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WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE

INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE FACT SHEETS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have always had valued roles and responsibilities in the governance of their families, clans, communities and nations. Today, senior women are often the bedrock of community and family wellbeing, and are active in many leadership and governance roles.

And the number of women in important governing roles in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, communities and organisations is growing.

But just like in the wider non-Indigenous Australian environment, challenges remain for women in Indigenous governance settings. These challenges are not just about the numbers; that is, equal representation of women reflected in membership, governance leadership, or organisational staffing and membership.

Challenges can also be experienced in terms of decision making power, respect and recognition of women's voices, leadership and capabilities, how resources are allocated to women and men, and ensuring that processes and structures are designed to overcome structural barriers to women's participation.

With carefully-considered strategies, these challenges can be overcome.



“Black women make the best leaders”

Michelle Deshong, CEO,
Australian Indigenous Governance Institute

CHALLENGES FACING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women face what is called 'intersectional' discrimination and disadvantage: that is, the combined effect of structural racism experienced as Indigenous people, and gender inequality experienced as a result of being women.

Gender inequality means that power, resources and opportunities are unequally distributed between men and women in a way which tends to advantage men and disadvantage women. It also means that women and men are afforded unequal value in social settings through attitudes, norms and practices.

Some of the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experience of adversity can manifest to affect their active participation in governance includes:

- lack of community and external stakeholder opportunity for or recognition women's voice, representation and participation in organisational or community decision making
- high rates of gender-based violence and specific traumas
- carrying more burden of unpaid work: domestic duties, caring for families and communities, healing trauma
- restricting ideas and beliefs about women's leadership capacities

more limited opportunities and resources afforded to women, including young women, to be exposed to capacity-building experiences, skills training, and mentoring opportunities.

International instruments which support Indigenous women's rights to equal participation in governance:

Endorsed by Australia in 2003, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) provides individual and collective rights for Indigenous peoples pertaining to their culture, identity, language, employment, health and education.

The Declaration also emphasises the rights of Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous women, to participate in decision-making institutions.

In signing the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Australia has committed to increasing the number of women in political and public life and to ensure that political and public bodies reflect the full diversity of the population, including Indigenous women and women from ethnic minorities.

Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre: converting discrimination into change

Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre was founded in Fitzroy Crossing in the mid-1980s. Its founders are women who had experienced and witnessed the devastation of domestic violence, and decided to do something about it.

They acknowledged their invisibility in local community governance structures and in formal dialogues with government, so formed their own platform to have a voice. Today, Marninwarntikura continues to lead its communities through healing, rebuilding and improving wellbeing.

HARNESSING THE STRENGTH OF WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have the right and the capabilities to actively participate in and shape Indigenous governance for the better. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women make Indigenous governance stronger, healthier, and more representative of a diversity of needs, viewpoints, skills and experiences.

“Black women make the best leaders ... [Black women exhibit] three particular traits that I think are extremely important in leadership. Passion ... We are passionate about our culture, about our communities, about our families. And we are passionate about passing on knowledge to the next generation ... This passion has led to work not only individually, but for the greater good ... The second is resilience. The strongest people in the world are not the ones who are most protected. They are the ones who have had to face struggles, adversity, and obstacles, surmount them, and survive. Aboriginal women have displayed a perseverance and resilience that has taken us through decades of change. We have achieved great things ... And finally, courage: the mental and moral strength to face difficulty, fear, and adversity, and to become better for it ... To me, these are the things that drive a better community.”

- Michelle Deshong, CEO, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, 'Black women: tipping the balance', Tedx|CUCairns, 2015

The onus is on us in rebuilding Indigenous governance to strategise to support women's active participation.

For more information, please see the Indigenous Governance Toolkit: toolkit.aigi.com.au



TIPS

Supporting women in governance:

Here are some example questions to prompt your thinking about how to better support women's representation, voice and decision-making power in your governance settings. Consult and listen to women in workshoping responses to these questions. As you think through these questions, ask yourself: in our governance setting, what can we do / do more / do better?

- Do we encourage women's representation—as board members, managers or members—at all levels of governance in the community or organisation?
- Does our community recognise and support women's participation in community conflict resolution and community development? Do women in our community have opportunities for decision making in organisations and community affairs?
- Does our organisation reserve spaces for women in our governance body?
- Does our organisation's rules include measures to protect women's rights and prevent discrimination?
- Does our community or organisation have plans to develop women's legal, management and financial literacy?
- Does our community or organisation recognise and value women's roles in making policies and rules?
- Has our organisation or community analysed its budget and made sure resources and money are distributed in an equitable way, internally and in external projects?
- Has our organisation or community set up leadership training and mentoring networks for young women in the community?
- Can we build on the idea of culturally-spaces for women to support and grow women's leadership and participation?
- Does our organisation or community support women to address violence and trauma through for example a responsive and caring environment, referral and access to services, time out of duties / family violence leave, opportunities for self-care?
- Does our organisation recognise women's multiple roles through providing flexibility, a family-friendly environment and time out / leave for caring duties?