



Make Us Count: Understanding Aboriginal women's experiences in Victorian public sector workplaces

by Debbie Bargallie, Bronwyn Carlson & Madi Day

Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University
Department of Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University

About the cover art

“Ginhar Gambidyawa-galang Guray-gu-galang” (Strong Womens’ Voices)

This artwork is an exploration of Black sisterhood and the importance of Black women and femmes within our communities. The roles that Black women and femmes possess within our communities are vital to our survival and liberation as mob.

The white, concentric circles in this artwork represent Black women and femmes – with each ‘layer’ representing the various knowledges and communities that have raised and cared for them. As Indigenous Peoples, we have generations of ancestors that have cared for us – and continue to care for us – and lead us to better futures. We embody the knowledges, experiences, and relationships of our ancestors – which is expressed in the various ‘layers’ of circles and ‘U’ shapes that depict our ancestors – particularly our Aunties and other staunch Black women that have raised us. The vivid, colourful shapes behind each layer represent the different community and Country knowledges that guide our relations today.

The white lines within each ‘layer’ represent the knowledges and experiences that Black women and femmes carry with them. These lines of knowledge and experiences have been passed down by the Aunties and mob before us, which are present in the actions we take to protect our mob. The connection of the outer circles represents the kinship that Black women and femmes possess with each other. Regardless of any personal differences, Black women and femmes always find a way to look out for, listen to, and connect with each other in any circumstance. There’s a mutuality and genuine kinship that exists between Black women, femmes, and queer folk, that is informed by their resistance of colonial systems and obligations to their communities.

In relation to the Make Us Count Project, Black women’s and femme’s experiences within the public service are direct results of colonial systems of racism, misogyny, and anti-Indigeneity. Even with the intersecting burdens of these systems, Black women and femmes have – and continue to – resist these colonial structures for the liberation of mob and broader society. Their roles within the public service are directly informed by their obligations to community, our ancestors, and to the generations that precede us.



Dylan Barnes
20/03/23

About the artist

Dylan Barnes (them/them) is a proud Wiradjuri person from the Riley and Ferguson clans in Dubbo, NSW. Dylan was born and raised on Darkinjung Country on the Central Coast of NSW but now resides on Dharug Country in Sydney. Dylan’s work is based around themes of community, growth, and Indigenous queer identity and experiences – and how each of these themes are interwoven with Country. As a queer, non-binary, Wiradjuri artist, Dylan’s identity, experiences, and connections to community are directly interwoven with their artistic expressions. Dylan is currently undergoing their Master of Research in Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University. Their research interests include Indigenous Queer Studies, Aboriginal art and creative practice, social media, and Country knowledges.

Acknowledgement of Country

The research for this report took place across the various Victorian public sector workplaces all of which are located on unceded Aboriginal lands. The authors acknowledge and pay our respect to the Elders past and present.

Researchers would also like to thank all the Aboriginal women who gave up their time and shared with us their experiences of working in the Victorian public sector. Your contributions, experiences and anecdotes have enriched this area of research.

Griffith University acknowledges the peoples who are the traditional custodians of the land and pays respect to the Elders, past and present, and extends that respect to other Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander peoples. South Bank, Nathan and Mount Gravatt campuses are situated on the land of the Yugarabul, Yuggera, Jagera and Turrbal peoples. Logan is situated on the land of the Yuggera, Turrbal, Yugarabul, Jagera and Yugambeh peoples. The Gold Coast campus is situated on the land of the Yugambeh/Kombumerri peoples.

The Department of Indigenous Studies acknowledges that Macquarie University is built on the lands of the Wallumattagal clan of the Dharug speaking peoples. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuity of knowledge that nurtures community and Country.

A note on terminology

This research report focuses on Aboriginal women, including cisgender and transgender women and those with expansive definitions of womanhood, who work in Victorian Public Sector workplaces. Our Call for Participants was open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, but only Aboriginal women responded. Therefore, we use the term Aboriginal in this report. When speaking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we use both the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We acknowledge that the blanket term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' fails to account for the diversities of the several hundred distinct nations and language groups present on this continent known as Australia.

This report uses the acronym LGBTQIA+ representing the terms 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual'. The additional '+' symbol serves as a reminder that there may be other terms that should be included such as 'non-binary' and 'pansexual' (see Day et al. 2023, p. 1).

Content Warning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people please be advised that this report may contain distressing information that relates to racism, harassment, and discrimination in workplaces. We understand that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had such experiences.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge and thank Dr Terri Farrelly, Dr Susan de Groot Heupner, Dr Nilmini Fernando, and Dr Jackie Huggins for their contributions in producing this report. We also acknowledge the support of Dr Kate Farhall and team at the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, Victoria State Government.

Suggested citation

Bargallie, D., Carlson, B., and Day, M. Make Us Count: Understanding Aboriginal women's experiences in Victorian Public Sector workplaces. Commissioned research report, Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, Victoria State Government, Griffith and Macquarie Universities, 2023.

Foreword

When I think about my work life, I often think to myself – wow this Murri woman has been around a long time. I have been at the forefront of many initiatives aiming for justice and human rights for Indigenous peoples.

I was the co-chair of the eminent panel and working group 'Path to Treaty' in Queensland, co-chaired the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, served as Director of the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research and previously the Deputy Director of University of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit. I have seen commissioned research come and go, often led by non-Indigenous researchers, and much that has led to very little change. This is predominantly the case with Aboriginal workers – particularly in relation to Aboriginal women and work. Back in 1995 I co-edited a book titled *Aboriginal Workers* with my non-Indigenous research colleagues Ann McGrath and Kay Saunders. It was a Special Issue of *Labour History* #69 relaunched again in late 2021. We wrote this book because Australia's national history has rarely allowed space for the history of Aboriginal work. In that book I wrote a chapter titled 'The Great Deception: Working Inside the Bureaucracy'. This was the story of my own experience as an Aboriginal woman working in the public service where Aboriginal people without exception were plagued by racism in one way or another in the workplace. When I experienced racist comments from a male colleague, I was told by the manager "not to be so sensitive". No further action taken.

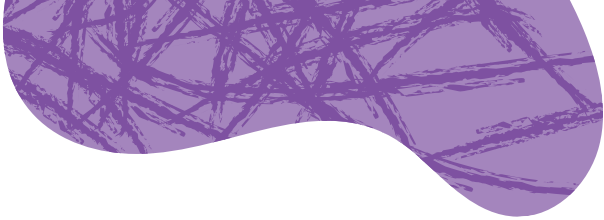
I was passed routinely passed over for positions in favour of the young woman with Caucasian characteristics of blonde hair and blue eyes who received meteoric rises through the ranks. I felt like the only challenge for me would be a typist until I was 60. Not me. I had a burning desire to work with and for Aboriginal people – to make a difference for mob. I relocated to Canberra – the public service Mecca. Regardless of the excitement and safety that I thought would be on offer in terms of job security and money - life there was much the same as my earlier public service experience.

Non-Indigenous people were the experts in Aboriginal affairs and most of them had never spoken to an Aboriginal person – it was a culture shock to me. There were no Aboriginal role models to look up to and I was again relegated to the lowly paid typist pool. I transferred to the Council for Aboriginal Development. Here there were Aboriginal role models in leadership roles, but behold they were mostly Aboriginal men.

I eventually landed a job as a Field Officer with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Brisbane – at last, I had found the job that I had always wanted – being back home in Queensland and working with my people. It took me 10 years to get to that place – to feel that I had finally made it and believe that I really was good at my job. But after my 12th year I felt like the challenge was no longer there. I changed my path and went to university to become a historian and writer. As I wrote in my chapter, in the public service 'I was a small cog in a huge machine believing I could change the system – as so many Blacks idealise – only to find out they are deceiving themselves. The great deception can only be changed by those in power' (2021 p. 212) and that is generally not Aboriginal peoples in influential positions – and most definitely not Aboriginal women. I learned that Aboriginal people had to work three times as hard as non-Indigenous people. I felt like I could not be me, I felt like Aboriginal mob were always under surveillance.

In 2020, I wrote the Foreword for *Unmasking the Racial Contract: Indigenous Voices on Racism in the Australian Public Service* written by one of the authors of this report, Kamilaroi and Wonnarua woman Debbie Bargallie. Her book reported the findings from doctoral research on Indigenous employees' experiences of racism in the Australian Public Service.

Reading that book was like reading my own biography – many of my experiences of structural and personal racism and gendered violence as a public servant in the 1970s and 1980s were being experienced by contemporary public servants.



Today, I read this *Make Us Count* report commissioned by the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector written by Aboriginal researchers Debbie Bargallie, Bronwyn Carlson and Madi Day. They give voice to Aboriginal women's experiences in the Victorian public sector. Not surprisingly, because Victorian Public Sector workplaces are a microcosm of Australia, Aboriginal women in this research provide honest and scathing accounts of their experiences of racism and gendered violence at work. So clearly, very little has changed since my earlier experiences in the public service. And as the literature review in this report shows, these experiences are not unique to Victorian Public Sector workplaces but Australian workplaces more widely. The Aboriginal women's voices in this report demonstrate agency, resistance, solidarity, and survival.

I commend the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector for commissioning this research and the writers for producing this rich analysis and privileging the voices of Aboriginal woman who work in the Victorian public sector workplaces. There is always a remarkable difference in the analysis of this kind of research when the researchers are also Aboriginal. There is a lens through which we understand the data that is based on our lived experiences as Aboriginal peoples that non-Indigenous researchers can never achieve. It is without a doubt my recommendation that further research is funded across a range of workplaces to capture a deeper understanding of Aboriginal women in the workforce. It goes without saying that this research should be Aboriginal led.

As my story has demonstrated, little has changed for Aboriginal women in public sector workplaces other than the fact that there are now more of us employed in these organisations, but equally there are so many elements we still do not know. A range of focus areas that have been identified in this report but are not in the scope of this research would provide a fuller picture. For example, what of the experiences of Aboriginal women who identify

as having a disability or those who identify as LGBTQAI+. What of older Aboriginal women, and, as this report points out, what of the toll of the unpaid labour expected of Aboriginal women in the public sector who already given so much to children, family, and community obligations. When is the last time that workplaces commissioned a workplace audit of their policies and procedures to ensure that they provide a safe and affirming place for Aboriginal women to work. When have they ever assessed whether their workplace works in good faith to ensure that recruitment and retention of Aboriginal women also includes a plan for progression within the organisation.

I call for the Victorian public sector to act. I call for Aboriginal led research that answers the above questions.

Yours in solidarity,

Jackie Huggins

Dr Jackie Huggins AM FAHA

Table of contents

| | | | |
|---|-----------|--|-----------|
| About the cover art and artist | 2 | Findings: Being an Aboriginal woman in Victorian public sector workplaces | 22 |
| Acknowledgement of Country | 3 | 1 Navigating the 'bureaucratic nonsense': Barriers to recruitment and progression | 23 |
| Foreword | 4 | 2 The terms of inclusion: Precarious employment and unpaid labour | 26 |
| Executive Summary | 7 | 3 Make us count! Authentic support, recognition, and value of Aboriginal women and their knowledges | 28 |
| Introduction | 10 | 4 Racisms at work: Every day and in every way | 29 |
| Background | 10 | 5 Denial and ambivalence: The failure of complaint policies, processes, and practices. | 32 |
| Methodology and Method | 10 | The Way Forward: Recommendations | 34 |
| Findings | 12 | References | 36 |
| A review of the literature | 13 | | |
| What do we know about Aboriginal women working in the Victorian public sector? | 13 | | |
| Compounding racial and gendered discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace | 15 | | |
| Examples of studies exploring the experiences of Aboriginal women in the workplace | 17 | | |
| Examples of studies specifically exploring the experiences of Aboriginal women in the public sector | 18 | | |
| Examples of studies exploring the experiences of both Aboriginal men and women in the public sector | 20 | | |
| The need for more complexity to disaggregated data collection | 21 | | |

Executive Summary

This research is undertaken by a team of Aboriginal researchers from Griffith University and Macquarie University. It responds to the paucity of qualitative data on Aboriginal women's experiences as employees in the Victorian Public Sector (VPS).¹

Aligning with the goals and values of the Gender Equality Act 2020 and the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, this project took an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989) to research on gender equality. We focused specifically on the experiences of Aboriginal

women, who are arguably one of the most under-researched yet most disadvantaged cohorts in the workplace (Bargallie 2020a).

The VPS is one of Victoria's largest employers of Aboriginal peoples and a job in this public service has the potential to provide stability and economic security for Aboriginal women. Participants in this research spoke highly of wanting to secure ongoing employment in the VPS. The findings, however, also revealed that working in the VPS poses many challenges for Aboriginal women. Our findings show that Aboriginal women in the Victorian public service sector experience high levels of both racism and misogyny in the workplace.

The findings of this research project are presented across the five following themes:



**Navigating the 'bureaucratic nonsense':
Barriers to recruitment and progression**



2 The terms of inclusion: Precarious employment and unpaid labour



**3 Make us count! Authentic support, recognition, and value
of Aboriginal women and their knowledges**



4 Racisms at work: Every day and in every way



**5 Denial and ambivalence: The failure of complaint policies,
processes, and practices.**

¹ The Victorian public sector comprises all departments, agencies and organisations that are owned and operated by the Victorian government and deliver services to the public.

