



Centering First Nations Perspectives in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Australia: Recommendations for Action

The Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security

Background

In October 2022, the Australian Civil Society Coalition (the Coalition) undertook consultations with women and gender diverse people across Australia, to explore their perspectives on peace and security and priorities for action. Participants in the consultation raised a variety of challenges facing First Nations women, who are disproportionately impacted by conflict and insecurity. The unique peace and security issues faced by First Nations women in Australia were a strong emerging theme and warranted further exploration.

As a result, in March 2023, the Coalition engaged Professor Sandra Creamer, to carry out additional research focused on the perspectives of First Nations Women. Professor Creamer conducted yarning, individually and in yarning circles, with 50 First Nations women from across Australia. Yarning is an Indigenous methodology based on storytelling with similarities to semi-structured interviews, and which recognises the strong oral communication preferences of Indigenous peoples

This paper summarises the responses to both consultations in the hope of serving as a foundation for embedding the WPS agenda within Australia's First Nations Policy. First Nations perspectives are often overlooked in discussions related to the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Coalition hopes to help bridge the gap in policy and research by amplifying the diverse voices and lived experiences of First Nations women.

Intersectionality

Participants in both consultations reiterated that First Nations women are not a homogenous group and called for an intersectional and feminist approach that recognises the differing needs of women based on age, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, disability, gender-diversity and other characteristics. Such an approach is essential in ensuring that policies and programs are developed with a full understanding of the complex and intersecting systems of oppression that diverse First Nations women face.

The Legacy of Colonisation and State-Sanctioned Violence

Many First Nations women in Australia still live in communities under intense securitisation and policing as a legacy of European colonisation. The peace and security perspectives of First Nations women continue to be impacted by the legacy of colonisation and the intergenerational trauma caused by dispossession of land and culture, as well as the long term impact of state-sanctioned violence and genocide. This includes higher rates of gender-based violence and barriers to accessing services caused by racism, gender inequality and the ongoing impacts of colonisation.

Responses from First Nations women called for work to promote harmony, unity and the leadership of impacted communities in building peace and security. They advocated for an approach to peacebuilding

that recognises and respects cultural difference and the important role of elders and community leaders. They also emphasised that deployment of police and peacekeeping forces may not be appropriate in marginalised communities with a history of government-sanctioned violence and oppression.

International Instruments

The United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples provides a framework for the rights of Indigenous peoples and was endorsed by the Australian Government in 2009. The Declaration recognises the 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 also focuses on the rights of Indigenous women and girls. Australia has ratified both instruments but has not fully codified them into domestic law. Through this, there is an opportunity for consultation with First Nations women in Australia to ensure these international instruments can support the fulfilment of their rights.

Participation

The Australian Government should recognise and resource the extensive and important work that First Nations women do as peacebuilders in their communities and around the world, and recognise truth telling, treaty, and voice as an essential to their achievement of peace. First Nations women want the opportunity to address their trauma and to tell their stories through truth-telling, acknowledging the systemic harm, oppression, and violence that First Nations communities have faced and continue to face.

More broadly, participants highlighted the importance of the Australian Government investing in the participation of First Nations communities, and specifically women, in policymaking, legislation, and program implementation. This must be done through a culturally appropriate, holistic, and rights-based approach, that provides opportunity for leadership by, and ensures the safety of, First Nations women and girls. First Nations women's active participation will help advance policy and legislation, leading to solutions that address their unique challenges.

First Nations women and girls face discrimination, poverty, and limited access to social services, all of which impact their ability to participate in decision making that impacts their lives. Overcoming this marginalisation will require collective action and differentiated peacebuilding and engagement approaches that challenge discriminatory gender norms.

Violence Prevention and Response

First Nations women want and have a right to feel safe in domestic and public spaces, as well as online, and some reported that their awareness and understanding of various forms of violence had been

heightened by recent media attention. Respondents raised a range of concerns related to intimate partner and domestic violence, calling for better access to support systems for those experiencing and needing to escape family and domestic violence.

Participants called for Apprehended Violence Orders and Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders to be given more power to guarantee the safety of women and their children, as well as calls for greater access to culturally and linguistically appropriate justice, health and mental health services for all women, and particularly those facing and escaping violence. They argued for a holistic and whole-community approach to prevention and addressing social norms embedded in local culture and with local leadership.

Financial Security

First Nations women in Australia face significant economic challenges, with a workforce participation rate lower than the overall rate for Australian women, due to factors such as limited education and training opportunities and a lack of locally available economic opportunities, particularly for women living in rural and regional areas. Lack of financial security leaves women more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and makes it more difficult to escape intimate-partner and domestic violence. Employment is crucial for women's financial security and personal fulfilment, and achieving positive economic and social outcomes is essential for their peace and security.

