



**Indigenous Women's Experiences of Work:
Key Issues in Urban Queensland**

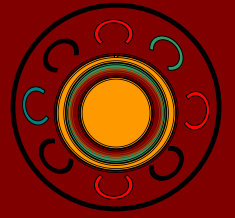
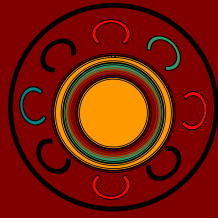
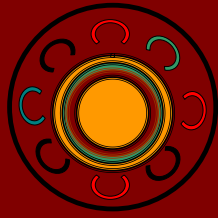
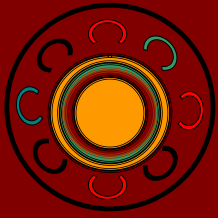
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Cover: The cover is adorned with an Indigenous motif of concentric circles and curved lines, which symbolises the coming together of Indigenous women and the sharing of stories of, the secret, the spiritual and the sacred.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks to Ms Kerriann Dear from Queensland Working Women's Service (QWWS) and to the Board of Management at Security4Women Incorporated for their support and confidence in helping to pursue a greater understanding of the issues that were raised in the *Indigenous Women and QWWS* report, for their tenacity and determination to follow this commitment through to the first step of understanding, and for their respect for the protocols that apply to Sorry Business.

We give special thanks to the COOEE Elders and Staff from the COOEE Indigenous Education and Family Resource Centre who hosted the yarning circles that inform this report. Their care and guidance helped encourage the women of the yarning circles to find within themselves the strength to share their own workplace stories; in the hope that something might be done to bring about a better position for them and other women in the workplace. We also acknowledge the administrative support of Vicki-Ann Speechley-Golden, Indigenous Community Engagement, Policy & Partnerships, Griffith University.

We owe our deepest gratitude to the women who participated in the Yarning Circles for it is their honesty and trust that has helped us present an overview of the level of discrimination and injustice that continues to plague the experiences of too many Indigenous women within the workplace. Many of the women felt that their stories of injustice and discrimination fell on administrative deaf ears as their cases were not resolved, they received no benefits or compensation and their only recourse was to suffer in silence, or leave their place of employment. To all of these beautiful women, we are deeply indebted. It is the hope of all involved, that this report will make a difference.

Acronyms, Abbreviations and Terms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ANZSCO	Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations
APS	Australian Public Service
ASCO	Australian Standard Classification of Occupations
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
ATSIWLAS	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Legal and Advocacy Service
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
Deadly	Really good, impressive (from, Aboriginal English)
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
eS4W	economic Security4Women
FaCSIA	Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
HRSCATSIA	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
IAPSEN	Indigenous APS Employees Network
IARE	Indigenous Area
Indigenous	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons
IES	Indigenous Employment Strategy
IEDS	Indigenous Employment and Development Strategy
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
Murri	Aboriginal person of Queensland

NAIDOC	National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee
IWRC	Indigenous Women's Research Consortium
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
OfW	Office for Women
QWWS	Queensland Working Women's Service
S4W	Security4Women
Sorry Business	A period of sadness for Aboriginal peoples is commonly known as Sorry Business
WWS	Working Women's Service

Summary

This research project was funded by Queensland Working Women's Service (QWWS) for Security4Women, which is an incorporated body that is funded by the Australian Government through the Office for Women (OfW), Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA). Security4Women works to promote lifelong economic wellbeing for women and is now called *economic Security4Women* (eS4W). QWWS is an organisation providing information, referral and support to women who work in Queensland. Driving this eS4W project is a commitment to inform government and the actions and interventions of agencies, like QWWS, and on how to best serve Indigenous women in the workplace. Though the project focuses on Indigenous women, the authors wish to make clear that the issues raised affect many Indigenous people (including men).

The current project builds upon our work in a recent report entitled: *Indigenous Women and QWWS*. Whilst that report was primarily concerned with the ways in which QWWS might improve its service to Indigenous women in Queensland, it also provided a glimpse of Indigenous women's employment experiences, which was the catalyst to the current project.

The current work is designed to examine *Indigenous women's experiences of work, with a focus on key issues in urban Queensland*. Its main objective is to explore those issues that continue to impede Indigenous women's employment and promotion at work. This objective is seen to be of crucial importance to enhancing the economic security and wellbeing of Indigenous women and their families.

Though the findings are limited to the urban context in which they were carried out, it is envisaged that they will contribute to a national analysis of the working experiences of Indigenous women and families across Australia.

This report recommends:

1. That eS4W advocate for the appointment of Indigenous women to relevant authoritative committees to ensure the outcomes from its consultations contribute to national policy reform that is appropriate to the lifelong economic wellbeing of Indigenous women (and men);
2. That eS4W design, propose and advocate to Government an Indigenous Employment and Development Strategy to ensure the equitable recruitment and retention of Indigenous staff at all levels of its operations;
3. That eS4W advocate to Government to fund and provide cultural awareness training for all employees to enhance understanding of servicing Indigenous clients, encourage recognition and respect of Indigenous values and cultures, and provide additional education for managers and supervisors of Indigenous employees to raise their awareness of issues faced by Indigenous employees;
4. That eS4W include an Indigenous friendly section on their website, with links to eS4W project reports by/for Indigenous women and to other Indigenous sites, particularly Indigenous employee networks that support and advocate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests, values and perspectives (e.g., Indigenous Australian Public Service Employee Networks, & DEEWR's Mura-Kaimel Yarrangi Network) and Indigenous newspapers, which contain information about employment opportunities, specifically for Indigenous Australians (e.g., Koori Mail, National Indigenous Times, & Torres News);
5. That eS4W use this report as a focus for discussion of the key issues concerning Indigenous women's experiences of work;

6. That eS4W disseminate the findings of this report to government and key agencies;
7. That eS4W convene a working party with the Indigenous Women's Research Consortium (IWRC) to consider the need and feasibility for a nation-wide investigation of Indigenous women's experiences of work; and
8. That eS4W approve processes to ensure that this and future research include an ISBN number so that the research is readily available through libraries and other collections in Queensland, and other States and Territories across Australia.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Report

Context

This is the report for the eS4W project on *Indigenous women's experiences of work*. It builds on the findings of an earlier report, entitled: *Indigenous Women and QWWS (Robertson, C. M. Demosthenous, & H. D. Demosthenous, 2010)* and presents select recommendations.