Based on the findings, the recommendations are as follows:

| Recommendations | |
|--|---|
| Acknowledgement of racism and gender discrimination | The Victoria Public Sector must acknowledge that Aboriginal women experience multiple forms of racism and gender discrimination in VPS workplaces due to their intersecting racial and gender identities and wilfully act to change the systems, policies, processes, and practices that perpetuate racialised and gendered inequities. |
| Collect disaggregated data | Lack of adequately disaggregated data can contribute to the unmet needs of Aboriginal women in the VPS (e.g., those with a disability or who identify as LGBTQAI+) by rendering them invisible when policies are made, resources are allocated, and programs are designed and implemented; it reflects systemic racism. Initiatives for equal access to opportunities for pay, recognition, and advancement for Aboriginal women with intersectional experiences are measures that can only be assessed through disaggregated data. |
| Further research into diverse experiences in the VPS | Commit to further research to adequately capture the experiences of Aboriginal people with disabilities and/or who are LGBTQIA+ in the VPS. |
| Recruitment and retention | Undertake a workplace audit works to identify that recruitment and retention of Aboriginal women is a priority and that this is reflected in policies and practices and that there are plans in place for each Aboriginal women's progression within the organisation. |
| Create better access to employment | Identify employment opportunities for locations outside of metropolitan and regional centres. Identify options for hybridity in work locations – a mix between home and office. |
| Take affirmative action | Undertake a VPS wide audit to identify positions in organisations that can specifically target the recruitment of Aboriginal women with emphasis on leadership opportunities. |
| Address precarious employment | Undertake a workplace audit to identify all Aboriginal women who are employed on VPS contracts and undertake discussions and processes to transition these employees to ongoing employment if this desired by the employee. |
| Respond to unpaid labour | Address unpaid labour undertaken by Aboriginal women in the VPS by appropriately renumerating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff for this additional workload, and allocating specific positions focused on employment, education, strategic implementation, and mentoring as this relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. |
| Prioritise institutional complaint policies and processes | Review and reform existing complaint policies and processes in consultation with Aboriginal people in and connected to the VPS. |

Develop and implement antiracism policy and praxis

A suite of antiracism and accountability measures that take an intersectional lens need to be developed and implemented, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts in consultation with workforces. Priority attention needs to be paid to HR policies, at all stages of the employment trajectory from attraction, recruitment, advancement, retention and exit.

Foster Racial Literacy across the VPS

Provide ongoing racial literacy education grounded in critical race and critical Indigenous studies to productively enhance the development and implementation of antiracism and intersectional gender equity approaches.

Create a VPS wide Aboriginal women's annual network event/retreat

Create and resource an annual networking event/retreat specifically for Aboriginal women in the VPS, with a specific focus on leadership and opportunities for professional development and replenishment in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women employees. This also presents an opportunity to create a well-resourced authentic VPS-wide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's ongoing informal networking platform.

For the details of the findings and recommendations, please see the full report.



Introduction

“Stress this to your daughters. There are two distinctly disadvantaged groups in Australian society – Aborigines and women. And try being both!”

The above quote is from an Aboriginal woman attending an Aboriginal employment seminar organised by the Victorian branch of the Department of Employment, Education and Training in 1987 (Runciman 1994, p.5). This is a compelling reminder some 40 years later that ‘being a woman is not a universal experience – not all women are the same’ and that ‘what shapes a particular woman’s experience is shaped by her gender and her race, and all of the facets that intersect are woven together’ (Nielsen 2004, p.23).

The Gender Equality Act 2020 explicitly identifies that intersectionality is essential to understand the experiences of women. Our research necessarily centres gender, race, and Indigeneity. Adhering to the goals and values of the Gender Equality Act 2020 and/or the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, we must strive for a better future for Aboriginal women in their work lives. We must map a more comprehensive picture, beginning by understanding the experiences of Aboriginal women at work. We need to ask the right questions about their experiences.

Much of the recent research highlights the challenges that all Aboriginal people experience in the workplace; however, Aboriginal women describe additional burdens due to their gender and their Aboriginal identity. Aboriginal women working in the public sector have described the challenge of working in ‘white, patriarchal, class-based’ workplace environments (Clark et al. 2021, p. 172). One participant in that research project described the ‘invisibility and lack of voice that is forced upon her as an Indigenous woman’ (p.172), recounting the common experience of trying to express an idea in a boardroom meeting with no reception, only to have the same idea then be stated by a ‘middle-aged white man’ who is then cheered for his brilliance. Another participant commented, ‘Oh, to be a mediocre middle-aged white man, you could go so far. But, to be an Indigenous person or to be a woman, you have to be exceptional to go far’ (p. 172).

Background

This research project titled *Make Us Count: Understanding Aboriginal women’s experiences in Victorian public sector workplaces* was funded as part of the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector’s Research Grants Round 2022. The funding is to support the expansion of research knowledge and to develop the evidence base underpinning the *Gender Equality Act 2020* (Vic) and its implementation, particularly as it pertains to the intersection of gender equality with other forms of discrimination and lived experiences. The activity covered by this funding provides a voice to Aboriginal women in Victorian public sector workplaces. Qualitative data from Aboriginal women’s lived experiences are combined with existing workplace gender data to give a comprehensive and rigorous account of Aboriginal women’s experiences in the Victorian public sector. The research for this project and the following report on the findings have been conducted and compiled via a partnership between the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University, and the Department of Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University.

Methodology and Method

The aim of this Indigenist research project was to conduct qualitative research with Aboriginal women who work in Victorian public sector workplaces to develop a comprehensive account of their experiences. The findings provide a rigorous and intersectional narrative of their experiences. This section reports on our Indigenist Research Methodology.

The **key research question** guiding this Indigenist research project is:

How do Aboriginal women experience and navigate Victorian public sector workplaces?

This research operationalised an Indigenist Research Methodology (Rigney 1999). Indigenist research is research led by Indigenous Australian researchers whose informants are primarily Indigenous Australian peoples. The research project was ethically framed by Rigney’s (1999) three interrelated core principles:

- 1 **Resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist** research (allowing Indigenous researchers to engage with the story of the survival and resistance of Indigenous Australians to racist oppression while enabling us to unmask continuing forms of oppression (p.118)
- 2 **Political integrity** (to responsibly serve and inform the political struggle of Indigenous Australian peoples through setting our own political agenda. 'Indigenist research ... takes the research into the heart of the Indigenous struggle' (p. 118)
- 3 **Privileging Indigenous voices** 'Indigenous research is research which gives voice to Indigenous people' (p.119).

A detailed literature review, including scholarly publications, grey literature, media commentary and so forth, focussed on the experiences of Indigenous people employed in the public services and more specifically, Indigenous women. An analysis of existing Indigenous workforce and gender equity quantitative data was also undertaken. Findings from these reviews informed the direction of the study.

Human Research Ethics Approval was through Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Reference: 2022/530).

Qualitative interview data were collected through Yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu 2010). As an Indigenous research method, we consider yarning to be a culturally appropriate and beneficial method of data collection. We engaged Research Topic Yarning (p.40), a conversation with a purpose, that takes the form of a semi-structured interview with a designated start (beginning of working life in the Victorian public sector) and end (current working life). Sub questions informed by the literature review were used to develop a Yarning Guideline to guide the Yarning sessions and to address the key research question. The qualitative data provides us with depth, nuance and meaning that is often absent from quantitative research.

A Call for Participants Flyer was developed and then promoted via social media platforms and Victorian public sector workplaces via the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. Yarning sessions and Yarning Circles (Focus Groups) (Carlson & Frazer 2018) were offered face-to-face and via online videoconferencing platforms across three locations in Victoria: Melbourne, Geelong, and Ballarat to capture

a range of Aboriginal women's experiences in different Victorian public sectors. However, interviews were offered to Aboriginal woman outside of these locations via Zoom to provide the opportunity for the voices of all the Aboriginal woman who had reached out to us be heard.

Thirty (30) Aboriginal women responded to the Call for Participants offering to participate in the research. Twenty-five (25) Aboriginal woman participated in yarning sessions with researchers Debbie Bargallie, Bronwyn Carlson and Madi Day. Five (5) interviews did not go-ahead due to availability and scheduling problems. Online Yarning proved to be the method of choice by most participants due to work, family and community time restraints and convenience. Both face-to-face Yarning and online Yarning sessions were recorded and transcribed. Participants comprise from a wide range of Victorian public sector workplaces. Specific workplaces are not identified in this report due to confidentiality and to ensure anonymity of the participants. This is particularly important considering the sparse numbers of Aboriginal woman in these workplaces with some being the only Aboriginal woman.

In addition, a survey using LimeSurvey was developed to provide an opportunity for further input from women working in the Victorian public service sector workplaces. The survey was shared across LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Respondents were asked to reflect on experiences around recruitment, career development/ progression and retention. They were further asked to reflect on any forms of abuse, harassment, bullying or racism may have been experienced or witnessed as an employee and how this was responded to and managed. Survey responses were anonymous unless otherwise desired. There were ten respondents to the survey.

Drawing on Indigenist Research Methodology (Rigney 1999), Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson 2013) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, Collins & Bilge 2016), data was analysed, themes identified, and recommendations developed. Moreton-Robinson (2013) argues that an Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory generates problematics informed by our knowledges and experiences. Aboriginal women's individual experiences will differ due to intersecting oppressions produced under the social, political, historical, and material conditions that we share.

Intersectionality requires our research to consider gender, race, and Indigeneity. In engaging an intersectional approach, we understand that nobody has a single unitary identity; we each represent and perform multiple aspects of our identities and sociocultural locations (Bargallie 2020). Combined, this analytical approach centred Aboriginal women and all elements of their intersectional identities to provide a collective account.

Findings

The findings of this research project are presented across the five following themes:



Navigating the ‘bureaucratic nonsense’: Barriers to recruitment and progression



The terms of inclusion: Precarious employment and unpaid labour



Make us count! Authentic support, recognition, and value of Aboriginal women and their knowledges



Racisms at work: Every day and in every way



Denial and ambivalence: The failure of complaint policies, processes, and practices.

We have departed from the usual framing of ‘culture’, and related terms such as ‘cultural load’ and ‘identity strain’ in reporting experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, to demonstrate that our cultures and identities are not the problem. The term ‘cultural load’, for example, masks the fact that Australian workplaces inundate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with additional, often forced, unpaid labour. It is work that is rarely acknowledged, let alone remunerated. It is work that the organisation has usually committed to in various policy documents, such as Reconciliation Action Plans, yet no provision is made in terms of a commitment to specific staff to take on the extra duties. The result is an untenable load placed on the shoulders of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members on top of their existing position and workload. As in broader Australian society, much of this unpaid labour is shifted onto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The term ‘identity strain’ is used in other reports to refer to a type of impact when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are expected to take on all things Indigenous, including what is referred to as ‘cultural load’ but extends to discrimination in recruitment and progression. These terms draw from psychology and interpersonal understandings of racism; they mask the severity of the situation that is fuelled by racism and institutional disregard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers. We have, therefore, used the appropriate terms to name the realities of how race functions as a technology and system of power in workplaces: unpaid labour, exploitation, and racism. It is important to provide an accurate language that is fit for purpose and adequately represents the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the workplace and material impacts on their lives and livelihoods.



A review of the literature

What do we know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in the Victorian public sector?

Across Australia, the ongoing effects of settler colonialism, intergenerational trauma, exposure to racism, social exclusion and compounding racial and gendered discrimination has resulted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experiencing high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) 2020), higher rates of mental illness and distress (Walker, Dudgeon & Boe 2020), poorer health and an almost 10-year less life expectancy (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2022). They also experience disproportionate rates of incarceration (AHRC 2018; Carlson 2021; McQuire 2022), violence and homicide (McGlade 2019; Collard & Higgins 2019; Fryer 2022), and numbers of children in out-of-home care (Family Matters 2021; SNAICC 2021) when compared to non-Indigenous women. The AHRC (2020 p. 534) notes:

There is a link between this history and the contemporary gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous people in terms of wealth, income, employment, educational attainment and wellbeing. Each generation inherits not only their families' financial wealth, but also their means to obtain it: their property; their social status; their network of relationships; their traditions of knowledge and learning in and outside of the home, including knowledge about how to operate within the financial system to maximise advantage; and a reinforced expectation that they will be included in society and that others will treat them fairly or face consequences for failing to do so.

The employment of Aboriginal women and girls in Australia is overshadowed by a history of injustices including forcible removal from families and communities, forced domestic labour and menial work, unpaid or underpaid labour, physical and sexual abuse, and restricted ability to participate in economic opportunities and build wealth (AHRC 2020). Since colonisation began, as Bargallie (2020a, pp. 50-53) explains:

[S]ystematic and racist legislation, government processes and employment practices relegated Indigenous peoples to menial, strenuous and always subservient work... Resistance and refusal to cooperate in the early days resulted in punishment and pathologizing constructions that represented Aboriginal peoples as indolent, dirty, lazy, unworthy and incapable of managing their own affairs... [which] resulted in a legacy of intractable racist beliefs, attitudes and totalising stereotypes of the Aboriginal identity that manifest, flourish and unduly influence employment and economic policy relating to Indigenous Australians to this day.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2022), in the 2021 Census of Population and Housing, 66,000 people in Victoria identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, presenting 1% of the total Victoria population (an increase from 0.8% in 2016 and 0.7% in 2011). Within this figure, there were slightly more males than females, however females outnumbered males in age groups over 35 years. According to the most recent National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), which was conducted in 2014-15 (ABS 2016), of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria, 51% were employed, and of these, 57% were employed full-time. Males (39%) were around twice as likely to be in full-time employment as females (19%).

The Victorian public sector is a part of the Australian economy that comprises all departments, agencies and organisations that are owned and operated by the Victorian government and deliver services to the public. It is comprised of two major employer groups: the Victorian Public Service consisting of approximately 40 government departments, agencies and administrative offices, and some 1750 public entities such as schools, hospitals, emergency services,

water authorities, creative industry agencies, and sport and recreation organisations (State Government of Victoria (SGV) 2018). As of June 2021, a total of 345,866 people were employed in the Victorian public sector by 1,840 different employers, accounting for 10% of the total Victorian labour force (Victorian Public Sector Commission (VPSC) 2022c). These employees work as nurses, engineers, paramedics, police officers, firefighters, economists, schoolteachers, scientists, park rangers and many other occupations (SGV 2018). Most of them (68%) were women, and 0.7% identified as transgender, non-binary or gender diverse (VPSC 2022b). Of these 345,866 employees of the Victorian public sector, 0.8% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (VPSC 2022b).

