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NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN'S ALLIANCE

NATIONAL Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA).

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

Introduction.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, digital inclusion is not simply about access to technology — it is about safety, participation, connection, and self-determination.

Women are often the primary organisers within families and communities. They manage health appointments, education, finances, communication, and care responsibilities. Increasingly, all of these systems are delivered through digital platforms.

When women are digitally excluded, the impact is not individual — it extends across families and communities.

Despite this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to experience significant barriers to digital access, affordability, and capability. These barriers are compounded by geography, cost, cultural safety, and systemic inequality.¹

Closing the Gap – Commitment and Reality

The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* recognises digital inclusion under Outcome 17, with a commitment that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will have access to information and services to support informed decision-making.²

Target 17 commits to achieving equal levels of digital inclusion by 2026.

Current evidence indicates that progress toward this target is not on track. National reporting shows that gains have been slow, uneven, and insufficient. The gap remains persistent, particularly in remote communities, where infrastructure, affordability, and service access continue to lag.³ Without targeted, community-led investment, this target will not be met.

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Access to Essential Government and Financial Services

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are increasingly required to engage with essential government and financial systems through digital platforms. Services that were once accessible in person are now primarily delivered online.

This includes access to:

- myGov accounts
- Centrelink payments and reporting
- Medicare and health service portals
- Housing and tenancy systems
- Child support and family services
- Online education platforms
- Employment services and job applications
- Banking and financial services

For many women, particularly in rural and remote communities, these systems are not easily accessible.

Key barriers include:

- Lack of reliable internet connectivity
- Difficulty navigating complex digital platforms
- Limited access to digital literacy support
- Multi-factor authentication requirements reliant on stable connectivity
- Shared devices limiting privacy and security
- Prepaid data limitations restricting consistent access

Women report missing appointments, payments, and critical communications due to unreliable access.

As banking and financial services shift almost entirely online, women without digital access face increased challenges in managing finances, accessing accounts, and conducting secure transactions.⁴ This creates heightened financial stress and risk.

Digital exclusion limits participation across employment, education, health, safety, and community life, with impacts extending beyond individuals to families and communities.

The Reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural, regional and remote areas are among the most digitally excluded populations in Australia.⁵ Within this, women experience distinct and compounded impacts.

Digital exclusion for women is driven by:

- Limited and unreliable infrastructure
- High costs of internet and devices
- Low digital literacy due to limited access and training
- Safety concerns in online environments
- Lack of culturally appropriate and safe digital services
- Competing financial pressures within households

National data confirms significantly lower levels of digital inclusion across access, affordability, and digital ability. Approximately 40.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are digitally excluded, around double the rate of the general population. In remote communities, this rises to as many as three in four people.⁶

For women, this exclusion is often more acute.

Women are more likely to:

- Share devices across households
- Rely on prepaid mobile data rather than fixed internet
- Prioritise family needs over personal access
- Experience online harm, including racism and gender-based abuse
- Have limited time and opportunity to build digital skills

In some communities, women report having to choose between essential expenses such as food, electricity, or connectivity.

This is not a marginal issue — it is a structural inequality that directly impacts daily life.

Impacts on Women, Families and Communities

Economic Participation

Digital exclusion limits access to employment, training, and income opportunities. Women are often excluded from online job systems, application processes, and digital work environments.

Education and Intergenerational Impact

Women play a key role in supporting children's education. Without reliable digital access, children's learning is disrupted, reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage.

Health and Wellbeing

Women manage health for themselves and their families. Limited digital access restricts the use of telehealth, appointment systems, and access to health information.

Safety and Access to Support

Digital access is critical for safety, including access to crisis services, legal information, and support networks. Women experiencing violence or crisis are disproportionately impacted by digital exclusion.

At the same time, online environments can be unsafe. Experiences of racism, lateral violence, and gender-based abuse create further barriers to engagement.⁷

Cultural Connection and Leadership

Digital platforms can strengthen connection to culture, language, and community. However, exclusion limits participation, visibility, and opportunities for women's leadership and knowledge sharing.

Self-Determination

Access to information is fundamental to decision-making. Without digital access, women are excluded from systems that shape their lives and communities.

Structural Barriers

The digital divide experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is the result of systemic and ongoing inequities, including:

- Unequal infrastructure investment in regional and remote areas
- High costs of connectivity and devices
- Lack of sustained, community-led programs
- Digital systems designed without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input
- Limited focus on women's specific needs and experiences
- Short-term funding models that fail to deliver long-term change

These structural barriers continue to reinforce exclusion and limit progress.

What Women Are Saying

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women consistently identify digital access as critical to their roles in family and community.

Women report:

- “We can't access services if everything is online and we don't have internet.”
- “Phones run out of credit — then you miss everything.”
- “We are expected to do everything online, but no one shows us how.”
- “We are keeping families connected, but we are not supported to do it.”

These are not isolated experiences — they reflect a consistent national pattern.

What Needs to Change

Addressing digital exclusion requires long-term, coordinated, and community-led action.

1. Affordable Access

Provide direct financial support for devices and reliable internet. Access must be treated as essential, not optional.

2. Infrastructure Investment

Deliver reliable connectivity across rural, regional, and remote communities as a priority.

3. Women-Centred, Indigenous-Led Programs

Programs must be culturally appropriate, flexible, and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

4. Safe and Culturally Appropriate Digital Spaces

Address online racism and abuse, ensure culturally safe services, and embed community control in design.

5. Inclusion in Emerging Technologies

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must be included in the development and use of emerging technologies, including AI.

6. Long-Term Investment and Partnerships

Sustained partnerships are required across government, technology providers, education sectors, and Aboriginal organisations.

7. Economic Empowerment

Digital inclusion must support employment pathways, digital enterprises, and participation in the digital economy.

8. Indigenous Data Sovereignty

All efforts must align with Indigenous data sovereignty principles, ensuring communities retain control over their data and knowledge.⁸

Access Conclusion

Digital exclusion is a critical barrier to equity, participation, and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

It impacts not only individuals, but families, communities, and future generations.

If governments are serious about Closing the Gap, digital inclusion must be prioritised and delivered through community-led, women-centred approaches. Anything less will continue to leave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and the communities they support behind.

References

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