Definitions

In the Australian context, the term “Indigenous” is commonly used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their descendants.

Indigenous Australians often use other terms to refer to themselves and one another. These terms can roughly refer to the place they come from. For example, Aboriginal people can identify: *Kooris* from NSW and Southern Queensland; and/or *Murris* from Queensland and northwest NSW, with the exception of Torres Strait Islander people who identify as *Torres Strait Islanders* (not *Murris*).

Further, Indigenous Australians may use more specific terms of identification. For instance, Aboriginal people may use nation names such as Bundjalung and Quandamooka, while Torres Strait Islanders may refer to Island names, such as Boigu and Saibai.

According to a brief guide from the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department on working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community,

It is difficult to identify an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander just by looking at them. Across Australia there is a great diversity in the appearance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Some Aboriginal people have dark skin; some do not. (no date, no page number)

Indigenous Australians are recognised as Indigenous by members of their community.

Structure of the Report

This report consists of six sections.

The remainder of this introductory section sets out the structure of the report. **Section 2** provides some background information on the history of Indigenous women and work and prior research that we undertook to improve QWWS's service delivery to Indigenous women in work in Queensland. **Section 3** outlines the methodology used in this report. **Section 4** produces a state profile from existing census data of all Indigenous women of working age in Queensland in 2006. **Section 5** presents relevant information about the yarning circles, with a focus on their location and demographics. **Section 6** presents the yarning. **Section 7** moves beyond the consultative findings of the yarning to reflect on the key issues and concludes with recommendations for securing the emotional and economic wellbeing of Indigenous women at work in Urban Queensland.

Section 2: Background Information

Section 2 provides some background information on the history of Indigenous women and work and prior research that we undertook to improve QWWS's service delivery to Indigenous women in work in Queensland.

The History of Indigenous Women and Work

Despite the concerted efforts of successive Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to address Indigenous disadvantage, there have been only modest improvements in outcomes in some areas such as education and health, with other areas either remaining static or worsening. Even in those areas where there have been improvements, the outcomes for Indigenous Australians remain far short of the outcomes for non-Indigenous Australians. (Council of Australian Governments, COAG, 2007, p. 4)

A plethora of research has been conducted to implement intergovernmental reforms to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage. Its evolution to policies and programs designed to increase employment outcomes for Indigenous women would be too exhaustive to include in this report (see Miles, 2009; Lawrence, 2005; Robertson, C. M. Demosthenous & H. T. Demosthenous, 2010; Uebergang, Dear, & Dann, 2008, for an introduction). An examination of the history of Indigenous women and work, however, will assist in identifying the issues that contribute to Indigenous disadvantage and discrimination in general, and thus impede Indigenous women's progress towards being treated in a fair and just way at work.

Traditionally, Indigenous women have always worked. But, following the arrival of the *white man*, the notion of Indigenous women's work shifted dramatically, as Indigenous women were moved away from their traditional work environments to workplaces.

Many Indigenous women worked on stations and pastoral properties. There are numerous examples of Indigenous women being abused in these roles. For instance, in a pivotal report to the South Australian Royal Commission, a pastoralist from the edge of the Nullarbor Plains stated that he knew of stations where every hand on the place had a gin, even down to boys of 15 years of age. (Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Investigate, Report, and Advise on Matters in Relation to the Condition and Treatment of Aborigines, 1934, p. 553)

While there are numerous examples that reveal the sexualisation, fetishisation and abuse of Indigenous women by white men in the culture of colonisation, a more charitable interpretation of the history of Indigenous women entered into the workforce is that of the labour they performed.

Indigenous women were employed as domestics in pastoral farms and cattle stations. As domestics, Indigenous women would cook, clean, wash and iron, care for their bosses children and much more; which, more often than not, included mothering *white women*. Indigenous women cared for and protected the wives of station managers, and performed the roles of midwives, helping *white women* to grow the nation (Robertson, C. M. Demosthenous & H. T. Demosthenous, 2005a).

Although Indigenous women have always worked, the payment that they received for their labour has been problematic, to say the least. For some Indigenous women, payment was made in the form of cast-off clothing (or rags) and/or rations (or food scraps). Some women were given accommodation,

which were basic corrugated iron humpies, without flooring, sanitation or facilities for cooking; a stark contrast to the accommodation of the homes in which they worked. However, many Indigenous women received no payment for their labour.

In their study of Aboriginal experiences of money and money management, C. M. Demosthenous, Robertson, Cabraal and Singh (2006) introduce Aunty Ruth: an Elder from western Queensland. The authors report that in the process of reminiscing about her work as a domestic on a cattle property, Aunty Ruth interrupts herself and casually remarks “come to think of it, I don’t think I got any pay.”

According to these and other authors (e.g., McGrath, 1987), following the enactment of the *Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, many of the civil rights that should have been extended to Aboriginal people were denied. The government assumed control of all aspects of life, including where women could live, work and the money they received.

So called ‘pocket money’ was handed out to Aboriginal people, who could work all their lives and see very little of their own money. (C. M. Demosthenous, Robertson, Cabraal & Singh, 2006)

According to the Cape York Justice Study Report (2001), in the Cape York communities of Northern Queensland,

Nearly 1,200 work contracts were processed by June 1900, and to counteract continuing labour exploitation a monthly minimum wage of five shillings (\$23 today) was introduced the following year when the 1897 Act was amended. In theory, contracts and permits were voluntary. In practice, refusal to work incurred physical assault, banishment to a reserve or imprisonment (p. 2).

