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NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND  
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN'S ALLIANCE

## **From Recognition to Action: Why Australia Must Ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance**

**National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIIWA)**

**17 June 2026**

### **NATSIIWA Introduction**

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIIWA) is the national peak body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across Australia. NATSIWA advocates for the rights, safety, wellbeing and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, girls, Sistagirls and gender-diverse people and works to ensure their voices are reflected in national policy, legislation and service reform.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children continue to disappear, be murdered and be failed by systems that were established to protect them. Behind every disappearance is a family left searching for answers, a community carrying collective grief and a nation that has yet to fully acknowledge its responsibility. The continued invisibility of these losses is not merely a policy failure—it is a human rights failure.

The disappearance and murder of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children are among the most devastating manifestations of colonisation, systemic racism and ongoing failures to adequately respond to the needs and aspirations of First Nations communities. NATSIWA supports the immediate ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and believes Australia must take stronger action to prevent disappearances, improve accountability and ensure that First Nations women and children are afforded the same protections, urgency and access to justice as all Australians.

### **Background**

For First Nations families, enforced disappearance is not simply an international legal concept. It represents the lived reality of families who continue to search for answers, justice and accountability when women and children disappear, are murdered or are failed by systems designed to protect them.

Australia has made commitments through international human rights mechanisms to strengthen protections for vulnerable populations and to consider ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. However,



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consideration alone is no longer sufficient. The ongoing experiences of First Nations women and children demonstrate the urgent need for stronger protections, greater accountability and meaningful action.

### **Why First Nations Women Are Uniquely Vulnerable to Disappearance**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage that increase their vulnerability to violence, exploitation and disappearance. First Nations women experience disproportionately high rates of family and domestic violence, housing insecurity, poverty, disability, mental ill-health and homelessness. Many women live in regional and remote communities where access to specialist services, policing and emergency responses is limited.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are also overrepresented within child protection, justice and correctional systems. Historical trauma, racism and experiences of institutional harm have contributed to significant distrust of government systems and reduced willingness to seek assistance. These intersecting forms of disadvantage create conditions in which First Nations women can become invisible to systems long before they become missing to their families.

### **Every Missing Woman Leaves a Community Wounded**

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the disappearance of a woman is never an individual loss. Women are cultural knowledge holders, carers, language keepers and community leaders. Their absence reverberates across generations. Children lose mothers and aunts. Elders lose caregivers. Communities lose teachers and protectors of culture.

The trauma of not knowing what happened to a loved one can last decades and is compounded when families feel their concerns are minimised, investigations are delayed or justice is never achieved. The collective grief experienced by families and communities is profound and can contribute to intergenerational trauma, social disruption and ongoing mistrust of institutions.

### **The Visibility Gap**

One of the most significant barriers to addressing disappearances involving First Nations women and children is the lack of consistent, reliable and nationally coordinated data. Inconsistent recording practices across jurisdictions, differing definitions and the failure to consistently identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status contribute to an incomplete understanding of the issue.

The absence of nationally consistent data undermines accountability and limits the ability of governments, researchers and communities to identify trends, evaluate responses and develop evidence-based policies. It also contributes to the perception that disappearances involving First



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Nations women and children are isolated incidents rather than manifestations of broader systemic failures.

### **What Families Tell Us**

Families report feeling dismissed when raising concerns about missing Aboriginal women and children. Families describe having to advocate for investigations themselves and repeatedly retell traumatic experiences to multiple agencies. Communities frequently report that responses to disappearances involving First Nations women do not attract the same urgency, media attention or resourcing afforded to other cases.

These experiences demonstrate the need for culturally safe responses, family advocacy mechanisms and systems that recognise the unique impacts of disappearance on First Nations communities.

### **The Cost of Inaction**

When governments delay action, the consequences are measured in lives. The tragic circumstances surrounding cases such as Kumanjayi Little have highlighted the devastating impacts of service gaps, displacement, inadequate support systems and failures in protection.

The cost of inaction is both human and institutional. It erodes trust in systems, undermines confidence in public institutions and leaves families carrying the burden of seeking justice on their own. Without reliable national data and stronger accountability mechanisms, governments cannot accurately measure the scale of the problem or develop effective responses.

### **Moving Beyond Symbolic Recognition**

Recognition is important, but recognition without action risks becoming symbolic. Governments have acknowledged violence against women, overrepresentation in negative social indicators and the findings of numerous inquiries and reviews. What First Nations families continue to seek is implementation.

This requires investment in culturally safe services, improved data collection, stronger accountability mechanisms, community-led solutions and genuine partnership with First Nations women and families.

### **NATSIWA Recommendations**

1. Immediately ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.
2. Establish a National First Nations Missing and Disappeared Women and Children Strategy.



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3. Develop a nationally consistent database on disappearances involving First Nations peoples.
4. Fund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to support families of missing persons.
5. Establish culturally safe family liaison and advocacy services.
6. Create an independent monitoring and accountability mechanism to report annually on disappearances involving First Nations women and children.

### **Conclusion**

Every woman and child who disappears leaves behind a family, a community and a story that deserves to be remembered. Australia cannot claim to uphold human rights while First Nations women and children continue to disappear into systems characterised by fragmentation, under-reporting and inadequate accountability.

Ratification of the Convention is not simply a legal exercise; it is an opportunity for Australia to affirm that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children matter, that their lives are valued and that their disappearances will no longer be met with silence. The time for recognition has passed. The time for action, accountability and justice is now.

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