The VPSC conducts an annual survey of Victorian public sector employees known as 'People Matter'. In 2021, a total of 92,008 employees from a variety of organisations including police and emergency services, public health care, TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and other education voluntarily responded (VPSC 2021). The results are disaggregated for the demographics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, disability, gender, cultural identity, or religion which does allow for some useful intersectional analysis, meaning that it is possible to view results particularly about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women depending on response rates for privacy reasons. This, along with the fact that some respondents opt not to indicate if they are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or not, and the limitations of the survey itself, means that it is difficult to determine just how representative the data is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees' experiences. However, the data reveals interesting patterns. In the 2021 People Matter survey (VPSC 2021), 11% of respondents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 7% preferred not to say. When compared to respondents who identified as being non-Indigenous, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander respondents were more likely to report that they had experienced bullying, sexual harassment, aggression or violent behaviour, and discrimination in the workplace. In the survey, 57% of all respondents – and 11% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women – selected that they had experienced discrimination in the workplace. Among the 11% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who experienced discrimination, 68% reported that this was on the basis of race.

Of these, 11% reported this occurred at least once a day, 49% reported this was by a senior manager, 25% reported this was by a group of colleagues, and 32% reported this was by one colleague. One quarter of these did not report the discrimination to anyone, with the main reasons chosen being a fear of negative consequences for their career, their reputation, and feeling it would not make a difference. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were also more likely to report high, very high or severe levels of stress.

While there is some quantitative data, there is limited literature about the actual and compounding *experiences* of race, gender, and other factors about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience workplaces, particularly in public sector employment, and specifically in the Victorian public sector. Up until recently, what we knew about the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and employment had come from the work of non-Indigenous-led researchers, often positioned from a deficit lens, and based on non-Indigenous assumptions of what these experiences were and meant (Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute (DCA/JI) 2020). Within some of this research, racism has been framed as bullying and harassment, rather than being named outright; this has served to mask racism and failed to accurately and comprehensively record the nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee dissatisfaction (Bargallie 2020a; Larkin 2014). More recently studies have been undertaken about the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in the public sector, and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in general. These studies have been conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, utilising Indigenous research methodologies, collecting qualitative data directly from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their employment experiences and needs (see Bargallie 2020a).

This review presents an overview of these studies and provides a summary of the themes evident in the literature as relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences in Victorian public sector workplaces.



Compounding racial and gendered discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace

For women working in the public sector, and elsewhere, there is a compounded risk of discrimination and disadvantage when other factors are added – for example, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, age, disability, geographical location, socioeconomic status, caring responsibilities, and so on. Combined, these factors can result in unique or complex needs. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, many of these factors are a cause for discrimination and marginalisation, and the compounding of these factors can result in marked disadvantage (AHRC 2020; Carlson & Day 2021; Day & Carlson 2022; Day et al. 2023).

One indicator of discrimination related to gender in the workplace is the gender pay gap. The gender pay gap measures the difference between the average earnings of women and men in the workforce. It is an internationally established measure of women's position in the economy in comparison to men. The gender pay gap is the result of the social and economic factors that combine to reduce women's earning capacity over their lifetime. It is not the difference between two people being paid differently for work of the same comparable value, which is unlawful—this is called 'unequal pay' (Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), 2022b). In August 2022, the Australian gender pay gap was 14.1%, which is an increase of 0.3 percentage points since early 2022, with men earning an average of \$263.90 more than women per week, with women having to work 60 additional days after the end of the financial year to earn the same average annual salary (WGEA, 2022a). A 2009 study of women's experiences of pay inequality found that Australian women are working longer and later in their lives and retire with less superannuation and less accumulated wealth than men (Cerise et al. 2009).

The gender pay gap is symptomatic of a broader workplace culture that has historically and systematically undervalued the contribution of women and resulted in the under-representation of women in senior executive and management roles (WGEA 2022b). The gender pay gap is influenced by factors as described by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency:

- conscious and unconscious discrimination and bias in hiring and pay decisions;
- women and men working in different industries and different jobs, with female-dominated industries and jobs attracting lower wages;
- lack of workplace flexibility to accommodate caring and other responsibilities, especially in senior roles;
- high rates of part-time work for women;
- women's greater time out of the workforce for caring responsibilities impacting career progression and opportunities; and
- women's disproportionate share of unpaid caring and domestic work (WGEA 2022b, para. 9).

The 2021 workplace gender audit data analysis conducted by the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (CGEPS) (2022b) found that for women working in the Victorian public sector, women comprised 66% of the workforce, yet comprised only 45% of leaders, and 38% of CEOs. Taking into account their total remuneration, the average pay gap between men and women was 15.6%, equating to men taking home \$19,000 more than women in the 2020–2021 financial year. While this was lower than that reported in the private sector, the CGEPS emphasises that this gap is still significant, and is evident across all occupational groups except for the CEO level—confirming that the pay gap is not a result of stereotypically work thought of as 'men's work'. Women were overrepresented in part-time work, formal flexible work arrangements, and underrepresented in industries stereotypically considered 'men's work' (such as Transport, Police, Emergency Services). The CGEPS noted that caring responsibilities continue to impact women's workforce participation, with eight out of ten parental leave-takers being women, while a lack of uptake of flexible working options by men further enforces stereotypical gender roles at work and home. The audit also found that women were 50% more likely to report experiencing sexual harassment, occurring most frequently in majority-men and frontline sectors such as Transport, Police and Emergency Services. Only 4% of these lodged a formal complaint, with reasons given being a fear of potential backlash and negative career consequences, and believing the incident was not serious enough (CGEPS 2022b).

Also of interest are the findings of a 2014 study of the perceptions of men and women in senior positions regarding the cultural and systemic barriers affecting the recruitment, retention and promotion of senior women in and Australian Public Service (APS) (Evans et al. 2014). Noting at the time that women made up most of the APS workforce yet were underrepresented in management positions –which is as described by Evans and colleagues as an ‘anathema to the notions of merit, equality, and fairness on which the service is founded and which it is bound to follow by law. No longer can it be argued that it is just a matter of time before talented women will rise to leadership positions’ (p. 502). The study proposed that the underrepresentation was due to: family responsibilities and other competing priorities that may prevent many women from taking up leadership roles; men’s negative perceptions of women’s ability; workplace structures and cultures that encourage processes of ‘unconscious bias’ that perceive men to be more suitable and capable; and workplace cultures and practices that have a deleterious impact on women’s self-confidence (Evans et al. 2014). Similarly, Bargallie (2020b, para 17) argues that ‘the idea that all employment, promotion, and commendation is made on an entirely neutral basis is a myth. A disproportionately high number of Indigenous employees languish on the lower rungs of the employment ladder’. The 2022 Australian Indigenous Employment Index released by the Minderoo Foundation found that Indigenous employees across a range of workplaces were almost entirely absent from senior management and executive leadership levels (p. 19).

Unfortunately, scant empirical evidence and disaggregated data exists about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women fit into the national landscape. The data on the gender pay gap presented by the WGEA (2022a) and on pay inequality presented by Cerise and colleagues (2009) does not appear to be disaggregated to examine the pay gaps specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Similarly, regarding workforce participation, the CGEPS (2022b) reports it is not yet able to use such audit data to produce analyses for groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, people with disability, people from diverse cultural backgrounds or religions, or LGBTQIA+ people, due to concerns regarding ensuring robustness and accurate representation.

However, the most recent National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2014–15 found that the workforce participation rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged 15 and above was 51.5% compared to 65% for men, and 59.2% for non-Indigenous women (ABS 2016). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be carers of children and other dependents, and this is particularly the case for women (Evans 2021). Some research has explored the impact of caring responsibilities on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women’s participation in the workforce, however, there has been little focus on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with caring responsibilities in the workplace (Evans 2021). Equally, there is scant research that highlights the carer responsibility for people who are LGBTQIA+ although it is well known that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQIA+ people play a significant role in families and communities in terms of caring for others (Carlson et al. 2022; Farrell 2020; Caldwell 2020; Riggs & Toone 2017).

The Australian Government has committed to reducing the gender participation gap between men and women aged 15 to 64 years by 25% by 2025, decreasing the gap, *not closing the gap*, from 12.1% (as recorded in 2012) to 9.1% and requiring an additional 200,000 Australian women to enter the workforce (Australian Commonwealth Government (ACG) 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are identified within this strategy as a ‘special focus group’. However, in November 2021, journalists Nigel Gladstone and Cameron Gooley reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that across 90 public sector organisations with more than 100 employees, only 21 of these employed a proportional amount of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and nine employed none (Gladstone & Gooley 2021). They also exposed ‘Destination NSW (New South Wales)’, the lead government agency for the NSW tourism and major events sectors, as having failed to employ an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person ‘for nearly a decade, despite developing two Aboriginal tourism industry plans and boasting about encouraging staff to celebrate diversity’ (para. 8). Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are frequently listed as a priority group in national equity initiatives, government efforts towards accurate data collection as well as hiring for this group in the workplace are thus far insufficient.

Examples of studies exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the workplace

In 2017, the Indigenous Affairs Group of the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, not the National Indigenous Australians Agency, and the Australian Human Rights Commission partnered to conduct the Wiyi Yani U Thangani project (Wiyi Yani U Thangani is Bunuba language translated into English meaning 'women's voices') (AHRC 2020). The project investigated how the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, and their communities, could best be promoted. A total of 50 communities across Australia were visited by the project team, who held 106 engagements and met with 2,294 women and girls, to discuss the strengths, challenges, aspirations, and solutions relevant to their communities. The impact of other intersections such as poverty, living in remote or regional areas, and being "subject to punitive legal and welfare structures" saw many respondents trapped in a cycle of disadvantage and being forced to live below the poverty line (AHRC 2020, p. 48). The project findings emphasise the failure of "institutions to recognise, value and build on the existing strengths, knowledge, and cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Where structures and institutions fail to do so, they fail to empower women and girls" (AHRC 2020, p. 497).

In 2020, the Diversity Council of Australia in partnership with Jumbunna Institute, University of Technology Sydney released the Gari Yala report (Gari Yala is Wiradjuri language translated into English meaning 'speak the truth'), detailing the findings of a survey of 1,033 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about their experiences of work, including 167 respondents from Victoria (DCA/JI 2020). A total of 623 (60.3%) of respondents identified as female; 383 (37.1%) identified as male; 11 (1.1%) identified as non-binary, gender fluid or another gender not specified; and 16% (1.6%) preferred not to say. The core concepts investigated were identity, cultural safety, racism, identity strain, cultural load, and organisational authenticity, making the survey one of the first of its kind to focus specifically on these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific issues in the workplace (DCA/JI 2020). This data was then disaggregated to enable a focus on gender. It should be noted that the report only focuses on understanding the differing experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who identified under the categories of 'male' or 'female' in the workforce and does not explore the experiences of those who identified as 'non-binary', 'gender fluid' or another gender not specified.

The focus on gender between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women resulted in a Gendered Insights report (Evans 2021). This report explored the same core concepts, however with a gender lens, to determine how these concepts intersect to determine not only workplace experiences, but also outcomes. Interestingly, little difference was found between men's and women's experiences of identity, cultural safety, racism, unfair treatment, harassment, what Evans calls "identity strain", and job satisfaction. The author of the report, Gomerioi woman Olivia Evans (2021), describes this as surprising given that women are more likely to experience discrimination, harassment, and unfair treatment in the workplace, and notes the possibility that issues such as identity strain and cultural safety may be equally relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women. The most significant differences were women reporting lower levels of available support, and a higher cultural load. Further analysis revealed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with caring responsibilities have the highest cultural load and are more likely to be working in organisations that are culturally unsafe and inauthentic. The highest cultural load was most evident among women in management positions and reports of poor levels of support were most common among women employed in lower positions. Evans (2021, p. 23) notes, 'Future research would also benefit from more nuanced measures of background and demographic information, particularly with regards to caring responsibilities. This report should therefore serve as a first step in the process of investigating these intersections'.

The Australian Women's Working Futures Project, conducted by the University of Sydney in 2017, included data from 53 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women under the age of 40 (Baird et al. 2018). Unfortunately, given the limited numbers, the project team note that the data collected for this group cannot be regarded as being representative of the broader population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, however, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were more likely than non-Indigenous respondents to: be members of a trade union (29% compared to 17%); place a high value on a well-paying job (78% compared to 65%); be concerned about being replaced (19% compared to 10%); rate having care for children and dependents as crucial to their success at work (62% compared to 48%); think that women and men were not treated equally (30% compared to 18%); and say they were aiming for a promotion (42% compared with 19% or looking for a new role with their current employer (32% compared with 14%) (Baird et al. 2018).

As noted, there is scant research that maps the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are also LGBTQIA+ and the workplace. A recent report focused on the health and wellbeing of transgender Australians by Bretherton and colleagues published in 2021 noted numerous barriers including high levels of discrimination and unemployment. The report found, “Of 928 participants, 37% reported female, 36% reported male, and 27% reported nonbinary gender identities. Despite 47% having tertiary qualifications, the unemployment rate was 19%, with 33% reporting discrimination in employment due to being trans” (Bretherton et al. 2021, p. 42). While the Bretherton et al. report did not identify any participants as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, research conducted by Nyungar Wardandi scholar Braden Hill at Edith Cowan University found that 73% of Indigenous LGBTQIA+ participants in their study had experienced discrimination and including racism, social exclusion, and queer-phobia. ‘The Breaking the Silence: Insights into the lived experiences of WA Aboriginal/ LGBTQIA+ people and community’ report noted that in terms of workplace discrimination, 20% of participants reported that they were either “ignored or teased at work because of their sexual or gender identity” (Hill et al. 2021, p. 16) and that 51.6% reported that they had experienced ‘being the “token” Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person in groups or organisations’ (p. 20). Feeling like a “token” is a common experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees as noted by Bargallie (2020b, para 22) who reported that some Indigenous employees in her study felt ‘tokenised and not seen as professionals with genuine skills or expertise to offer’ and being treated as cultural advisors instead.