Despite the introduction of wage scales into Queensland, a large proportion of those monies were forcibly saved into government trust accounts, without consultation with and/or consent of the employee, to whom the system was not explained (McGrath, 1987).

Access to stable employment and enjoying positive experiences in the workplace are significant indicators of women's wellbeing and independence across all races and cultures. Reports of discrimination and disadvantage alert us to the negative impact of poor work experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Queensland who continue to express feelings of concern for the high unemployment of Indigenous Australians and the ongoing injustices they experience within the workplace.

Despite these and previous attempts to address Indigenous disadvantage, the development of policies and programs by successive governments over the years have been limited in their ability to find a successful solution to the high level of Indigenous unemployment and to deliver positive employment outcomes for those in the workforce (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, SCRGSP, 2003; 2009; Robertson, C. M. Demosthenous, H. T. Demosthenous & Soole, 2005b). Further, in 2001 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA) reported that the low levels of employment of Indigenous women and their disadvantaged socioeconomic status, when compared with the wider population, were key social indicators of their poor health and reduced wellbeing.

The low rates of Indigenous employment and high rates of unemployment were also reported in the 2006 census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Further, unemployment figures may have also been under-reported due to the large numbers of Indigenous people involved in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme. It should be highlighted

that the CDEP “Work for the Dole” scheme “employs” greater numbers of Indigenous men, than women.

Prior IWRC Research

To reiterate, the current project builds upon prior IWRC research on *Indigenous Women and QWWS* (Robertson, C. M. Demosthenous & H. T. Demosthenous, 2010). That research was funded by Griffith University under the Community Grants Programme and conducted out of the Office of Indigenous Policy, Community Engagement and Partnerships.

The *Indigenous Women and QWWS* report built a state profile of all Indigenous women of working age in Queensland in 2006. It also presented the findings of four yarning circles that were conducted with Indigenous working women from Brisbane, Townsville, Doomadgee and the Torres Strait Islands, some of which is highlighted in the current report.

To better provide its service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women the Report recommended that QWWS plan, develop and implement a series of strategies that included the following:

1. Appoint Indigenous persons to relevant authoritative committees of QWWS to ensure best ethical practice in service provision to Indigenous women in work;
2. Plan, develop and implement an appropriate Indigenous Employment Strategy to ensure the equitable recruitment and retention of Indigenous staff at all levels of QWWS’s operations;
3. Evaluate existing training and development programs to ensure the delivery of cultural awareness training to all staff;
4. Plan, develop and design a marketing approach that promotes QWWS as a service provider to Indigenous women, and ensure those promotions incorporate Indigenous imagery (e.g., photos of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Island flags and other iconography) and hypertext links to other Indigenous work-related organisations (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Legal and Advocacy Service, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Working Group, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice, Australian Indigenous Health*InfoNet*);

5. Deliver marketing campaigns at strategic locations and events – for example, through Indigenous information and referral service organisations (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Legal and Advocacy Service, First Contact), at local and state annual Indigenous events (e.g. NADOC, Black, Bold and Beautiful Indigenous Women in Leadership event), on Indigenous radio in Queensland (e.g., 4AAA Murri Country), in Indigenous Queensland newspapers (e.g., Koori Mail, The Indigenous Times, & Torres News);
6. Look at ways to provide visiting locum services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that lie beyond the greater Brisbane area to ensure improved access to QWWS’s support services; and
7. Develop and strengthen inter-agency consultation and engagement across local and state Indigenous organisations, communities, councils and bodies for a collaborative and shared approach to supporting Indigenous “working” women in Queensland.

That report was finalised in October 2009 and published in 2010.

Summary

This section of the report has presented background information that is relevant to the current research project, which is designed to examine Indigenous women’s experiences of work, with a focus on those issues that continue to

impede the employment and progression of Indigenous women in the workforce. The next section provides an outline of the methodology.

Section 3: Methodology

Section 3 of the report outlines the methodology, with a focus on the practical limitations and method of inquiry

Practical Limitations

In considering the scope and findings of the report regard needs to be given to the practical limitations that had an effect on the methodology, including time, costs and ethical concerns.

Method of Inquiry

The method of data collection used primarily involved consultative activities in the form of yarning circles with Indigenous working women in urban Queensland, but also included literature and prior research review, and the examination of Australian Bureau of Statistics census data sets.

The yarning circle method is a qualitative style of doing research that offers participants an “intimate and closed forum” in which “to share their stories” (C. M. Demosthenous, Robertson, Cabraal & Singh, 2006, p. 3; Robertson, C. M. Demosthenous & H. T. Demosthenous, 2009, p. 2). These forums can lead to an evolutionary body of in-depth knowledge that is grounded in the data; and, at the same time, provide participants with “a real say” on matters of relevance to them and their work (Calma, 2006).

We understand that when Indigenous women come together to share their stories, they often disclose experiences and knowledges that speak to, and of, the secret, the spiritual and the sacred. We understand the lores governing the

ownership and protection of certain private information and, with respect and humility, present only that which can be shared, publicly.

Our preference for using the yarning circle method was governed by the ethical protocols set down by the Indigenous Women's Research Consortium 2010, the National Health and Medical Research Council 2003/2007, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2000, and the Human Research Ethics Committee at Griffith University (Robertson, et al., 2010).

Summary

This section of the report has outlined the methodology. The next section builds a state profile of all Indigenous women of working age in Queensland.

Section 4: State Profile

Section 4 of the report produces a state profile from existing census data of all Indigenous women of working age in Queensland in 2006, that is, those of 15 years and over. The report also sketches comparisons with their non-Indigenous counterparts. It is reproduced here with minor modifications from Robertson, C. M. Demosthenous and H. T. Demosthenous (2010).

All Women by Indigenous Status

In the 2006 Census, there were 1,576,498 women of 15 years and over, usually resident in Queensland (see Table 4.1). Of these, 92.2% were non-Indigenous, 2.6% were Indigenous and 5.2% did not state their Indigenous status.

