



# **WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY:**

Aligning the WPS agenda with the priorities  
of First Nation women in Australia Report

April 2023





We thank and acknowledge the women and girls from the Central Arrernte Tribe of Anarpipe for allowing the use of the cover picture.

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This report argues for a focus on First Nation Women's Voices within the Women, Peace and Security agenda. While First Nations women in Australia face a particular set of peace and security challenges, their voices are not regularly centred within discussions of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Aiming to ensure the Women Peace and Security agenda is more inclusive, the Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security commissioned this report to create a space for First Nations women to share and define the agenda, as well as determine priorities for action.

The Indigenous methodology of yarning was conducted with relevant First Nations women in Australia. The respondents were identified through personal and professional contacts as having a relevant contribution to make on this topic.

Yarning is an Indigenous methodology<sup>1</sup> with similarities to semi-structured interviews. 'Yarning' is a form of engagement that is based on storytelling and recognises the strong oral communication preferences and skills of Indigenous Peoples. Yarning can occur across a range of mediums and in individual or group settings ('yarning circles'). The researcher seeks to build on existing rapport with the respondent and conduct a trust-based conversation while ensuring key question topics are covered.

In total, 50 yarns and interviews were conducted during March and April 2023. The yarns were conducted verbally (by telephone and in person), and both individually and in yarning circles where practical or appropriate. Each response was written up by the Indigenous interviewer. The interview responses were combined and reviewed to identify the main themes that emerged. Relevant quotes were selected to illustrate some of the results to provide a clear voice from the women affected.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Bessarab and B. Ng'andu (2010), Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research, International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies Vol. 3 Issue 1 Pages 37-50.

# Results

*“A sense of peace of security can have various meanings, such as freedom from all forms of violence, racism, discrimination, and sexual harassment. However, for me peace and security are equity and equality. I see a greater need for the representation of First Nation women in leadership and governance roles with all aspects of a community leading our way to a much healthier, safer, and healing community.”*

The women who were interviewed or surveyed in this cultural groundwork, come with their heart, spirit and communities and share their life works and dedication from their different perspectives, expertise, front line actions as Indigenous women. They are movement builders, educators, visionaries, engaged on the front line throughout the First Nation communities, organisations and universities on their healing and well-being. The foundation of the report will rest on truth telling, justice, equality, balance, non-discrimination, good faith and universal human rights.

The survey and research conducted through yarning or surveys with First Nations women aims to address research gaps by exploring and bringing together the diverse voices and lived experience of First Nations women around peace and security, challenges, barriers and racism and looks at how they must now be overcome for intergenerational change. The survey and yarning served as a platform for rich discussion and sharing insights that are critically affecting the lives of First Nation women in Australia. The discussions were structured around three key questions:

- What do you think Peace and Security mean to First Nation women in Australia?
- How have your perceptions of Peace and Security shifted in recent years and why?
- What are the top three things you would like the Australian Government to do to build peace and security?

The findings have been used to develop recommendations on how the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security can better deliver for First Nations women in their diversity. The summary of background, findings and recommendations is written into this report for decision makers.

## Report for Peace and Security

In October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The entire Women, Peace and Security Agenda is relevant for First Nations women in conflict-affected societies such as Australia.

On landing in Australia in 1770, Captain James Cook claimed Australia in the name of King George III, on the basis that it was *Terra Nullius*, “*land no one owned prior to European assertion of sovereignty*”. This claim was backed by the Doctrine of Discovery, which decreed that European Christians were able to acquire land that was deemed ‘empty’ even though First Nations people lived there. The Doctrine asserted non-Christians to be nonhuman and therefore unable to own the land on which they lived. In the 1860’s, Victoria became the first state to pass laws authorising Aboriginal children to be removed from their parents. Similar policies were later adopted by other states and territories. From there, comprehensive powers were put in place to regulate every aspect of First Nations people’s lives – many were separated to live in First Nations communities, had wages withheld (Stolen Wages), ownership of land denied, personal relationships and contact with families and communities restricted.

