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**“I AM AN AUSTRALIAN WOMAN, WHO IS  
INDIGENOUS, PLEASE STOP CATEGORISING ME AS  
JUST BEING AN INDIGENOUS WOMAN!”**

**By Sarina Jan & the Indigenous Business Institute Ltd**

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**This international conference is for all who care passionately about improving women's position in the world, who demand justice and full human rights for women everywhere and who believe that a feminist analysis is essential to defining a fairer globalised world.**

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To the Bindal & Wulgurukaba peoples, the traditional owners of this land. I thank you for the opportunity in allowing me to talk with my sisters on your land.

I am a Nyul Nyul woman of the Bardi people from the Kimberley Region of Western Australia.

Today, I am going to share with you my sisters, my experience and struggles as an Indigenous woman living in Australia and the inequalities that I face daily because I do not enjoy the same status and privileges that an Australian woman enjoys, even though 60 years ago I was given the right to vote as an Australian citizen.

So, I start my paper off today by stating that: I am an Australian woman, who is Indigenous, so please, do not categorise me as just being an Indigenous woman.

### **Understanding Indigenous Affairs**

In order to understand some of the issues I face as an Indigenous Women in Australia, there is a need to look at the importance of Indigenous Affairs within Australia and its contribution to this countries economy.

For example: the 3 main income-generating industries for Western Australia and for Australia as a whole, are tourism, mining and government. The one thing they all have in common is Indigenous people and their culture.

In fact, Indigenous Affairs is an industry that generates a lot of money, however, many Australians perceive Indigenous Affairs as only being a welfare industry (i.e. a responsibility of Government) and not one that is contributing greatly to the general economic development of this Country.

Our Indigenous art industry contributes to the export industry of Australia and the overall reduction of Australia's balance of payments. In addition, international tourists travel thousands of kilometres to Australia to experience our unique culture that is rich in heritage and mystique. These and many other areas are where Indigenous Australians are able to directly influence and contribute to Australia's economic development.

Within Indigenous Affairs itself, the monies that Government Agencies administer for Indigenous people largely contribute to non-Indigenous employment, wealth and the maintenance of foreign frameworks. For example, within my state's public service, there are only 3 Indigenous people in Executive positions and they are all male. On average, the highest level that Indigenous people reach in the public service is a level 6. There are no Indigenous Chief Executive Officers or Indigenous Corporate Executives in the private industry, even though Indigenous people enjoy a number of joint ventures with major companies like BHP Billiton, Henry Walker & Rio Tinto.

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## **Sexism**

But, then again as an Australian woman, who is Indigenous:

- I too am hampered by Access & Equity strategies, which undervalues my skills, experience and knowledge as a woman against a male counterpart due to mateship or the boys club.
- I too am pissed off at the inequality Australian women experience when they are unable to benefit from their previous partners future superannuation payout after many, many years of service.
- I too am angry that motherhood still remains a woman's total responsibility when the male is also a resident parent.
- I too question why the Government taxes GST on women's menstrual products and not on men's shaving cream or cologne.
- I too abhor the high cost that females must pay for makeup, clothing, jewellery and hair products when men do not.

All of these are disempowerments that I experience with you, my sisters daily. And together, as Australian women, we can walk the streets, sign petitions and use our collective voices to vote at the ballot boxes to make change. And yes, our power, our right and our unity as Australian women make us a force to be reckoned with.

Luckily too, as Australian women we can come together in forums such as this to empower each other, to gain new knowledge, to meet old friends, to share stories and to make a collective difference.

## **Racism**

But then again, for me as an Indigenous woman, it can also be very different.

You see, as an Indigenous woman, daily I continue to struggle for my rights as an Australian woman because I am not easily recognised or accepted as such and, because as an Indigenous woman, I will always face racism because of my Aboriginality.

I bet you are asking yourself, how can this be? Well, it's true, as an educated professional woman standing before you my sisters, I can make this powerful statement: because daily I am denied equality as an Australian woman, mainly because ONE my cultural heritage and TWO, the colour of my skin. The reality for me is that I will always battle racism.

This lovely natural tan, that so many Australians spend hours in the hot summer sun trying to acquire, actually puts up barriers that many of you in the audience will never experience. It defines me, but it also allows another person to make assumptions or judgements as to my worth; it identifies me as "being different" but it also labels me as an activist or radical; it acknowledges that I am Indigenous, but it does not prove that I am Indigenous, only a Government Identity form can do that.

Sadly, it is a reality that for me and many other Indigenous women, that you my sisters will exclude me, even though Gender discrimination is common to us both.