Table 4.1 All women of working age in Queensland by Indigenous status – Based on place of usual residence in 2006

Indigenous Status	Queensland	% of all women in Queensland
All women(a)	1,576,498	-
Non-Indigenous	1,453,495	92.2
Indigenous(b)	40,512	2.6
Not stated	82,491	5.2

(a) Excluding females under 15 years of age.

(b) Comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Source. 2006 Census of Population and Housing Cat. no. 200202.

All Indigenous Women by Labour Force Status

Of the 40,512 Indigenous women of working age usually resident in Queensland during 2006, 50.0% were in the labour force, 45.1% were *not* in the labour force and the 4.9% did not state their labour force status (see Table 4.2). More specifically, of those in the labour force 43.1% were employed and 6.9% were unemployed.

Table 4.2 All Indigenous women of working age in Queensland by labour force status – Based on place of usual residence in 2006

Labour force Status	Queensland	% of all Indigenous women in Queensland
All Indigenous women(a,b)	40,512	-
Employed	17,473	43.1
Unemployed	2,786	6.9
Not in the labour force	18,254	45.1
Not stated	1,999	4.9

(a) Excluding females under 15 years of age.

(b) Comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Source. 2006 Census of Population and Housing Cat. no. 200202.

All Indigenous Women in the Labour Force by Age

Of the 20,259 Indigenous women of working age in the labour force usually resident in Queensland during 2006, over three quarters (77.5%) were in three of the six age categories: that is, 5,672 (28.0%) in 15-24 years; 4,891 (24.1%) in 25-34 years; and 5,138 (25.4%) in 35-44 years (see fig. 4.1).

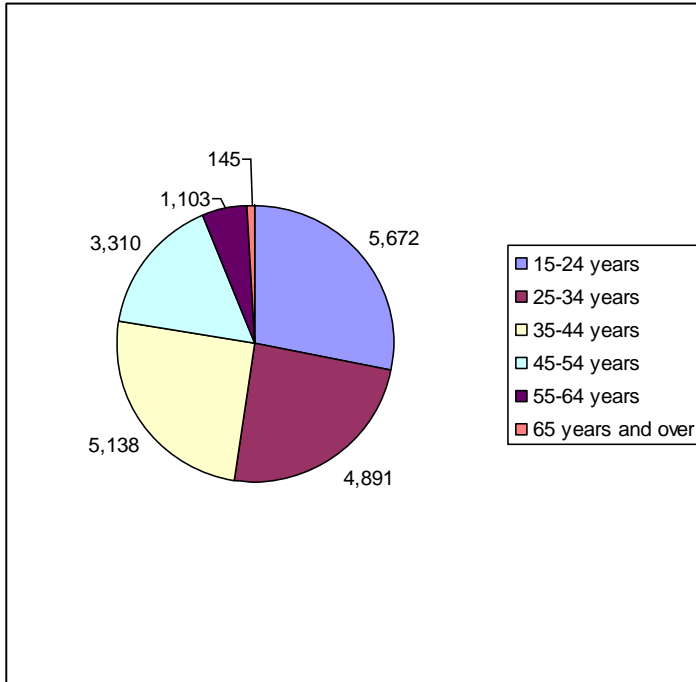


Figure 4.1 Frequency of all Indigenous women in the labour force (N=20,259) by age categories (N=6) in Queensland during 2006

Further, the frequency of employed Indigenous women in Queensland during 2006 was significantly greater than that of their unemployed counterparts across all six age groups: 15-24 years; 25-34 years; 35-44 years; 45-54 years; 55-64 years and 65 years and over (see fig. 4.2).

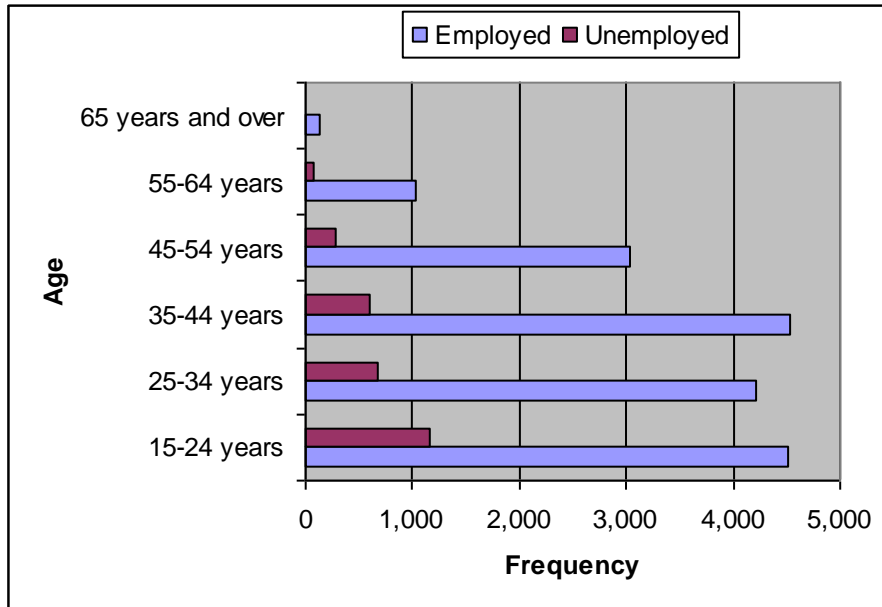


Figure 4.2 Frequency of all employed and unemployed Indigenous women (N=20,259) by age (categories) in Queensland during 2006

Note that the census figures for all 17,473 employed Indigenous women in Queensland during 2006 included Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) participants. Thus, we conclude that the figures for Indigenous working women in Queensland are “artificially inflated.”

Summary

Section 4 of the report has provided a profile of all Indigenous “working” women in the State of Queensland, and drawn comparisons with their non-Indigenous counterparts. The next section presents the yarning circle demographics.

Section 5: The Yarning Circles

Section 5 of the report presents relevant information about the yarning circles, including their location and demographics.

