

REPORT

The 3rd National First Nations Women in Leadership Summit

Presented by The Hatchery, in partnership with NATSIWA — 20–21 May 2026, Meanjin (Brisbane)

1. Executive Summary

The First Nations Women UNLIMITED Leadership Summit is the third edition of an annual national summit series presented by The Hatchery in partnership with NATSIWA. Held over two days in Meanjin (Brisbane) on 20–21 May 2026, the summit convened First Nations women leaders from government, community organisations and the private sector, alongside a ministerial address from the Minister for Indigenous Australians and a keynote from Professor Marcia Langton AO.

Beyond its function as a networking and professional-development event, the summit surfaced a consistent set of policy and advocacy positions concerning structural underrepresentation, the value of lived experience as a form of institutional authority, and the strategic case for First Nations women taking up roles inside mainstream systems rather than solely advocating from outside them. Section 3 of this report sets out these positions in more depth, situating them against the broader representation data on First Nations people in leadership roles.

2. A Reflection from The Hatchery

Over the past three years, NATSIWA has partnered with The Hatchery on three First Nations Women in Leadership Summits, bringing together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from government, health, education, community services and the not-for-profit sector.

NATSIWA has shaped the programs from the outset, guiding the program structure, speaker selection and content to ensure they reflected the priorities and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The Hatchery has brought its expertise in program design, event delivery and audience engagement to create a platform for these voices and experiences to be shared.

The strength of the partnership has been bringing these capabilities together to deliver programs that are relevant, respectful and meaningful, while creating opportunities for women to connect, learn and lead. We're proud of what we've built together and look forward to continuing the partnership.

— Andrew Savage, CEO, The Hatchery

3. Critical Policy and Advocacy Insights

The sessions and addresses at the summit converged on several substantive positions relevant to policymakers, employers and advocacy organisations working on First Nations workforce and leadership issues, summarised below.

3.1 The representation gap remains structural, not incidental

First Nations people make up around five per cent of the national workforce but hold only 0.7 per cent of senior management positions, according to the 2023 Australian Indigenous Employment Index. The summit's framing treated this gap as a product of institutional design rather than a pipeline or "readiness" problem — sessions repeatedly located the barrier in decision-making structures that were not built with First Nations women's participation in mind, rather than in the capability of First Nations women themselves.

3.2 Representation inside institutions is framed as strategy, not compromise

A recurring position across several sessions, including the panel First Nations women who change systems, not just succeed within them, was that First Nations women taking up roles inside government and mainstream organisations is a deliberate structural intervention. The argument: those closest to the harms of a system carry the standing to redirect what that system funds, values and prioritises — meaning institutional entry is advocacy carried out by other means, not a departure from it. This has direct implications for how organisations frame senior First Nations appointments: as structural reform mechanisms rather than diversity milestones.

3.3 Advocacy that resists policy silos is positioned as more effective

Speakers, including Penney Ferguson (CEO, First Nations Women's Legal Service Queensland), argued for advocacy models that represent the whole person rather than routing individuals through separate, disconnected policy systems (health, housing, legal, education). The summit's position is that fragmented service and policy design is itself a barrier to effective advocacy, since it forces community leaders and service providers to work around structural divisions that don't reflect how disadvantage is actually experienced.

3.4 Government engagement was direct, not symbolic

The Hon Malarndirri McCarthy, Minister for Indigenous Australians, delivered a ministerial address addressing what First Nations women bring to Australia's future, and Senator Jana Stewart spoke on representation and institutional accountability. Their attendance signals an

active, direct channel between this advocacy network and current Commonwealth policymaking on Indigenous affairs, rather than the summit operating solely as a community or industry event.

3.5 Workforce sustainability is framed as a retention and policy issue

Sessions on "building leadership legacy without burnout" reframed attrition risk among First Nations women in senior roles as a structural workforce issue rather than an individual resilience gap. The summit's position was that organisations and funders that do not account for the compounding load of cultural, community and family responsibility alongside professional responsibility will continue to lose senior First Nations women from leadership pipelines regardless of recruitment investment.

