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The use of active resistance by Indigenous Australian women
to create a platform for race and gender based rights.

Introduction

In Indigenous Australia, cultures across the continent ground our identity is shaped and defined by lineage and heritage - identifying clan (language) group and country (land). Dorinda would greet you by saying that she is a Bibbulmun Noongar and Yamatji woman from the west coast of Australia. Her people came from the south west areas and Midwest areas of the State, but were moved by successive governments and became commonly known as the 'Stolen Generations'. Florence, a Dauareb Wuthathi woman, is from Far North Queensland and represents the interconnection between the Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people over the generations of trade within the region. The aim of this discussion paper is to observe key milestones in the history of Australia's Indigenous women, in correlation to mechanisms for change, over our time of inclusion, and identify the opportunities to improve. This continues our narrative and further supports the need to create a platform for race and gender based rights.

In many ways we (Indigenous women) have survived the colonial process that forcibly removed generations of our children from their families and communities attempting to disconnect culture and identity. By removing them from their traditional homelands (country) or metaphorically speaking the Earth (Our spiritual mother) the one which we are custodians for as Indigenous people and the forced removal from their biological mothers was a carefully crafted legislatively based manoeuvre that was unable to be challenged by Aboriginal people until 1969.

But many years before there was an attempt by non-Indigenous women to champion a resistance for the removal of Indigenous children who had previously been placed in positions as caretakers for the removal of our children into missions and other church based institutions. Mary Bennett, who for many years worked at the Mt. Margaret

Mission in Western Australia. In 1937, Bennett implored other white women NOT to condone or justify taking half-caste children from their aboriginal mothers. She stated "The unfortunate mothers are only victims of starvation and to separate parents and children is to destroy both in the most cruel way.... The recent Land Act Amendment of Western Australia (W.A.) takes away from natives the right to hunt over their tribal lands when these are enclosed, and ... all the native waters are fenced in [by] the [white] squatters.... Their game is destroyed and their dogs are destroyed and the only way they can come by a meal is by selling their women. So I say that W.A. is deliberately starving their natives to death in their own country." (Mary Bennett to Olive Pink, 12 September 1937, I. F. (a) (2), Olive Pink Papers, Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, AUS).

There are well known facts and research about the treatment of Indigenous women in the colonial era and the legacy which was successfully passed to the future generations of children through cultural disconnect and intergenerational trauma resulting in successive government policies and ongoing colonialism that contribute to the contemporary issues relating to gender and race inequality and continue to invade and manifest themselves in the everyday lives of Indigenous women in Australia.

The positioning of Indigenous women in Australia is well researched and documented, particularly across the overrepresentation of social justice issues - which are often deficit based or quantified through statistics that often describe the issue as one dimensional, without connectivity to other factors and that lack connectivity to legislation and policy outcomes written by and for government processes.

Critically this ad hoc and fragmented way of defining and ultimately shaping the lens in which historical experiences and active resistance employed by Indigenous women in Australia is portrayed means that this is not widely recognised or acknowledged as being important to working towards the creation of more gender focused systems and processes.

There are two critical questions which require solutions and for a history that has bared witness to the treatment of Indigenous women through the actions of governments but also societal acceptance of the social order which sees Indigenous women at the bottom with extreme marginalisation and renders us invisible to the systems that govern our lives and influence the future generations of Indigenous women and girls in Australia.

Firstly, is how do we create a narrative that can articulate the importance of recognising this active resistance and respect and value the resilience and survival of Indigenous women, most importantly their connection to their culture and identity that has been passed on to their daughters and other women in the next generations.

Secondly, how do we create agency to elevate and find a space in the social and political landscapes that respect and value the critical roles Indigenous women have these include cultural, spiritual and political influence in their families and communities for generations; and continue to grow through the ever-growing concept of 'Indigenous feminism'. We would liken this concept of Indigenous or Blak Women's Feminism - that we will coin as "the shoulders we stand upon that have built the foundations of the work and issues that were created for us, not by us and now require a decolonising systemic processes to eradicate these from our communities."

Connection to Beijing 25+

Ultimately ensuring that gender and race equality are achieved in Australia is the important intersectional work that requires urgency, investment, commitment and sustainability this consistency with the critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action reflected through our domestic policy must be inclusive of the Beijing 25+ agenda and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP).

Currently the Indigenous Affairs policy space is dominated by the Closing the Gap targets which do not have any gender referencing or markers that are capable for measurement. This disjointed and inconsistent policy framework makes it difficult to see

the importance of connecting outcomes for Indigenous women and girls with capability, consistency, measurement and accountability to the Beijing Platform for Action. This also does not include some of the critical principles of UNDRIP such as justice, democracy, respect for human rights, equality, non-discrimination, good governance and good faith, all grounded in the self determination of Indigenous peoples to decolonize our current approaches and methodologies and based within a human rights framework.

As mentioned in the Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women NGO forum China 2015, the critical reference point of the Beijing Platform for Action is “the persistent and increasing burden of poverty”, which for Indigenous Australian women is a ongoing issue which sees has no National leadership and doesn’t not underpin any of the policies or legislation Indigenous Affairs portfolio in a strategy to eradicate which is also Goal #1 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Agenda.

