



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY  
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# **Submission Cover sheet**

## **Inquiry into Unpaid Work**

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# Submission to the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory Inquiry into unpaid work

Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice  
in collaboration with the Australian National University  
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Policy Research and the University of Queensland

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[Submissions Terms of Reference](#)

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We acknowledge and pay respects to all First Nations peoples, lands, waters and skies across the continent, as Institute staff work remotely from city, coast and bush.

## Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory ('ACT') Inquiry into unpaid work and acknowledge the important work of the ACT Government in understanding the impacts and breadth of unpaid work performed across the ACT. We see this Inquiry as an important means to recognise forms of unpaid work that are often unacknowledged and unremunerated, despite taking place as fundamental to the functioning of families and communities. We hope this Inquiry acknowledges the breadth of unpaid work, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, as well as individuals with diverse lived experiences, abilities and backgrounds. As such, it is important that a place-based and community-focused approach is taken to responding to and supporting those with unpaid work responsibilities.

This submission will centre on the unique and diverse unpaid work provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. It draws on the Australian Human Rights Commission's submission to the Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy (2023)<sup>1</sup> ('AHRC Submission') and the Australian National University's [Caring about Care Report](#) (2024) ('ANU Research'). This submission quotes and paraphrases from these sources. The ANU research was conducted in partnership with Aboriginal organisations in five sites across Australia including the ACT<sup>2</sup>

This submission also draws on discussions of unpaid care in the [Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report](#) (2020), [Implementation Framework](#) (2022), and [Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice](#) (2024), which were each developed through direct and ongoing engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, girls and gender-diverse mob. We encourage consideration of the recommendations provided in these documents.

Recognising the value and extent of unpaid work, hereafter referred to as unpaid care, performed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls is central to the Wiyi Yani U Thangani project. Women and girls carry knowledge about sustaining existence, they do the backbone work of society – caring for children, family and Country – and are at the forefront of driving economic and social change. Recognising this economy of care, which is largely invisible and unpaid, and investing in the services, goods and resources to ensure women are supported, healthy and self-determined, is vital to advancing societal health and wellbeing.

In using a First Nations gender lens, this submission, therefore, not only responds to 'unpaid care work' as expressed in the terms of reference but also to parental and familial work, volunteering and other forms of unpaid work that extend beyond mainstream western definitions of 'care' and 'work'. This will be defined in the following sections, including an exploration of the dynamics between unpaid and paid work. The submission will then respond to the [ACT Wellbeing Framework](#), and discuss opportunities to address unpaid care performed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. Challenges faced by unpaid carers are threaded throughout the submission.

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<sup>1</sup> Provided in Appendix

<sup>2</sup> The ACT case study is reported in Chapter three of the Caring about Care Research Report.

It is critical that this Inquiry recognises the true scope and complexity of care through a First Nations gender lens so that unpaid care can be accurately measured and adequately funded and supported. Getting this right has a direct impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their communities. Alongside the ACT Government's Wellbeing Framework, we hope that action will emerge to truly value and support the full extent of care work. This work must take place alongside system reforms that end harmful and punitive systems, which cause trauma to individuals and families increasing the burden of trauma -related care work for those in recognised and unrecognised caring roles.

## The economic contribution of care and dynamic between paid and unpaid work

### Defining unpaid care work

To adequately understand the economic contribution of unpaid work, it is important to acknowledge and expand this definition to include the full spectrum of care work provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, including care for community, kin and Country.

First Nations conceptions of care and support are far more holistic and intersectional than what is traditionally considered care and support in the western world. The term 'collective care' is used to describe the shared responsibility of caring for family, community, and Country, and signifies that the act of care is a means to intergenerationally transfer knowledge and culture. In this way, care and support not only exist within the formal paid economy but also encompass culturally grounded practices and customs that enable communities to be safe, happy and connected through kinship and Country. In many ways, care is treated as an ethic or value that is held by community to give and receive love, kindness and support, rather than an obligation or occupation.

