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NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN'S ALLIANCE

Submission: Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032

Department of Social Services

Prepared by:

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

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Acknowledgement of Country

NATSIWA acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands, waters and skies across Australia and pays our deepest respects to Elders past and present. We honour the enduring strength, resilience, knowledge and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose cultures are the oldest continuing cultures in the world. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and acknowledge the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country, culture, language, kinship and community.

We also acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who continue to lead, care for and strengthen their families, communities and Nations. Their knowledge, lived experience and cultural authority underpin the work of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA). We recognise that meaningful change can only be achieved through genuine partnership, self-determination and respect for the voices and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

About NATSIWA

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) is the national peak body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across Australia. Funded by the Australian Government under the National Women's Alliances Program, NATSIWA ensures that the voices, leadership and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women inform national policy, programs and decision-making.

NATSIWA engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in urban, regional, rural and remote communities through culturally safe consultation, yarning, surveys, community forums and strategic partnerships. Grounded in the principles of self-determination, cultural authority and community-led solutions, NATSIWA recognises lived experience as a critical source of expertise. Through ongoing engagement, we identify emerging issues, elevate community priorities and provide evidence-informed advice and practical solutions to Australian Government agencies and other stakeholders, ensuring that policies and programs are shaped by the voices, knowledge and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

NATSIWA is committed to upholding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and communities own their data and have the inherent right to determine how information about them is collected, owned, accessed, interpreted, stored, shared and used. All consultation, research and evidence gathering undertaken by NATSIWA is guided by the principles of cultural safety, free, prior and informed consent, transparency and community benefit. We are committed to ensuring that the knowledge and lived experiences entrusted to us remain under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander control and are used ethically to strengthen advocacy, inform government and stakeholder decision-making, and deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, their families and communities.

Executive Summary

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Consultation Paper *Evidence to Action: Informing Direction for the Second Action Plan*, which supports development of the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (the National Plan). This submission responds against the five priority areas identified in the Consultation Paper: victim-survivors; prevention and early intervention; children and young people in their own right; people who use violence; and system integration and workforce.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to experience family, domestic and sexual violence at disproportionately high rates, driven by the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, social and economic disadvantage, and unequal access to culturally safe services, as this consultation's own evidence base confirms.^{1,2,9} While significant progress has been made in establishing national policy and legislative frameworks, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to experience fragmented service systems, inconsistent responses and barriers to accessing the support they need to achieve safety and recovery.

The Second Action Plan should focus on implementation rather than the development of new strategies. Australia now has a strong policy foundation through the National Plan, *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan to End Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence 2026–2036*³, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality, Safe and Supported*, and complementary reforms across health, housing, justice and child wellbeing. *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices* is now Australia's first standalone national plan dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, domestic and sexual violence, sitting alongside the National Plan on equal footing.³ The priority for the Second Action Plan is to align these existing commitments, strengthen coordination across governments and portfolios, and ensure investment delivers measurable improvements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, families and communities.

NATSIWA calls for a genuine whole-of-government response that recognises family, domestic and sexual violence as more than a justice issue, strengthens existing Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) before establishing new programs, and places women and children, not government systems, at the centre of service design. The Second Action Plan should be explicitly aligned with Closing the Gap Target 13⁴, supported by nationally consistent reporting guided by Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.

This submission sets out NATSIWA's priority recommendations below, followed by detailed responses against each of the Consultation Paper's five priority areas.

Priority Recommendations

NATSIWA's recommendations are detailed throughout this submission. The following cross-cutting priorities should be treated as the Second Action Plan's most urgent starting points for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, families and communities:

Priority recommendations

1. Embed Closing the Gap Target 13 as the primary measure of progress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes under the Second Action Plan, explicitly aligned with Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices.
2. Provide sustainable, multi-year (minimum five-year) funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, prioritising existing services and workforce stability before establishing new programs.
3. Expand Aboriginal Liaison Officer and Indigenous Family Liaison Officer positions across mainstream services, policing, courts and justice agencies, prioritising regional, rural and remote Australia.
4. Strengthen recognition of coercive control and systems abuse across legislation, policy, workforce training and professional practice.
5. Address the systemic misidentification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as predominant aggressors in family violence matters through mandatory trauma-informed, culturally safe training for police and frontline services, and independent review where misidentification is alleged.
6. Recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, with dedicated, culturally safe and developmentally appropriate responses.
7. Invest in nationally consistent, comparable data collection on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children's experiences of violence, currently a recognised national gap, governed by Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles and developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

1. Overarching Priorities: Implementation and Accountability

Australia has established a strong national policy and legislative foundation to address family, domestic and sexual violence. The National Plan, *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices*, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, *Working for Women, Safe and Supported*, and complementary reforms across justice, housing, health and child wellbeing collectively provide a comprehensive framework for action. The Second Action Plan should focus on strengthening implementation, improving coordination and ensuring these existing commitments deliver measurable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, families and communities, rather than creating another standalone reform agenda.

A consistent message from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is that government systems remain fragmented. Women do not experience violence through the lens of individual government portfolios; they experience interconnected systems that influence every aspect of their lives. The Second Action Plan should therefore promote a genuine whole-of-government approach that recognises family, domestic and sexual violence as a cross-portfolio responsibility, with every government agency demonstrating how its policies, programs and investment contribute to preventing violence and improving outcomes.

The Action Plan should demonstrate clear alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, particularly Target 13, which aims to reduce all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children by at least 50 per cent by 2031, as progress towards zero.⁴ It should also be explicitly designed to work alongside *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices*, which sets the future direction of government action in the family, domestic and sexual violence service system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities under Target 13.³ Consultations for both plans should take a genuine ‘tell us once’ approach so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are not required to repeat their experiences across multiple processes.

