



WIYI YANI U THANGANI INSTITUTE FOR FIRST NATIONS GENDER JUSTICE

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO ECONOMIC SELF-DETERMINATION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FIRST NATIONS AUSTRALIANS

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We acknowledge and pay respects to all First Nations peoples, lands, waters, and skies across the continent, as Institute staff work remotely from city, coast and bush.

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INTRODUCTION

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into economic self-determination and opportunities for First Nations Australians.

We make this submission to draw attention to breadth and depth of care work undertaken by First Nations women.

It draws on the Australian National University's [Caring about Care Report](#) (2024) ('ANU Research'). This submission quotes and paraphrases from these sources. The ANU research was conducted in partnership with Aboriginal organisations in five sites across Australia.

This submission also draws on discussions of unpaid care in the [Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report](#) (2020) ('WYUT Report'), [Implementation Framework](#) (2022), and [Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice](#) (2024) ('The Change Agenda'), which were each developed through direct and ongoing engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, girls and gender-diverse mob. The Change Agenda emphasises the need for systemic reforms to address the intersectional nature of care work and its cultural significance, advocating for policies that honour and integrate First Nations' perspectives on care and justice. We encourage consideration of the recommendations provided in these documents.

ECONOMIC SELF-DETERMINATION FOR FIRST NATIONS EMPOWERMENT

Economic self-determination is crucial for the empowerment and autonomy of First Nations communities. It involves the right to participate freely in cultural, social, and economic life, exercising the control over resources and decisions that affect one's community. For First Nations women, economic self-determination is not just about access to economic opportunities; it is deeply tied to cultural identity, community well-being and the continuation of ancestral knowledge.

First Nations women have articulated economic self-determination as a process that integrates traditional roles and modern economic practices. They envision economies that are not extractive or exploitive but are sustainable and community-centric, where care work is recognised as a valuable contribution to economic health. This perspective is informed by a holistic understanding of wellbeing that includes health of the land, community and future generations.

The WYUT Report and Change Agenda emphasise that true self-determination for First Nations women and girls involves creating systems where they can lead in defining what economic success looks like. This includes having a significant role in designing policies and initiatives that affect their lives and communities, ensuring that these



mechanisms are not only inclusive but are also reflective of First Nations values and priorities. These reports advocate for supportive frameworks that recognise the unique challenges faced by First Nations women, proposing targeted strategies to overcome barriers to economic participation and leadership.

BY FOSTERING ENVIRONMENTS WHERE FIRST NATIONS WOMEN CAN THRIVE ECONOMICALLY, IT NOT ONLY UPHOLD THEIR RIGHTS BUT ALSO ENRICHES THE BROADER AUSTRALIAN ECONOMY. SUPPORTING THEIR LEADERSHIP AND FULLY INTEGRATING THEIR PERSPECTIVES INTO ECONOMIC PLANNING LEADS TO MORE RESILIENT AND DIVERSE ECONOMIC SYSTEMS THAT BENEFIT ALL. THEREFORE, POLICIES AIMED AT ECONOMIC SELF-DETERMINATION MUST BE EXPANSIVE AND ADAPTIVE, RECOGNISING THE DIVERSE WAYS FIRST NATIONS WOMEN CONTRIBUTE TO AND REDEFINE ECONOMIC PARADIGMS. DEFINING UNPAID CARE WORK

First Nations conceptions of care and support are far more holistic and intersectional than what is traditionally considered care and support in settler understandings – including those used by governments. The term ‘collective care’ is used to describe the shared responsibility of caring for family, community, and Country, and signifies that the act of care is a means to intergenerationally transfer knowledge and culture. In this



way, care and support not only exist within the formal paid economy but also encompass culturally grounded practices and customs that enable communities to be safe, happy and connected through kinship and Country. In many ways, care is treated as an ethic or value that is held by community to give and receive love, kindness and support, rather than an obligation or occupation.

The Change Agenda envisions care as a central pillar of First Nations gender justice, intimately linked to our cultural integrity and resilience. It acknowledges that care work, as practiced in First Nations communities, is fundamentally a form of empowerment and cultural continuity. It underscores that collective care not only sustains social structures but is also a dynamic force for systemic change. This perspective calls for the integration of First Nations' ways of knowing and doing into policy frameworks to ensure care work is recognised and supported as a crucial aspect of self-determination and justice.