3.6 Implications

- Organisations reporting on First Nations leadership representation should treat appointment numbers as one indicator among several, alongside retention, decision-making authority, and whether appointees have genuine influence over resourcing.
- Policy and program design that separates First Nations women's issues into single-portfolio categories (health-only, housing-only) runs counter to the advocacy model most consistently endorsed at the summit.
- Government and corporate engagement with this summit series appears to be deepening (ministerial and Senate-level attendance in 2026), suggesting it is becoming a recognised channel for Indigenous affairs policy engagement rather than a standalone professional development event.

4. Speakers and Programming

Key Speakers

- Hon Malarndirri McCarthy — Yanyuwa woman, Minister for Indigenous Australians, Parliament of Australia (ministerial address)
- Professor Marcia Langton AO — Yiman & Bidjara woman, Associate Provost & Foundation Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies, University of Melbourne
- Senator Jana Stewart — Mutthi Mutthi & Wamba Wamba woman, Labor Senator for Victoria
- Wendy Anders — Arrernte woman, CEO, NATSIWA
- Sarah Corrigan — Chair, NATSIWA

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- Dr Michelle Deshong — Kuku Yalanji woman, Founder, Deshong Consulting
- Lil Gordon — Ngemba woman, First Assistant Secretary – First Nations Partnerships, Dept of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport & the Arts
- Marjorie Anderson — NSW Aboriginal Woman of the Year 2025, Head of Indigenous Affairs & Government Affairs, Lifeline
- Penney Ferguson — CEO, First Nations Women's Legal Service Queensland
- Lisa Sarago — Bundaburra Yidinji/Western Yalanji woman, CEO & Founder, Digital Trackers

Additional speakers included Helen Ockerby (Shooting Stars), Lucy Davis (Mob23), Ann-Maree Long (EPIC Pathways), Alisi Tutuila (Aboriginal Housing Company), Katja "Kat" Henaway (Blax Capital & Politics in Colour), Kim Dyball (CSIRO), Jasmin Gentle (GKB Impact), Dr Raylene Nixon (QUT), Helena Wright (QATSICPP), Danika Ryan (Queensland Public Sector Commission), and Jacqueline Elwell (NATSIWA member).

Session Highlights by Day

Day One (20 May): Ministerial address from Malarndirri McCarthy; panels on First Nations women leading beyond traditional pathways and leading with responsibility, not just authority; sessions on truth-telling in the digital/algorithm age and on balancing strength, softness and authority in personal brand.

Day Two (21 May): Panels on the next generation of First Nations women already leading, and on First Nations women who change systems, not just succeed within them; sessions on building leadership legacy without burnout, ethical leadership in community, and culture/strength-based leadership; closing reflections on "what I wish I knew earlier."

5. Attendee Feedback

"So grateful to listen to, learn from and stand alongside so many deadly women. All ages, all industries, but all inspiring."

"Inspiring and empowering event that was trauma-informed, culturally safe and respectful."

"When First Nations women lead, communities grow stronger, culture grows deeper, and future generations rise with pride. This summit is a space to stand together, share our stories, and remind one another that our leadership is not only powerful — it is necessary."

"Attending this summit was an investment in my leadership journey and nourishment for my

cultural soul. I walked away feeling inspired and grateful for the opportunity to learn from outstanding blak leaders."

6. Sources

- NATSIWA Events page: natsiwa.org.au/events/
- NATSIWA Post-Event Wrap / Key Takeaways (PDF): "Key Takeaways – 8698 QLD First Nations WIL UNLIMITED"
- National Indigenous Times, "First Nations Women in Leadership Summit to showcase the strength of Indigenous women" (Brendan Foster, Feb 2024) — source of the 2023 Australian Indigenous Employment Index figures cited in Section 3.1
- The Hatchery, Women UNLIMITED Leadership Summit — Brisbane 2026: womenunlimited.co/location/brisbane/