a national leader on gender and climate.

Throughout engagements, women described how climate and environmental changes and instability undermine gender equality and compound existing systemic and structural harms and injustices. Recognising this connection in the Strategy—and linking it to the NT's climate and environmental plans, national frameworks, and international commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals—will drive the long-term shifts needed for all focus areas to progress. In the wake of Cyclone Fina and with future environmental disasters looming, this inclusion is both timely and essential for mitigating future harms by embedding the language and strategic actions needed to protect the rights of women, girls and gender-diverse people.

This intersectional approach addresses critical issues that cut across all focus areas and deepens our understanding of how gender equality is realised through a systems lens acknowledging climate changes impacts, including:

- Food and water insecurity in regional and remote communities
- Safe and climate-appropriate housing
- Violence against women, girls and gender-diverse people, which intensifies under climate pressures
- Access to Country and transmission of cultural knowledge
- Protection of Country and biodiversity

Addressing environmental and climate impacts—and the barriers they create—supports systemic interventions that enable safe, healthy, and thriving lives. Without this perspective, gender equality cannot be sustained, as climate impacts will continue to erode progress.

Conclusion

A strong Gender Equality Strategy is vital to creating safe, healthy, and thriving communities across the NT. Its success depends on reflecting the needs and values of all community members, with Wiyi Yani U Thangani ways of working at its core. By doing so, the Strategy can lead by example, offering lessons to other governments and communities and positioning the NT at the forefront of gender justice leadership. The Institute supports driving this change and is available for further discussions with the Office.