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For example:

- At a state level, the key women organizations that advise our Premier on women's affairs for the state of Western Australia, such as the Women's Advisory Council, the Domestic Violence Advisory Committee and the YWCA, we have minimal Indigenous women members and maybe one Indigenous women representative on their Executive Council.
- At a national level, the Office of the Status of Women who report direct to the Prime Minister on women's affairs nationally have 3 funded National Women Secretariats, the NCA, the BPW and the YWCA, again they have minimal Indigenous women members and no Indigenous women representative on their Executive Council.

Yet, many of you (my sisters) are aware of this and have done nothing to change this situation, even though Indigenous women continually bring it to your attention. Sometimes too, you are in a position that can make change or at least question it, but you do nothing!

So it is indeed sad that double standards continue to exist especially, where my participation as an Indigenous woman is at a much lower level than that of an Australian woman. And, where my exclusion (and that of many other Indigenous women's exclusion) is never questioned, except maybe when an Indigenous woman's expertise or answers are required, and the obligatory Indigenous women's Committee is established to answer Indigenous issues.

To put into perspective the inequality of Indigenous women in Western Australia, let's consider the following statistics supplied by the Australian Bureau of Statistics; WA Department of Justice & ATSI:

SOURCE: Aust Bureau of Stats, WA Dept of Justice & ATSI

- 1 Indigenous women have a life expectancy age of 61 compared to an Australian women at 81;
- 2 the mortality rate for an Indigenous woman dying from cervical cancer was over 8 times that of an Australian women during the period 1992 to 1994;
- 3 Indigenous women make up 43% of the total population of all women in jail;
- 4 Indigenous girls make up 46% of all girls in detention centres;
- 5 of the 21% of Indigenous deaths in custody for the period 1992 to 1994, over 50% were Indigenous women;
- 6 the risk of Indigenous women dying in custody is 22 times greater than it is for Australian women;
- 7 60% of all the reported domestic violence cases in the State involved Indigenous women
- 8 Indigenous women are 45 times more likely to be a victim of domestic violence than Australian women
- 9 in 1994, the unemployment rate for the general Australian population was 10.5% compared to 50% for the Indigenous population, with 43% of Indigenous women least likely to enter the labour force, compared to 72% of Indigenous men

These are very high numbers considering that Indigenous people make up 3% of Western Australia's population, and Indigenous women in particular, make up 52% of the total Indigenous population in Western Australia.

As you can see, as an Indigenous woman living in Australia I face many barriers of exclusion. On the one hand, there is SEXISM, which as sisters we all experience. On the other hand, there is RACISM, which only minority groups living in Australia can understand.

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## **Institutionalised Racism**

But, adding to these “2 ISMS” (on another level), I also face INSTITUTIONALISED RACISM, where infrastructures and accountabilities of everyday living is based on ‘white male frameworks’ which are foreign and inflexible to my culture. And, which continue to dis-empower me as an Indigenous woman whilst, also taking away my citizen rights as an Australian woman.

What I mean, is that Agencies, Governments and Australians in general, tend to maintain practices and perceptions about Indigenous people that are false and misleading and which tend to perpetuate the maintenance of myths and barriers which exclude my participation, status and ownership as an Australian woman, who is Indigenous.

For example: Whenever an Indigenous problem or issue is raised, people have a tendency to automatically refer you to an Indigenous agency (such as ATSIC or the State Dept of Indigenous Affairs) OR to the Indigenous unit/section of that Agency (such as the Aboriginal Housing Secretariat or the Aboriginal Health Unit)

1. When enquiring about breast cancer with the Dept of Health and I mentioned I was Indigenous, I was automatically referred to the Aboriginal Health Unit who knew nothing about the issue, when really I should have been referred direct to Cancer Australia or BreastScreen WA.
2. When applying for a business loan from the Commonwealth Bank, the 1<sup>st</sup> question asked of me, was whether or not I had applied for a business loan with ATSIC.

For example: Whenever funding is required from Government or private and public agencies for the Indigenous community, there is a tendency for that Agency to request Indigenous proof of identity and proof of community representation.

1. Our organization applied for grant funding from WA Lotteries, but we had to provide evidence that our organization had consulted with Indigenous people, represented Indigenous people in a particular area and had the support of our local ATSIC Regional Council.

These Discrimination practices are further perpetuated when we, as individuals also have to provide Proof of Aboriginality (show form) that states we are recognised and accepted within our community as being Aboriginal. Yet, mainstream organizations do not have to prove the same conditions of representation, identity and support.

## **Internalised Sexism**

Additionally, as an Indigenous woman, I also have to put up with INTERNALISED SEXISM from my own Indigenous men, where my own culture is used to keep me and many other Indigenous women down. Indeed it is sad for me to admit to you my sisters that in many instances, Indigenous men’s ego, power and politics play a major part in how Indigenous men and women interact, when previously, traditional cultural respect protocols (regarding marriage and extended family relationships) had determined our interaction.