Implementation should recognise the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia. A nationally consistent framework should support flexible, place-based implementation that enables communities to determine local priorities while maintaining consistent national expectations for safety, quality, cultural responsiveness and accountability. Place-based implementation should build on existing community strengths, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, local partnerships, and trusted community organisations, rather than creating parallel service systems that duplicate existing capabilities.

Existing place-based justice models show that this does not require new infrastructure. It requires existing systems to genuinely share authority with communities. The Second Action Plan should resource the expansion of proven place-based models of this kind, rather than treating place-based delivery as a general aspiration.

What is already working

- Marram-Ngala Ganbu (Victoria's Koori Family Hearing Day), an Aboriginal-led, culturally grounded Children's Court process that has demonstrated more Aboriginal children remaining with family and greater culturally sensitive decision-making, evidencing what place-based, community-designed justice responses can achieve.²²
- The Barndimalgu Court, Geraldton (WA), a specialist, place-based family violence court for Aboriginal people, combining Aboriginal Respected Persons, behaviour change programs and case management within an existing mainstream court, showing how place-based models can be embedded rather than built from scratch.²³

Sustainable implementation depends on long-term investment. Short funding cycles continue to undermine workforce stability, organisational capability and service continuity across the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector, with organisations frequently required to devote significant resources to grant applications and reporting rather than service delivery. Longer-term funding agreements would enable organisations to retain experienced staff, strengthen governance and undertake long-term planning that better reflects community needs.

Effective implementation of the Second Action Plan also depends on sustained investment in the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's peak bodies that provide independent policy leadership, community engagement and government accountability. National peaks play a critical role in ensuring that the voices, lived experiences and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women inform national policy development, implementation and evaluation. They provide an essential bridge between government and communities, identifying emerging issues, monitoring the impact of reforms and supporting coordinated, evidence-informed responses across jurisdictions. Short-term and project-based funding limits the capacity of peak organisations to undertake this role effectively. Long-term, sustainable investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's representative organisations is necessary to ensure ongoing engagement, independent advice, culturally informed policy development and meaningful accountability throughout the implementation of the Second Action Plan.

Effective implementation requires governments to move beyond reporting activity towards reporting outcomes. The collection, use and interpretation of data should be guided by the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have greater control over how information about their communities is collected, analysed and used, and communities can access and apply that information to local planning and service improvement. Data collection is not a technical or secondary issue, it is foundational. Without

it, governments cannot know whether the Second Action Plan is working for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children and cannot be held accountable for the outcomes this submission calls for.

