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NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN'S ALLIANCE

CEDAW Update and Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

NATSIWA BRIEFING PAPER

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Purpose

This briefing paper provides an update on Australia's ninth review under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It outlines the current review process, identifies priority issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and provides broad recommendations to the Australian Government.

Key message

Australia submitted its ninth periodic report on 28 February 2025. The Office for Women now advises that Australia will be invited to appear before the CEDAW Committee in 2027, although a confirmed examination date has not been publicly announced. The remaining process must ensure that the Committee receives current evidence and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are directly represented in the examination and follow-up.

What is CEDAW

CEDAW is the principal international treaty addressing discrimination against women. Australia ratified the Convention in 1983 and is required to report periodically on the laws, policies and practical measures it has taken to meet its obligations. The CEDAW Committee, made up of independent experts, considers the Australian Government's report together with information from national human rights institutions and civil society.

The Committee questions the Australian Government and then issues concluding observations. These findings are not a substitute for domestic law, but they are an important accountability and advocacy tool. They can be used to identify gaps, support funding and policy proposals, and hold governments accountable for continuing discrimination and unequal outcomes.

Why this review matters

The CEDAW review provides an international forum in which the Australian Government must explain both its progress and the outcomes that remain unequal. For Aboriginal and Torres

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Strait Islander women, the review must go beyond general statements about gender equality. It must examine the combined effects of sex discrimination, racism, colonisation, poverty, disability, geographic isolation and institutional harm.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must not be treated only as a vulnerable population described by government data. Women must be recognised as rights holders, leaders and holders of cultural authority. Their lived experience must shape the evidence presented to the Committee, the questions put to Australia and the recommendations that follow.

Priority issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

Missing and murdered women and children

The review should examine Australia's response to missing and murdered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, including implementation of recommendations from the Senate inquiry. This must include prevention, culturally safe reporting and investigation, consistent national data, accountability for police responses, support for families, and First Nations women's leadership in the design and oversight of reforms.

Family domestic and sexual violence

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to experience unacceptable levels of family, domestic and sexual violence. The Committee should examine whether the National Plan and the dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander plan are producing measurable change, whether community-controlled services have adequate long-term funding, and whether police, courts, health, housing and child protection systems respond safely. Attention is also required to systems abuse, misidentification of victim-survivors as perpetrators, and the needs of women in same-sex relationships.

Child protection and family separation

The removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children cannot be considered separately from women's safety, poverty, housing insecurity and unequal access to culturally safe services. The review should examine whether governments are investing early enough in family preservation, whether mothers seeking help for violence are being penalised, and whether decisions comply with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle and the right to culture, family and community.

Criminalisation imprisonment and deaths in custody

The increasing imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women requires specific examination. Relevant issues include over-policing, imprisonment on remand, short sentences, lack of non-custodial options, criminalisation connected with poverty and violence, health care in prisons, deaths in custody, and inadequate housing and support on release. The Committee should ask what measurable action Australia is taking to reduce incarceration and prevent women from cycling between violence, homelessness, child removal and prison.

Health disability and wellbeing

CEDAW obligations extend to equal access to health care. Evidence should address culturally unsafe care, racism, preventable harm, maternal and reproductive health, menopause,

infertility, disability, mental health, traumatic brain injury, oral and dental health, and access to services outside major cities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health services must be central to design and delivery.

Housing poverty and economic security

Safe and affordable housing is essential to women's safety and equality. The review should consider homelessness, overcrowding, poor housing conditions, the lack of social housing, and barriers faced by women leaving violence or prison. It should also examine the cost of living, income support, unpaid care, employment, digital exclusion and the cultural load carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Climate change and remote communities

Climate change affects access to housing, health care, water, food, transport and cultural responsibilities. Women in remote communities and the Torres Strait face particular risks from extreme heat, flooding, disrupted transport and displacement. Responses must recognise women's cultural knowledge and authority and must support community-led adaptation without weakening connection to Country.

Racism accountability and data sovereignty

National averages can conceal the circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Governments should be required to provide consistent sex-disaggregated and location-sensitive data while respecting Indigenous data sovereignty. Evidence must also address institutional racism and establish clear accountability for whether policies improve women's safety, health, housing, justice and economic outcomes.

Recommendations to the Australian Government

1. Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their representative organisations participate directly in Australia's examination, including civil society briefings and government engagement before and after the Committee hearing.
2. Provide adequate funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's representatives to participate in the CEDAW process, including travel where required.
3. Provide the Committee with current, sex-disaggregated and location-sensitive evidence on outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women while respecting Indigenous data sovereignty.
4. Address the intersecting effects of sex discrimination, racism, colonisation, disability, poverty and geographic isolation across all areas of Australia's evidence and responses.
5. Adopt and resource a coordinated national response to missing and murdered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, with transparent implementation of the Senate inquiry recommendations.
6. Provide long-term funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations delivering violence prevention, legal, health, housing, healing and family support services.
7. Establish measurable national targets and public reporting to reduce violence, homelessness, child removal, imprisonment, deaths in custody and preventable ill-health among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Proposed message to government

The CEDAW process must ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are not spoken about without being directly represented. The Australian Government should provide a clear timetable, support women's participation in the examination, and ensure that its response addresses the intersecting discrimination experienced across cities, regional centres, rural towns and remote communities. Recommendations concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must be supported by transparent implementation, dedicated resources and regular public reporting.

Sources

- Australian Government Attorney-General's Department, Treaty body reporting
- Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australia's ninth periodic report to the CEDAW Committee
- United Nations Treaty Body Database, Australia and CEDAW documents
- United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
- IWRAW Asia Pacific, CEDAW sessions and civil society participation