The doctrines, policies, laws and regulations arrayed against First Nation peoples, communities and their culture, left a lasting and inter-generational impact on their lives and well-being. The Women, Peace and Security recognises that First Nations women must be involved in all efforts to sustain peace and security, to promote their equal and meaningful participation.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda is a key framework for advancing the rights of women and girls during conflict and crisis and outlines the importance of integrating gender perspectives into conflict prevention, resolution, and peace building, as well as in disaster and crisis response.

The Women, Peace and Security framework aligns with First Nations women’s advocacy around peace and security challenges in Australia, which should be used to inform Australia’s Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. The National Action Plan centres four key pillars:

1. participation,
2. protection,
3. prevention, and
4. relief and recovery.

It envisions a world without armed conflict, but also goes further mandating action to secure universal freedom from fear and oppression.

Its aims are broad and include:

- The promotion of women’s and civil society empowerment and participation
- Prevention of sexual and gender-based violence
- The protection of vulnerable groups
- Ensuring gender inclusive relief and recovery plans in places hard-hit by armed conflict and insecurity

To ensure the Women Peace and Security Agenda is more inclusive, the Coalition would like to create a space for First Nations women to shape and define the National agenda, as well as determine priorities for action. The Coalition has created a space for First Nations women to share strategies, inspiration, learn about the history of colonisation and how for generations First Nations women and girls have lived without the peace and security that should come from the safety created by the right to homeownership, employment, land and freedom from discrimination.

The Coalition as a network can support the participation of First Nations women by:

- Promoting leadership and self-determination
- Calling for effective and meaningful participation in decision making
- Supporting local solutions
- Urging better protection
- Strengthening our work by exploring how it is informed by historical, social, political and economic experience.
- Applying an intersectional lens across policies and programs

A key part of working together is recognising the complex history and inequality which shape the lives of and have made life difficult for First Nations women. It has been laid bare how much existing policies fail to protect First Nation women due to systemic discrimination and inequality. To forge a just recovery, it is critical they are involved in decision making processes at all levels. Policies and legislation should be deeply rooted in communities, centring the needs of First Nation women, girls and families.

*“With the increased take-up of social media I am heightened by the exposure online for my daughters that’s likely, which victimises women and girls. I hold myself responsible to keep them safe, as they interact with systems, but also online.”*



# Participation

*“In the best interest of the well-being and self-determination for First Nation women, there has to be a holistic approach, the Government and Departments need to work collectively. Under the rights for First Nation women of “Free Prior and Informed Consent,” there has to be consultation with First Nations women/communities to work with them in finding solutions to their priorities, instead of the Government identifying those priorities. The priorities for each community are not in the same order.”*

Whilst the Australian Federal Government and State Governments have made attempts to provide human rights instruments for First Nations women and girls, they need to work more collectively to ensure equality. Investing in the participation of First Nations communities and women to address, implement and adopt policies, legislation and programs which have a cultural, holistic and rights-based approach for the empowerment and safety of First Nations women and girls is vital.

Supporting First Nations women in leadership roles has to be backed by the Government and the private sector, through reforms to program and service delivery. First Nations women need to be at the centre of the decision-making and delivery processes and not be a passive bystander. Their participation will help advance policy and legislation through the types of solutions they propose. This will build a pathway for First Nations women to play a key role in the building process to ensure their lives are free from discrimination and to have peace and security.

The support of First Nations women’s participation and leadership in the security sector strengthens legislation, frameworks and policies. Participation is one of the pillars for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

*“Provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with the tools to lead, implement and develop community-based programs and supports that address issues of peace and security specific to their language and community group”.*



# Domestic Violence

***“Ensure school workforce and curriculum teach how trauma harms, and that a mature Australia does not tolerate victimisation in any form.”***

International human rights standards are still required in an effort to help protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the justice system – for example, statistics on violence perpetrated against First Nations women show rates are high and violence takes place both in the home and on the streets. Violence is complex and multi-faceted, resulting in years of dispossession and marginalisation of First Nation women, their families and communities. The relationship between First Nations women and the Government can at times be a paternalistic one. Oversimplification of this issue may at times serve a political agenda, but does not serve the women, families and girls whose lives are at risk.