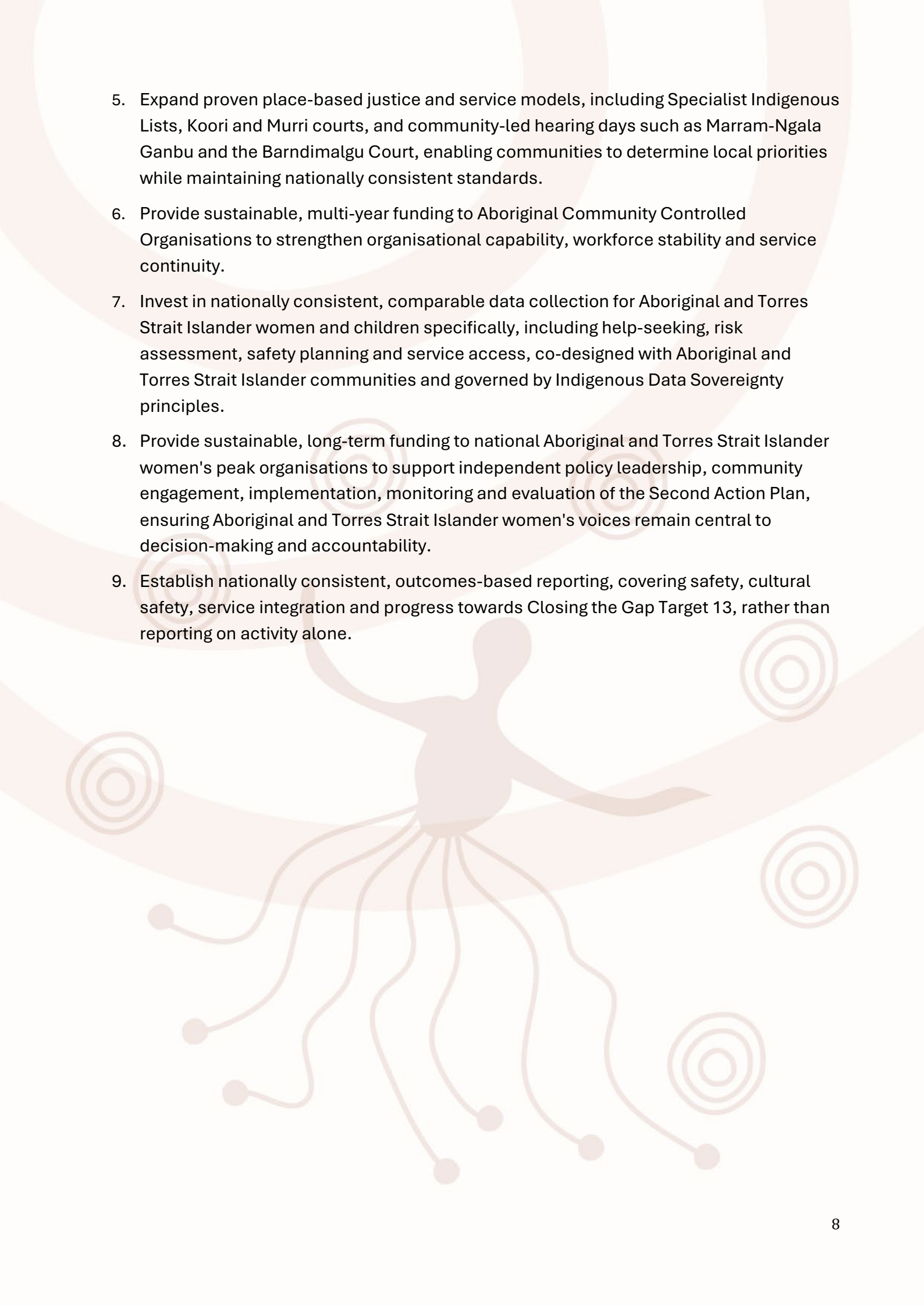
Where the gaps remain

- Closing the Gap Target 13 cannot currently be tracked, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports there has been no new data since Target 13's 2018–19 baseline, meaning progress towards the 2031 target is not possible to track at this stage.²⁴
- National data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences remains inconsistent, a gap this consultation's own evidence base already identifies as a priority for national monitoring.⁹ This is precisely the accountability and data sovereignty gap this submission's recommendations are intended to close.
- Accountability gaps extend beyond data: Australia has been the subject of an early warning and urgent action submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination over laws that increase the criminalisation and incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, illustrating the absence of binding consequences for governments that the Second Action Plan must help address.³⁷

While Target 13 itself cannot be tracked, related indicators that can be measured point to a worsening, not improving, picture: the Productivity Commission's most recent Closing the Gap reporting confirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult imprisonment and children in out-of-home care are both continuing to worsen nationally.¹¹ Given family violence is a key driver of both, this is strong indirect evidence that the underlying problem is not improving, even though Target 13 cannot confirm this directly.

Recommendations

1. Align implementation across the National Plan, Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Working for Women and other relevant national reform agendas through coordinated planning and shared accountability.
2. Embed Closing the Gap Target 13 as the primary measure of progress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes under the Second Action Plan.
3. Adopt a whole-of-government implementation approach that recognises family, domestic and sexual violence as a shared responsibility across all relevant portfolios.
4. Prioritise strengthening existing services, organisations and partnerships before establishing new programs or governance structures.

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5. Expand proven place-based justice and service models, including Specialist Indigenous Lists, Koori and Murri courts, and community-led hearing days such as Marram-Ngala Ganbu and the Barndimalgu Court, enabling communities to determine local priorities while maintaining nationally consistent standards.
 6. Provide sustainable, multi-year funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to strengthen organisational capability, workforce stability and service continuity.
 7. Invest in nationally consistent, comparable data collection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children specifically, including help-seeking, risk assessment, safety planning and service access, co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governed by Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.
 8. Provide sustainable, long-term funding to national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's peak organisations to support independent policy leadership, community engagement, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Second Action Plan, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's voices remain central to decision-making and accountability.
 9. Establish nationally consistent, outcomes-based reporting, covering safety, cultural safety, service integration and progress towards Closing the Gap Target 13, rather than reporting on activity alone.

2. Priority Area 1: Victim-Survivors

This section responds to Priority Area 1, addressing cultural safety and service integration, access to justice, coercive control and systems abuse, and long-term recovery and healing, including the gaps affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities this consultation seeks to identify.

Cultural safety and integrated service delivery

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women consistently report that accessing support following family, domestic and sexual violence is complex, fragmented and often retraumatising. Government systems continue to operate in silos, with different eligibility criteria, assessment processes and funding arrangements, and women are frequently required to navigate multiple agencies while managing immediate safety concerns, caring responsibilities, housing insecurity and financial hardship.

Cultural safety extends beyond awareness training or cultural competency. It requires organisations to embed Aboriginal leadership, employ Aboriginal staff, establish genuine partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and demonstrate accountability for culturally responsive service delivery. Women continue to report being required to repeatedly disclose traumatic experiences to multiple agencies before receiving assistance, repeated storytelling that delays support, increases emotional distress and contributes to disengagement from services.

Access to justice, coercive control and systems abuse

Access to justice remains one of the most significant barriers facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Geographic isolation, limited access to legal assistance, inconsistent policing responses, lengthy court processes and a long history of institutional racism and over-surveillance continue to affect women's ability to obtain protection, secure justice and rebuild their lives. Access to justice should not depend on where a woman lives. Expanding the Indigenous Family Liaison Officer (IFLO) program and Specialist Indigenous Lists nationally, including through On Country or community-based hearings, would give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families genuine access to culturally safe support and navigation throughout family law proceedings, prioritising regional, rural and remote communities where coverage remains lowest.