Examples of studies specifically exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the public sector

In 2007, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a Goenpul scholar of the Quandamooka nation, wrote about being asked by the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Tribunal as an expert witness to attend a case of racial discrimination by Queensland Health against an Aboriginal nurse referred to as ‘Leesa’. The account was later published as a chapter in her 2015 book *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Leesa had reported being treated differently at work compared to her non-Indigenous colleagues and witnessed the same happening to Indigenous patients. She was alienated, subjected to racist remarks, treated as

inferior, and excluded from training opportunities. When Leesa lodged a complaint about this treatment with management, they failed to take it seriously. In her review of the affidavits of Leesa and 25 non-Indigenous nurses, Moreton-Robinson noted the sense of racial unity, evidenced by their obvious collaboration of testimonies that had resulted in a consistency in their recollection of events that some had not even personally witnessed. Moreton-Robinson (2015, p.99) highlights how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who report racism in the workplace are typically positioned as “troublemakers”, and “too sensitive”. Positioning Leesa as such served as a tactic to make Leesa, rather than racism, the problem. After the case was settled outside the tribunal, Queensland Health was later criticised in the media for culture of bullying among its staff—making bullying, rather than racism, the problem. Moreton-Robinson (2015, p. 108) notes that Leesa’s case was one of the few workplace racial discrimination cases brought before the law. For Leesa, it took great strength and courage, and yet it cost Leesa her nursing career. Moreton-Robinson (2007; 2015) presents the case study as an example of how the workplace is a place that supports and normalises non-Indigenous behaviour and attitudes, and the challenges that Indigenous people face in having to navigate in order to participate.

Aboriginal researcher Anne-Maree Nielsen interviewed five Aboriginal nurses to explore their experiences of ‘the whiteness of nursing’ (Nielsen, Stuart & Gorman 2014, p. 191). It was not indicated how many of these participants were women. Little research has been conducted on the phenomenon of white dominance within nursing and the impact it has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses. The authors note the link between ‘pre-colonial Aboriginal health’s subordination to Eurocentric health practices [and] present Aboriginal health disparities’, and how ‘racially definitive healthcare practices [are] are perpetuated through the whiteness of nursing in our healthcare system’ (Nielsen et al. 2014, p. 193). Though limited in sample size, the study found that the whiteness of nursing ‘is an ever-present dominating force, more often than not dismissing the unique ability that Aboriginal registered nurses bring to bear in their care for Aboriginal patients in a truly culturally appropriate practice’ (Nielsen et al. 2014, p. 195). The challenge described for the Aboriginal nurses interviewed is to successfully walk in competing cultural contexts often referred to as ‘walking in two worlds’ —as an Aboriginal person and as a nurse.

Following a dramatic increase in Indigenous workforce policies and employment strategies as part of a push to employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Aboriginal scholar Bronwyn Fredericks presented findings of research conducted in 2003 with 20 Aboriginal women in Rockhampton, Central Queensland, whose interviews included discussions about employment in health services. With a particular focus on empowerment, participants noted that being an empowered Aboriginal woman can prove to be a disadvantage—the non-Indigenous culture of workplaces prefers Aboriginal women to be able to simply ‘fit in to the white world’, be ‘puppets’ who can ‘be told what to do’ (Fredericks 2009, p. 30).

[I]f you are an empowered Aboriginal woman who can articulate what you want and need, you may not get the same assistance or be asked to participate because other workers don't necessarily know how to relate to you as you don't fit within their white way of seeing Aboriginal women...I believe this is an historical phenomenon connected to past colonial practices and the belief that the dominant society was trying to 'rescue' and 'save' Aboriginal women. It is about nurturing dependence, benevolence, and paternalism. It is also about measuring Aboriginal women up to a standard that is not our own and one that is based on a society that believes itself to be better than us. (Fredericks 2009, p. 30)

In the context of falling growth in female police numbers in Australia, and a recommendation from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody for an explicit focus on Indigenous women as police officers, a group of non-Indigenous researchers from the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University, aimed to identify barriers to employment, retention, and integration (Fleming et al. 2013). The ultimate aim of the research project, conducted in partnership with the Queensland Police Service, was to identify mechanisms to improve the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in policing. Using a written questionnaire, the researchers surveyed 56 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female officers in the Queensland Police Service. None of the respondents were in senior management positions, and nearly half of respondents reported having one or more dependent children and/or other dependents.

Regarding their training, 40% reported being subjected to racist remarks and racist assumptions that they had been given special consideration on the basis of Aboriginality. Over half had reported the behaviour, and a third of these felt the complaint had not been satisfactorily resolved. When asked if they believed their gender or Aboriginality had impacted on their deployment, almost half indicated their gender had, and 19% indicated both. Despite the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommending an explicit focus on Indigenous women as police officers, at the time of writing, the researchers found there was no evidence of this being implemented (Fleming et al. 2013). In 2020, journalist Benita Kolovos reported that following the release of their Aboriginal inclusion strategy and action plan 2018–2021, the Victoria police had failed to hit its own 1% Indigenous employment target. The action plan detailed ‘systemic barriers limiting Aboriginal people from joining the Victoria police and a culture in which some employees “chose not to self-identify as Aboriginal” (Kolovos, 2022, para, 6).

In many ways, the police force is not a safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as noted by Kolovos (2022, para 9) and Yuin scholar Marlene Longbottom’s 2021 submission to the Commission of inquiry to Queensland Police Service response to domestic and family violence. Longbottom writes, “police culture is something that requires immediate attention” (p. 2). In another submission to the Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce: Discussion Paper 1 – Options for legislating against coercive control and the creation of a standalone domestic violence offence, Longbottom and co-author Aboriginal criminologist Amanda Porter write, ‘For Indigenous women and girls, the police represent a site of lethal violence’ (Longbottom & Porter 2022, p. 2). While both submissions speak to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women when dealing with police, increasingly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ex-police are speaking publicly of their experiences working in the police service. Gunai/Kurnai woman Veronica Gorrie has recently authored a book about her experiences as a former police officer with Victoria and Queensland Police, titled *Black and Blue: A Memoir of Racism and Resilience* (2021). Gorrie reports joining the police force in an attempt to “break the cycle of fear” of police that had its roots in her childhood (cited in Valentish 2021, para. 1). However, she admits doing so cost her a lot of friends and family members. She also describes the ‘stress experienced by those who are targeted by tokenistic recruitment drives and heralded as “good role models”, while expected to tolerate

racist remarks and racial profiling on the job' (cited in para. 3). Gorrie asserts that, 'In 2001, I began training to become a police officer, and by the end of my ten-year career I had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression' (Gorrie 2021, p. 7). A 2022 inquiry into Queensland Police Service underway at the time of writing has also uncovered reports of recruits being taught racist attitudes against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and of rape, sexual assault, and harassment against female officers (Smee & Gillespie, 2022).

Across various workplaces, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience racism, harassment, and discrimination. A team of Aboriginal female researchers with a base in the University of Technology Sydney, explored the experiences of five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in public relations (Clark et al., 2021). The study particularly noted the marginalisation experienced by these women because of 'the Australian culture of whiteness and patriarchy' as well as the resulting mental stress and distress (pp. 163-164). Existing literature indicates that many Australian workplaces are hostile to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Examples of studies exploring the experiences of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women in the public sector

Kamilaroi and Wonnarua scholar Debbie Bargallie conducted doctoral research with 21 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who were, or had been, employees of the APS, and her findings have been published in the book *Unmasking the Racial Contract: Indigenous Voices on Racism in the Australian Public Service* (Bargallie 2020a). The book has a base in the work of Charles Mills (1997 pp. 13-14), who described the political, moral and epistemological structure of modern society as being determined by the 'racial contract' which 'establishes a racial polity, a racial state, and racial juridical system, where the status of whites and non-whites is clearly demarcated, whether by law or custom', the main purpose being to 'maintain and reproduce racial order, securing the privileges and advantages of the full white citizens, and maintaining the subordination of non-whites'. Bargallie (2020a) exposes the contemporary prevalence of racism in the APS and asserts that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous APS employees are bound by a racial contract that operates through structural, systemic and everyday racism and is maintained by the ongoing failure of those in power to change the APS cultural norms and address racism. Bargallie (2020a)

describes how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees use their agency to resist racism in the workplace and offers solutions for how the APS could break the racial contract and lead the way for workplaces across the nation.

In her book titled *Reluctant Representatives: Blackfella Bureaucrats Speak in Australia's North*, public servant Elizabeth Ganter (2016) reports findings from her doctoral research interviewing 76 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civil servants in the Northern Territory, 53 of whom had been employment at a senior level. The interviews coincided with the Australian Government's 2007 'Northern Territory National Emergency Response' also known as 'The Intervention' targeting Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The research highlighted the discomfort of many participants in being expected to act as role models and speak on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; being perceived as not 'Aboriginal enough' to be a legitimate representative if they were light-skinned; and not being heard—just being 'bums on seats' (Ganter 2016, pp. 87 & 158).

Steven Larkin (2014), a Kungarakany Aboriginal past employee of the APS conducted doctoral research interviewing 11 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 12 non-Indigenous senior executive officers with experience in Indigenous-specific program or policy areas. Larkin's (2014) work highlighted that non-Indigenous senior bureaucrats are often unaware of racism and racialized hierarchies in APS workplaces, and as a result, such racial bias, comprised of attitudes, beliefs, values, and assumptions that prioritise non-Indigenous interests, continues to define the APS institution.

Samantha Faulkner, a Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal woman from Badu and Moa Islands in the Torres Strait and Yadhagana and Wuthathi peoples of Cape York Peninsula, and non-Indigenous anthropologist Julie Lahn conducted interviews with 50 current or former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander APS employees, predominantly at the Executive and Senior Executive Services levels (Faulkner & Lahn 2019). The research particularly focused on the enablers and barriers that support or impede career progression to senior levels in the APS. Findings highlighted the importance of informal mentoring, and the hindrance of institutional biases, poor management practices and a failure to value Indigenous skills and leadership styles. The conclusion reached by Faulkner and Lahn (2019) is that the APS needs to develop a business case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment that is strengths-based.

Julie Lahn also teamed with social researcher Nicholas Biddle to interview 34 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently or previously employed by the APS, 16 of whom were women, to determine the reasons behind why they choose to leave at rates greater than their non-Indigenous colleagues (Biddle & Lahn 2016). They found five key themes: the APS not meeting expectations as a result of an initial 'overselling'; frustration at the limiting impact of politics on positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy initiatives; negative career experiences such as lack of promotion, lack of recognition of skills and unsatisfactory relationships with supervisors; experiences of racism and restricted ability to respond; and a lack of cultural awareness within the APS and undervaluing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees (Biddle & Lahn 2016, p. 16).

Craig Leon (2022), a Worimi and Kamilaroi scholar and employee of the APS conducted a case study of implicit bias of 1544 APS employees as measured by the Australian Aboriginal Implicit Association Test. The Test measures the strength of associations between the images of faces and the terms used for good and bad words. A score is determined by the time it takes a participant to respond—being quick to group positive terms with Caucasian faces and slow to group positive terms with Aboriginal faces is deemed indicative of having a bias in favour of Caucasian faces. Leon (2022) found that male participants across all age categories showed a higher preference for Caucasian Australians than female participants, which has implications for the career progression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees of the APS, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

The need for more complexity to disaggregated data collection

There are numerous reports that reveal the high levels of racism and discrimination in the workplace experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a homogenous group. For example, the Minderoo Foundation's annual report, The Australian Indigenous Employment Index (2022) found that many Indigenous employees feel culturally unsafe in the workplace due to racism. 50% of the participants reported direct and indirect racism and that employers had low levels of understanding of racism and how to appropriately respond (p. 19). The report did not capture if the experiences of racism and discrimination were impacted by gender for example. There are also reports that reveal the specific challenges faced by women in terms of recruitment and progression.

The Diversity Council of Australia released a 2023 report, Culturally and Racially Marginalised Women in Leadership: A Framework for (Intersectional) Organisational Action. The findings revealed that 61% of respondents reported experiencing racism and sexism in the workplace, and that women who are culturally or racially marginalised felt locked out of leadership roles with the majority of the 370 participants reporting fewer career opportunities and being subjected to a higher bar compared to those not culturally or racially marginalised. It was not clear however, if any participants were Indigenous women or identified as LGBTQAI+ however, the results are comparable to reports that did focus on Indigenous women.

There is a need for more complexity to disaggregated data collection beyond Indigenous/non-Indigenous and women/men. For example, if we only focus on Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous the statistics may give a skewed representation of the workplace and inequalities experienced by a range of employees including Indigenous women and LGBTQAI+ people. If research only considers men/women again Indigenous women are the most likely to be underrepresented as the results will likely speak to the experiences of non-Indigenous women.

In a resource released by the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health entitled, 'Five Ways Intersectionality helps us to understand gender inequality in the workplace' (Nasr 2020), the importance of intersectionality and the collecting of more complex disaggregated data is outlined. The report states that, 'intersectionality can help organisations recognise the complex and diverse relationships people have with power and privilege and move away from making assumptions or reinforce stereotypes' (p. 4).

As this review of the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences working in the Victorian public sector has revealed, more qualitative research using Indigenist and intersectional methodologies, in addition to disaggregated quantitative data is required for more nuanced understandings of the unique, diverse, and complex workplace experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. We caution, however, that it is essential to invest in robust measures to ensure anonymity when gathering and disaggregating sensitive data in research with and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women employees due to their sparse numbers in the VPS workplaces.

Findings: Being an Aboriginal woman in Victorian public sector workplaces

The findings of this study are presented through the following five themes:



Navigating the 'bureaucratic nonsense': Barriers to recruitment and progression



2 The terms of inclusion: Precarious employment and unpaid labour



3 Make us count! Authentic support, recognition, and value of Aboriginal women and their knowledges



4 Racisms at work: Every day and in every way



5 Denial and ambivalence: The failure of complaint policies, processes, and practices.

The participants in this research were aware that the Victorian public sector (VPS) is one of Victoria's largest employers of Aboriginal peoples and that a job in this sector has the potential to provide stability and economic security for Aboriginal women. They also made clear that the sector poses many challenges for Aboriginal women. One participant stated that, 'you know, being in the VPS is well paid, but it comes with so many little landmines' (P17).