In addition to person-centred care, caring for Country is a vital economic practice threaded through practices of culture and knowledge sharing. That is, care work is a 'glue' that connects everything in perpetuity, guards against exploitative capitalism, and creates the conditions for empowered, thriving and healthy people and communities leading to strong economies.

There is a dramatic inadequacy of mainstream measures and policies to understand and support care provided by and received by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Significantly, experiences within formal, paid care services are not a key theme in Wiyi Yani U Thangani consultations – which were open-ended and led by the women who participated – whereas informal collective care was a major theme and central to women's lived experiences. This reflects the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences of providing care fall outside, or are marginalised, by the mainstream formal economy. The systemic invisibility of this reality means that care work is experienced predominantly as unpaid labour with insufficient social and economic support from formal systems.

To adequately capture this understanding of care, work needs to take place immediately. Key to this change is developing tools and strategies to accurately measure unpaid care work, shifting policy and legislation to broaden their definitions of care, and responding to the systemic challenges faced by unpaid carers through a place-based and community-centred lens.

ONGOING COLONISATION CREATES MORE UNPAID CARE WORK

Because of historic and ongoing colonisation, First Nations women do more unpaid care work than non-Indigenous men and women. Despite being blunt measures of unpaid care, this pattern is reflected in ABS Census data as well as our own research.



Put bluntly, unpaid care work mops up the mess of colonisation – The ongoing and historical impacts of colonisation has and continues to create intergenerational trauma, structural disadvantage, lateral violence, state incarceration, removal of children by the state and creates challenges accessing the formal care sector. Intertwined with racism, discrimination and gender inequalities embedded within mainstream systems and service delivery has forced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to take on complex and heavy care loads¹. This has made accessing supports for care extremely difficult, and maintains harm, exclusion and insecurity.

It also is important to note that state institutions set up to “care”, are often uncaring and can be violent and harmful to First Nations people - such as hospitals, care facilities – such as aged care and child protection, as well as social security. This further adds to the unpaid care demands of First Nations people and all of this damage requires Indigenous people’s care to heal, adding extra demands on existing care loads.

The legacy of colonisation perpetuates an inequitable care burden, exacerbating the intergenerational trauma and systemic disadvantage faced by First Nations communities. The Institute’s work emphasises that the impact of colonisation not only increases the volume of unpaid care work but also deepens the structural inequalities that First Nations women face. Acknowledgement of this historical context in developing supportive measures and policies, ensuring that care work is not only recognised, but also adequately resourced and supported is critical.

Without acknowledging the impacts of colonisation that maintain structures of dispossession, governments will indefinitely respond to these issues as crisis demanding interventions viewed as the fault of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities alone without a cause.² This maintains the invisibility of women’s experiences and voices, and a feedback loop of ongoing harm that requires women to take on a lion’s share of care work, above and beyond communities that do not receive the brunt of colonisation’s harm. The impacts of colonisation creating higher care loads was particularly a theme in the ANU research from interviews of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

¹ The ANU Research further elaborates on these harms as an outcome of settler colonialism: Elise Klein et al., *Caring about Care* (Report, 2024) 19.

² Australian Human Rights Commission, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani: Securing our Rights, Securing our Future* (Report, 2020) 68.



THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN PAID AND UNPAID CARE WORK

Many of the women we spoke to also talked about how unpaid care and paid employment interact. In addition to their unpaid care roles, most women in paid employment in this study had roles in the community sector which put them at the frontline of caring for community. They saw this work as part of their broader commitment to supporting their families, communities and advancing Indigenous peoples. It is therefore hard to draw a line for these women between paid and unpaid work, meaning it is rare to be able to “switch off”.

Often, employers didn’t realise the amount of unpaid care of this type women do in their paid work roles, even though this actually makes their paid employment successful. Women are also not paid adequately for these valuable skills.

The ANU research follows other research (see Bargallie et al., 2023), to argue that a shift to supporting the role of unpaid care is critical in understanding and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in paid employment. Government policy has a limited understanding of work, and focused on getting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers into paid care jobs, however, this will not transform the situation for these women unless the importance of unpaid care is appreciated and supported as critical and important work too. Government policy needs to embrace the unpaid work that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women undertake, and policy needs to support the work they are *already* doing. This will require a policy shift – moving from seeing unpaid care as a burden to seeing it as a form of strength and cultural importance that has its own value. It will also require a deep commitment to decolonisation, and financially supporting Indigenous-controlled organisations.