Where the gaps remain

- Family Violence Prevention Legal Services are chronically under-resourced, only 16 FVPLS providers operate nationally, and some services are so under-resourced they must turn away 30 to 40 per cent of the women seeking assistance, leaving large geographic gaps in coverage, particularly in regional and remote Australia.²⁵

The National Plan itself already acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are too often misidentified as perpetrators when they seek assistance, and that the legal and justice system is not well adapted to respond to the interlocking forms of violence they experience, particularly at the frontline of policing.⁶ It also recognises that failure to correctly identify the perpetrator disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who are more likely to encounter structural racism in the criminal legal system.⁶

The Second Action Plan is the opportunity to act on this acknowledgment. Aboriginal Community Controlled legal services report that misidentification affects a substantial proportion of the Aboriginal women they support, Djirra estimates at least a quarter of the women it assists have experienced misidentification¹⁸, and Victorian data indicates misidentification may occur in 30 to 50 per cent of women listed as respondents seen by specialist family violence services, with the number of female respondents identified as Aboriginal rising 44 per cent between 2016 and 2020, compared with 27 per cent for all women.¹⁹

Evidence to the Yoorrook Justice Commission described misidentification as a systemic problem, driven by gendered and racialised assumptions about who appears calm, credible or fearful, resulting in Aboriginal women being removed from their homes, wrongly listed as respondents on protection orders, made ineligible for family violence refuge and support, and in some cases charged or imprisoned.²⁰

This is not a series of isolated errors. It reflects entrenched bias in how frontline responders assess risk and identify perpetrators, and it actively deters Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from seeking help. The Second Action Plan must treat misidentification as a national priority requiring mandatory workforce training, independent review mechanisms and accountability, not an issue confined to one state or service system.

What is already working

- Aboriginal Community Controlled legal services, services such as Djirra continue to demonstrate how community-led legal advocacy identifies and addresses the misidentification of Aboriginal women as predominant aggressors, providing a practical model for the training and review mechanisms recommended above.¹⁸

Where the gaps remain

- Misidentification has a prison pipeline, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women make up around 34 per cent of Australia's female prisoner population despite representing only around two per cent of the female population, and Aboriginal women's imprisonment continues to climb, including sharp recent increases in remand for domestic violence-related offences.²⁶ This is a direct, measurable

consequence of the misidentification this submission calls on the Second Action Plan to address.

Women have identified increasing concerns regarding systems abuse, where perpetrators misuse family law proceedings, child protection processes, housing systems, financial arrangements or repeated legal applications to continue coercion and control following separation. These forms of abuse are often poorly recognised across government systems. Similarly, responses to coercive control must recognise the complexities of extended family relationships, cultural obligations and community dynamics, and be accompanied by consistent workforce training and culturally appropriate risk assessment, not legislative reform alone.

Economic abuse and reproductive coercion also require explicit recognition as forms of family violence in their own right, not only as downstream vulnerabilities. Economic abuse, controlling access to money, sabotaging employment and coercing debt, is already identified within the Closing the Gap Target 13 data framework as a distinct form of family violence requiring disaggregated measurement.³³ Reproductive coercion carries a specific and continuing history for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, including coerced contraception and structural forms such as barriers to birthing on Country. Reproductive coercion has previously been recognised within national action plans to address violence against women; it is not yet clear whether it will be retained with the same visibility in the Second Action Plan, and NATSIWA calls for this to be made explicit.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with disability face compounded and distinct forms of coercive control, including having assistive technology, communication support, medication, personal care or transport withheld or manipulated by a perpetrator or carer. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with disability are more likely than non-Indigenous women with disability to experience domestic and sexual violence and coercive control. In New South Wales, Aboriginal women with disability were recorded as family violence victims at almost four times the rate of non-Aboriginal women with disability.³⁴

NATSIWA supports disability-inclusive definitions and practice guidance, developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with disability and organisations with disability expertise. This intersection is made more acute by digital exclusion in regional and remote Australia, where withholding a phone, device or connectivity can be a more severe form of control given how few alternative means of communication or help-seeking exist.

Where the gaps remain

- Digital exclusion in remote Australia is severe and widening, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians face a 10.5-point digital inclusion gap nationally, a gap that more than doubles in remote communities and is driven overwhelmingly by lack of access rather than affordability or skills. This directly affects women's ability to seek help, maintain contact with support services, or escape a perpetrator controlling their access to communication.³⁵