Several participants indicated that the VPS supported them in their educational aspirations including financial support to complete tertiary education. Many were attracted by the variety of work roles across the sectors. Some commented that they had worked for the VPS for more than two decades. Several participants also specifically commented about the enjoyment they get from working with Aboriginal people and communities.

I've stayed for 30 years and have certainly been the recipient of some pretty reasonable work arrangements along the way. I mean, not many jobs you can have a baby and be off 7 years if you want to come back to your same job. You're not necessarily getting remuneration through the roof, but I think in my position now I'm getting remunerated pretty damn good. (P11)

I actually worked with other Aboriginal people, which was really wonderful not having to explain humour, not having to explain ways of working and understanding stuff, like that was actually wonderful. (P17)

However, most participants had experienced significant organisational barriers that impede opportunities in the workplace. Most participants in our study felt their workplace largely failed to actively support the employment, development, retention, and promotion of Aboriginal woman. One participant who worked in the VPS for 22 years in various roles on mostly short-term contracts

stated that although there had been some wonderful moments, such as support for study, overall, they feel undervalued in the workplace. Over the 22 years they had only progressed to a VPS Level 5 (P10). Another stated they had worked in the VPS for over 19 years beginning at a VPS Level 2 and only now working as a Level 4 (P13). Another participant stated over 20 years they went from VPS Level 1 to Level 3 (P9). The above women had not even reached the top rung of the lowest hierarchy of the VPS employment ladder. This pattern of Indigenous employees being trapped at the bottom rungs of the employment ladder in public service workplaces was identified by Bargallie (2020a) and is evident in this study, as the data that follows demonstrates.

One participant stated they had given up external employment opportunities to remain in the VPS, holding on to their aspirations to create change:

I've been offered them and have turned them down to stay here. Which is interesting, because I've certainly got my share of complaints to stay here, So I don't know particularly what keeps me here whether it's a belief that I can get the work done and change the way that things are, or whether it's a kind of Stockholm Syndrome, like you know, or I've been here so long its comfortable. (P22)

However, one of the survey participants made clear that they were ready to leave the VPS as they felt unsupported:

I am very deflated and am looking beyond the VPS now, even though I had wanted to stay. The lack of support and belief in me as a leader has not given me any opportunities to grow professionally. (S5)



Navigating the 'bureaucratic nonsense': Barriers to recruitment and progression

Recruitment

Most of the participants in this study spoke about the bureaucratic barriers that they experienced, particularly in relation to recruitment within the public sector. One participant referred to the systems required to recruit Aboriginal peoples as 'bureaucratic nonsense' (P21). Many participants reflected that the inflexibility of VPS recruitment processes present an obstacle to recruiting Aboriginal peoples. Others questioned the remuneration and the concentration on recruitment for low level positions. This was the case for several of the women interviewed, who in fact, had tertiary level qualifications. Another disqualifying barrier was that positions were being primarily offered in the Melbourne metropolitan region and larger towns, with little consideration for flexible work location arrangements for those living in regional and rural areas.

Everything is Metro all the time. So, a lot of regional people, Aboriginal mostly, they get left behind. (P13)

You know, I think the last time I looked there was over 70 job vacancies and they are all based in [a large regional town in Victoria]. I live nearly 400 kilometres away from [a large regional town in Victoria]. There is a number of Aboriginal people between here and there that could apply for those roles but can't because they actually have to live in the large regional town. (P1)

A small number of participants raised the issue that power influenced who was hired and at what level. Some stated that they were aware of positions that were offered to Aboriginal peoples, known to, and at times related to managers and/or dominant family groups. It was further stated that most of the senior level management positions were offered to Aboriginal men. Another concern raised is that the public sector only 'pays lip service' (P22) to Aboriginal employment strategies. One example included a young woman who was in a 'trainee position'; the team member who

mentored her had identified her as suitable for a VPS 2 role with some additional support. However, the manager had stated that there was no scope for such a progression, despite the existence of suitable Indigenous identified vacancies within the department. Aboriginal workers had to jump through hoops to navigate recruitment processes and practices despite VPS commitments and policies to recruit Aboriginal people. For example, the composition and the vetting of recruitment panel members may negate the outcome of opportunities for members of local communities.

I think one thing the department doesn't do well at all for our Indigenous staff is the process around recruitment. I don't think that is something that sits well with mob in regard to the many hoops that you have to jump through...In our space, proactively seeking Indigenous employees is something we want to do, but the system really doesn't allow us to. (P21)

My (family member) had previously had a conflict with a local Aboriginal man and there he was on my interview panel and when he saw me, he did the whole "who are you" thing. I knew who he was, but I didn't let on that I knew of him. He had protected a man who had done very, very, very, very badly by Aboriginal women in our community. (P10)

Some Aboriginal people are all well-known Aboriginal people because of their family. So, it is family groups who are controlling the public sector down...So if you don't have the right family, you've got to fight really hard. (P16)

Progression – 'More than a bum on a seat'!

Several participants raised concerns that at times they felt Aboriginal employees are deliberately kept from advancing to higher positions. Many further identified that when Aboriginal people made it into managerial positions, they were mostly Aboriginal men. One participant commented that in their workplace 'our women get stuck at a level three or a four. And that is not on' (P17). Most women who had progressed remained at the lower levels of the VPS employment ladder for extensive periods of time. Only a small minority of the women in this study were able to progress beyond the VPS Level 5. For Aboriginal woman, it appears that there is a 'broken rung' phenomenon (Huang et al., 2019) that poses a barrier to advance from entry level to the first rung of management. It is this broken rung phenomenon that contributes to the glass ceiling at higher levels.

It's taken me 17 years to get from entry level to get to where I am now. (P18)

I was managing 13 staff, so all of them were Aboriginal peoples, but of course, above you is a white fulla. (P7)

I don't see a lot of Aboriginal men or women in management positions. (P8)

I don't believe there are any Aboriginal people on the board or in the executive suite that I'm aware of or any senior managers even under there. (P1)

One of my observations was that for a long time, most of the management roles were going to men...I'm extremely qualified. I've got two postgraduate degrees. I've got undergraduate degrees, and my executive director has a high school education. It's really demoralising...There seems to be different rules for men, Black men, so I'm talking about Black men. There is some sort of, you know, Black man energy, or Black men spell that white people will fall under, especially white women. It is Black man charisma and Black women are just quiet achievers...we just do the work. (P15)

Participants felt at times that they are nothing more than a statistic – merely a 'bum on a seat' to be counted as a tick box (P15). They felt that they were deliberately held back from progressing to higher positions because they were good at their job and felt that their managers proactively ignored their career aspirations. The majority of participants highlighted the fact that they have rarely seen Aboriginal woman in managerial or leadership positions which led them to believe that they were unlikely to progress.

Sometimes I think that we are unable to progress in the workplace and treated like we are just a bum on a seat. When they get a good Aboriginal person, and by good, I mean somebody that is good at their job, they don't want to let them go. This is because it's good for their targets. So, there's a disincentive, actually, for them to try and facilitate your career. Because they want to keep you in the job because it makes them look good. (P15)

We've recently been given the data around the wage distribution of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, we have, basically zero managers. And so, while I love my manager, there's times where she just does not understand where I'm coming from. And there's only so much that I think words can do in those kinds of circumstances, like there are instances where you really need someone with a lived experience that's similar to you to be able to understand where your concerns are coming from. (P22)

In our study, participants spoke of being requested to backfill positions for managers on leave but not receive remuneration at the higher level. Some participants stated that it wasn't worth their while to take on these extra duties and not be paid for it. Other participants had taken up the opportunity to act in higher level positions and in some cases, on numerous occasions. However, when the same participants applied for the role as it became vacant, and despite holding high level tertiary qualifications and demonstrating capability to fulfil the position, they were nevertheless overlooked. The positions went to non-Indigenous people, mostly men. The exploitation of Aboriginal women's labour manifested in various forms.

I am tired of just coping under that male structure. I just want to be able to be in a job where I can actually do the job and then still have the capacity to give back to the community. (P10)

I think as a cohort we've [Aboriginal women] got so much to offer. But somehow men are valued more...it's hopefully going to change...The white women run the place, they run the show. But Aboriginal women are still bottom of the pecking order. (P15)

Another participant spoke about the Gender Equity plan, amid a culture of persisting inequitable gendered systems.

Aboriginal men come in at a VPS Level 5.2 and all the women were coming in at base grade levels. The difference in level made it possible for men to always be higher than the women. (P9)

Overall, in terms of recruitment and progression, Aboriginal women's experiences speak to systemic and interpersonal racism, sexism and misogyny and at times a combination of them all. Many reported that managerial positions were largely held by non-Indigenous men and at times Aboriginal men. One participant commented that when managerial positions were held by Aboriginal men, they were often gay men, who themselves had significant support of non-Indigenous women in leadership roles.

And I think that white people, non-Aboriginal people, their own bias is that they see Black men as a safe pair of hands. Or there's this kind of Black man charisma. And because there's a lot of senior white women in power, there's some kind of attraction there. With flirty kind of sexual attraction. And I know I talked to other Aboriginal women, they do think that something is there...I do think there is biases that show up in recruitment patterns and support...You have to work harder as an Aboriginal woman to show you can do the job. (P15)

I'm never going to be in an executive level. I never get the skill set that my white counterparts get, or my male counterparts get...The men are included, but the women aren't. And that is overlooked. And even sitting in on meetings with people and, you know, I have an Aboriginal man and one Aboriginal woman in the project and the man always shut down the woman. (P2)

Aboriginal women's experiences of progression in VPS workplaces are racialised and gendered; as Aboriginal women they face a triple jeopardy of race, gender, and Indigeneity which adds another layer to the exploitation of their labour. Aboriginal women feel that they must work better and harder to be recognised.

I'm being brutal here. Unless you're always performing at 150% or more, people don't see you. (P17)

Another barrier to progression for Aboriginal women is the Indigenous-as-deficit ideology (Bargallie 2020a; Fogarty et al. 2018) which manifests in opportunities for management and leadership roles and in performance management processes, as identified in research with APS Indigenous employees. One of the respondents to the online survey stated:

I know that Aboriginal women are not encouraged or given opportunity to be strong leaders in the VPS. I hear our women say it. I have been put down by other staff members and one told me that a director said I could not write! If we are not valued, then how can we reach our full potential? (S10)

The following participant told us how about how the deficit ideology during a performance management discussion forced her to state: 'You've not asked me what I contribute, and what I'm bringing to this situation. You asked me *what I don't have*' (P10).

Another commented, 'The decision makers do not see me as a leader in my own right with skills and capabilities to work in two worlds. I am well educated and seem to be denied opportunities to learn skills. I am always an afterthought' (S7).

Several of the participants mentioned the need for a state-wide VPS Aboriginal women's networking event. Aboriginal women are isolated in VPS workplaces as often they are the only Aboriginal person there.

I do not have any Aboriginal Employment Network emails, connections, or Aboriginal networks to rely on, most staff have left and moved on to other departments...I try to engage and consult with Aboriginal people in all areas of work, but the trouble is the department does not support or fund this type of communication well. (S8)

We don't have a network with other powerful people pulling us along. But the only way you get a start is if other Aboriginal people will see your potential, see your capability, and pull you along. And then when other people see, "Oh, yep, she's good", then that will bind to you. (P15)



The terms of inclusion: Precarious employment and unpaid labour

Precarious employment

Many participants spoke of experiencing frustration, stress, and depression because of the precarious terms of their employment. That is, being subjected to non-ongoing contract employment over extensive periods while often doing the same job in the same place. Many spoke about having little confidence about their future in the VPS. Several had informed their managers that they were eager to obtain an ongoing role. One woman stated that they had been trying to save their career for years to no avail (P11). Many women said that they are actively looking for ongoing work, but their managers had not initiated any conversations about their future in the workplace. In some instances, the Aboriginal woman had been working in higher level positions for extensive periods without being offered a full-time ongoing role. Many feel undervalued.

I've been in tears three times saying I need an ongoing role. (P11)

I'm only contracted till June 30 at this stage. So, I am keeping my options open. I am still actively looking for work. It's not safe. It's not secure. And it's hard to put 100% focus in your job when you know there's not a future there or you anticipate there's not a future there because as far as I'm concerned it can get to June 30 and they're like see you later you were contracted till June 30 and that's it. What's the guarantee that I'm going to get ongoing? Like, this is what I'm scared about? (P12)

So, the project that I'm working on is due to be completed...so I currently have really no confidence or visibility as to what my future looks like. And that really is probably the number one concern or even motivator at work for me. So, feeling valued is about having work...having a job in the future as well. You know, I've never had someone say to me, what do you want to do with your future? And let's have a look at what roles there are or could be. (P1)

I have applied for Aboriginal jobs, but they are hard to come by in the [place of employment withheld]. I really jumped at that job. But working my way up, so I received an award for the work I had been doing. I have been doing a lot of stuff in the background and waiting for a job to come up. (P13)

I am in a contract position and have been working at higher level since 2019. I do not have a substantive position. I go from contract to contract which is unstable and always leaves me looking for other jobs. There was early support and I have had a higher duties assignment, but these never become permanent. I am now in a position where I am not sure if my contract will be renewed. I go for days without contact and feel that my role is one that is there to show the department has some cultural representation. I do not feel valued at all, it is making me depressed. (S8)

Unpaid labour: practices of exploitation and racism

The unpaid labour expected of Aboriginal woman in the workplace was a significant issue identified by participants. In the literature, unpaid labour is often referred to as a 'cultural load'. However, this term fails to name the reality and the extent of the extra labour Aboriginal people are expected to produce without remuneration. This unpaid labour is generally undervalued and unrewarded (Bargallie 2020a).