In addition to person-centred care, caring for Country is a vital economic practice threaded through practices of culture and knowledge sharing. That is, care work is a 'glue' that connects everything in perpetuity, guards against exploitative capitalism, and creates the conditions for empowered, thriving and healthy people and communities leading to strong economies.

There is limited published research into collective care beyond Indigenous scholars, reflecting the invisibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences, knowledge and values in the mainstream arena. There is also a dramatic inadequacy of mainstream measures and policies to understand and support care provided by and received by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Significantly, experiences within formal, paid care services are not a key theme in Wiyi Yani U Thangani consultations – which were open-ended and led by the women who participated – whereas informal collective care was a major theme and central to women's lived experiences. This reflects the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences of providing care fall outside, or are marginalised, by the mainstream formal economy. The systemic invisibility of this reality means that care work is experienced predominantly as unpaid labour with insufficient social and economic support from formal systems.

## The intersection between paid and unpaid care work

Informal collective care is recognised as a productive and creative industry of workers, albeit, without economic security, remuneration or protection, that has a significant role in shaping and strengthening how society functions. However, this economy can only function sustainably as long as those undertaking the responsibility are without burden or harm.

The ongoing and historical impacts of colonisation has and continues to create intergenerational trauma, lateral violence, state incarceration, removal of children by the state and challenges accessing the formal care sector. Intertwined with racism, discrimination and gender inequalities embedded within mainstream systems and service delivery has forced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to take on complex and heavy care loads<sup>3</sup>. This has made accessing supports for care extremely difficult, and maintains harm, exclusion and insecurity.

The ANU Research noted that state institutions set up to ‘care’ are often uncaring and may be violent. This damage, as well as the ongoing impacts of harmful state responses, requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s care to heal, adding extra demands on existing care loads. As a result, many of the women interviewed in the ANU Research were tired and often, carers needed care too. Some were in, or had been through, periods of utter exhaustion and illness due to trying to carry the stressful care load they had. Most had little or no time to themselves, to have a break from the caring work they do or have a holiday without needing to care for others while they did. State program and policies that are meant to support unpaid care work are inadequate and often work against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women’s care work – for example the punitive nature of the social security system impoverishes women, further adding to their stress and exhaustion.

As described in the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* Report, without acknowledging the impacts of colonisation that maintain structures of powerlessness, governments will indefinitely respond to these issues as crisis demanding interventions viewed as the fault of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities alone without a cause.<sup>4</sup> This maintains the invisibility of women’s experiences and voices, and a feedback loop of ongoing harm that requires women to take on a lion’s share of care work, above and beyond communities that do not receive the brunt of colonisation’s harm. The impacts of colonisation creating higher care loads was particularly a theme in the ANU research from interviews of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the ACT. These findings are described in the following section.

Additionally, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers work across both the informal and formal economy, causing further care loads on top of their paid care employment to support the needs of family and communities, again often at the detriment of their wellbeing. Often balancing these roles comes at a significant wellbeing and financial cost. For example, the ANU Research points to several studies, including Hunter et. al (2016), which state that

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<sup>3</sup> The ANU Research further elaborates on these harms as an outcome of settler colonialism: Elise Klein et al., *Caring about Care* (Report, 2024) 19.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani: Securing our Rights, Securing our Future* (Report, 2020) 68.

those providing the most care to persons with disability were more likely to be in parttime (rather than full-time) employment. Furthermore, Hunter et.al (2016) also note that, 'Indigenous women with caring responsibilities have an employment rate of 41%, lower than the employment rate of 48% for those [Indigenous women] without caring responsibilities'. This, of course, has flow-on effects for reducing overall incomes of carers. Data from Carers NSW referred to in the ANU Research states that 70.5% of formally registered Indigenous carers involved in the study experienced financial stress, and 29.5% experienced severe financial stress.

