



Women With Disabilities Australia and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance

First Nations Women's Gender Equality Exploration

Community Consultation Summary Report

■ Contents

Section	Page
Introduction	3
Methodology	7
Findings	12
Interview data	22
Summary	29

Introduction

Overview

The Australian Government has created a strategy for gender equality, called Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality.

Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) want to identify what gender equality themes are important to First Nations women living with a disability.

The aim of the consultation was to identify key priority themes in relation to the Government's strategy for gender equality.

The results have been summarised for this report.



■ Background

The Australian Government's strategy for gender equality, identifies on 5 priority areas, namely:

- Gender-based violence
- Unpaid and paid care
- Economic equality and security
- Health
- Leadership, representation and decision-making.

WWDA and NATSIWA aspire to understand what gender equality topics are important to First Nations women living with a disability and understand how relevant the 5 identified priority areas are.

They also aspire to develop best practices for respectful First Nations community engagement & consultation.



Objectives

- To identify gender equality themes that are important to First Nations women living with disabilities
- To identify which government priority areas are relevant to First Nations women living with disabilities
- To identify best practices for respectful First Nations community engagement & consultation



Methodology

Target Audience

Ethnolink conducted 6 x 45-minute in-depth interviews with First Nations women living with a disability, including:

- 3 living in metropolitan areas
- 3 living in remote/rural areas



Interview topics

Spontaneous priority themes and topics

- What topics come to mind when thinking about gender inequality?
- Which of these topics are important to you personally?
- Which of these topics you deem important to First Nations women living with a disability?
- What are your hopes and dreams around this topics?
- Anything else that comes to mind?

Working for Women priority themes and topics

- What are your thoughts on the 5 priority area themes?
- Relevance to you – how important is this theme for you?
- What are your hopes and dreams around this theme?
- Relevance to your community – how important is this theme for your community?



Interview topics

Additional areas

- What inequality do you experience in terms of:
 - Discrimination and stereotypes?
 - Education?
 - Housing?

Best practices

- What advice would you give to organisations that wish to develop programs to achieve gender equality for First Nations women with a disability?
 - What are good examples of how to engage with this community?
 - What should be avoided when engaging with this community?
 - How would you hope people like yourself would be included into community engagement and consultation?



■ Data collection and results

The results in this report are indicative of what topics can be important to First Nations women living with disability. The report aims to provide a starting point to further understand gender equality issues for First Nations women living with a disability.

Differences in perceptions and experiences are to be expected between women living in community, women living in rural centres, and women living in metropolitan areas. Generational difference are also to be expected, as well as cultural differences between indigenous communities.

Data were collected by recording interviews. All data in this report has been anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

Ethical considerations such as informed consent and right to access held information were observed throughout.

Interview data has been prepared for this report by correcting grammatical errors in conversational dialogue and by removing filler utterances.

Findings

Gender equality – A cultural starting point

Most women indicate that their culture is egalitarian, in which individuals are valued for who they are



Strong gender roles exist, but both male and female roles are valued equally. Women can speak up for themselves to correct gender in-balances when they occur. In community, there are rituals and mediation mechanisms to come together and correct (gender) in-balances.



There is a profound notion of strong women. In cultural groups this may be expressed in women practicing culture together and maintaining indigenous law via rituals. Women have a strong caring role and are key decision makers.



In a more contemporary Australian context, many women are raised with the notion that they can become whatever they want. They are encouraged to speak up for themselves.



Gender inequality is not seen as a big issue from a cultural perspective, however, challenges do exist and in-balances are observed both within cultural groups as well as in contemporary Australia. Women are less likely to speak up in some cultural groups. This seems to depend on their upbringing.

Family – The foundation

Looking after family is a purpose that can be challenging in contemporary Australia



Family is the foundation of indigenous cultures. Life decisions are centred around family needs and cultural expectations to look after each other.



Women are expected to look after their children and their extended family in need. Men more likely focus on bringing in an income and doing the “hard work”. Gender roles seem strongly defined in traditional cultural groups living on country, but are also observed in more culturally diverse and metropolitan settings.



Having care-responsibilities can be challenging. Women often have to balance work with family care and can feel stretched. Being a sole carer, may also result in women joining the workforce later, women being less educated, women struggling to keep a job, or women not having enough income to own a home or live in a private rental. Finding support can be hard when not living in traditional cultural groups.



It would be helpful if wider society has a better idea of the strong caring expectations for indigenous women. For instance in the workforce, where women can't just leave their family for work travel.

■ Practising culture – A fundamental part of life

Practicing culture is fundamental to First Nations women, but poorly understood in contemporary Australia



Both First Nations men and women are expected to practice culture. Men's Business, Women's Business, Sorry Business, Christmas time rituals. Performing rituals and traditions is fundamental to their culture. Not taking part can be stigmatising and frowned upon.