First Nations women and children have extremely limited housing pathways to choose from in the aftermath of domestic and family violence. Transitional and long-term housing, particularly in regional and remote locations, is not available or very limited. Therefore they are turned away from refuges and safe houses because they are at capacity. This leaves them in a revolving door situation between crisis and transitional services, homelessness (often involving shelter with family/friends) or returning to an unsafe home. This is the likely key factor in the high rates of domestic and family violence related injury among First Nations women.

First Nations women support engagement with men, youth, brother boys, sisters girls, elders, disabilities and LGBTQIA+ to challenge gender inequality and find local cultural solutions to any form of violence. Violence in all forms is an obstacle to the achievement of equality, development and peace. Therefore, security in housing, financial assistance, legal assistance, healing and funding for resources are urgently needed, as are effective steps to eliminate violence against First Nations women and children. The Women, Peace and Security agenda calls for a strengthening of justice and security institutions that protect women and girls from violence.

***“More safe, secure housing needs to be made available for ALL women but especially Aboriginal women fleeing domestic violence situations including better financial support. Counselling needs to be provided to families especially young ones who have been impacted to break the cycle and intergenerational trauma. The men need to have increased programs to get them to break the cycle too and say no to violence.”***

# Housing

*“Peace is where we are content and everything is running smoothly. Security is knowing that I have a safe home for the children and for me, and I am emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically strong.”*

For First Nations women in remote areas, rates of household overcrowding are much higher in remote communities (34%) than in urban areas (8%).<sup>2</sup> Research in the Barkley region in Northern Territory, 500 km north of Alice Springs, found up to 22 residents in some three-bedroom houses.<sup>3</sup>

Limited housing pathways and overcrowding places First Nations women at risk of having their children removed by Family Services, as long-term stable housing cannot be secured in the timeframe specified in the policies and legislation for transitioning children to permanent care. The Covid-19 pandemic put more strain on existing housing issues for First Nation women with some shelters having to reduce services or close down due to public health and physical distancing rules. The deeply embedded and systemic shortfalls in housing and social support for First Nations women shows the issue needs to be tackled beyond expanding emergency housing support.

The high rates of homelessness, overcrowding and poor housing have a high impact on First Nations health indicators and fuel the disproportionately high rate of First Nations children entering the child protection and youth detention systems.<sup>4</sup>

Functional and uncrowded housing provides security, safety and protection for First Nations women and children. The lack of safety and security has been connected with transient visitors which can increase levels of violence, and the social stress associated with over-crowding may contribute to family and domestic violence.

Housing is the basis of stability and security. A home should be a place to live in peace and security.

*“Affordable housing, we live as a holistic system, we live as an extended family model and housing should cater for our extended living”.*

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<sup>2</sup> The Conversation–Nina Lansbury Hall, Andrew Redmond, Paul Memmott, Samuel Barnes <https://theconversation.com/fix-housing-and-youll-reduce-risks-of-coronavirus-and-other-disease-in-remote-indigenouscommunities-1360>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples on her visit to Australia – Human Rights council, Thirty-sixth session, 11–29 September 2017, Agenda item 3, Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

# Land Tenure Insecurity

*“Housing affordability for low-income families/single mothers to enter the home ownership market needs to be urgently addressed, to bring peace and security for First Nations women, children, families, and communities. Address home ownership for First Nation women in the urban areas as well as in communities, to provide a safe and secure environment for themselves and families.”*

Land tenure insecurity is the root cause of other forms of insecurity, particularly in remote communities. For example, some First Nations remote communities in Queensland are impacted by Deeds of Grant in Trust (DOGIT), meaning the Minister for Resources appoints a trustee as manager and administers responsibility for Aboriginal DOGIT land. The ability to home ownership for First Nation people in those areas, the trustees of the land have the power to grant leases under the agreement for 99-year land lease (communities). Otherwise they have to make a request to the Local Council who are the trustee to the land on the community, for the Council use their powers to make their house block freehold, at the moment the land is held in trust for the benefit of the community, it a community tenure. This can be a long process.

