

**Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Eighth Session
New York, 18 May – 29 May 2009**

Speaker: Melissa Saunders - Indigenous Peoples Organisation Network Youth Delegation

AGENDA ITEM 3(b): Follow Up to the Recommendations of the Permanent Forum – Indigenous Women

STATEMENT BY THE AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS YOUTH CAUCUS

JOINT STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF

**National Native Title Council (NNTC)
Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA)
Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre
New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC)
Office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner
National Indigenous Higher Education Network (NIHEN)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Legal and Advocacy Service Aboriginal Corporation (ATSIWLAS)
Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement (ALRM)
Bullana, The Poche Centre for Indigenous Health
National Indigenous Youth Movement of Australia (NIYMA)
Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia Inc
Indigenous Peoples Organisation Network Youth Delegation**

Thank you Madam Chair

The Australian Indigenous Youth delegation wish to recognise and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and are honoured to pay our respects to the Elders both past and present.

The Australian Indigenous Youth delegation acknowledges and endorses the Australian Government's recent decision to fully support the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This demonstrates respect for our people and we now encourage the Government to continue to go forward with the recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights by taking direct measures to give effect to this declaration.

Australia still has a long way to go before our Indigenous people can enjoy all their rights as first peoples of the land and we urge Government and all states to now walk the talk by taking on their full responsibilities, consulting with Indigenous people and together taking action to enable true quality of life on all levels for its first nations peoples.

The Indigenous Youth of Australia that are 25 year and under make up 60% of the Indigenous population and of that 50% are under the age of 18. Indigenous youth carry with them the burdens of colonisation, past and present discriminatory policies that have led to the dispossession of culture, traditional lands, language and the forced removal of children. This contributes to the disruption of Indigenous women's connection to their family, their country and their culture.

Like all Indigenous nations the Australian Indigenous youth play an integral role in the continuation of cultural knowledge, language and the passing on of these to future generations. Furthermore, the very foundations on which Indigenous communities are built rely on the strength of Indigenous women.

The challenge for young Indigenous women is the demands placed on them to maintain their identity in an Indigenous and non-Indigenous society. The non-Indigenous society continue to adopt a somewhat assimilationist attitude involving ideas that often discourage young Indigenous women from understanding and living out their Indigenous identity. This internal struggle to preserve our identity in a cross-cultural world exacerbates other external pressures that contribute to women's quality of life including health, maternal well-being, education, employment, housing, safety and social justice. The inadequate provisions of essential services to young Indigenous women mean that we do not have the social and economic freedom that the non-Indigenous population enjoy.

Madam chair, there are many issues that continue to affect young Indigenous women, in particular the relationship between Indigenous women and the juvenile justice system needs to be highlighted. The Incarceration rates of Indigenous women under the age of 17 years is currently 13 times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous women. There are many consequences to incarceration, such as mental health issues, loss of identity and culture and increased numbers of children entering into foster care.

Indigenous women are more likely to have children at a young age, be sole parents, have reduced employment opportunities, less income and fewer educational qualifications.

We continue to have increased rates of all Sexually Transmitted Infections and blood borne viruses particularly hepatitis B, C and HIV/AIDS. This is due to lack of access to culturally appropriate health services, lack of access to safe sex equipment and incompleteness of education making it difficult to access sexual health information and family planning options, which also impacts morbidity and fertility. We must have the right and respect to express healthy sexual identity in our culture as Indigenous women.

Government and non-government organisations need to implement strategies to address social stigmas relating to Indigenous women's identity and promote positive contribution to society. It is imperative that our young Indigenous women value themselves, have the ability to make healthy lifestyle choices and have strong, positive role models. The empowerment of young leaders will ensure Indigenous people maintain a strong identity and have an ongoing voice in decisions that impact them.

Recommendations

We the Australian youth delegation, make the following recommendations:

- 1. The World Health Organisation, UNAIDS, the Special Rappateur on the Right to Health and all States to promote collection of culturally appropriate comprehensive and identified data and the provision of desegregated data capturing the issues effecting young Indigenous peoples relating to sexual health, healthy life choices and self perception.**
- 2. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues encourage all States to appropriately resource Young Indigenous women's health initiatives to create a holistic approach with a focus on mental and emotional well being, sexual and reproductive right.**
- 3. We urge all States to implement their duties under Article 18 of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to enable youth to participate in decision making in matters that effect their rights through the establishment of national Indigenous advocacy bodies that represent the voices and interests of Indigenous women.**