Practising culture takes time. Sorry Business may take 2 weeks, certain Women's Business could take up to 6 weeks.



Balancing culture, care responsibilities and holding a job, can be hard. Men need time off to practice culture, which impacts the women's flexibility in the workforce. Women on their turn need time off to practice culture. Cultural leave allowances may not sufficiently cover the time needed to practice culture. This can result in women taking up sick-leave, resulting into a lack of leave (and income) when they actually need sick-leave to manage their disability.



It would be helpful if society is aware of indigenous expectations around cultural practices. For instance, if an employer understands that an employee needs leave for Women's Business, without a need to explain it, and with an appropriate leave structure that fosters income security and sick-leave.

Concerns around men

Several women mentioned that men were sometimes more disadvantaged than women



There was a notion that there are much more men in jail compared to women. It seems that men have fewer support systems to tackle their issues, like mental health problems, addiction and violence.



A vicious cycle of domestic violence must be broken by supporting men dealing with their issues. Helping them not to fall back into previous patterns. And also helping them to deal with their wife's and family's demands and issues.



Some women also indicated that men's health typically is worse than women's health. They may be reluctant to seek help, not have fitting support or have cultural barriers to certain medical practices.



Men with a disability may face more stigma, for instance by being ignored in meetings.

■ Accessibility issues not gender specific

Accessibility challenges exist, but they are typically not seen to be gender or culturally specific



Poor access to buildings



Poor road surfaces in rural areas



Finding the right support



Belittling – being seen as less capable than people without a disability



Being taken advantage of – although a general concern for some people living with disability, it was mentioned that that some indigenous women are not used to speak up for themselves, which could make them more vulnerable

■ Working for Women priority areas

Most topics are deemed important and relevant



Gender-based violence

This is deemed a top priority. A difficult problem to solve. Observed in indigenous communities and wider society. Financial hardship, mental health and substance abuse seem to amplify violence. On a societal level, the sexualisation of women is a concern, women may feel undervalued and can feel unsafe in public.



Unpaid and paid care

Family care is central to indigenous cultures and women are expected to look after their family. This care is largely unpaid. It can be a burden if combined with work or can lead to a distance to the workforce. Care is prioritised, but not always recognised.



Leadership, representation and decision-making

This is recognised as an issue that is changing. In wider society, women have seen little representation in leadership positions, which makes it harder to imagine oneself in a similar role. Women having more representation is seen as a positive development, although some stress that a role needs to be earned on merit.

■ Working for Women priority areas

Economic security is a challenge for First Nation's people altogether and health perhaps more a men's problem



Economic equality and security

As mentioned previously, combining care, culture and managing a disability can be a strain from an income and job security perspective. It is sometimes recognised as a gender issue, but more likely seen as being part of a disadvantaged cultural group in contemporary Australia. There is little generational wealth and a lot of poverty. It is also mentioned that women do a lot of cultural work for research and entertainment purposes, without getting paid for it. In a more urban context, career choices can be affected by stereotyping and male/female dominant work cultures, which is recognised as an Australia wide problem.



Health

There is little notion of women being disadvantaged in the health system. Women feel they have good access to health services. Some feel men may be worse off from a health perspective. As observed earlier, using sick-leave to practice culture may lead to financial barriers in using sick-leave to treat disabilities (or result in financial hardship).

■ Best practices for community engagement

When engaging with community the problems to solve need to be real, achievable and relatable



Do:

- Make sure the intentions to solve issues are genuine
- Make sure the issues to solve are personable and relatable
- Be honest about aspirations and possible outcomes
- Make women part of the solution and acknowledge their contributions
- Have a good cultural understanding of the groups/custodians you are working with
- Use respectful and correct language (cultural awareness training)
- Get women together in groups to talk about these issues
- Be part of a state's reconciliation action plan for diversity and equality in the workplace
- Remunerate for time spend, expenditure, etc.
- Start with young people, in schools and men in prison



Don't:

- Pay lip service to addressing gender equality
- Engage in processes that don't solve anything
- Focus on making your brand look good rather than the people you are meant to serve

Clashing of cultures

Differing cultural norms can lead to misunderstanding and discrimination



Discrimination on different levels

Discrimination can be experienced in wider society as well as between and within cultural groups. For instance, seeking employment for an indigenous role in a different cultural group may be frowned upon. Being of mixed background can also lead to not being seen as truly indigenous in some cultural groups.



Unawareness of gender roles can lead to discomfort

Working according to indigenous laws can be misunderstood in contemporary Australian workplaces. For instance when women are expected to talk to men about things they are not allowed to in their own cultural law. In some situations men and women are not allowed to speak to each other.