Communal-title land in remote areas for First Nations communities are held jointly in some form of a trust for the broader ‘community’.<sup>5</sup> First Nations people have different levels of property rights over different land. Land is a fundamental asset for sustainable economic development for First Nations women, and security of land tenure is associated with improved economic outcomes.

The routes to home ownership for First Nations women are also limited by financial barriers because they have no income or limited income, and they are without economic opportunities in their communities.

The spiritual beliefs of First Nations women are deeply rooted in their connection with land and often subsistence activities of hunting, fishing, and gathering. Access to or ownership of land includes rules for leadership, inheritance and group belonging. Access to land puts First Nations women in a stronger position to leverage and protect their interests. Land rights are crucial to the collective identity of First Nations women and groups.

First Nations land rights and tenure security are important for equity and economic growth to develop and reduce poverty and violence. Land is fundamental for peace, and one of the objectives of peace and security is challenging unjust structures and building the right relationships to help transform the way people and communities live, through sustainable social and cultural living that improves their security.

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<sup>5</sup> Australia Institute of Health and Welfare – Indigenous housing – Australian Institute of Health and Welfare ([aihw.gov.au](http://aihw.gov.au))

# Financial Security

*“Security is knowing that your way of life is safe from attack, having an adequate income and equal access to opportunities.”*

First Nations women face some of the most challenging economic circumstances within Australia. Employment is a vital aspect of financial security.

A paid job provides income, superannuation, and opportunities for Australian women. The workforce participation rate for First Nations women is 51.5 percent compared with 59 per cent for Australian women overall. This gap is driven in part by differences in skills, training and educational opportunities, and the limited number of economic opportunities in areas where First Nation women live.

Economic well-being that consistently meets the basic needs of First Nations women and girls is linked to security, satisfaction, and personal fulfillment. Empowering First Nations women and girls to achieve positive economic and social outcomes will play a vital role in establishing and maintaining their peace and security. Australia’s Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security should consider ways to expand economic prosperity and opportunity in line with the Women, Peace and Security agenda.



# Protection within International Frameworks

The United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples creates new possibilities for Indigenous peoples. It is an International Human Rights instrument that creates a comprehensive stand-alone framework that defines our rights. It has 41 articles and is the new order for the day for 143 nations around the world. The Declaration was endorsed by the Australian Government on 3rd April 2009, reversing the decision of the previous Government who had voted against it in 2007. Though not legally binding or enforceable in Australia, the Declaration is a vehicle for strengthening the rights of First Nations women and girls. First Nations women are standing at a crossroads. This Declaration brings their rights into the 21st century and lays a path for their self-determination.

First Nations women continue to challenge current legal frameworks that impact their self-determination, and to advance any further they need implementation of the United Nations Declaration. It provides a life-line to make our laws and culture more just. The social issues and gaps facing First Nations women and their families mean they have the highest rate of child removal, poor housing, high rates of suicide, domestic violence, high incarceration rates, mental health issues and unemployment. These social harms have lingered for so long they are seen as normal and threaten to become permanent. The United Nations Declaration is specifically designed to solve these hard to solve social harms through a human rights framework.

Articles 21 and 22 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples refer specifically to particular rights and needs of First Nations women. First Nations women and girls can use the Declaration to lobby for reforms to laws and policies, in particular Article 7 (1) and (2) emphasizing the importance of the demilitarization of the lands and territories of Indigenous peoples, and how this contributes to peace, economic and social progress and development, understanding and friendly relations among nations and peoples of the world.

The Declaration recognises the serious challenges facing First Nations women, explicitly stating that States must take serious measures, together with First Nations peoples, to ensure that First Nations women enjoy full protection against all forms of violence and discrimination.

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Recommendation 39 is the first language in a binding international treaty focused on the rights of Indigenous Women and Girls and answers to an enduring call by Indigenous women for a specific instrument to further and protect their rights. Australia is a signatory to CEDAW. Recommendation 39.

