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Submission to Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



Our Watch

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Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is a whole of community issue. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Aboriginal people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the culture, behaviours, attitudes, institutions, systems and social structures that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national evidenced-based frameworks, *Change the story* (2nd ed 2021), *Changing the picture* (2018) and *Changing the landscape* (2022), we work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work, and socialise.

Our Watch's work to prevent violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is central to our Strategic Plan, which specifically acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience disproportionately high rates of violence due to the combined impact of racism, colonisation, and gender inequality. Our work to prevent this violence is led by the Our Watch Directorate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy and grounded in our national *Changing the picture* framework.

About this submission

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide advice to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Our Watch's submission focuses on the following two aspects of the Inquiry's terms of reference:

- TOR item 1: The nature, prevalence and impact of racism, hate and violence towards First Nations people, including trends over time.
- TOR item 3: Initiatives that are effective in combating racism targeted at First Nations people and reduce individual and collective harm.

While appreciating the broader remit of the Inquiry, in line with Our Watch's specific evidence base and expertise, this submission emphasises the gendered dimensions of some forms of racism and violence and highlights the specific experiences of First Nations women. It does so by drawing the Committee's attention to Our Watch's framework *Changing the picture: a national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children.*



The full *Changing the picture* [resource](#) and [background paper](#) are linked here, and form part of Our Watch's submission to the Committee.

Our Watch recommends that any discussion of racism, hatred and violence towards First Nations People include discussion of violence perpetrated by non-Indigenous men against First Nations women, as part of the broader picture.

To support the Committee's understanding of this dimension of the issue, and the strategies needed to remedy it, Our Watch's submission points to key content from our evidence base that highlights:

- the nature, prevalence and impact of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women;
- the intersections between racism, colonialism and gender inequality in driving violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women;
- initiatives that are needed to prevent violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and reduce individual and collective harm

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide further advice or assistance in relation to the issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy, Regan Mitchell, at regan.mitchell@ourwatch.org.au

Violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

Item 1 in the Terms of Reference seeks advice about ***the nature, prevalence and impact of racism, hate and violence towards First Nations people, including trends over time.***

As a contribution to developing a broader picture, this submission emphasises the need to:

- recognise the gendered dimensions of violence against First Nations people;
- place contemporary violence in a historical context; and
- specifically highlight non-Indigenous men's use of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Understanding the nature, prevalence and impacts of violence must include its gendered dimensions

In the contemporary context, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of all genders experience high levels of racism, hate and violence, at both interpersonal and structural levels. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, these experiences are common and widespread. They also involve gendered dimensions, which must be understood to fully include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in this overall picture.

In addition to other forms of racism, hate and violence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience particularly high rates of:

- intimate partner violence (which can be physical and/or sexual and/or involve psychological, economic, social, cultural and other forms of control); and
- sexual violence (which can be perpetrated by a partner, or another person either known or unknown to the woman).

The [*Changing the picture Background paper*](#) (p. 28-34) paints a detailed picture of the nature, prevalence and impacts of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch also refers the Committee to:

- The [*Wiyi Yani U Thangani report: securing our rights, securing our future*](#), which includes extensive examples of the kinds of racism and violence that First Nations women experience; and
- the [*2024 report of the Senate Inquiry into missing and murdered First Nations women and children*](#), which includes data on violence against First Nations women and consideration of the causes and factors driving this violence, and which has outstanding recommendations;
- the [*Northern Territory Coroner's 2024 report*](#) of the inquests into the deaths of Miss Yunupingu, Ngeygo Ragurk, Kumarn Rubuntja and Kumanjayi Haywood, which has outstanding recommendations.

The importance of social, political, cultural and historical context

It is important to place contemporary forms of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in their social, political, cultural and historical context.

There are interconnections between gendered violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and other forms of violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Both must be understood within the context of historic and ongoing colonial and racist violence perpetrated by non-Indigenous people (men and women) and institutions, against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, women and children.

This history of colonial violence includes widespread sexual violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, perpetrated by non-Indigenous men (see [*Changing the picture* Background paper p. 44-45](#) for further discussion of this context).

Recognising non-Indigenous men's violence against First Nations women

As noted above, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience particularly high rates of intimate partner violence and sexual violence.

We know that both these forms of violence are overwhelmingly perpetrated by men. Violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can be perpetrated by men from any cultural background. Yet too often, discussions of this issue assume or imply that this violence is always perpetrated by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander men, when this is not the case.