Recovery, healing and long-term wellbeing

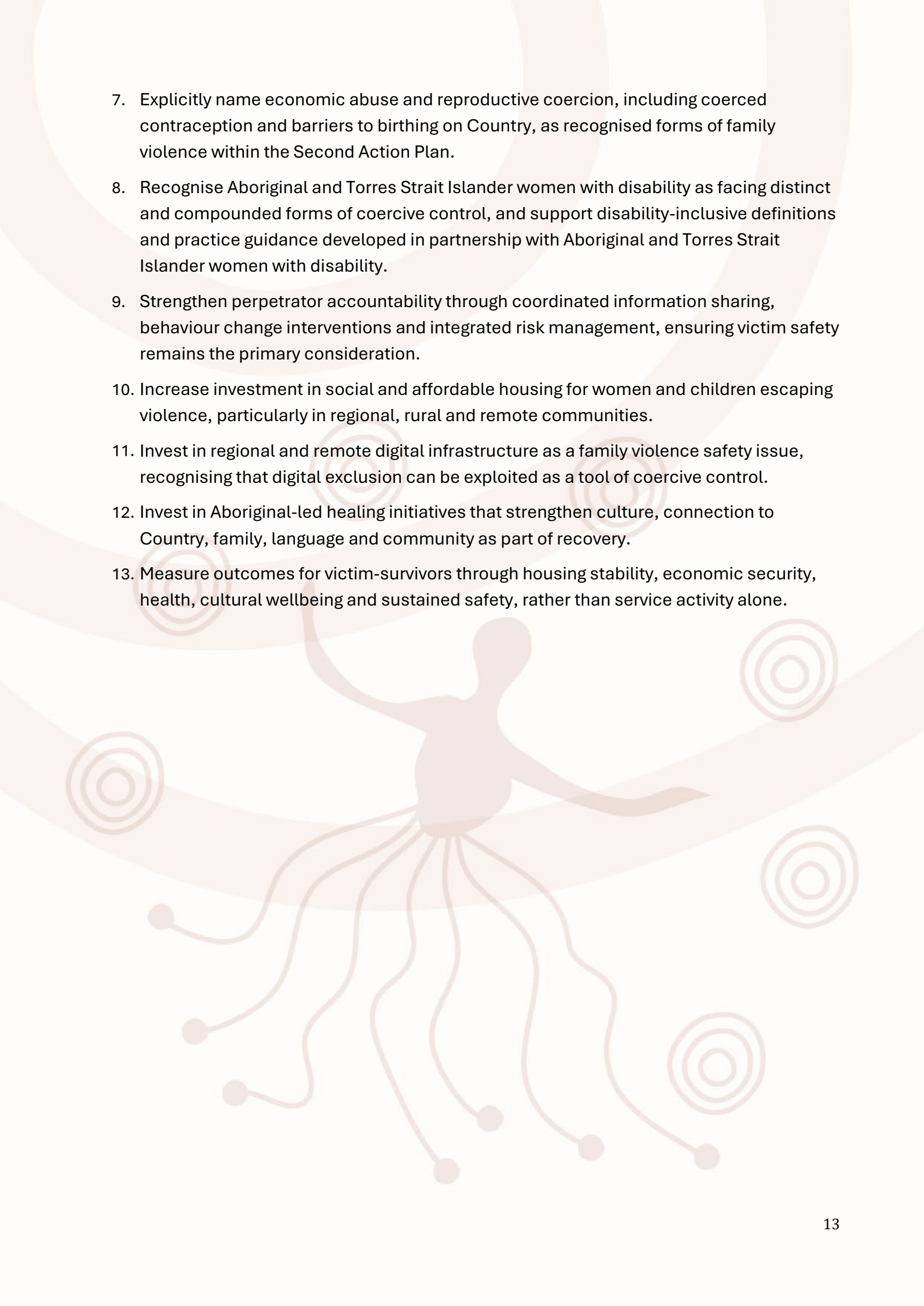
Recovery is a long-term process that extends beyond emergency accommodation, legal protection or crisis intervention. Housing remains one of the greatest barriers to recovery: women continue to report remaining in violent relationships because safe, affordable and culturally appropriate housing is unavailable, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities.

Economic Security

Coordinated health and social and emotional wellbeing support, and community-led healing that strengthens culture, connection to Country, language and kinship are equally critical, and should be recognised as essential components of culturally safe recovery rather than optional additions to mainstream services.

Recommendations

1. Develop an integrated service system that places women and children at the centre of service delivery, with coordinated referral pathways and shared assessment processes that reduce repeated trauma.
2. Require mainstream services to demonstrate culturally safe practice through Aboriginal leadership, workforce participation and organisational accountability.
3. Improve equitable access to culturally safe legal assistance across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote Australia, including through the Indigenous Family Liaison Officer program discussed further under system integration and workforce below.
4. Address the systemic misidentification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as predominant aggressors through mandatory, trauma-informed and culturally safe risk-assessment training for police, courts and frontline services, and independent review of cases where misidentification is alleged.
5. Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have been misidentified as using violence are not made ineligible for family violence refuge, legal assistance or other protective supports as a result.
6. Strengthen recognition of, and responses to, coercive control and systems abuse across legislation, policy, workforce capability and professional practice.

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7. Explicitly name economic abuse and reproductive coercion, including coerced contraception and barriers to birthing on Country, as recognised forms of family violence within the Second Action Plan.
 8. Recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with disability as facing distinct and compounded forms of coercive control, and support disability-inclusive definitions and practice guidance developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with disability.
 9. Strengthen perpetrator accountability through coordinated information sharing, behaviour change interventions and integrated risk management, ensuring victim safety remains the primary consideration.
 10. Increase investment in social and affordable housing for women and children escaping violence, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities.
 11. Invest in regional and remote digital infrastructure as a family violence safety issue, recognising that digital exclusion can be exploited as a tool of coercive control.
 12. Invest in Aboriginal-led healing initiatives that strengthen culture, connection to Country, family, language and community as part of recovery.
 13. Measure outcomes for victim-survivors through housing stability, economic security, health, cultural wellbeing and sustained safety, rather than service activity alone.

3. Priority Area 2: Prevention and Early Intervention

Responding to Priority Area 2, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, prevention cannot be separated from the broader legacy of colonisation, dispossession and intergenerational trauma. Ongoing experiences of racism, discrimination, social exclusion, economic disadvantage and housing insecurity continue to influence women's safety and wellbeing, requiring coordinated action across government portfolios rather than a narrow focus on individual behaviour change.

Opportunities for early intervention are frequently missed. Women often engage with health services, maternity services, schools, early childhood services, housing providers, Centrelink, employment providers and community organisations long before violence escalates. These services should be equipped to recognise early indicators of risk and connect women with culturally safe supports before intervention becomes crisis-driven, backed by established referral arrangements with specialist services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Community-led prevention remains one of the greatest strengths within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Culture should be recognised as a protective factor: strong cultural identity, connection to Country, language, kinship and community leadership contribute significantly to resilience, healing and wellbeing. Prevention strategies should support initiatives that strengthen cultural identity and promote community-led solutions that build on existing strengths, alongside programs, developed in partnership with communities, that promote respectful relationships, healthy masculinities and shared community responsibility for preventing violence, so that prevention is not treated as the responsibility of women alone.