In-between worlds and generations

Elderly people may desire to preserve and pass on culture, where younger people may also be expected to succeed in a more contemporary lifestyle. With a legacy of past trauma, there are strong notions of having to stick together and stick up for one another.

Interview data

Urban

[On stereotypes in work]

It is important not to make assumptions in physical strength and ability. For instance years ago, when I applied for the army, there were only certain jobs we could do. But I'm sure there are plenty of women who can do what men can do.

[On understanding cultural leave]

People leave workplaces because there is no understanding of different cultural days. We have things like Sorry Business, Men's Business, and Women's Business. And you can't ask people to explain it other than saying just that. It is culturally inappropriate to ask those questions.

[On the burden of family care]

If I think of it, I never have any time off. I only rest when I am asleep. It is hard, especially when you are not feeling well mentally.

[On childcare and career]

When it comes to having children, there are times where the woman can make more money than the man, but the gender role reversal isn't quite there yet for the man to take on the care role.

[On putting family first]

A lot of our community will put family first and that just has to be an understanding.

Urban

[On gender based violence]

Gender based violence, you just want to live in peace and harmony. It is complex and layered. To live in an accepting world, where there is truth-telling and having a conversation for us to come to truth, honesty, acceptance and respect for First Nations people and culture.

[Gender inequality topics]

Gender inequality is men and women not being paid the same. And domestic violence, the power struggles between a male and female or any other identified person.

[On female representation]

Women's voices. Especially First Nations women even more so as there is not much female advocacy. And being CEOs and directors of companies, that's what I like to see more off. It is happening, slowly. It is a slow burn.

[On child-care support]

It is family and culture. Coming together. Obviously we have a gender inequality in culture, because men are at the front, but that is culture. That is what it is. Domestic violence is very high. Women and children are not supported enough. Being away from culture, they may need more help with basics and nappies and in-care support. There is little support from men.

[On inequality and disability]

I haven't seen inequality in the Aboriginal community in having a disability. There is a range of support available. Also at my work, there is a plan with medical support. In remote communities there was no wheelchair access. It was gravel roads, not fit for a wheelchair. But that was for everyone.

Urban

[On what comes to mind in relation to gender inequality]

Impact on values and opinions. Gender inequality seeps into people's mindset on what they can and cannot do. It is hard to break, because if it gets ingrained in younger people's minds, they get caught up in a gender inequality cycle.

[On safety]

It is things that you can or can't do. Like as a woman, you can't walk home alone at night. The other day at midnight on a main road, a car stopped and started accosting me. Does that happen if you are a male walking home, I then think?

[About inequality in the workforce]

So at uni my classes are female dominated, like 80% is female, but when you then look at the workforce, it is male dominated. Like it is a boy's club which can become detrimental to women's willingness to stay in that career.

[On stereotypes]

Like in the workspace, an admin role is often female dominated. I went for another role and it was like, it is all female, but that is expected, because it is admin work, so those stereotypes start to form.

[On equal opportunities]

In my family I've never been told that I can or can't do anything. There has been strong family support. But I can't speak for the indigenous community as a whole. Everyone is basically viewed as a person.

[Inequality in relation to disability]

With appearance based disabilities, being female, there is more pressure on appearances. So with appearances, it has a bigger impact on me I feel. It comes down to appearance stereotypes.

[On being Indigenous]

From my indigenous side, I believe in the spiritual side, so I started trying Chinese medicine as they have a very holistic approach to treat my disability. In the real world there is still some prejudice against that.

Rural

[On the lack of cultural understanding]
Within our culture it is very strict, you can't work with men. It is hard to explain at work that this is how our culture is. It is very hard to explain how we work. No, I can't talk to that male, it is within our law. They don't understand why. It is something we learned from our old people, it is a sign of respect. It is our law. So if they want us to work with them, they need to respect our culture as much as we respect theirs.

[On men needing support]
We have to start by supporting our men, with jobs and housing right from the prison. They need to have the chance to better, otherwise they fall into the same trap again. We have a women's safe house, but where is the men's safe house.

[On being strong]
I was fortunate to grow up in a family and my parents always taught me to speak my mind and do not let anyone ever walk over you. I would always be someone that would get onto a board or something to have influence over the rest of the community.

[On employment] Men typically have higher positions, but that is starting to level out. Women had to break the glass ceiling first, but they should not expect a job to fall in their lap. It should be earned on merit.

[On inequality in indigenous cultures]
Culturally women are a quieter force. They need a man to speak up on behalf of everybody. In that respect, they are 10 times less likely to speak up if there is a disability aspect, compared to being able bodied. A lot of confidence comes with that. It is about being assertive, which doesn't come naturally.