Housing Security

Currently, First Nations women in remote areas experience high rates of housing insecurity and household overcrowding. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing housing issues, and expanding emergency housing support alone will not be sufficient to address the problem, particularly in the context of a growing rental crisis in Australia.

High rates of homelessness, overcrowding, and poor housing have a significant impact on First Nations health indicators and put women at risk of having their children removed by Family Services. This is also a contributing factor to the disproportionate number of First Nations children in child protection and youth detention systems. Adequate housing provides security, safety, and protection for First Nations women and children, and can help reduce violence associated with transient visitors and social stress from overcrowding.

Land Security

Land tenure insecurity is a major issue highlighted by women in remote First Nations communities. Where land is jointly owned by the community, it can be challenging for individuals to obtain freehold title to land for home ownership. Communal-title can impact the ability of First Nations women to secure their homes, access economic opportunities, and exercise their rights. The spiritual beliefs of First Nations women are also deeply rooted in their connection with land and with subsistence activities such as hunting and fishing.

Ensuring land rights and tenure security is crucial for the peace and security, as well as the spiritual harmony, of First Nations women.

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is an entitlement acknowledged in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It empowers First Nations People to consent or dissent to a project that could have an impact on them or their land and enables them to withdraw consent at any point. This provides First Nations people with the opportunity to negotiate the terms and conditions for the design, execution, tracking and assessment of the project.. The Free, Prior and Informed Consent principle is part of the fundamental right to self-determination and First Nations women called for this to be written into Australian law.

Climate Insecurity

Many First Nations women in Australia live in communities and regions at particular risk of insecurity caused by climate change impacts, which disproportionately affect remote communities with limited access to services. This includes Torres Strait Islander women, who are among the most vulnerable to climate change impacts with rising sea levels damaging food resources, burial sites, and homes. First Nations women are calling for their right to be involved in decision making around Australia's approach to climate change, domestically and overseas.

Those most impacted by climate change are often those who have least access to political influence and power. By centering First Nations voices in debates around climate change, Australia can ensure that the policies and solutions proposed are informed by those with valuable knowledge and expertise about their local environment and the challenges they face. This knowledge can inform the development of policies and solutions that are better adapted to the local context, more effective, and more sustainable.

A First Nations Approach to Foreign Policy

A First Nations approach to foreign policy involves recognizing and respecting Indigenous sovereignty, knowledge, and values in international affairs. It involves building cross-border relationships and partnerships between Indigenous communities, engaging in respectful dialogue, and supporting self-determination and decolonization efforts in Australia and overseas. It prioritises issues with particular impacts on First Nations peoples, such as climate change, human rights violations, and the protection of Indigenous cultures and languages.

Participants recognised the invaluable work that has already been done to frame a First Nations approach to foreign policy by First Nations thought-leaders (for example [Blackwell & Ballangarry, 2022](#)) and called on the Government to adopt and uphold the principles they have outlined.

Integrating First Nations worldviews and unique cosmologies in policy approaches aligns with Feminist perspectives, and offers valuable insights in areas such as sustainability, caring for Country, and

relationality. Adopting a First Nations Foreign Policy will not only advance the interests of First Nations peoples but also set global standards for respecting human rights and democratic principles.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for the Australian Government were proposed through these consultations and form a set of actions that can be taken to enhance the peace and security of First Nations women and girls in Australia.

Recommendation 1: Prioritise the genuine participation and engagement of First Nations peoples as a core principle within Australia's First Nations Foreign Policy.

Recommendation 2: Implement the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including the collective right to live in freedom, peace and security. The Declaration should be incorporated into domestic law and monitoring and reporting mechanisms developed to track progress and outcomes and hold government agencies and departments accountable to its provisions.

Recommendation 3: 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 integrate truth telling, treaty, and voice within state, territory and Federal government policies and frameworks.

Recommendation 4: Support the meaningful participation of First Nations women in Federal, State and local level decision making, to shape and strengthen policies and laws that build security and peace for all people in Australia.

Recommendation 5: Negotiate 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 their leadership.

Recommendation 6: Ensure Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Children is fully resourced and integrated into the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security as fundamental to ensuring the peace and security of all women in Australia.

Recommendation 7: Recognise and prioritise the knowledge and perspectives of First Nations peoples in responding to climate change, including by elevating Indigenous science and traditional knowledge in policy and decision-making processes, as well as to ensure First Nations womens' systematic participation in the United Nations Climate Change Conference process.

Recommendation 8: Ensure social services and programs are resourced, culturally appropriate and delivered in partnership with First Nations women/peoples.

Recommendation 9: Provide new pathways to home ownership and housing security for First Nations women, including by ensuring Indigenous Business Australia reviews its guidelines for home ownership loans for single mothers and older First Nations women.

Recommendation 10: Review Australia's Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security to ensure it addresses the various issues facing First Nations women outlined in this report, taking a holistic and intersectional approach.

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