



Digital Literacy and Social Inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

Policy Position Paper

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Our position

Digital inclusion must be treated as an essential service, not an optional extra. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women should not be locked out of income support, health care, education, banking, housing, legal assistance and family violence services because they cannot afford a device, a data plan or reliable connectivity. Closing the digital gap requires coordinated action on access, affordability, digital ability and online safety, designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and community-controlled organisations.

Executive summary

Government services, employment, education, banking, health care and communication are increasingly delivered online, and exclusion from digital technology increasingly means exclusion from everyday life. National data shows this exclusion falls unevenly. In 2025, 40.9 per cent of First Nations people were digitally excluded, compared with 20.6 per cent of Australians overall, a gap of 10.5 points that widens to 16.5 points in remote areas and 22.8 points in very remote areas. Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits governments to equal levels of digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by 2026, but progress cannot currently be measured through official Closing the Gap reporting, and the best available evidence shows the gap remains wide.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, digital exclusion compounds other forms of disadvantage. Women on low incomes, older women, women with disability, women leaving prison and women experiencing housing insecurity or family violence are among those least likely to have secure, reliable access to a device or connection. At the same time, digital technology carries its own risks: eSafety Commissioner research has found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in regional and remote areas experience threats, harassment, monitoring, stalking and impersonation carried out through digital technologies.

NATSIIWA's position is that access, affordability, digital ability and online safety must be addressed together, and that programs will not succeed unless they are designed,

delivered and evaluated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and community-controlled organisations, rather than delivered as short-term or one-size-fits-all projects.

NATSIWA's priority recommendations

1. Establish a national device access and replacement program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experiencing financial hardship, family violence, homelessness, release from prison or other circumstances that limit safe access to technology.
2. Provide affordable internet and data packages alongside devices, with options that meet the needs of women in urban, regional, rural, remote and very remote communities.
3. Invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led digital literacy and mentoring programs that respect culture, community priorities, disability access needs and different ways of learning.
4. Maintain reliable community access points and face-to-face service options so digital-by-default systems do not exclude women who cannot safely or confidently access services online.
5. Build digital safety into all inclusion programs, including support for women experiencing technology-facilitated abuse, scams, identity misuse and coercive control.
6. Require government and industry to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the design and testing of digital services, artificial intelligence and automated decision-making systems.
7. Protect Indigenous data sovereignty by ensuring communities have authority over how their data is collected, accessed, interpreted, stored and used.
8. Report progress against Target 17 using data disaggregated by gender, age, disability and location so gaps affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are visible.
9. Establish long-term partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, education providers and technology companies to support employment, enterprise and economic participation.

1. Understanding the digital divide

Digital inclusion is now a condition for participating in ordinary life. Government services, employment, education, banking, health care and communication are increasingly delivered online, and a service being available online does not make it accessible. A woman may be unable to use an online service because she cannot afford data, does not

have a suitable device, has unreliable connectivity, or cannot access culturally safe assistance to use it. Mobile-only access, in particular, is inadequate for completing complex forms, uploading documents, taking part in education or applying for work.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in rural, regional, remote and very remote areas remain among the most digitally excluded people in Australia. Limited infrastructure, unreliable services, high costs and fewer local opportunities for digital skills training compound the gap. Digital exclusion also affects people in cities and regional centres, particularly women on low incomes, older women, women with disability, women leaving prison and women experiencing housing insecurity or violence; it is not only a remote or regional issue.

Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits governments to equal levels of digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by 2026. Progress against this target cannot currently be assessed through official Closing the Gap reporting, as comparable data is not yet included in that dataset. The best available evidence, from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, shows that equality has not been achieved: in 2025, 40.9 per cent of First Nations people were digitally excluded, compared with 20.6 per cent of Australians overall, a national gap of 10.5 points that widens to 16.5 points in remote areas and 22.8 points in very remote areas.