For many of the participants in the ANU Research, care was central to their paid work roles as well as the unpaid care work they did outside of employment. Specifically, most of the women in paid employment in the study had roles in the community sector which put them at the frontline of caring for community. They saw this work as part of their broader commitment to supporting their families, communities and advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is therefore hard to draw a line for these women between paid and unpaid work. The ANU research follows other research (see Bargallie et al., 2023), to argue that a shift to supporting the role of unpaid care is critical in understanding and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in paid employment. Government policy has a limited understanding of work, and focused on getting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers into paid care jobs, however, this will not transform the situation for these women unless the importance of unpaid care is appreciated and supported as critical and important work too. Government policy needs to embrace the unpaid work that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women undertake, and policy needs to support the work they are *already* doing. This will require a policy shift – moving from seeing unpaid care as a burden to seeing it as a form of strength and cultural importance that has its own value. It will also require a deep commitment to decolonisation, and financially supporting Indigenous-controlled organisations.

To adequately capture this understanding of care, work needs to take place immediately. Key to this change is developing tools and strategies to accurately measure unpaid care work, shifting policy and legislation to broaden their definitions of care, and responding to the systemic challenges faced by unpaid carers through a place-based and community-centred lens.

## The economic contribution of care work

Far from being peripheral to the economy, what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women tell us is that care underpins everything. It is an ethic, a way of life, and is essential to the flourishing of human societies. Care is at the heart of any economic system, and the monetised part of the economy cannot be sustained without the underpinning care of Country, culture and people. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caring economy is holistic, relational, and fundamental to Aboriginal wellbeing. A focus on supporting care work in all its manifestations must be central in healing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to enable them to flourish.

There is currently no nationally consistent data for measuring the economic value of unpaid work, including the care work provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. This is important because we know that unpaid care is a critical form of social reproduction and essential for the paid economy to exist. Research shows that the monetary value of unpaid care

work in Australia has been estimated to be \$650.1 billion - the equivalent to 50.6% of GDP<sup>5</sup>. However, there has been no study until now that looked at the monetary value of specifically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's unpaid care work. This invisibility creates and maintains systems of exploitation and expropriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women whereby communities, and the broader economy benefit and generate wealth at a significant social and economic cost to women without reimbursement.<sup>6</sup> Lack of measurement and evaluation also contributes to gaps in responding effectively to community needs and policy priorities, as well as poor accountability by governments. The Productivity Commission's review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap reflects this failure stating that where evaluations are not taken, they undermine the ability of government to learn, respond to failures and centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, perspectives, priorities and knowledges.<sup>7</sup>

The ANU Research analysis of ABS census data shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women do more unpaid work than non-Indigenous women and Indigenous men. This is especially the case for childcare and care of people with disabilities, largely because of the demographic structure and relatively poorer health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is also notable that nationally, 8.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who themselves had a disability also simultaneously provided unpaid assistance to other people, and 12.1% did voluntary work.

In addition to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women providing significant volumes of care, care also tends to be taken up at a younger age for Indigenous compared with non-Indigenous groups, which shapes the lives of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. Restricting women's time and resources to engage in other activities comes at a significant detriment to their economic and financial wellbeing, as well as potentially restricting their opportunity to study or engage in employment.

Significant levels of expertise and skill also typify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's care work. This is evident in women's abilities to multitask and tend to complex care work and needs, but also in women's descriptions of navigating delicate and important relationalities – for example, knowing when to speak, act, and how. This expertise is learnt and built across many years and, indeed, also shared across generations. The excellence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in their work was very evident in the ANU Research study – those in paid employment were often senior and valued employees, and women undertaking unpaid care work were often critical and highly valued community members asked to sit on boards, volunteer, and to support or lead community initiatives regarding relational and cultural issues.

The ANU Research used three approaches to estimate how much time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women engaged in care work. The following data shows how significant parts of

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<sup>5</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *Unpaid care work and the labour market* (Report, nd) <<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/australian-unpaid-care-work-and-the-labour-market.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> Elise Klein, 'Unpaid care, welfare conditionality and expropriation' (2021) 28(2) *Gender, Work & Organisation* 1475.

