United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Sixteenth Session - New York
24 April-6 May 2017

Agenda Item 3: Follow up on the recommendations of the Permanent Forum: (a) Empowerment of Indigenous Women

INTERVENTION DELIVERED BY CATHRYN EATOCK ON BEHALF OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ORGANISATION OF AUSTRALIA AND THE ABORIGINAL RIGHTS COALITION.

Thank-you Madam Chair, Honourable Members and distinguished Indigenous Brothers and Sisters. I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Indigenous Peoples Organisation of Australia and the Aboriginal Rights Coalition, on the Empowerment of Indigenous Women. My name is Cathryn Eatock and I am a Kairi and Badtjala woman, from central Queensland in Australia.

We appreciate efforts of the Forum to ensure the annual reporting on women within these Forums and its raising at the Commission on the Status of Women this year.

Our recommendations first, are:

1) We recommend that the Forum request, States to provide written reports to the Forum on progress made in relation to the empowerment of women.

2) We encourage Indigenous peoples to provide their own annual Country Reports to the Forum on progress made on the Implementation of the Declaration in relation to women.

Women’s strength has always been the backbone of our communities. Our women traditionally had our own Women’s Business which set out our lore. Our women ancestors survived another dimension of violence, which continues to give us the many complexions of our communities today.

That strength is reflected in our communities across the country where women are at the front line but are not always at the decision-making levels of hierarchical and patriarchal structures imposed on us.
It is crucial to Indigenous self-determination and decolonization processes to consciously address the lack of women in decision making positions. When Aboriginal women take leadership positions they often bring differing approaches, drawn on cultural values of responsibility to community and country, remembering ancestors past and obligations to generations ahead, and through inclusive and consensus decision making rather than more western directional approaches.

Our women have valuable insights and lessons, not just for our own communities, but for the benefit of broader communities and within these United Nations forums.

Our women face particular challenges, the rate of violence and sexual assault while pervasive in the broader Australian society, for Aboriginal women the situation is much worse. Aboriginal women die from violence at 10 times the rate of non-Indigenous women and are hospitalised for assault 35 times the rate of those for non-Aboriginal women.

Sexual assault for Aboriginal women is recorded at 6 times the rate of non-Aboriginal rates. However, studies have shown half of perpetrators are non-Indigenous. Studies also confirm that it is a minority, between 6-13% of men, who commit sexual assaults, with two thirds committed by serial offenders.

However, independent analysis, shows that violence is lowest in Aboriginal communities where cultural connection is at its strongest.

Levels of violence increased with the rate of social deprivation, alcohol use, financial stress, over-crowding, and being a member of the stolen generation were all factors.

The historical use of police to enforce occupation and control over Aboriginal people, the forced removal of children and poor experiences of the justice system, all contribute to a deep distrust of police and low reporting rates.

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1. Don Weatherburn and Lucy Snowball, Is there a cultural explanation for Indigenous violence? A second look at the NATSISS Survey Analysis for Indigenous Policy in Australia
Failures to provide sufficient women’s and families services, or to address institutional racism has resulted in the revictimizing of women victims through the criminal justice system. Aboriginal women’s incarceration rate is 36.2% of the prison population, while 2% of the adult population².

However, the vast majority of women prisoners have committed minor, non-violent offences. Almost all women prisoners have been victims of violence and sexual abuse. Many women are the sole caregivers for their children, resulting in the state removal of children which further traumatises women and children, leading to intergenerational trauma, while prison itself perpetuates cycles of violence and trauma³.

We must remember, women’s outcomes also directly impact outcomes for future generations, and that Indigenous women need real and meaningful agency and self-determination over their lives to thrive and prosper.

Thank you, Madam Chair

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² The Australian Law Reform Commission Inquiry into the incarceration rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Sisters Inside submission 13 January 2017

³ Ibid