THE EXPROPRIATION OF CARE WORK

Far from being peripheral to the economy, what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women tell us is that care underpins everything. It is an ethic, a way of life, and is essential to the flourishing of human societies. Care is at the heart of any economic system, and the monetised part of the economy cannot be sustained without the underpinning care of Country, culture and people. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caring economy is holistic, relational, and fundamental to Aboriginal wellbeing. A focus on supporting care work in all its manifestations must be central in healing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to enable them to flourish.



The undervaluing of care work significantly undermines the economic potential of First Nations communities. The WYUT Report advocates for a systemic re-evaluation of how care is valued within the economy, calling for comprehensive measures to integrate care into economic assessments and policies.

There is currently no nationally consistent data for measuring the economic value of unpaid work, including the care work provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. This is important because we know that unpaid care is a critical form of social reproduction and essential for the paid economy to exist. Research shows that the monetary value of unpaid care work in Australia has been estimated to be \$650.1 billion - the equivalent to 50.6% of GDP³. However, there has been no study until now that looked at the monetary value of specifically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's unpaid care work. This invisibility creates and maintains systems of exploitation and expropriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women whereby communities, and the broader economy benefit and generate wealth at a significant social and economic cost to women without reimbursement.⁴ Lack of measurement and evaluation also contributes to gaps in responding effectively to community needs and policy priorities, as well as poor accountability by governments. The Productivity Commission's review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap reflects this failure stating that where evaluations are not taken, they undermine the ability of government to learn, respond to failures and centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, perspectives, priorities and knowledges.⁵

The ANU research included a time-use survey, which showed that all unpaid care activities accounted for, on average, 62% of our participant women's time on a usual weekday (about 14.8 hours per day on average), with 48% of their time (around 11.5 hours) spent caring for others and/or caring for Country and culture specifically. The ANU Research estimates that the market value of First Nation's women's labour ranges between \$223.01 to \$457.39 per day (representing an annual estimated salary of between \$81 175.64 to \$118 921.40). Notably, these estimates are intended to give a sense of the market value, but do not capture the full extent of labour undertaken. For instance, the estimate fails to account for multitasking, even though large proportions of women reported that they were caring for others while also undertaking the primary activities they reported for this study. This labour is not paid for, despite its incredible contribution to women's communities and society, and despite it being expropriated by the settler economy. Moreover, despite the high workload carried by women, many of

³ Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *Unpaid care work and the labour market* (Report, nd) <<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/australian-unpaid-care-work-and-the-labour-market.pdf>>.

⁴ Elise Klein, 'Unpaid care, welfare conditionality and expropriation' (2021) 28(2) *Gender, Work & Organisation* 1475.

⁵ Productivity Commission, *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (Volume 1, Study Report 2024).



the women included in the study are categorised as 'unemployed' and passed off as unproductive by settler policies and measures.

The approximate market value of this unpaid care work raises important questions as to what is owed to Indigenous women, not just because the economy free-rides on unpaid care – something feminists have long noted, but also because much of this unpaid care work of First Nations women is created from colonisation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The depth, breadth, complexity, and skill of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's work, including unpaid care work, calls into question the lenses, measures and frames that have been applied to understanding Indigenous care until now. At best these have been partial. At worst, these have informed deficit discourses that fail to see the sheer volume, skill and importance of the work that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women undertake, while also leaving these crucial contributions desperately under-supported.

In alignment with The Change Agenda, our recommendations advocate for a transformative approach to understanding and supporting unpaid care work. This includes recognising care as a vital component of First Nations' self-determination and cultural continuity, and ensuring that policies and measures reflect the intrinsic value of care in both economic and social dimensions. The Institute supports the recommendations for a comprehensive reworking of care frameworks, integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, and decolonising policy and institutional practices to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment for First Nations people. Our recommendations are broad by support the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice in their change agenda which lays out a blue print for a complete rethinking regarding First Nations women, unpaid work and care. The full ANU report is also attached outlining specific recommendations for policy.

Our recommendations are extensive and require a complete reworking of how care and work is understood in policy – as well as how it is measured. It would also position care as not a burden, but a key base for social and economic transformation. This includes the decolonising of settler institutions and practices. It would also require working with Aboriginal controlled women's organisations that are community based to provide First Nations specific forms of care – and not have these subsumed by non-Indigenous services.

It would also take seriously the extraordinary economic contributions First Nations women's unpaid care work have and continue to provide – which the mainstream economy free rides on.