Examples of unpaid labour that have been shared with us include the expectations to organise events such as those associated with NAIDOC and Reconciliation week. Aboriginal women were expected to do this on behalf of the workplace which is generally a commitment that the department has identified in a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP).

The value [of Aboriginal cultural knowledge] is only when I organise NAIDOC or Reconciliation Week celebrations. The worst part is that it is up to me to drive the recognition of these important events and for the rest of the year, culture and I are forgotten. (P8)

Another form of unpaid labour includes providing advice on Indigenous policies and programmes regardless of knowledge or expertise on the subject or whether this is their job. Additional forms include: being required to act as a representative of all Aboriginal peoples and issues; be the Aboriginal face of the workplace; be a role model and/or mentor for all other Aboriginal employees; deliver a Welcome or Acknowledgement of Country; and having to educate non-Indigenous colleagues about racism as it pertains to Aboriginal people.

I wasn't in an Indigenous Identified role, but still they'd come to me to consult. But that wasn't a recognised part of my job and they had me drafting their Reconciliation Action Plan. But I'm working full time [in my role] I can't do that as well. (P20)

I do have to tell people that I do not represent all of everything Aboriginal in Victoria like and I'm not going to try to, and I can't advise you on issues that really need deep and thoughtful consultation. (P5)

There's an automatic default to the Aboriginal team for any Indigenous questions. In every meeting with Aboriginal liaison officers, I usually thank them for carrying the cultural load. Their roles are actually external facing roles to support Aboriginal people on their health journey. But what tends to happen is all the internal stuff also goes to them. So, they're out, they're writing the RAP, they would run the NAIDOC Week, internal staff events, they wrote the standard Acknowledgement of Country that has been distributed to all. (P1)

The participants above describe practices of exploitation which are racist techniques that benefit employers (Bhattacharyya 2018). As the terms of employment for many Aboriginal woman working in the Victoria public sector is precarious, they take on this unpaid labour, often unquestioningly, to survive the workplace. Many do this with the hope that it will help to make a difference to Aboriginal people and communities.

Make us count! Authentic support, recognition, and value of Aboriginal women and their knowledges

Authentic mentoring and support

Participants spoke of the benefit of authentic mentoring. That is, mentoring that has a mutually beneficial relationship in the best interest of supporting the mentee. One participant spoke highly of an Aboriginal Women's Leadership Network Fast Track Programme. Some Aboriginal women spoke of positive experiences where more senior Aboriginal women had taken the participant under their wing. One participant stated that she would not be in the Victorian public sector workforce today if it was not for that mentor. In another instance, a participant spoke about getting practical and realistic advice what they described as 'real life situations' (P18). Another participant spoke of the benefit of being supported and mentored by a more senior Aboriginal woman that she describes as 'strong Black woman' (P23). One of the issues identified in this study was the lack of Aboriginal woman in senior roles to be able to mentor and support others to progress. Another, as identified above, is that Aboriginal women may take on, or be expected to take on, mentorship and management responsibilities to support other Aboriginal people without being adequately compensated for management and mentoring skills.

Having the Aboriginal manager really created a safe environment. (P23)

Definitely had one of the staff there that was like sort of mentoring me, which was really nice. I had a really good experience because she sort of took me under her wing and I think I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for her. (P16)

I'll say, this is what I'm feeling, how can I best approach it? He'll give me examples of how he dealt with it 15 years ago. The advice he gives me is actually realistic, and not textbook, it's real-life situations. (P18)

There were three Aboriginal managers, two blokes and me and then the bloke, Director, Aboriginal, we'd have our manager meetings, and nothing that I say is right, I wasn't allowed to have an opinion...I just got shut down and I just felt really stupid. And then the new manager came in, and she was awesome. She was a strong Black woman, she's part of community. She's like a mother, very nurturing...held my hand really tight when she first came in, because I'm like "I'm useless, I'm shit, I'm not good at anything" and sort of picked me up again. (P23)

So, there was things that I'd go 55 paces ahead with and he'd pull me back into line and say stop, listen, learn, that kind of stuff... So, he was really good. But my point is – he let me fly. (P14)

I've never been encouraged to apply for anything by anyone. No one ever reaches out, except for one woman, an Aboriginal woman who I knew from the Aboriginal staff network.... she was my kind of champion and mentor. (P15)

Participants were more likely to have had positive experiences of management and mentorship from other Aboriginal women and sometimes, Aboriginal men, than they were from non-Indigenous people in the VPS. What stands out in the data is that authentic mentors cultivate professional Indigenous excellence and autonomy.

One participant observed that in terms of gender in the workplace, women had certainly fought for and had made gains – "the sisterhood have really lifted each other up" – but this was generally in favour of white women. Aboriginal women "are still bottom of the pecking order" (P15).



Racisms at work: Every day and in every way

No recognition – No value!

As noted above in the section on Unpaid Labour, many Aboriginal woman in the VPS felt that they received little recognition for the unpaid work which was generally not part of their actual job. More generally, most of the participants felt that they were not valued in the workplace as Aboriginal women, and many described being treated in a way that left them feeling lost or worthless.

It was so condescending, and disempowering. (P24)

I do not feel valued by most and am only wanted if there is a cultural issue to address. I am seeking opportunity and career progression and I am invisible...I am ready for opportunity and leaders will not give me a go. I have so much to give...I am very deflated and am looking beyond the VPS now, even though I had wanted to stay. The lack of support and belief in me as a leader has not given me any opportunities to grow professionally. (S8)

I don't feel valued. I feel useful. That's a slightly different perspective. (P17)

I feel used abused and disrespected. (P10)

If you are a Level 5, you are no-one. No-one will notice you. (P15)

It's as hard as being an Aboriginal woman anywhere else, I guess. (P22)

Participants generally agreed that they are not recognised or valued by non-Indigenous colleagues and managers because they are Aboriginal women. Where there was some element of feeling valued, it was rarely from those in management or leadership roles or the "right people".

I feel valued by the other Aboriginal women in my workplace and some of the people that have offered a lot to the project that have been really strong allies, but I don't feel overall valued by the leadership...I'm doing the best that I can do, and I'm valued by different people. You know, not the right people, but different people. And a lot of my recommendations are always shunned. (P2)

Most participants in this study reported experiencing multiple forms of racism in VPS workplaces: structural, systemic, and interpersonal racisms. These forms of racism simultaneously structure the everyday lived experiences of Aboriginal women at work yet are largely invisible to those who are not its victims. A key feature of racism at work is the denial of its existence. One participant said she had experienced 'racism and a lack of professional development' (P13) over her entire 19 years in the VPS. Participants reported facing daily racial microaggressions, including questions about their Aboriginality, stereotyping, racist remarks, and jokes. One participant revealed that, 'we have all experienced racism – happens to us every day. Just depends on what type of boss that you have as to how good you're gonna get it in your workplace' (P13). More insidious were reports of structural and systemic forms of racism. These include reports of being overlooked for promotion or progression and even voluntary redundancies. One participant stated that it is best to 'stay under the radar or it doesn't work out good for you in the end' (P13). The data indicates that regardless of policies, racism remains pervasive across VPS workplaces and creates a racial and gendered division of labour.

We've all experienced the racism thing - happens to us every day. It just depends on what type of boss that you have as to how good you're gonna get it in your workplace. If you've got a respectful boss, that's great, but a lot of times they're not. Unfortunately. So, we've got to be careful there. (P13)

There is a tendency to talk about us as though we're not still here, or even in the room with you, which can be a particular kind of racism. (P22)

I've worked in workplaces and I've never been treated like shit like that before. And just knowing that I'm black was enough for them. There's this whole idea that you only receive racism if you are dark skinned and we know that it's true, dark skin people do experience racism, but we all experience racism in different ways. (P2)

I think people – I'll be a bit cheeky and say, I think people have become smarter. And it's a lot more covert rather than overt. Things like, "Oh, really, are you Aboriginal? What part?" (P17)

I was in that VPS Level 5 role from 2018 to 2019. And that's where it got bumpy. I just started to observe and feel there's racism. (P24)

I have heard some really disrespectful things throughout my time at the department. I guess less so when we moved to online working. (P5)

I have expressed quite clearly that I would like to be a VPS 5 and I've been unsuccessful ever since and multiple times. And it's dissatisfying, especially seeing the meteoric rise of the non-Indigenous staff. (P22)

I have definitely experienced racism. And blatant too because people think that's not an issue, really. It was toxic. It was just enough to make you sick. Like you were just constantly sick and emotional the whole time and that wasn't just me who was targeted and from a higher-level...it was terrible to watch and see and to try and get action taken - that was near impossible. (P21)

Some participants spoke about the tensions of working with some non-Indigenous people who they stated had a 'white saviour complex' (P17). This participant spoke about a non-Indigenous man who worked in a predominately Aboriginal environment and who expressed often how he can "help" the Aboriginal staff:

He does this whole "oh look, I can educate you on how to write...and I'm like dude, "I am very clear about what I need to write or say"...he then sent me a message saying, "what I'm sensing is a fight for control and self-determination". (P17)

Some participants described how their intellectual production and professional contributions can not belong to them because their knowledge is considered to have greater value if it is recast and presented by a non-Indigenous person. Indigenous knowledges were considered to not be a priority – often merely tacked on as an afterthought.

People often say, oh, you've got really great ideas, but I often sort of have to hand over those ideas to someone who can sell them in a more white bread business type way. (P20)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are expected to provide the input and advice but ultimately it is the colonised decision makers who have the final say...I believe it is only an afterthought, Indigenous knowledges are something to show on special days to tick diversity and inclusion boxes and are always put to the bottom of the pile, not a priority. (S8)

I've been introduced as our Aboriginal staff member, and it's like, "I'm here", but what's the point of me being here if you're not actually going to listen and genuinely use my position to authentically incorporate Indigenous knowledge...It's almost like we want your voice, but we don't want to hear it. (P5)

The politics of identity

Participants in this research often expressed a frustration about what their non-Indigenous colleagues thought or commented about how they should look or behave. This was generally based on outdated and stereotypical ideas about what it means to be Aboriginal. Carlson (2016, p. 164) refers to this as 'material constraints' and suggests that this may include, 'not looking or sounding Aboriginal, not having a narrative of disadvantage, or not being able to demonstrate connection to or knowledge of country, kin and culture' that matches the ideas that non-Indigenous people may hold. Participants recall experiences where they were confronted with having to respond to non-Indigenous colleagues who have asked racist questions based on stereotypical notions of what Aboriginal peoples should, in their minds, look like.

I have a great example, when a non-Indigenous colleague was putting together a PowerPoint presentation and asked me for a photo of an Aboriginal person that looks Aboriginal. I had a frank conversation. I'm like, do you realise what you're asking and what you're actually suggesting about me as a person? And they didn't. (P5)

And she's like... what percentage Aboriginal are you? And I'm like, it doesn't work like that. (P6)

I'm not a real Aboriginal to them. (P2)



Aboriginal people, especially women are not valued. I have been called racist names and because I am fair skinned, I am not believed as a black fella and not recognised as a white fella. I am tired of proving who I am. (S8)

Participant responses indicated that being one's full self in the workplace was difficult for Aboriginal women, who often had their identity attacked with racism or called into question. With this considered, it is not surprising that none of our participants chose to share whether they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex women. One participant stated that she had not known many Aboriginal people to share information about their sexuality in the workplace 'they don't put their hand up' and 'you know, with our mob, they are silenced' (P13). The same participant said, 'it is hard enough being Aboriginal but let alone being a gay Aboriginal person.'

Another participant reported receiving kickback from VPS staff when implementing a LGBTQIA+ state-wide strategy and stated that their manager 'often receives some very nasty emails' (P9). They stated that this is often framed as being about religious beliefs about gender. This participant stated that there is an 'unconscious bias' module that staff are required to complete but it frames gendered workplace relations as between men and women -presumably heterosexual, cisgender.

Lateral violence

In terms of the politics of identity, lateral violence as it is known and understood is often cited as a significant issue between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In the workplace, this manifests in inappropriate and harmful behaviours. It should be noted that lateral violence is a more intense interrogation of Aboriginality or Indigenous identity that is over and above the usual questions of - what's your name, where are you from, and who are your mob - which is Aboriginal protocol for locating oneself and making connections.

Lateral violence is an internalised racism and 'comes from being colonised. It comes from being told you are worthless and treated as being worthless for a long period of time. Naturally you don't want to be at the bottom of the pecking order, so you turn on your own' (Frankland 2009, p. 21). More research is needed to better understand what this complex legacy and resulting lateral violence means to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly in the workplace (Bargallie 2020a).

One participant who expressed that they had been targeted explained that lateral violence is about 'keeping people down even though you're on the same team' (P23) and likened it to 'tall poppy syndrome' or people being 'jealous'. Other participants in our study spoke of incidences of lateral violence that were about challenging Aboriginal identity:

I attended a group in the city and most of the people in that meeting I'd joined additional staff network events before with. But this one person didn't, and he was referring to me as if I was a white woman who had just joined them for something, he assumed that I was not Aboriginal and this was a group of Aboriginal workers, employees, and this was an Aboriginal male. (P20)

I have experienced lateral violence and lost a higher-level position because of it...I have had to answer about my ancestry and sometimes feel I am not Black enough. Non-Indigenous managers are unable to manage Aboriginal conflict and lateral violence. I was abused and not supported, leaving me feeling mentally unwell and depressed. (S8)

You know, the mob will ask about identity that don't know me. "Where are you from? You don't look Aboriginal". We can't say that. That's, you know, lateral violence. You cannot say that to your own people. It's a terrible thing to say...I'll call people out now, because I feel I've got to an age that I should be shown respect. We work hard. And we do that for our people. (P13)

My manager worked with another manager who was an Aboriginal man, and he didn't like me. I am not from the local area and the Aboriginal manager told my manager that he didn't think I was mob. My manager then treated me as if I wasn't Aboriginal. He wouldn't invite me to Aboriginal events or meetings, just froze me out. I left that department after nearly 11 years because of him. (P10)

It is important to note that many of these experiences of discrimination are not, in fact, lateral, but involved Aboriginal men and non-Indigenous managers of all genders in positions of horizontal power. The experiences above highlight the sexism of a double patriarchy and racism within structural whiteness that Aboriginal women face in the workplace.