What is already working

- Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way, Victoria's Aboriginal-led family violence prevention and response strategy, developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities and implemented through rolling three-year action plans, demonstrates what sustained, self-determined, community-led prevention looks like in practice.²⁷

Where the gaps remain

- Aboriginal-led prevention faces structural barriers, not just funding gaps, evidence reviews find that funding and partnership arrangements are often structured with inadequate attention to self-determination, and that communities face real barriers accessing the data and evaluation evidence generated about their own programs.²⁸

Economic security is a critical, underused lever for prevention. Women who experience financial hardship, insecure housing, unemployment or limited access to education face additional barriers to leaving violence or seeking assistance. Coordinated policies that improve access to employment, affordable housing, financial capability and education reduce vulnerability to violence as well as advancing gender equality more broadly.

Recommendations

1. Prioritise prevention and early intervention as equal priorities alongside crisis response and recovery, with coordinated action across health, housing, education, employment, child protection, justice and community services.
2. Establish culturally safe referral pathways ensuring women identified at risk receive timely and coordinated support.
3. Increase long-term investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to design and deliver community-led prevention initiatives, and ensure funding and partnership structures genuinely support self-determination.
4. Recognise culture, connection to Country, language, family and community as protective factors within prevention strategies.
5. Expand culturally responsive programs that strengthen respectful relationships, parenting, youth engagement and community leadership, engaging men and boys as partners in prevention.
6. Address the structural drivers of violence through coordinated action on housing, economic security, education, employment and social inclusion.
7. Provide sustainable, multi-year funding and support long-term evaluation of prevention initiatives, using measures developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and ensuring communities can access the evidence generated about their own programs.

4. Priority Area 3: Children and Young People in Their Own Right

Responding to Priority Area 3, this is an area where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are too often overlooked, treated only as an extension of their mother's experience of violence rather than as rights-holders with their own safety, healing and cultural needs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly overrepresented in child protection and out-of-home care systems, and the impacts of witnessing or experiencing family violence compound the intergenerational effects of colonisation, past removal policies and institutional mistrust. Responses that are adult-centric, or that treat children primarily as evidence in adult legal proceedings, can retraumatise children and fail to recognise their own experience of harm. Casework, safety planning and therapeutic support should explicitly reflect children's perspectives, risks and developmental needs, supported by age-appropriate and culturally grounded engagement.

Self-determination in decision-making, not only funding, remains unfinished business. The 1997 Bringing Them Home report recommended that responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child welfare, including out-of-home care decision-making, be transferred to Aboriginal communities and organisations³⁸; almost three decades on, decisions to remove children still sit with state and territory departments, frequently exercised without the benefit of best-practice, culturally grounded models such as Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making³⁹. The Second Action Plan should treat this as a long-outstanding commitment to implement, not a new proposal.

What is already working

- Aboriginal community-controlled early intervention works, SNAICC's Family Matters reporting finds that Aboriginal community-controlled early intervention, prevention and family support programs are keeping children safe and connected to family, community and culture, but remain critically underfunded relative to what is needed to shift overrepresentation.²⁹

Where the gaps remain

- Overrepresentation in out-of-home care is severe and not improving fast enough, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are around six to ten times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children, yet nationally only around 8 per cent of child protection spending is directed to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.²⁹

Culture, connection to Country, language and kinship are protective factors for children as much as for adults and should be central to how the Second Action Plan supports children's recovery, not treated as a secondary consideration to mainstream therapeutic models. This should be delivered in a way that is fully aligned with Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices, which is built on strengths-based, healing-informed and self-determined approaches for First Nations families.

Children and young people are also navigating rapidly changing forms of harm, including technology-facilitated abuse, harmful online content and exploitation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in regional, rural and remote communities face additional barriers to safe, confidential support in responding to these harms, including limited access to specialist services and digital connectivity. The Second Action Plan should ensure that responses to emerging, and online harms are developed with, and are accessible to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, rather than assuming mainstream digital safety initiatives will reach them equally.

Recommendations

1. Recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people as victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence in their own right, with dedicated policy and practice responses.
2. Ensure casework, safety planning and therapeutic support reflect children's own perspectives, risks and developmental needs, delivered through age-appropriate and culturally safe engagement.
3. Invest in culturally grounded, healing-informed therapeutic services for children and young people that strengthen connection to culture, Country, language and kinship, aligned with Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices.
4. Substantially increase the proportion of child protection and family support funding directed to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, in line with evidence that their programs keep children safe and connected to family.
5. Ensure responses to technology-facilitated abuse and other emerging harms affecting children and young people are developed with, and accessible to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities.
6. Involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, where safe and appropriate, in shaping the policies, programs and services that affect them.
7. Support the transfer of decision-making authority over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection matters to Aboriginal communities and organisations, including through models such as Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making, consistent with the recommendations of the 1997 Bringing Them Home report.

5. Priority Area 4: People Who Use Violence

Responding to Priority Area 4, a continuing theme among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is a desire to invest in First Nations men and boys, rather than approaches that demonise them. Perpetrator accountability should remain central to justice reform: responsibility for managing risk should sit with those who use violence, not with women.

Mainstream behaviour change programs are frequently unavailable to, or inappropriate for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, with a lack of culturally specific programs, waiting lists and workforce shortages limiting access. Successful programs must be trauma-informed, culturally safe, delivered through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and grounded in self-determination, engaging Elders, men, young people and communities in shaping what accountability and behaviour change look like.