Location

The yarning circles were conducted through the COOEE Indigenous Education and Family Resource Centre in the Redland Shire (commonly called the Redlands). The Redlands is located on the southeast coast of Queensland. Fringed by Moreton Bay, the Shire covers 537 square kilometres of mainland and island communities which boarder Brisbane City's outer suburbs to the north, Logan City to the west and the Gold Coast to the south (see Fig. 5.1).



Figure 5.1 Redland Shire (Statistical Subdivision) Queensland

Note. © Commonwealth of Australia & PSMA Australia 2007

The yarning circles included women from the two Indigenous Areas (IAREs) in the Redlands: Redland (Indigenous Area) and North Stradbroke Island

(Indigenous Area). These are marked respectively in Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3, below.



Figure 5.2 Redland (Indigenous Area) Queensland

Note. © Commonwealth of Australia & PSMA Australia 2007



Figure 5.3 North Stradbroke Island (Indigenous Area) Queensland

Note. © Commonwealth of Australia & PSMA Australia 2007

The Redland Shire's mainland and island communities include:

- 1 Alexandra Hills;
- 2 Amity;
- 3 Birkdale;
- 4 Capalaba;
- 5 Cleveland;
- 6 Coochiemudlo Island;
- 7 Dunwich;
- 8 Karragarra Island;
- 9 Lamb Island;
- 10 Macleay Island;
- 11 Moreton Bay;
- 12 Mount Cotton;
- 13 North Stradbroke Island;
- 14 Ormiston;
- 15 Point Lookout;
- 16 Redland Bay;
- 17 Russell Island;
- 18 Sheldon;
- 19 Thorneside;
- 20 Thornlands;
- 21 Victoria Point; and
- 22 Wellington Point.

It is important to note that while the women are residents of the Redland Shire, they have cultural and family ties to Indigenous communities throughout Queensland.

In addition, in the last Census count 621 women of working age (or 1.2% of the population) in the Redland Shire identified as Indigenous, while a further 1,990 (or 3.8%) choose not to state their Indigenous status.

Demographics

The demographic categories of the yarning circles included: Indigenous Area; Indigenous Status; Age; Employment Status; Occupation and Organisation (see Table 5.1). Of the 20 participating Indigenous women of working age, 90.0% were usually resident in Redland suburbs on the mainland and the remaining 10.0% were usually resident on North Stradbroke Island. The majority of the Indigenous women were of Aboriginal origin (90.0%), between 25-54 years of age (80.0%) and employed on a casual and/or part-time basis (75.0%). In addition, over half of the women were engaged in community and personal service or clerical and administrative work (55.0%). Participation was a good deal higher for employees of non-Indigenous organisations (70.0%).

Table 5.1 Demographics of the yarning circles in the Redlands

20 Indigenous Women		All women in sample	% of all women in sample
Indigenous Area	Redland	18	90.0
	North Stradbroke Island	2	10.0
Indigenous Status	Aboriginal	18	90.0
	Torres Strait Islander	2	10.0
Age(a)	15-24 years	2	10.0
	25-34 years	4	20.0
	35-44 years	5	25.0
	45-54 years	7	35.0
	55-64 years	1	5.0
	65 years and over	1	5.0
Employment Status	Employed(b)	18	90.0
	Unemployed	2	10.0

Occupation(c)	Professionals	1	5.0
	Community & personal service workers	6	30.0
	Clerical & administrative workers	5	25.0
	Sales workers	2	10.0
	Labourers	4	20.0
	Not stated	2	10.0
Organisation	Indigenous	4	20.0
	Non-Indigenous	14	70.0
	Not stated	2	10.0
(a) The data on age refers to working age, defined as 15 years and over.			
(b) Includes participants on traineeships.			
(c) The data by occupation was coded to the 2006 Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO). This has replaced the 1996 Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) Second Edition.			

Note that the frequency of employed Indigenous women in our sample included two women on traineeships: one in age category 45-54 years and one in age category 15-24 years. We have intentionally included those on traineeship arrangements together with those in “real” employment to enable comparisons with existing census figures for the State, though we understand these to be “artificially inflated” (see fig. 5.5, below and compare with fig. 4.2, above).



Figure 5.5 Frequency of all employed and unemployed yarning circle women (N=20) by age (categories)

Summary

Section 5 of the report has provided background information about the yarning circles, including particulars about the Redland Shire, where the yarning circles took place, and selected yarning circle demographics. In the next section we take a look at what the women have to say to about their experiences of work.

Section 6: The Yarning

Section 6 of the report documents the stories of two yarning circles that were carried out in the Redland Shire: (1) The Redland Yarning Circle and (2) The North Stradbroke Yarning Circle. The following presents excerpts from the stories that the women shared in these yarning circles, with a focus on experiences of racial discrimination in employment practices and at work, and the aftermath of disadvantage and oppression.

Prior to turning our attention to the stories of the women of the Redlands we pause to honour the Quandamooka dreaming ancestors and acknowledge the Quandamooka people as the Traditional Owners of the lands where the Indigenous women of the yarning circles usually live.

Experiences of Racial Discrimination

Employment Practices

Key aspects to emerge from the yarning were the stories about racial discrimination in employment practices. The women raised a number of fundamental concerns about the mainstream media's negative stigmatisation of Indigenous people as someone no one would not want to employ. According to two of the women:

The mainstream media don't show a true representation. They give a bad representation of Indigenous people. I know the stigma that's attached for people, "they're bums," "they don't work" "they're alcoholics."

There's racism in the media, on television and in the news and radio. In every negative incident that involves an Indigenous person you always hear about the person's race. That's racist.

Another woman was particularly worried about the negative images of her people on television, because as she put it:

Dis is da only way white ones know us. Dey not coming to my home.

Many of the women in the yarning circles reported that racism restricted their prospects of looking for work, despite the mainstream jobs on offer in and around the city. One woman summed up the sentiment across the groups, stating:

Indigenous people don't want to branch out into mainstream jobs. We stick with our own mob pretty much in fear of racism. The racism is horrific in this country.