Rural

[On gender equality issues]

I think of work, but it is more about being of Aboriginal race than being a woman. Personally I think it is a bit over the top. There is some common sense that men are the stronger species and now all the customs go out of the window. I am old school, I appreciate men to pull out a chair and open a door for me.

[On being being assertive]

If people are condescending I can pull it up you know. And put people in their place. Whereas if you have a disability and are indigenous, you are probably more shy and and don't speak loud or clearly, like almost inaudible, because of not knowing how to communicate. And that is why I thank god I have a good vocab as well. It has to do with education, awareness, and disability is a whole new world.

[On being taken advantage of]

I've even noticed with taking taxi's and stuff, that taxi driver will notice that you have a disability and straight away go like, ah, I am with an NDIS company or they talk to my daughter, and say, you are your mum's carer hey? And you can hear in their tone that they are looking for an opportunity to scam or whatever.

[On engaging people]

For me the leadership is important, but it should not be another tokenistic thing. You need to have grass roots input, having people with disability join the conversation, being very leading in the conversation and be part of it.

[On economic security]

I am blessed that I come from a language background so I am able to get some work to translate from English to Indigenous language, but I need support to get things on paper or a computer you know. And thinking of what employment options I have, it is very limited. I need someone to be my eyes.

Rural

[On work conditions]

Women lost their wages [in a particular job] and even paid care. You know how in western white society you get special privileges like superannuation and permanent positions. Us ladies never had that.

[On unpaid work]

It is hard sometimes. Our strong women group are all volunteers. We look after women, family, we sing everywhere across the world, it is all unpaid. It is assumed that our people all do it voluntarily.

[On gender equality]

Men and women are coming together. In ceremony, there is equality, now in council it is balanced too. In dance, everybody will know their roles and position. In the western workplace we use that, we know our roles and take it from the ceremony. In leadership roles, men and women coming together.

[On gender roles]

In our culture everybody knows their roles and position. How to approach each other. We are strong women and we pass that on to the young generations.

[On dealing with domestic violence]

Sometimes there is domestic violence, but we work it out. We have a tribal structure and kinship and that is what we use as discipline. It is called skingroup and peace keeping mediation, called pumgki. That is working with police and court, but we always use our tribal structure for discipline and correction. In our culture we can't tell people of, unless they are within our skin group. But we are still one.

[On men]

Sometimes they are good, but mental health is a big issue for our men. And now women. The same as everywhere.

...

Social and emotional wellbeing is an issue for men because of alcohol and drugs and trauma.

In summary

Balancing family, culture and disability

Traditional gender roles are accepted, but come with challenges in contemporary Australia

Gender and Culture

Strong gender roles exist in indigenous cultures, whereby women's and men's roles are respected equally.

Women are expected to take part in cultural traditions, care for their family and support each other.

In a contemporary Australian context, it can be challenging for women to fulfil all their roles, whilst securing an income and possibly having less access to community support.

Gender and Disability

Managing family, culture and a disability can be hard. As family care and cultural duties are prioritised, women can have a lack of sick-leave and income to manage their disability.

Women with a disability may also be taken advantage of more easily. Although many indigenous women are raised to be strong women, some are not used to speak up.

Otherwise, women don't experience gender inequality when it comes to living with a disability.

Working for Women

The priority areas mentioned in the strategy for gender equality are deemed important and relevant.

Recognised issues include:

- Gender based violence
- Paid and unpaid care
- Economic security
- Leadership representation

We observed differences between women living on country, women living in multi-cultural rural cities and women living in metro areas. As well as between age groups, which are worth exploring further.

■ A starting point in persona creation

Different challenges exist in different cultural contexts. Below a starting point for further exploration

Traditional on-country

- Strong gender roles
- Women valued equally as men
- Women are care-givers, educators and decision makers
- Women support each other
- Conflict resolution mechanisms in place embedded in local law

Potential issues include

- Care of extended family
- Unpaid cultural work
- Passing on culture
- Limited "work" experience
- Language barriers
- Lack of influence on youth
- Earning a living

Rural multi-cultural

- Strong gender roles
- Women valued equally as men
- Women are care-givers and income earners
- Women take part in cultural traditions

Potential issues include

- Balancing family care, cultural practise and work
- Family violence, substance abuse, men's mental health
- Housing and home ownership
- Workplace understanding
- Limited opportunities (men)
- Lack of wealth

Contemporary Metro

- Women raised with equal opportunities mindset
- Women valued equally as men
- Women raised to stand up for themselves and each other
- Cultural belonging
- Multi-cultural background

Potential issues include

- Sexualisation of women
- Gender stereotypes in career choices
- Expectations to keep culture alive and following dreams
- Lack of wealth



Thank you