What is already working

- Aboriginal-led behaviour change programs show what works, an ANROWS process evaluation of the Marra'ka Mbarintja Men's Family Violence Prevention Program, delivered by Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation in Alice Springs, identified quality practice including cultural safety for Aboriginal participants, prioritising women's safety support and collaboration across the service system.³⁰

Where the gaps remain

- Reliable evaluation of Aboriginal-led programs remains scarce, reviews of Aboriginal men's behaviour change and healing programs consistently find a paucity of reliable evaluations, making it difficult to identify and scale what works nationally, even where individual programs show real promise.³¹

Effective responses to people who use violence must also address the structural drivers that increase risk of perpetration, including intergenerational trauma, exposure to violence in childhood, harmful substance use, and gambling, while never allowing these factors to excuse the use of violence or displace accountability. Perpetrator interventions should operate alongside, not instead of, strong legal protections and comprehensive support services for women and children.

Recommendations

1. Invest in culturally safe, trauma-informed behaviour change programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys, delivered through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and grounded in self-determination.

2. Strengthen perpetrator accountability through coordinated information sharing, behaviour change interventions and integrated risk management, with victim safety as the primary consideration.
3. Fund consistent, long-term evaluation of Aboriginal-led behaviour change and healing programs so that promising local models can be identified, resourced and scaled nationally.
4. Address the structural and intergenerational drivers of violence perpetration, including trauma, substance use and gambling, without displacing individual accountability.
5. Expand the availability of culturally specific behaviour change programs in regional, rural and remote communities, addressing current workforce and waiting-list barriers.
6. Engage Elders, men, young people and communities in shaping locally led approaches to accountability and behaviour change.

6. Priority Area 5: System Integration and Workforce

Responding to Priority Area 5, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women frequently engage simultaneously with housing providers, health services, police, courts, legal assistance, child protection, Centrelink, disability services and specialist family violence organisations. Navigating these systems can be overwhelming, particularly during periods of crisis, and the responsibility for coordinating support too often rests with women rather than with the service system itself.

Building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce across both specialist and mainstream services should remain a national priority. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women consistently report that culturally safe engagement is strengthened when services include Aboriginal staff with appropriate authority, cultural knowledge and decision-making responsibilities. Embedding Aboriginal Liaison Officers across mainstream services, health, housing, policing, education, employment, child protection, disability and community services, improves cultural safety, facilitates communication and strengthens collaboration between agencies and communities. Within the justice system, Indigenous Family Liaison Officers play an equally important role, helping women understand legal processes and engage with systems that are often perceived as complex and culturally unsafe.

Accessibility remains a significant issue for women living in regional, rural and remote Australia, where workforce shortages, limited specialist services, transport barriers and unreliable digital connectivity persist. Governments should strengthen outreach services, mobile service delivery and multidisciplinary teams, while recognising that digital solutions cannot replace face-to-face, culturally safe engagement. Integrated service delivery also requires stronger collaboration across housing, health, justice, child protection, mental health, alcohol and other drug services, disability supports, financial counselling and employment services, through locally agreed referral pathways and coordinated case management.

The family law system illustrates both the opportunity and the current gap. The Indigenous Family Liaison Officer (IFLO) program has grown to 16 officers supporting Specialist Indigenous Lists across Adelaide, Alice Springs, Darwin, Melbourne, Sydney, Newcastle and Lismore²¹, assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to understand and engage with court processes and connect with culturally safe legal, health and other support services. Approximately one in every 14 applications for parenting or property orders involves an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander party or child²¹, yet current funding allows the IFLO program to support under half of these families.³⁶ This program should be expanded nationally, alongside Specialist Indigenous Lists and culturally responsive case management, with priority given to regional, rural and remote communities where access to justice remains most limited. Increasing opportunities for hearings and other court services to be delivered on Country, or closer to community, would further recognise the importance of culture, place and connection to community in family law matters.

What is already working

- Indigenous Family Liaison Officers (IFLOs) and Specialist Indigenous Lists, the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia's IFLO program now operates in seven locations nationally, helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families understand and navigate court processes and connect with culturally safe support, demonstrating what national expansion should build on.²¹