A number of the women spoke about the problems of being “black” for non-Indigenous employers.

Getting a job is tough when you're black.

I rang [name of store chain] about a job and the woman told me to come in for an interview. But, when I got there she said “we've given the job to somebody else.” I could see she was gamin. No jobs for our mob there.

In the city, there are thousands of jobs on offer, but only a few are specified for us. We don't feel comfortable applying for other jobs, because we are judged by the way we look.

It's too hard, with dis black skin.

One of the women from the North Stradbroke Island Yarning Circle talked about the problem many of the women with “black skin” experienced when travelling to work on public transport.

When do dey sit next to us? That’s okay. “You white fellas stand up and hang on,” I have the whole seat to myself [laughs].

Racial discrimination in employment practices was different, but nonetheless disturbing for those who were lighter skinned Indigenous Australians, many of whom are descendents of Australia’s Stolen Generations. The term “Stolen Generations” is used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who were forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970, because of the Government’s policy to assimilate young children of mixed Indigenous and European origin into white society. For further information see the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s 1995 report on the Stolen Generations, *Bringing Them Home*.

One of the young Aboriginal women said,

Well for me, I don’t visibly look like I’m Aboriginal. So, I think that plays a big part. I’ve never had a problem, but I know it’s not easy for Aboriginal people. I’ll get a “black text message” from someone who doesn’t know I’m Aboriginal. And you just think – it makes me mad. People go, “Oh you’re Aboriginal? Guess that happens. My great grandfather was part of the “Stolen Generation.” He was half Aboriginal and half Chinese. All the other ones were a different mix. I’ve got German, Irish, British and that’s about all I know. Other than being brought up in a western society the Indigenous society is all I know.

The women acknowledged that in spite of the fact that the city has thousands of “mainstream jobs” there were many forms of racial discrimination that they

encountered when it came to getting work and getting to work. While the women expressed different concerns about not being able to find work and feel comfortable travelling to work many of the women went on to talk about issues of racial discrimination at work.

At Work

Key aspects to emerge from the yarning were the stories about racial discrimination at work. Many of the women felt that their stories fell on administrative deaf ears as their cases were not resolved, they received no benefits or compensation and their only recourse was to suffer in silence or leave their place of employment. One woman said,

I'm really quite depressed about my job experiences.

A few months back, I applied for an advertised position, was short-listed, interviewed for the job and won it. I felt really happy - like on a high; I had a three year contract, a good wage, recognition for my many years of study, some super, yeah, life was good.

But, once I started work, it was a whole new story. I was supposed to be managing the program, but the duties that I performed everyday were domestic duties - serving morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea to around 30 people who were taking part in training. It didn't take me long to realise why I was employed. The program was funded by government for black people - 4.5 million, something like that. But, the organisation was a white one, the unit was a white one, fully staffed by white people - five administrative staff, seven academic staff - they need at least one black member of staff- that's where I came in. I was the token black.

Anyway, after being a domestic all week, I decided to raise the issue with my supervisor. I remember saying something like, "I just want to let you know that I won't be able to serve the food tomorrow. I really don't feel comfortable serving food with no other member of staff helping me, and

everyone else sitting down watching me, expecting me to tidy up. I didn't apply for the job of a cleaner, and I'm not going to do it anymore". He looked stunned, I felt relieved. And, I walked out of his room, a bit scared, but triumphant.

And, the next day, I didn't do a thing. Yeeeeeeaa. I never lifted a cup or saucer, or put the muffins out or the quiches. And, he ignored me the whole day. He wouldn't look at me, he wouldn't speak to me, he wouldn't make eye contact with me, nothing. And, it was so obvious to the others in the room. This went on for the whole day, and while I didn't want to care, the truth is, I did.

So, the next day, I was back pushing that friggen trolley around, and I just felt so depressed. I remember I stood outside the training room and cried and cried. I just felt so disappointed in me, like I'd let myself down.

That afternoon, I spoke with my supervisor again, explaining that I just couldn't do the domestic stuff anymore. I remember telling him that I was skilled at this, and that I could manage that, and I could organise this, and blah blah that. But, he was angry, really pissed off. And, responded by saying, "well that's what I want you to do. Who's going to do it?" I remember trying to explain that I didn't know would do it, I just couldn't do it; that I didn't mind making cups of tea and coffee but that for so many reasons I just couldn't do it, I just couldn't be the black one serving all the white ones. For some strange reason he decided to tell me about his childhood poverty which led him to something about "knowing how I felt", which shocked me. I remember saying, "you don't know how I feel, you're white, you're a man, you're in a position of power, enshrined in privilege, you know, nothing about me or how I feel". And, he looked straight at me and said, "when I thought about coming here today, the thought of seeing you made me sick in the stomach. You think you're too good to do the cleaning. You say you're good with people and good at communication, but when people see you they recoil, recoil, recoil".

I'll never forget it. I lasted at that job three weeks.

Another woman added:

I don't want to work for a non-Indigenous boss anymore, because they don't care. The last job I had my boss screamed and screamed at me, in front of all the other staff. And they were all white. And she would call me into her room and tell her secretary to leave and close the door behind her, so there were no witnesses, and then she'd say derogatory things about our people. I knew things could never be good there, so I left.

A number of the fairer skinned Indigenous women revealed that identifying as Indigenous had grave repercussions for them in the workplace. One of the women explained that she had concealed her Aboriginal identity at work in order to secure a well-paid employment.

I'm working at [name of current organisation] now. I've worked my way up to manager over four years. I'd like to think that it's because I'm good at my job, but I think it's because no one knows I'm Aboriginal.

I used to work as a receptionist at [name of real estate office]. The others were all non-Indigenous, of course. I used to put up with their racism, day-in, day-out.

I remember this Aboriginal woman coming in one day, and just standing there. The others refused to acknowledge her presence. I had to ask one of them to assist her. And I heard them say "No, sorry, we don't have anything in your affordability range."