By adopting a human-rights based approach to international peace and security and aligning their efforts with the human rights mechanisms the Australian Government can ensure their actions contribute to long-term changes to inequality and discrimination.

# Discrimination and Barriers

***“We need more support systems; we should not have to go through Domestic Violence to get support”.***

First Nations women and girls continue to face many challenges because of discrimination and barriers. Some of those challenges are:

- Social policies are enforced and interpreted in different ways by non-First Nations people working with women, including social workers
- Very few First Nations women are represented in leadership and management positions where serious decision making is done to truly influence change.

First Nations women and girls suffer high levels of discrimination, extreme poverty and poor health care. Poverty is one of the main reasons they face issues with the child protection system. Discrimination is grounded in the historical exclusion of First Nations women; barriers include limited access to financial resources, capacity building, or support for First Nations women and communities to meet their basic needs. First Nations communities’ access to well resourced education and economic systems are also impacted, compounding their poverty and limiting their development.

Overcoming discrimination requires multiple strategies and collective actions with differentiated peacebuilding approaches to shape the values concerning and rights of First Nation women to be equal in Australia. These approaches have to align with Australia’s Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and aim to challenge discriminatory gender norms.

***“Clear and simple approaches/tools to identify and address racism and discrimination in the workplace and/or public.”***

# The New Emerging Threat of Climate Change

***“Local First Nations women lead, engage, and participate in the local disaster management cycle before, during and after”.***

There now exists a strong evidence base that First Nations women’s participation in peace and security processes is essential to their operational effectiveness in relation to climate change.

Water-related impacts from climate change in remote areas include impacts on surface water quality and on the speed of recharge of groundwater supplies.<sup>6</sup> Australia is projected to continue to experience a range of human-induced climate change impacts on the physical environment, including more frequent and severe extreme weather events. In turn, these impacts will have both direct and indirect effects on human health. Remote First Nations communities are highly vulnerable to such physical and health impacts as they are often located in harsh environments, isolated from many services, and the population can be economically disadvantaged and with an existing high burden of chronic and acute disease.<sup>7</sup>

Torres Strait Islanders are part of the First Nations population. The Torres Strait region includes 18 communities on 17 inhabited islands and is among the most vulnerable regions to climate change. There is no adequate protection for these communities from the impact of climate change. Rising sea levels have already damaged food resources and ancestral burial sites, and their homes are at risk of being submerged.

Rather than sweeping national policies there needs to be a focus on the unique needs of these communities and the voices and concerns of First Nation women from the Torres Strait have to be heard when developing solutions to support the security of their homes and traditional knowledge.

***“The Government should be looking at the erosion on the islands and they need to make sure the communities are made safe. Where our reefs are getting killed and they should be saving our islands from climate change.”***

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<sup>6</sup> Climate Change Impacts on Health in Remote Indigenous Communities in Australia – Nina Hall, Lucy Crosby Published online 16th June 2020 – National Library of Medicine Climate Change Impacts on Health in Remote Indigenous Communities in Australia – PubMed (nih.gov)

<sup>7</sup> ibid

# Truth Telling

The Australian constitution does not allow anyone to apply directly to the courts regarding a violation of their rights. Complaints have to be lodged in tribunals, and First Nations women do not have the resources to find legal advice or the support of a representative to go through the tribunals process.

Therefore, the Uluru Statement to the Heart, The Voice and Treaty are important for securing change for First Nations peoples and women. The Australian Constitution does not adequately protect their rights. The Constitution has a relationship with Senators, Federal Government and States. It does not have a relationship with the people. First Nations women and peoples must have constitutional protection to avoid regression.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are gaining rights and one of the ways has been through international and national legal instruments that have pressured the Government into adopting specific policies. Therefore, to ensure peace and security, cross-movement building is essential as well as utilising First Nations women's traditional knowledge, supporting empowerment, participation and leadership through their rights under the Free, Prior and Informed Consent framework.