Now however, our Indigenous men are being disrespectful and abusive and are attempting to use our culture as an excuse and a reason to absolve themselves of the responsibility for their conduct. This INTERNALISED SEXISM against Indigenous women is being reflected in the high number of problems that we are experiencing in our Indigenous community such as: family violence, alcoholism, illiteracy, youth sexual abuse (paedophilia), youth suicide and increased numbers of Indigenous women incarcerated in prison.

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For example:

Our key Indigenous organizations such as the Abl Medical Service, the Abl Legal Service, our Land Councils, etc - Indigenous women are under represented in senior positions within the organization and minimally represented on their Executive Boards/Committees.

Our State Native Title Working Group, who advises the WA Government on native title and land matters across the state, has no Indigenous Woman representative, even though Indigenous women are native title claimants.

Or within ATSIC (our own Nationally elected Indigenous representative organization) In Western Australia, out of the 9 ATSIC Regions (45 Wards), only 24 of the 91 positions were filled by Indigenous Women, resulting in only 1 women being elected as a Regional Council Chairperson ... even though Indigenous women represent 52% of the Indigenous population for this state!

Or again, at a National level, the highest Indigenous representation possible, we have only 4 ATSIC Women Commissioners out of 18 positions Australia-wide ... even though again Indigenous women are the larger gender group for our Indigenous population.

Sadly too, ATSIC's Women's Program became defunct 3 years ago and is no longer a major policy program of ATSIC. Now when Indigenous women require monies for women's business, it is skeptically granted due to the "goodwill" of Regional Councils, whose members are mainly Indigenous men.

So, how can these Organisations purport to reflect the values of the indigenous community when they under-value Indigenous women and they don't allow Indigenous women to be involved in the decision making processes? Sadly too, Indigenous women are also seeing non-Indigenous Agencies accepting this status-quo as being true and readily accept Indigenous men's explanation of excluding Indigenous women on the grounds of culture and gender.

I could go on and on about the realities that I and many Indigenous women face, in being and living as an Indigenous woman in Australia, let alone in trying to live and enjoy the life of being an Australian woman, or citizen in this country.

But, the fact remains that for me as an Indigenous woman, I am still trying to move up to your level my sisters, so as to be of equal status and to enjoy the same privileges that you enjoy as Australian women. Unless you understand my struggles and unless you understand the levels of exclusion that I and many other Indigenous woman face, then you can never understand why it is so hard for me to participate and be involved in some of the issues / topics being discussed here today.

For example:

Many of you's don't know my achievements as an Indigenous leader, so how can you as an Australian nominate me as your next Head of State or as the next Governor General of Australia? Or, how can you ask for my involvement in planning for a Republic, when you don't understand the Indigenous politics that I operate and live within? OR how can I be involved in constitutional reform, when many of you's don't recognise or accept my sovereignty as a 1<sup>st</sup> Nations person?

So my sisters, I hope that my talk today gives you an insight and understanding of me and my Indigenous sisters, as to the battles, the myths and the barriers that we must constantly face and fight both within the Australian community, and also the Indigenous community.

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Please understand what I have said today ... let Indigenous women be part of the new change both within our Indigenous community, but also within our greater Australian nation. Let Indigenous women be part of the decision making process, where we can determine and develop policies and programs that are applicable and culturally appropriate to us, and where Indigenous women can have ownership and responsibility of the funding, the implementation and the evaluation of change.

Look around you, isn't it being proven to you that no matter how much monies, new projects and changes this Government and Australians in general make within Indigenous Affairs, Indigenous people are still experiencing high incarceration rates in prisons; ongoing Indigenous deaths in custody; experiencing 3<sup>rd</sup> world health, high illiteracy and high unemployment; and the list goes on.

- As Australian women, let us all work together as sisters, united in gender and spirit.
- As Australian women, let us support each other in what-ever way we can, by being true to each other as sisters of change.
- As Australian women, let us:
  1. recognise and accept Indigenous Women are Australian leaders
  2. provide Indigenous Women with opportunities to learn and develop better and appropriate leadership skills in our community
  3. allow Indigenous Women leaders to develop within their Indigenous community in their own way and in their own time
  4. acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous Women in Australia and the many challenges that they face
  5. encourage and recognise that Indigenous Women are great assets to our Nation, and
  6. value strongly the contributions Indigenous women make to Australia's economy (\$) and to Australian's living future

And finally, I would like to say that even though Indigenous people got the vote as Australian Citizens in 1942, Indigenous women as a group have never got the recognition, status and acceptance that goes with it, and that is why 60 years later, I stand before you to remind you that I am an Australian woman, who is Indigenous. So please stop categorising me as just being an Indigenous woman, because I am so much more ... I am woman!