2. What women have told us

Women have raised the cost of buying and replacing phones, computers and other devices as a practical barrier to digital participation. For women on low incomes, a lost, damaged or unsafe phone can mean losing immediate access to banking, government services, health information, family contact and safety supports. This must be treated as an access and affordability issue, not as a lack of interest or ability.

NATSIWA supports a funded program to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women purchase or replace suitable phones, computers and other essential devices. The program should include affordable connectivity, setup assistance, digital skills support and safe transfer of accounts and information where a device has been compromised or is being used as part of coercive control.

3. Digital safety and technology-facilitated abuse

Access and safety must be addressed together. eSafety Commissioner research found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in regional and remote areas experienced threats, harassment, monitoring, stalking and impersonation through digital technologies. Phones and online services can be used as part of family violence, but they can also be a lifeline for contacting family, services and emergency support, and responses that treat technology only as a risk can end up isolating women further.

Digital literacy initiatives must therefore include practical and culturally safe information about privacy settings, location tracking, account security, scams, image-based abuse and how to keep evidence and report harm. Support must not require women to disconnect from technology or surrender a device when this would increase isolation or risk.

4. NATSIWA's policy position

Access and affordability as essential services

Digital access should be treated as an essential service, not a discretionary purchase. Government and industry must ensure that suitable devices, affordable data and reliable connectivity are within reach of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women regardless of income, location or personal circumstances.

Digital ability, not just access

Providing a device or a connection is not sufficient on its own. Women need practical, ongoing support to build digital skills, delivered in ways that respect culture, community priorities, disability access needs and different ways of learning, and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations rather than delivered as generic training.

Safety without disconnection

Responses to technology-facilitated abuse must expand women's options rather than remove them. Safety support should help women keep using technology safely, including keeping evidence, reporting harm and securing accounts, rather than defaulting to disconnection, which can cut women off from family, services and safety supports.

Maintaining community and face-to-face alternatives

As government and essential services move to digital-by-default delivery, reliable community access points and face-to-face service options must be maintained so that women who cannot safely or confidently access services online are not excluded altogether. Short-term or one-size-fits-all digital inclusion projects will not address the different barriers experienced across urban, regional, rural and remote communities.

Self-determination and Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must have a direct role in designing, delivering and evaluating the programs intended to close the digital gap, and communities must have authority over how their own data is collected, accessed, interpreted, stored and used. Government and industry must also involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the design and testing of digital services, artificial intelligence and automated decision-making systems that increasingly determine access to payments, services and support.

5. Policy and accountability context

Several national frameworks already commit to closing the digital gap. The National Indigenous Australians Agency's First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan (2023–26) and the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap 2026 and Beyond set out national priorities and actions for digital inclusion, developed with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group. Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap provides the overarching accountability mechanism, but the Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap Information Repository currently reports that progress against Target 17 cannot be assessed, because comparable non-Indigenous digital inclusion data is not yet built into official reporting.

NATSIWA calls for Target 17 to be measured with the same rigour applied to other Closing the Gap targets, including data disaggregated by gender, age, disability and location, so that the particular circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are visible rather than folded into a single national figure.

6. Conclusion

Closing the digital gap requires more than infrastructure. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must be able to afford suitable devices and connectivity, build practical skills, access culturally safe support and use technology without being exposed to further harm. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must have a direct role in the design, delivery and evaluation of policies and programs intended to close this gap.

NATSIWA calls on Australian governments and industry to move beyond fragmented, short-term digital inclusion projects. Reform must be nationally coordinated, locally informed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and accountable to the women whose participation it is intended to support.

References

- Australian Digital Inclusion Index (2025), Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2025.
- Featherstone, D. et al. (2025), Mapping the Digital Gap: 2025 Outcomes Report, ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society and RMIT University.
- Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (2024), First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap 2026 and Beyond, developed with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group.
- National Indigenous Australians Agency (2023), First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan (2023–26).

- Productivity Commission (2026), Closing the Gap Information Repository, Outcome 17.
- eSafety Commissioner (2021), Technology-facilitated abuse among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Note: This position paper is a policy document and does not constitute legal advice.