The focus of Australian domestic policy continues to focus on economic growth and development which fail to recognise the colonialism, imposition and homogenising that continues through these models which have far reaching implications through the destruction of diverse biological and cultural resources which have been sustained for many generations by Australia’s First Peoples causing further harm in particular to Indigenous women their knowledge, spirituality and culture.

The Australian Government 2019 review of Beijing 25+ for Indigenous Women gave only a few examples of progress across the 12 areas of the Beijing Platform for Action, which were not connected to other areas of Indigenous policy and were superficial in addressing the drivers of gender inequality for Indigenous Women in Australia. These areas were;

List the areas of the 2019 review

Building a platform to decolonise Indigenous Women’s issues

In 2004 the demise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was a pivotal turning point in national Indigenous affairs in Australia. This dismantling of the only attempt that Indigenous people have had at self determination resulted in winding back the clock to the earlier days of dependence and disenfranchisement experienced by Indigenous people during the early colonial years.

In 2009 the development of the National Women's Alliance provided a glimmer of hope for Indigenous Australian Women and girls through the establishment of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA). This development of the Alliance fell well short of the expectations of Indigenous women nationally and continues to struggle with ongoing support both internally and via governments to provide effective change to policy and system responses for Indigenous Australian Women and girls, to practice effective self determination and co-determination of the critical aspects of the Beijing 25+.

In 2019 the Closing the Gap processes through the National Coalition of Peaks was also a critical opportunity missed that allowed NATSIWA to provide a gendered analysis to the current policies and to provide advice on building the gender based data systems required to measure effectively the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and UNDRIP.

This inconsistency is at the heart of the decolonising actions required to make effective and meaningful change, rather than the ongoing policy "circle work" that plagues the ineffective implementation of these global instruments which leads to the ongoing uncertainty commitment to racial and gender equality in Australia.

Importance of voice and agency

The opportunity for change presented through the global Black Lives Matters campaign highlighted the racial inequality in policies, systems and practice that regular play out in the daily lives of Indigenous Australians, in particular women who are grossly

overrepresented in social justice issues. This work is highlighted through the Social Justice Commissioners reports from 2000 - 2020.

These issues highlighted and coupled with urgent need for the response and recovery of the global pandemic CoronaVirus, there was a once in a lifetime opportunity to re-model, re-configure and re-energise the systems that were creating these rapidly increasing statistics.

The urgent need of an effective platform for policy and legislative change led by Indigenous Australian women requires urgent investment to understand, plan, implement and effectively measure the 12 areas of the Beijing Platform for Action in Australia. This Platform would provide a gendered lens working across Beijing to ensure that these are consistently and harmonious with current domestic policy to re-politicise the issues for Indigenous Women in order to get urgent action, commitment and investment.

Conclusion

Australia's lack of commitment to its international obligations through UNDRIP and the Beijing Platform for Action sees our progress significantly less than other progressive States. The disconnect from the globally endorsed frameworks for human rights of race and gender equality must be prioritised and consequently reflected through its domestic policy work. These must include the appropriate data collection agencies to monitor progress and provide advice on implementation and evaluation of legislation, policy and programs.

This lack of action by successive Australian Governments prevent Indigenous people, especially women from their rights to self determination, these should ensure the historical, political, social, cultural, economic and religious rights of Indigenous people be enshrined in their constitutions and legal systems including treaties with its First Peoples.

Investment into re-building the infrastructure removed through ATSIC's demise can ensure that the key principles of self determination are embedded across national policy systems, these must be informed by international and national best practice and which are consistently reviewed in partnership with Indigenous Women to ensure effectiveness.

Further investment in Indigenous Women's organisations, building networking opportunities and creating space for the specific issues affecting Indigenous Women based on diversity and nationhood can create measurable and sustainable outcomes as per the UN Sustainable Development Goals Agenda by 2030.

Building a research agenda for Indigenous Women

Understanding that the historical research agenda grounded in the challenges of Feminism and how Gender inequality has manifested itself in the lives of Indigenous Women. Many Australian Indigenous academics have written extensively about the plight of being absorbed into the mainstream feminist agenda in order to have their voices heard and their critique of the starting point of difference for Indigenous Women through colonisation are important for the shaping of contemporary issues and the need for different approaches grounded in our Indigenous women knowledges and experiences.

The contemporary issues are all ever present for Indigenous women in the social justice area and must be understood coupled with the historical aspects and the policy approaches which fail to recognise cultural resistance and resilience of Indigenous women as important factors for success.

Any future research agendas written by and for Indigenous Women in Australia must be grounded in co-creating new principles for creating voice and agency for Indigenous researchers and different methodologies that are centred on cultural ways of working and knowledge.

The building of the hybrid model for the research of 12 areas of the Beijing Platform for Action and its correlation with UNDRIP must have a connection with the Indigenous policy portfolio to ensure consistency and accountability. This hybrid model must also include an economic analysis of the investment into Indigenous Women's areas to ensure accountability and transparency for both research and policy are key features.

The research agenda can not be disconnected through a separate entity to the Platform for Indigenous Women's areas of the Beijing Platform for Action and should be sufficiently resourced to act as a key knowledge based portal for Australia's effective international engagement and honouring its global obligations.