I caught her laughing about it with one of the others saying: "hell will freeze over before I let another 'boong' be a tenant".

When I asked her about it, she said "it was just an off the cuff comment." I tried talking to my manager. After that things got worse. Everyone kept making racist jokes about "Abo's being lazy" and "Abo's stealing stuff" I tried putting in a complaint to the managers at [name of head office], but they said there was "insufficient evidence".

Most days I tried not to care about it, because we needed the money. But after three years I couldn't handle it anymore.

Anyway, I didn't know what to do after that, so I walked away from that job. And it took me about twelve months to find the one I've got now.

I haven't said anything about being Aboriginal there. That's just the way it has to be if you want to keep working.

Racial discrimination was reported to be such a serious problem in the workplace, that it forced a number of these Indigenous women to quit economically secure jobs. Some have been fortunate enough to find other jobs, but others have not.

Speaking as an Indigenous woman, I've worked for many years in the catering business, and raising my children. When I got the job as Head Chef and kitchen manager [restaurant] I thought my luck had changed.

But, when I started they didn't greet me warmly. They made all these snide comments about "not being Aboriginal 'cause I could tell the time" and asked, "when was I going to go?" as "most black fellows came on time the first day or so but then went on walkabout".

I tried to ignore it. But, a junior staff member was giving me a hard time. She wouldn't listen to me. I had to rely on the team, so I called a staff meeting, and when I was speaking she started asking about my qualifications and where I'd worked before.

I thought I handled it okay. But later I talked to her, in private, to try and fix the situation. But it only made it worse.

The owner jus' said "turn a blind eye." When I pressed it he said "there's a process" that I needed to go by. But when I did, it escalated. I was accused of "stirring up trouble" by my boss. It became so tense; I was forced to leave the restaurant with nothing having been resolved.

The women readily agreed that working in Indigenous organisations was one of the “best” ways of avoiding unjust treatment in the workplace on the grounds of race.

The best job I've ever had is the one where I am now. I enjoy being at [name of Indigenous organisation], because my boss is kind to me and always tells me I'm doing a good job, and everyone else is nice and friendly. I feel at home. If I need to go home to care for my family there's no problem. Everyone understands why I'm doing that. I don't have to explain myself and beg for time off. I can just go.

I truly get respect from der boss and colleagues.

If you work in a non-Indigenous organisation, it's a struggle every day. But, if you work in an Indigenous organisation you don't have the racism to deal with.

However, the joys of working in an Indigenous organisation were often marred by the problems associated with a lack of government funding. One woman said:

The governments are giving all this funding for blackfellas. But they don't want to give us the funding. If something doesn't come good, we're going to be forced to close our doors, and we'll all lose our jobs.

For others the problem related to not being able to find secure well-paid employment.

I'm casual. So I could be sent packing tomorrow.

Look I'm on a fixed term. I've always been on a fixed term, or casual.

Der money's not so good. But der is no good jobs for us.

The women also spoke about the government's efforts to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage by introducing Indigenous training and employment programs. One young girl had the following to say:

I can tell you all 'bout my experience with my traineeship at [name of IT business]. It was good to get support to do my traineeship through the government. I'd go there and do my traineeship it was for twelve months. But, said I'd have full time employment if I'd do a good job. I'd like to go there and worked hard. I'd go in early. But it turned out they're not looking for people at the end of the traineeship. They didn't tell me. I went to Centrelink to look for other IT courses, look for jobs, apply for jobs. I've been applying for jobs where they have an Indigenous Employment Strategy, and commitment to engaging us as a commitment to reconciliation and closing the gap. But they're not looking to employ me full time.

My mum helped me with my complaint to [name of council member] about this Indigenous "gravy train." That did little to lead to full time work.

The IT businesses get funding from the Government to train and employ Indigenous people. But no matter how hard I worked all I can find is traineeships, no jobs. Aboriginal people were the most over trained, trainees in Australia.

Centerlink and [name of an employment agency] only sends us for traineeships. My friends are sick of "nowhere to go" the "trainee circus" that is just to keep businesses in business, and get all the government money to help us get training and jobs but with no real commitment to getting us jobs.

The women openly expressed their concerns over racial discrimination at work. After the women acknowledged that the government's efforts to reduce Indigenous unemployment and close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage were good in theory, but not in practice, many women went on to talk about the inequalities they faced when attempting to secure well-paid positions and promotions.

“Well-paid” Positions and Promotions

The women of the yarning circles raised a number of fundamental concerns relating to the ways in which racism continued to impede equal access to well-paid positions and promotions at work. The women from the Redland Yarning Circle said:

The majority of our women don't get a look in. Where's my promotion?

It's very difficult to get promoted.

As an Indigenous woman prior to obtaining my degree, I found it difficult to obtain employment that was fulfilling for me. I worked in the hospitality industry for 17 years minimum 19 hours per day. I went to grade 9 at high school due to being raised in and out of the child protection system. As an Indigenous child I was placed in a children's home named [...] for approximately two and a half years. It was then that I decided to make a difference to other Indigenous children through the child protection system.

I applied to the university as a mature age student and commenced my studies immediately. I obtained a position as an Indigenous child safety support officer in a high needs area that no one wanted to work in. Throughout the next five years, I completed my degree whilst working full-time and raising two children on my own. I was always overlooked

for a promotion due to not yet having my degree. However, I was the most experienced as I was training all of the new child safety officers and completing all of the department's projects. I now have my degree and am ready to make my mark as a proud Aboriginal woman.

After I finished my cadetship, I was happy to have that opportunity. So I worked hard. And I thought my hard work had paid off. I wanted to show my supervisors that I could do the job. And I thought "yeah, they're happy with my skills" 'cause they kept giving me extra jobs. And some of those jobs were only for people in higher positions than me. I thought "it's good to be working for the government". But then I kept seeing all these white ones getting promoted while I continued to be employed at the base grade level. When I applied for a promotion I was overlooked for a non-Indigenous colleague. When I eventually got the courage to appeal one of the decisions they made against me, that's when I started to experience their racism. I remember the line manager, saying "why do you want to be lodging appeals when it could jeopardise the best chance that one of your people will ever get". Up until then I thought she was sympathetic to my case.