Enhancing First Nations engagement in sustainable peace and security requires an integrated approach and it will strengthen national accountability in ensuring their protection from all forms of human rights violations. Truth telling is essential to achieve long-lasting peace, and social change is necessary for peace building.



# Conclusion

*“Pushing towards holistic healing which will in turn give us the peace needed.”*

First Nations women have suffered the brunt of colonisation and are still living it. Federal and State governments have an obligation to ensure their safety and security. First Nations women’s human rights are now increasingly being recognised and so are the human rights violations and abuses they face. This includes domestic violence and family violence, and the gendered denial of economic, social, and cultural rights. Overlapping and intersecting oppressions shape First Nations women’s understanding of race, class, cultural beliefs, and sexual orientation.

Intersectionality means, rather than looking at First Nations women through the lens of only their race and gender, we consider the whole of the picture of who they are, for example:

Remote First Nation women in communities, lack access to employment, lack of transport, housing issues, this shows the interaction and overlapping of gender, class inequalities and geographic isolations which have negative effects on their lives.

Intersectionality provides a better understanding of the multiple interactions of different social inequalities and systems that impact the challenges First Nations women face.

For First Nations women it is just not domestic violence, it is the multiple barriers that the First Nations women have to face, all of these combined have placed limitations as they suffer multiple hardships and barriers. The whole circle of First Nation women’s issues is not taken into account, and this is the failings of the specific conditions that First Nation women face as well as the cultural values and challenges they face.

Existing systems and mainstream discourses fail to address the specific dynamics of First Nation Women’s peace and security and they fail to see the differences between indigenous and non-indigenous women. First Nations women have many issues arrayed against them, and the situation is worse for a First Nations woman who is living with disability, LGBTQIA+ and on top of everything, living with historical trauma.

*“Security is paramount, we all need to feel safe and secure within our homes, neighbourhoods, and workplaces. This encompasses both psychical and psychological safety. When legislation is looked at for change, governments need to ensure that the end product is useful for all, as many fall between the gaps as laws are either antiquated or not able to be looked at from differing perspectives. For example, people with disabilities need to be looked at as individual cases and not grouped in one size fits all, this goes for domestic violence, mental health and other areas. Women are often put at risk because they don’t fit in a particular group or box the legislation covers.”*

# Recommendation

## Recommendation 1

Prioritise the genuine participation and engagement of First Nations peoples by adopting an explicit First Nations Foreign Policy.

## Recommendation 2

Implement the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Indigenous Rights Framework, a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of Indigenous peoples, including recognition of the collective right to live in freedom, peace and security.

## Recommendation 3

Incorporate the United Nations Declaration on the Indigenous Rights Framework into domestic law and develop monitoring and reporting mechanisms that track progress and outcomes to hold government agencies and departments accountable to its provisions.

## Recommendation 4

Endorse and implement the Uluru statement from the Heart as critical to upholding the security of First Nations women and revisit Australia's Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security to ensure it integrates truth telling, treaty, and voice within state, territory and federal government policies and frameworks.

## Recommendation 5

Support the meaningful participation of First Nations women in Federal and State level decision making, to shape and strengthen policies and laws, to build security and peace.

## Recommendation 6

Demonstrate accountability by negotiating with and support First Nations women to participate in meetings as the Traditional Landowners who hold the right to make decisions on the development of their land, and support them to take leadership roles.

## Recommendation 7

Ensure Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Children is fully resourced and ensure it is integrated into the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

## Recommendation 8

Review Australia's Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security to ensure it addresses the various issues facing First Nations Women with a holistic approach. These issues are all interdependent. First Nations women's health insecurity is impacted, by housing insecurity, which is impacted by food insecurity issues, which is impacted by economic insecurity. The Government has to stop addressing these issues in isolation as that approach has not worked for the last two hundred years.

### Recommendation 9

Service delivery, allocation of resources and the development of programs needs to be culturally appropriate and delivered in partnership with First Nations women/peoples.

*“Children need the foundation of support and the balance of from the parents and grandparents. What is the sense of society? We talk of peace and security in the world but not in the home.”*



We thank and acknowledge Darumbal mother and daughters.



