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First Nations women in governance

Women play an important role in strengthening their families and groups. Harnessing their skills, cultural knowledge and experience makes governance healthier and stronger.



Despite the bias against recognising women leaders as ‘leaders’, women have and continue to provide impactful leadership in various roles within families, clans, organisations, and communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women face what’s called intersectional discrimination and disadvantage.

This is the combined effect of structural racism experienced as Indigenous peoples, and gender inequality experienced as women.

It’s important that your group takes steps to support the leadership aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Part of this requires a commitment to closing gender inequality gaps and making sure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are well-represented in leadership roles.

Supporting women in governance also means treating women as individuals with their own goals and aspirations - and giving them opportunities to follow these aspirations. Groups should make an effort to recognise the significant role women have played – and continue to play – in their organisation, community or nation.

Challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

As in the wider non-Indigenous Australian environment, challenges remain for First Nations women in governance settings. These challenges are not just about equal representation of women in membership, governance leadership, or staffing in organisations. Challenges can also be experienced by women in the practical realities of exercising leadership. For example, in terms of:

- **having decision-making power**
- **respect and recognition of women’s voices as leaders**
- **lack of mentoring and support for their leadership and capabilities**
- **how resources are allocated to women and men**
- **caring responsibilities that impact women’s abilities to participate in meetings or other governance processes**
- **making sure that processes and structures are designed to overcome structural barriers to women’s participation.**

Support for the equality of First Nations 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 and healthier. They also better represent the diversity of needs, viewpoints, skills and experiences.

While everyone has a responsibility to rebuild Indigenous governance to support women's active participation, it's First Nations women themselves who do this best.

Several frameworks reaffirm the rights of First Nations women to:

- **participate in governance and decision-making**
- **enjoy the same political, cultural, economic and social opportunities as men**
- **be free from discrimination.**

With carefully considered strategies, these challenges can be overcome.

The Healing Foundation suggests groups invest in tailored, localised training programs that:

- **aim to build the confidence of young women to become future leaders**
- **focus on succession planning and sustainable leadership outcomes.**

There are other ways to support women in governance. This might mean:

- **making sure women have access to leadership roles**
- **encouraging women to engage in leadership and capacity-building opportunities.**

Supporting women in governance also means treating women as individuals with their own goals and aspirations, and giving them opportunities to follow these aspirations.

Frameworks such as the Wiyi Yani U Thangani report outline key principles that should underpin the way forward for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls.

Key principles outlined in the report include embedding culture and respect for identity, truth-telling about past injustices, equity in leadership representation and promoting inclusion, accountability, and transparency.

International frameworks also reaffirm the rights of First Nations women to:

- **participate in governance and decision-making**
- **enjoy the same political, cultural, economic and social opportunities as men**
- **be free from discrimination.**

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) are two of the most well-known.



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