Now I can't stand going into work. They just devalue everything I do. I've been going in there for 16 years. And that's about what they think of the capabilities of Aboriginal people when it comes to promotions.

Despite the attempts of some employers to foster positive working relationships with Indigenous women, the women of the yarning circles expressed a general, underlying sense of mistrust and apprehension towards non-Indigenous bosses and colleagues alike.

The Aftermath

The unresolved nature of the experiences of racial discrimination was part of the yarning. The experiences that the women shared in the yarning circles were marked by strong emotions, with all stories providing examples of how racism affected and affects their working and daily lives. Many emotions were relived in the sharing of these stories.

Stories of their inability to secure well-paid work and promotions that would enable them to share in the nation's good fortune – buy their own home and feed their own children nutritious foods – brought up feelings of sadness, frustration and despair.

Death was a painful theme. One of the women described how she felt after learning that two of the women had since committed suicide, but she has asked for this to remain private. These memories were shared with us when she was asked to review the final draft of this report. For her, this involved reconciling past experiences with current reality.

These stories highlight and link Indigenous women's experiences of racism in employment to issues of overcoming Indigenous disadvantage in Australia.

Summary

This section of the report presented a number of themes shared in the Redland Yarning Circle and the North Stradbroke Yarning Circle. In these yarning circles, the women shared stories from the heart about their experiences of work, raising issues of racial discrimination in employment practices and at work, inequality in accessing secure well-paid jobs and promotions, and its disturbing aftermath. The next section concludes the report.

Section 7: Conclusion

Section 7 of the report moves beyond the consultative findings of the yarning to reflect on the key issues and concludes with recommendations for securing the emotional and economic wellbeing of Indigenous women at work in urban Queensland.

Key Issues

Key issues to arise from the stories that the Indigenous women of the yarning circles shared revealed that they experience racial discrimination in life in general and consequently across a wide range of work and work-related situations, including finding work, travelling to work, gaining equalised access to secure well-paid jobs and promotions and more.

The women's experiences of racial discrimination reminded us of the stories that other Indigenous women had shared with us about their experiences of work across other parts of Queensland, including Brisbane, Townsville, Doomadgee and the Torres Strait Islands. The women revealed that they were typically overworked and underpaid in workplaces that perpetuated others interests (over theirs). All the women of the yarning circles expressed a pressing need for change.

A major challenge to organisations that aim to change employment outcomes for the better for Indigenous Australians is to recognise and address the interrelated factors that can act as barriers to Indigenous women's employment, which is something touched on by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2007.

Yet, formal policies and agreements at the national or state and territory levels have proven to be limited in their guarantee and ability to deliver positive Indigenous employment outcomes. In the words of an Aboriginal Employment Officer, who chose to remain unnamed,

A national framework for Indigenous empowerment, self determination and wellbeing must be underpinned by a thorough assessment of these issues and a clearly defined set of programs and policies that are defined with the specific needs of Indigenous people in mind. We are tired of the hollow acknowledgement by Governments and service providers of these issues and we are exhausted by the succession of their failed attempts to help our people secure that elusive thing that they call “equality” in employment. There is a general acceptance that the black history of this country is one of injustice and inequality that generations of our families have inherited. Poor access to employment has become the building block for the oppressive and pitiable conditions that have defined the circumstances of generations of Indigenous Australians. (Personal communication, 2010)

The success of a sustainable framework that purports to target equitable access to employment outcomes for Indigenous women must be based on an understanding of issues that inhibit equitable employment as seen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women themselves. Such an overview is critical to highlighting factors that are seen to promote or hinder sustainable employment and successful participation of Indigenous women in the work force and the achievement of a significant increase in Indigenous employment rates across all levels. It is also in line with the principles and spirit of the National Apology, the Closing the Gap Campaign and addressing Indigenous wellbeing, which are fundamental to the objectives of the eS4W project.

The Indigenous women of the yarning circles willingly agreed to participate in this eS4W project in the hope that sharing their experiences of work would help

address these key issues. Though the issues raised may not be the lived experience of all Indigenous women, we believe that they will be of relevance to all Indigenous women, and perhaps non-Indigenous women, as well. On this basis, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

1. That eS4W advocate for the appointment of Indigenous women to relevant authoritative committees to ensure the outcomes from its consultations contribute to national policy reform that is appropriate to the lifelong economic wellbeing of Indigenous women (and men);
2. That eS4W design, propose and advocate to Government an Indigenous Employment and Development Strategy to ensure the equitable recruitment and retention of Indigenous staff at all levels of its operations;
3. That eS4W advocate to Government to fund and provide cultural awareness training for all employees to enhance understanding of servicing Indigenous clients, encourage recognition and respect of Indigenous values and cultures, and provide additional education for managers and supervisors of Indigenous employees to raise their awareness of issues faced by Indigenous employees;
4. That eS4W include an Indigenous friendly section on their website, with links to eS4W project reports by/for Indigenous women and to other Indigenous sites, particularly Indigenous employee networks that support and advocate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests, values and perspectives (e.g., Indigenous Australian Public Service Employee Networks, & DEEWR's Mura-Kaimel Yarrangi Network) and Indigenous newspapers, which contain information about employment opportunities, specifically for Indigenous Australians (e.g., Koori Mail, National Indigenous Times, & Torres News);

5. That eS4W use this report as a focus for discussion of the key issues concerning Indigenous women's experiences of work;
6. That eS4W disseminate the findings of this report to government and key agencies;
7. That eS4W convene a working party with the Indigenous Women's Research Consortium (IWRC) to consider the need and feasibility for a nation-wide investigation of Indigenous women's experiences of work; and
8. That eS4W approve processes to ensure that this and future research include an ISBN number so that the research is readily available through libraries and other collections in Queensland, and other States and Territories across Australia.

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