Denial and ambivalence: The failure of complaint policies, processes, and practices.

On making a complaint!

The failure and resistance of management to respond to racism in the workplace, and to deny that racism exists, were common themes reported by participants. Bargallie (2020a, p. 121), notes the fear of the 'backlash and litigation that comes with accusing individuals and departments of racism' is what ensures that victims of racism are silenced, which enables racism to persist. In another incident an Aboriginal woman reported sexual harassment to her manager, a non-Indigenous man. She was told if she wanted to keep her position, she should not make a formal complaint. She was forced to continue working with the perpetrator. She felt demoralised and resigned. Many participants were resigned to the reality that there was no point in making a formal complaint and those who had, felt they did not receive adequate support. Aboriginal women reporting racism or harassment expressed that they were often positioned to be the problem, not the racism or sexual harassment. Participants expressed that their voices were just not heard.

I was told "I know you've got a future in the department. So please be mindful of that if you are thinking of making any formal complaint". Management should be more aware of what's going on around them. It shouldn't take for me to be constantly calling stuff out, complaining. And that's what you get labelled in the end. Well, here she goes again... So, you sort of get to the point where you just go, if you call it out, then you're adversely impacted. (P12)

The director wasn't addressing the issues with the management and the complaints from staff regarding the issues about these white men making inappropriate comments. (P16)

The complaints process is not great. I could never see that process benefiting me more than not doing anything. (P23)

I reported the incident, and it was not handled according to policy, I was subjected to ongoing ghosting and did not feel heard. It affected me significantly and I am yet to heal. The manager did not follow the procedure and the offender was allowed to get away with the behaviour. I was hurt by this action and after emailing about my feelings and concerns, I did not even get a reply from the manager, it was not addressed, and I was left to feel isolated and unheard. (S8)

When I complained to HR, it got escalated right to the top pretty quickly and that person was a man who I then had to deal with from there...he would regularly tell me, "Oh don't worry, I've spoken to him, he's told me what the issue is. We'll just forget about it". So, there was a real boys' club type relationship there where they got to discuss me and what was wrong with me, but I wasn't allowed to say what I thought was wrong with him...I just had to focus on what other job I can do instead. (P1)

Some participants felt managers failed to intervene or follow policy and procedures due to a vested interest in keeping family and factional groups on side, so they have their support. The lack of leadership has real consequences that can impact Aboriginal women securing employment, even if they are the most qualified candidate.

In another incident, a young Aboriginal woman was organising an event for Aboriginal employees. She spoke to a manager in another department to encourage him to let his Aboriginal staff member know. He responded saying "I'm not sending them to your fake cultural event" (P22). The woman responded, telling him she would report him to HR. It turned out that he had numerous complaints made against him. HR suggested mediation. Despite the power difference in terms of VPS levels, the woman who held a significantly lower level was advised by HR that she could not bring a support person to mediation as it made the male manager feel uncomfortable. She stated, 'So it's kind of just discouraged me a lot around not reporting' (P22). Mediation as a proposed solution can provide the perpetrator opportunity to revictimize and gaslight the victim, and re-construct themselves as the injured party. This raises the vital question whether mediation can be deemed suitable in cases where there are alleged racial and gender abuses in the context of gross power imbalances in the context of facing the "boys club" as black and white patriarchy close ranks.

As Sara Ahmed (2021) points out, mediation has a place in conflict resolution, but abuse is not the same as conflict, although it is often framed as such by institutions. Ahmed argues that when a Black woman names a problem, she becomes the problem and when she makes a complaint, she becomes the complaint. Complaint policies, procedures, and practices can be seen to be 'nonperformative' – that is 'they do not bring into effect what they name' (p.30). If, as Ahmed argues 'to make a complaint is often to fight for something' (p.26) the Aboriginal women in this study show enduring strength, agency, and resistance to survive and thrive in VPS workplaces to access the most basic workplace rights.

On cultural safety

The term 'cultural safety' was widely used by Aboriginal women as VPS employees in this study when speaking about the environments that they work in. Participant 9 stated, 'A lot would say they don't feel culturally safe.' Cultural safety is used as an overarching term to describe experiences of lateral violence, racism, bullying and harassment in VPS workplaces or when leadership and management failed to intervene in such circumstances. The solution often proposed is to create 'cultural safety' through training sessions. However, the cultural lens fails to highlight structural and systemic racism or explain how race as a political structure of power produces and reproduces racist ideologies and racism on Indigenous employees (Bargallie, Fernando & Lentini 2023). When racism does come up in such training, it is the individual forms of racism that dominate the conversation.

Participants reported that even in the most severe cases of racism, the outcome was to prescribe cultural awareness or cultural safety training for the perpetrator(s). One participant spoke about such training and stated, 'it's just a tick of the box' (P13). Another participant spoke about how non-Indigenous staff behave worse after they had completed the training. In one incident a non-Indigenous woman stated, 'It looks like its gonna rain' then looked at the Aboriginal employee and said, 'Oh you would know' and said she learnt in the cultural training how Aboriginal people can tell the weather and laughed (P22). When asked if cultural awareness training made a difference in people's behaviour one participant stated, 'no, nothing at all. Nothing' (P24).

Workplace training sessions that focus on cultural safety, cultural awareness, cultural competency, and unconscious bias have not proven to effectively transform interpersonal relationships and fails to address structural and systemic racism (Fredericks & Bargallie, 2016/2020). Cultural safety and cultural

awareness training, if it existed, was described by some participants as tokenistic or having been shelved because of COVID-19 and not yet reinstated. None of the participants were able to confirm of any training for understanding racism though some training available for 'unconscious bias' and 'gender equity'. The training offered was not always provided by qualified Aboriginal trainers which meant a hit and miss approach that focused more on individual experiences and lacked an agenda for changed workplace policies, processes, and practices. That is, even when non-Indigenous people reported they had enjoyed the training, there is scant evidence to suggest that any meaningful change in workplace behaviour followed.

I talked to my manager about how I could put in a formal complaint if I wanted to do that. And I said yes, I do. I do want to do that because I know this person has said things like this before. This is not new behaviour and it's not OK. So I went through that process that took about four months. And then the response I got back was that what I described occurring wasn't considered to be a cultural safety issue. (P8)

I spoke to my manager about what was going on and he agreed that we would come together with these two-particular people. Then said to me that this must be a cultural thing as opposed to it being the bullying and harassment that it was. So, they failed to act. (P7)

Ironically, as illustrated above, the use of the cultural lens can create a no-win situation; racism, bullying, and harassment may be denied by managers on the grounds of not falling under cultural safety or because it deemed specific to Indigenous culture.

Participant comments in this study paint a comprehensive picture that indicate the need for a suite of antiracism and accountability measures across Victorian public sector workplaces. We identify the need for greater criticality, reflexivity and the centralising of race and racism in VPS workplace programs that aim to create workplaces that adhere to authentic intersectional justice, gender equity and workplace rights. A critical racial literacy (Brown et al., 2021) approach rather than a cultural lens has much to offer and may productively enhance existing approaches that participants find ineffective. Our analysis of the data reinforces that Aboriginal women nor their identities and cultures are the problem – they are just naming the problem!

The Way Forward: Recommendations

In 2017, the Victorian public sector launched the 5-year Aboriginal Employment Strategy, known as Barring Djinang (a Taungurung phrase meaning in English, ‘Pathway of the Feet’), which supported a target of 2% representation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees by June 2022 (VPSC 2022a).

The strategy aimed to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in senior positions, as well as ensure better access to development opportunities, support, and career pathways (SGV 2017). This was in response to identified challenges relating to ongoing attraction and recruitment, inconsistent career experiences and opportunities, lack of culturally safe work cultures, limited access to support, and lack of central governance and oversight (SGV 2017). In addition, the *Gender Equality Act 2020* was implemented in 2021, requiring the Victorian public sector, universities and local councils to conduct workplace gender audits and gender impact assessments, develop a Gender Equality Action Plan, promote gender equality in policies, programs and services that impact the public, and publicly report on their progress in relation to workplace gender equality (Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (CGEPS), 2022a).

Naturally, all the recent research findings detailed in the review of the literature in this report have informed conclusions about what is needed to

address the above identified issues. The *Gari Yala* survey findings report calls for workplace truth-telling – ‘however uncomfortable this may be’ (DCA/JI 2020, p.19). Moving forward, we suggest the VPS must transition their focus from ‘cultural safety’ and ‘cultural awareness’ towards fostering racially literate workplaces where all employees learn to recognise and combat the multiple and layered manifestations of racism. The AHRC (2020) encourages a move away from deficit-based to strengths-based approaches, and the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Understandably, the problem is complex, and much bigger than just implementing better cultural safety and cultural awareness training. As Bargallie (2020, p. 65) states in relation to the Australian Public Service:

improving the conditions for Indigenous employees will take much more than progressive initiatives on offer, such as the various iterations of the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy and reconciliation action plans. Though designed to increase levels of employment, development and retention of Indigenous staff, they have proved ineffectual in redressing the high separation rates through resignation and the racial imbalance of labour.

Bargallie (2020, pp. 251-252) calls for “tackling race head on”, emphasising “if we are serious about dismantling racism, we must be willing to recognise it in all its forms”. We echo that call.

Recommendations

Acknowledgement of racism and gender discrimination

The Victoria Public Sector must acknowledge that Aboriginal women experience multiple forms of racism and gender discrimination in VPS workplaces due to their intersecting racial and gender identities and wilfully act to change the systems, policies, processes, and practices that perpetuate racialised and gendered inequities.

Collect disaggregated data

Lack of adequately disaggregated data can contribute to the unmet needs of Aboriginal women in the VPS (e.g., those with a disability or who identify as LGBTQAI+) by rendering them invisible when policies are made, resources are allocated, and programs are designed and implemented; it reflects systemic racism. Initiatives for equal access to opportunities for pay, recognition, and advancement for Aboriginal women with intersectional experiences are measures that can only be assessed through disaggregated data.

Recommendations

| | |
|--|---|
| Further research into diverse experiences in the VPS | Commit to further research to adequately capture the experiences of Aboriginal people with disabilities and/or who are LGBTQIA+ in the VPS. |
| Recruitment and retention | Undertake a workplace audit works to identify that recruitment and retention of Aboriginal women is a priority and that this is reflected in policies and practices and that there are plans in place for each Aboriginal women's progression within the organisation. |
| Create better access to employment | Identify employment opportunities for locations outside of metropolitan and regional centres. Identify options for hybridity in work locations – a mix between home and office. |
| Take affirmative action | Undertake an VPS wide audit to identify positions in organisations that can specifically target the recruitment of Aboriginal women with emphasis on leadership opportunities. |
| Address precarious employment | Undertake a workplace audit to identify all Aboriginal women who are employed on VPS contracts and undertake discussions and processes to transition these employees to ongoing employment if this desired by the employee. |
| Respond to unpaid labour | Address unpaid labour undertaken by Aboriginal women in the VPS by appropriately renumeration Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff for this additional workload, and allocating specific positions focused on employment, education, strategic implementation, and mentoring as this relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. |
| Prioritise institutional complaint policies and processes | Review and reform existing complaint policies and processes in consultation with Aboriginal people in and connected to the VPS. |
| Develop and implement antiracism policy and praxis | A suite of antiracism and accountability measures that take an intersectional lens need to be developed and implemented, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts in consultation with workforces. Priority attention needs to be paid to HR policies, at all stages of the employment trajectory from attraction, recruitment, advancement, retention and exit. |
| Foster Racial Literacy across the VPS | Provide ongoing racial literacy education grounded in critical race and critical Indigenous studies to productively enhance the development and implementation of antiracism and intersectional gender equity approaches. |
| Create a VPS wide Aboriginal women's annual network event/retreat | Create and resource an annual networking event/retreat specifically for Aboriginal women in the VPS, with a specific focus on leadership and opportunities for professional development and replenishment in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women employees. This also presents an opportunity to create a well-resourced authentic VPS-wide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's ongoing informal networking platform. |

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). Victoria: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population summary*, ABS Website, accessed 29 September 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/victoria-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-population-summary#cite-window1>.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2016). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014-15*, catalogue number 4714.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed 29 September 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4714.0>.
- Australian Commonwealth Government. (2017). *Towards 2025 An Australian Government strategy to boost women's workforce participation*. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018). *Imprisonment rates of Indigenous women: A national shame*, AHRC, accessed 6 October 2022, <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/imprisonment-rates-indigenous-women-national-shame>
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2020). *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): securing our rights, securing our future report*, Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission.
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). *Indigenous health and wellbeing*, AIHW, accessed 6 October 2022, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/indigenous-health-and-wellbeing>
- Ahmed, S. (2021) *Complaint!* Durham: Duke University Press.
- Baird, M., Cooper, R., Hill, E., Probyn, E. & Vromen, A. (2018). *Women and the future of work: Report 1 of The Australian Women's Working Futures Project*, Sydney: University of Sydney.
- Bargallie, D. (2020a). *Unmasking the racial contract: Indigenous voices on racism in the Australian Public Service*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Bargallie, D. (2020b). 'Tokenised, silenced': New research reveals Indigenous public servants experiences of racism'. *The Conversation*, accessed 25 March 2023, <https://theconversation.com/tokenised-silenced-new-research-reveals-indigenous-public-servants-experiences-of-racism-141372>
- Bargallie, D., Fernando, N., & Lentin, A. (2023). Breaking the racial silence: Putting racial literacy to work in Australia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2206470>
- Bhattacharyya, Gargi. (2018). *Rethinking racial capitalism : questions of reproduction and survival*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Bessarab, D., & Ng'andu, B. (2010). Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*. 3 (1): pp. 37-50.
- Biddle, N. & Lahn, J. (2016). *Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee decisions to exit the Australian Public Service. CAEPR Working Paper 110*. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University. https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/CAEPR-WP110_2016pdf_0.pdf.
- Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Carlson, B. (2016). The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian identity within education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19(4), 784-807.
- Bretherton, I., Thrower, E., Zwickl, S., Wong, A., Chetcuti, D., Grossmann, M., ... & Cheung, A. S. (2021). The health and well-being of transgender Australians: a national community survey. *LGBT health*, 8(1), 42-49.
- Brown, L., Kelada, O., & Jones, D. (2021). 'While I knew I was raced, I didn't think much of it': the need for racial literacy in decolonising classrooms. *Postcolonial Studies*, 24(1), 82-103.
- Caldwell, B. (2020). 'Aboriginal queer motherhood'. *Archer magazine*, accessed 18 February 2022, <https://archermagazine.com.au/2020/01/aboriginal-queer-motherhood/>.
- Carlson, B. (2016). *The Politics of Identity: Who Counts as Aboriginal Today?* Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Carlson, B., & Frazer, R. (2018). *Social media mob: being Indigenous online*. Macquarie University.