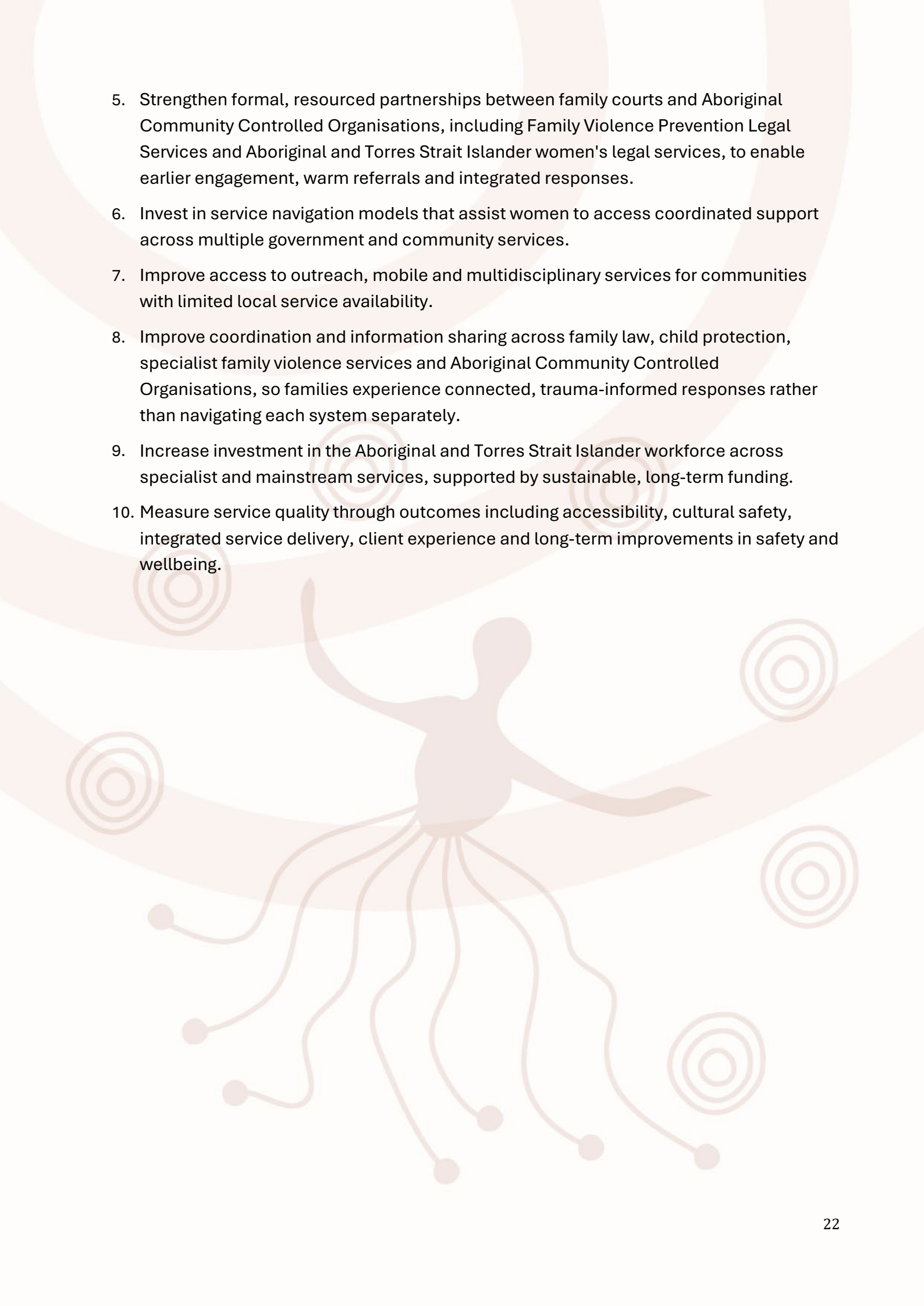
Where the gaps remain

- Workforce instability undermines service integration, research on remote Aboriginal Community Controlled health services found annual staff turnover as high as 150 per cent and stability rates as low as 49 per cent in the most remote clinics, illustrating the scale of workforce instability that sustained, long-term investment is needed to address across the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector.³²

System integration also depends on formal partnerships, not informal goodwill. Family courts, child protection agencies, specialist family violence services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, including Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's legal services, should have clear, resourced partnership arrangements that enable earlier engagement, warm referrals and coordinated case management. This requires sustained investment in growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce across family law specifically, including Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners, lawyers, judicial support staff, child specialists and family violence practitioners, so that culturally safe capacity keeps pace with demand rather than depending on a small number of individuals.

Recommendations

1. Expand Aboriginal Liaison Officer positions across mainstream government services to improve cultural safety, communication and service accessibility.
2. Expand the Indigenous Family Liaison Officer (IFLO) program and Specialist Indigenous Lists nationally, particularly in regional, rural and remote Australia.
3. Increase opportunities for family law hearings and related court services to be delivered On Country or closer to community, recognising the importance of culture, place and connection to community.
4. Invest in the growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce across family law specifically, including Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners, lawyers, judicial support staff, child specialists and family violence practitioners.

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5. Strengthen formal, resourced partnerships between family courts and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, including Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's legal services, to enable earlier engagement, warm referrals and integrated responses.
 6. Invest in service navigation models that assist women to access coordinated support across multiple government and community services.
 7. Improve access to outreach, mobile and multidisciplinary services for communities with limited local service availability.
 8. Improve coordination and information sharing across family law, child protection, specialist family violence services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, so families experience connected, trauma-informed responses rather than navigating each system separately.
 9. Increase investment in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce across specialist and mainstream services, supported by sustainable, long-term funding.
 10. Measure service quality through outcomes including accessibility, cultural safety, integrated service delivery, client experience and long-term improvements in safety and wellbeing.

Conclusion

The Second Action Plan presents an opportunity to move beyond policy commitment and deliver meaningful change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, families and communities. Australia now has a comprehensive policy framework through the National Plan, *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices*, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, *Working for Women* and other complementary reforms. The challenge is no longer identifying what needs to be done, it is ensuring these commitments are implemented in a coordinated, accountable and culturally responsive way.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to experience unacceptable levels of family, domestic and sexual violence, compounded by systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, housing insecurity, economic disadvantage and inequitable access to culturally safe services. These issues cannot be addressed by individual programs operating in isolation. They require sustained, coordinated action across governments, portfolios and service systems, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women recognised as partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of policy and services.

The Second Action Plan should strengthen, not duplicate, the work already underway, building the capability of existing services, strengthening Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, supporting a sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, and recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as victim-survivors with their own rights and needs. Governments should remain accountable for demonstrating measurable progress against Closing the Gap Target 13, judged by tangible improvements in the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, rather than the number of programs funded.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have consistently told governments what is required to keep women and children safe. The evidence already exists. The policy frameworks are in place. The Second Action Plan must now focus on implementation, accountability and sustained investment. Success will not be measured by the number of strategies developed, but by fewer women experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence, fewer children entering statutory systems, stronger Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, and safer, healthier communities.

NATSIWA looks forward to working in genuine partnership with governments to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women remain central to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Second Action Plan.

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