There are significant gaps in data on the cultural backgrounds of men who perpetrate violence. However, anecdotal and practice evidence from service providers (as well as Census data on relationship status) suggests that non-Indigenous men make up a significant proportion of perpetrators of violence against First Nations women. This is particularly significant in capital cities where the majority (59%) of partnered Indigenous women have non-Indigenous partners (exceeding 75% in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide). See [*Changing the picture* Background paper](#) (p. 20).

Any discussion of racism, hatred and violence towards First Nations People must recognise the contemporary forms of violence perpetrated by non-Indigenous men against First Nations women. This violence is both a contemporary phenomenon and a continuation of colonial sexual violence perpetrated by non-Indigenous men against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women since colonisation.

The [*Changing the picture* Background paper](#) (p. 42-49) provides more detailed discussion on these issues and demonstrates the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

What is needed to prevent violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women?

A primary prevention approach

Item 3 in the Inquiry Terms of Reference seeks advice about ***initiatives that are effective in combating racism targeted at First Nations people and reducing individual and collective harm.***

While there is rightly a focus on the role of law enforcement agencies, and improving avenues for reporting and responding to racism, Our Watch advises the Committee to also outline the need for a primary prevention approach to this issue – one that directly addresses the underlying drivers of racism in Australia.

This is the approach that Our Watch takes to violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Responding more effectively to current extreme levels of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is critical. But preventing this violence from happening in the first place, requires actions that directly address its underlying drivers.

Actions to address the drivers of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

Changing the picture (p. 15-32) outlines in detail, and with examples, three sets of actions that are needed to address these drivers. While all these actions are critical, in the context of the current Inquiry, Our Watch directs the Committee's attention particularly to Actions 2 and 3 in *Changing the picture*. Each of these includes a range of strategies that will contribute to the overall goal, as outlined below.

Action 2: Address the legacies and ongoing impacts of colonisation for non-Indigenous people, and across Australian society

Challenge and prevent all forms of racism

- Implement a range of strategies using multiple mechanisms, and in multiple settings to challenge and prevent racism and discrimination, both interpersonal and institutional, and promote equality and the specific human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Challenge racist, discriminatory and disrespectful social norms, attitudes and practices that reproduce and perpetuate a culture of racism and drive racist violence.

Challenge indifference, ignorance and disrespect towards Indigenous people and cultures

- Increase non-Indigenous people's understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures, knowledge and perspectives, and the significance and value these are afforded in Australia. This can be achieved through formal and informal education, and public communication practices.

- Increase the meaningful, public recognition and acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, by incorporating in public, organisational and institutional policies, protocols, and practices and by marking significant dates and key events.

Address power inequalities, particularly in decision making positions

- Develop and implement strategies to increase the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including both women and men) in positions of power and decision making – particularly those responsible for decisions that directly affect the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as specified in international human rights frameworks.

Identify and amend racist and discriminatory laws, policies and organisational and institutional practices

- Prioritise the protection of Indigenous people's human rights and the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in legislation and policy.
- Identify and address any racist or discriminatory aspects of government policy, practices, programs and services, and those of other agencies and organisations.

Challenge the condoning of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

- Challenge social norms, practices and structures that excuse, trivialise or downplay violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, shift blame onto the victim or reduce accountability.
- Improve media reporting to increase the visibility of all forms of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, eliminate the use of stereotypes, frame stories in an ethical way, convey the seriousness and prevalence of racialised violence, and highlight the voices of Indigenous people in commentary and analysis.
- Increase the profile of violence against Indigenous people on the national agenda, in public and political debate, with a view to building support for prevention initiatives that address the underlying drivers of this violence.

See [*Changing the picture*](#) page 27-28 for more detail on Action 2.

Action 3: Address the gendered drivers of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

- Implement intersectional approaches to preventing violence against women across the Australian population
- Challenge the condoning of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women by challenging both racist and sexist attitudes and social norms
- Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's participation in leadership and decision making
- Challenge gender stereotypes, and the impacts of colonisation on men's and women's roles, relationships and identities
- Strengthen positive, equal and respectful relationships between women and men, girls and boys

- Engage both Indigenous and non-Indigenous men to challenge harmful and violence-supportive ideas about masculinity and relationships

See *Changing the picture* p. 28-31 for more detail on Action 3.

Contact for further information

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide further advice or assistance in relation to the issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy, Regan Mitchell, at regan.mitchell@ourwatch.org.au