- Carlson, B. (2021). 'Data silence in the settler archive: Indigenous femicide, deathscapes and social media'. In Perera, S. & Puggle, J. (Eds.). *Mapping Deathscapes: Digital Geographies of Racial and Border Violence*. Routledge, London, pp. 84-105.
- Carlson, B. & Day, M. (2021). 'Technology facilitated abuse: The need for Indigenous led research and response'. In Harris, B. & Woodlock, D. (Eds.). *The Routledge Handbook on Technology and Domestic Violence: Victimisation, Perpetration and Responses*. Routledge, London pp. 33-48
- Carlson, B., Kennedy, T. & Farrell, A. (2022). 'Indigenous Gender Intersubjectivities: Political Bodies'. In Walter, M., Kukutai, T., Gonzales, A., & Henry, R. (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous Sociology*, Oxford University Press.
- Cerise, S., O'Connell, K., Rosenman, E. & SaratChandran, P. (2009). *Accumulating poverty? Women's experiences of inequality over the lifecycle*. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission.
- Clark, T., Dodson, S., Guivarra, N. & Widders Hunt, Y. (2021). "We're not treated equally as Indigenous people or as women": The perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women in Australian public relations. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 10(2) 163-183. DOI: 10.1177/2046147X211005358.
- Collard, S. & Higgins, I. (2019) Senate should investigate 'missing, murdered, maimed' Indigenous women, Linda Burney says, *ABC News*, accessed 6 October 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-09/linda-burney-wants-senate-inquiry-into-missing-indigenous-women/11773992>.
- Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. (2022a). About the Gender Equality Act 2020, *Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, Victorian Government*, accessed 14 September 2022, <https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/about-gender-equality-act-2020>.
- Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. (2022b). *Baseline report – 2021 workplace gender audit data analysis*. Melbourne: State of Victoria.
- Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2019). *Our Public Service, Our Future. Independent Review of the Australian Public Service*. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-167.
- Day, M. & Carlson, B. (2022). 'Predators & Perpetrators: White settler violence online'. In Callander, D., Farvid, P., Baradaran, A. & Vance, T. (Eds.). *(Un)Desiring Whiteness: (Un)Doing Sexual Racism*. Oxford University Press.
- Day, M. (2023). Day, M., Carlson, B., Bonson, D., Farrelly, T. (2023). 'Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQASB+ people and mental health and wellbeing'. *Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse*. <https://www.indigenoussmhspc.gov.au/publications/lgbtqiasb-wellbeing>.
- Demosthenous, H., Robertson, B. & Demosthenous, C. (2010) *Indigenous women's experiences of work: key issues in urban Queensland*. Security4Women Inc.
- Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute (Brown, C., D'Almada-Remedios, R., Gilbert, J., O'Leary, J. & Young, N.). (2020). *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centring the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians*, Sydney: Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute.
- Diversity Council Australia (V. Mapedzahama, F. Laffernis, A. Barhoum, and J. O'Leary). (2023). *Culturally and racially marginalised women in leadership: A framework for (intersectional) organisational action*, Sydney: Diversity Council Australia. <https://www.dca.org.au/research/project/culturally-and-rationally-marginalised-carm-women-leadership>.
- Evans, O. (2021). *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): gendered insights*, WGEA Commissioned Research Report in partnership with the Jumbunna Institute of Education and Research and Diversity Council Australia, Sydney, Australia. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gari-yala-speak-the-truth-gendered-insights>.

- Evans, M., Edwards, M., Burmester, B. & May, D. (2014) Not yet 50/50 – barriers to the progress of senior women in the Australian Public Service. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 73 (4) 501–510. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12100>.
- Family Matters (2021) The Family Matters report 2021, *Family Matters*, accessed 6 October 2022, <https://www.familymatters.org.au/the-family-matters-report-2021/>.
- Farrell, A. (2020). Queer and Aboriginal in a regional setting: Identity and place. *Archer Magazine*. Available at: <https://archermagazine.com.au/2020/06/queer-and-aboriginal-identity-and-place/>.
- Faulkner, S. and Lahn, J. (2019), Navigating to Senior Leadership in the Australian Public Service: identifying employment barriers and enablers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Commissioned Report no. 02, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra. doi: 10.25911/5ddb9fdaaff62 https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/186512/1/CAEPR_CR_no02_2019_%20Faulkner_Lahn.pdf.
- Fleming, S., Prenzler, T. & Ransley, J. (2013). The status of Indigenous women in policing: a Queensland case study, *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 24(3) 357–374. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10345329.2013.12035966>.
- Fogarty, W., Bulloch, H., McDonnell, S. & Davis, M. (2018) *Deficit discourse and Indigenous health: how narrative framings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reproduced in policy*, Melbourne: The Lowitja Institute.
- Frankland, R. (2009). 'A frank discussion on tackling black lateral violence', *NIT*, 14/5/2009, p.21.
- Franklin, R., Bamblett, M., and Lewis, P. (2010). *Forever Business: A Framework for Maintaining and Restoring Cultural Safety in Aboriginal Victoria*, accessed 12 February 2023, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ILB/2011/25.pdf>.
- Fredericks, B. (2009). 'Getting a job': Aboriginal women's issues and experiences in the health sector, *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 2(1) 24–35.
- Fredericks, B., & Bargallie, D. (2016). "Which way? Talking culture, talking race": Unpacking Indigenous cultural competency course. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 9(1), 1–14.
- Fredericks, B., & Bargallie, D. (2020). An indigenous Australian cultural competence course: talking culture, race and power. In: Frawley, J., Russell, G. & Sherwood, J. (Eds.) *Cultural Competence and the Higher Education Sector*, (pp. 295–308). Singapore: Springer.
- Fryer, B. (2022). 'Vanished: The unsolved cases of First Nations women'. *The Feed*, SBS, accessed 20 February 2022, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/creative/vanished-the-unsolved-cases-of-missing-first-nations-women/w9fsk4m99>.
- Ganter, E. (2016). *Reluctant representatives: Blackfella bureaucrats speak in Australia's north*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.
- Gladstone, N. & Gooley, C. (2021, 15 November). Government says 'more work required' to boost Indigenous jobs in public sector, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, accessed 26 September 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/government-says-more-work-required-to-boost-indigenous-jobs-in-public-sector-20211111-p5980m.html>.
- Gooda, M. (2011). *Social Justice Report 2011*, Australian Human Rights Commission.
- Gorrie, V. (2021). *Black and blue: a memoir of racism and resilience*. Melbourne: Scribe.
- Hill, B., Uink, B., Dodd, J., Bonson, D., Eades, A., Bennet, S. (2021). Breakig the Silence: Insights into the lived experiences of WA Aboriginal/LGBTIQ+ people, community summary report 2021. Kurongkuri Kaititjin, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA. https://www.ecu.edu.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0005/931784/BTS_Community_final.pdf
- Huang et al, (2019) Women in the Workplace Report. New York: McKinsey and Co.
- Huggins, J. (1961/2021) 'The Great Deception: Working inside the Bureacracy. In Mc Grath, A., Saunders, A. & Huggins, J. (Eds.) *Aboriginal Workers*. Sydney: Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.
- Kolovos, B. (2022). 'Victoria police fails to hit its own 1% Indigenous employment target'. *The Guardian*, accessed 20 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jun/06/victoria-police-fails-to-hit-its-own-1-indigenous-employment-target>.

- Larkin, S.R. (2014). *Race Matters: Indigenous employment in the Australian Public Service*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.
- Leon, C. (2022). Insights for Indigenous employment into a case study of unconscious bias in the Australian Public Service, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 00:1- 22. DOI:10.1002/ajs4.221.
- Longbottom, M. (2021). Submission to the Commission inquiry into Queensland Police Service response to domestic and family violence', *Parliament of Queensland*, accessed 20 February 2022, <https://www.qpsdfvinquiry.qld.gov.au/public-hearings/assets/exhibits/week-3/marlene-longbottom-annexure-a.pdf>.
- Longbottom, M. and Porter, A. (2021). 'Submission to the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce: Discussion Paper 1 – Options for legislating against coercive control and the creation of a standalone domestic violence offence', accessed 20 February 2022, https://www.womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0009/691218/wsjt-submission-dr-marlene-longbottom-and-dr-amanda-porter-university-of-wollongong-and-university-of-melbourne.pdf
- McQuire, A. (2022). Digging deeper into data on disappeared Aboriginal women', *Curtain podcast*, accessed 17 January 2022, https://amymcquire.substack.com/p/digging-deeper-into-data-on-disappeared?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2
- McGlade, H. (2019). 'Australia is turning a blind eye to violence against Indigenous women, but we will not stay silent – our lives matter', *ABCNews*, accessed 17 January 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-06/jody-gore-release-domestic-violence-indigenous-aboriginal-women/11570042>.
- Mills, C.W. (1997). *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Minderoo Foundation, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) at Curtin University, and Murawin, (2022), *Woorit Koorliny – Australian Indigenous Employment Index 2022 National Report*. Minderoo Foundation. <https://cdn.minderoo.org/content/uploads/2022/05/22105150/Woorit-Koorliny-Australian-Indigenous-Employment-Index-2022.pdf>.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2007). Witnessing the workings of white possession in the workplace: Leesa's testimony, *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 26, 81-84.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2013). Towards an Australian Indigenous women's standpoint theory: A methodological tool. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28(78), 331-347.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2015). *The white possessive: property, power, and Indigenous sovereignty*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nasr, H. (2020). Five ways intersectionality helps us understand gender inequality in the workplace. Melbourne: Multicultural Centre for Women's Health.
- Nielsen, A.M., Stuart, L.A. & Gorman, D. (2014). Confronting the cultural challenge of the whiteness of nursing: Aboriginal registered nurses' perspectives, *Contemporary Nurse*, 48(2) 190-196. DOI: 10.1080/10376178.2014.11081940.
- Nielsen, J.M. (2004). How mainstream law makes Aboriginal women "disappear." *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, 6(1), 213-215
- Rigney, L.I. (1999). Internationalization of an Indigenous anticolonial cultural critique of research methodologies: a guide to Indigenist research methodology and its principles, *WicazoSa Review Journal for Native American Studies*, vol. 14, no.2, pp. 109-21.
- Riggs, D. W., & Toone, K. (2017). Indigenous sistergirls' experiences of family and community. *Australian Social Work*, 70(2), 229-240.
- Runciman, C. (1994). *Elevating Choice: A study of Aboriginal Women's Labour Market Participation in South-East Queensland*. Australian Government Publishing, Canberra.
- Smee, B. & Gillespie, E. (2022, 6 October) Queensland police inquiry hears allegations of recruits being taught racism, officers being raped. *The Guardian*, accessed 6 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/oct/06/queensland-police-inquiry-hears-allegations-of-recruits-being-taught-racism-officers-being-raped>,
- SNAICC, (2021). Media release: The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care is a national shame'. SNAICC webpage, accessed 20 February 2022, <https://www.snaicc.org.au/media-release-number-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children-in-out-of-home-care-is-a-national-shame/>.

State Government of Victoria. (2017). *Barring Djinang*. Melbourne: Aboriginal Employment Unit, Victorian Public Sector Commission.

State Government of Victoria. (2018). About the Victorian public sector. *Careers.VIC*, accessed 24 September 2022, <https://careers.vic.gov.au/victorian-public-sector>.

Valentish, J. (2021, 12 April). 'I had not one friend in the job to debrief with': life as an Indigenous police officer. *The Guardian*, accessed 26 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/apr/12/i-had-not-one-friend-in-the-job-to-debrief-with-life-as-an-indigenous-police-officer>.

Victorian Public Sector Commission. (2021). People matter survey data, facts and visuals (state of the public sector), *Victorian Public Sector Commission*, accessed 26 September 2022, <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/data-and-research/people-matter-survey-data-2021/>

Victorian Public Sector Commission. (2022a). Barring Djinang, *Victorian Public Sector Commission*, accessed 15 September 2022, <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/aboriginal-employment/barring-djinang/>

Victorian Public Sector Commission. (2022b). Employee demographics and diversity. *Victorian Public Sector Commission*, accessed 15 September 2022, <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/data-and-research/data-facts-visuals-state-of-the-sector/employee-demographics-and-diversity/>

Victorian Public Sector Commission. (2022c). Employee numbers. *Victorian Public Sector Commission*, accessed 27 September 2022, <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/data-and-research/data-facts-visuals-state-of-the-sector/employee-numbers/>.

Walker, R., Dudgeon, P. & Boe, M. (2020). Addressing existing inequities in Indigenous mental health and wellbeing through transformative and decolonising research and practice. *Research in Health Science*, 5(3):48

Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2022a, 18 August) 'Hard choices on necessities for Australian women as gender pay gap persists', *Workplace Gender Equality*, accessed 21 September 2022, <https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/new-national-gender-pay-gap>.

Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2022b). 'The gender pay gap', *Workplace Gender Equality*, accessed 21 September 2022, <https://www.wgea.gov.au/the-gender-pay-gap>.