<sup>7</sup> Productivity Commission, *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (Volume 1, Study Report 2024).

women's days are dedicated to unpaid care work, as well as the market value of this unpaid care work :

- Time-use survey data and qualitative interview data analysis based on 96 research participants for the ANU study found that care activities accounted for, on average, about 62% of our participant women's time on a usual weekday (i.e. 14.8 hours per day on average), with 48% of their time (i.e. 11.5 hours) taken caring for others and/or caring for Country and culture specifically.
- Analysis was undertaken in line with the four Activity Classifications that the ABS uses to group time-use activities.<sup>8</sup> The study found that women spent most of their time (9.6 hours per day, on average) undertaking what the ABS calls 'committed activities', such as domestic work and caregiving, and they had very little free time (3.3 hours per day, on average). Women with paid employment had less free time and spent less time on necessary activities than other women. Participants in the study were also spending more than double the amount of time on committed (care) activities compared to all Australian women, and were often multitasking – caring whilst also undertaking other activities.
- Lastly, using Federal Award rates for relevant employment categories, the researchers calculated the approximate economic value of the unpaid care work women do (excluding care for self). The researchers did so because (lost) remuneration for this work was raised directly by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women during interviews. The Report estimates that the market value of this labour ranges between \$223.01 to \$457.39 per day (representing an annual estimated salary of between \$81 175.64 to \$118 921.40). Notably, these estimates are intended to give a sense of the market value, but do not capture the full extent of labour undertaken. For instance, the estimate fails to account for multitasking, even though large proportions of women reported that they were caring for others while also undertaking the primary activities they reported for this study. This labour is not paid for, despite its incredible contribution to women's communities and society, and despite it being expropriated by the settler economy. Moreover, despite the high workload carried by women, many of the women included in the study are categorised as 'unemployed' and passed off as unproductive by settler policies and measures.

The depth, breadth, complexity, and skill of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's work, including unpaid care work, calls into question the lenses, measures and frames that have been applied to understanding Indigenous care until now. At best these have been partial. At worst, these have informed deficit discourses that fail to see the sheer volume, skill and importance of the work that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women undertake, while also leaving these crucial contributions desperately under-supported.

Additionally, investing in care as a safeguard of human rights presents economic benefits in addition to positive social, cultural and environmental outcomes. Strengthening supports for women to safely provide care without strain on their social and economic wellbeing provides greater possibility of realising rights to health, education, safety, and cultural rights, among

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<sup>8</sup> 'Necessary activities' such as sleeping, eating, personal care, health, and hygiene; 'Contracted activities' like paid work and study; 'Committed activities' like domestic work, childcare, adult care, and voluntary work; and 'Free-time activities' such as social interactions, going out, and watching television.

others. Adequate measures that alleviate barriers to accessing care promote rights to non-discrimination and equality. The realisation of these rights creates the foundations for a healthy and strong society and economy. As Klein (2021) describes, ‘care is an essential part of life; it grows peoples, nourishes peoples, and no one can live without it’.<sup>9</sup> We must, therefore, continue to ensure respect for the full spectrum of human rights – which are all interconnected – In order to create the supportive and enabling environment necessary for every individual to live a dignified life.

When individuals and communities are supported and listened to, they are in turn able to participate in the economy and the economic benefits for all of society are multiple and widespread.<sup>10</sup> As described by the former Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona – unpaid care work is ‘major human rights issue’ and one that poses a significant threat to women’s enjoyment of basic human rights the world over. Further exploration of the connection between human rights and unpaid care is provided in the AHRC submission on page 21.

## Findings from the Australian Capital Territory

While the volume and type of care work differs across Australia, there are often common themes that are experienced across the continent, such as lack of adequate supports and the influences of colonial violence informing types of care provided (as well as the personal toll on the carer). Despite the ACT being a strong economy with low unemployment, high income and education,<sup>11</sup> there are many women in unpaid caring roles that continue to fall through the gaps, and are unable to access supports. Findings from the ANU create a context in which unpaid care work takes place in the ACT:<sup>12</sup>

- Care work is described as being central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women’s wellbeing and identity. It is not an independent role, but something generational - core to identity, culture, and wellbeing. It is about looking after and empowering people, community and Country.
- Care is ongoing and both stimulating and challenging, threaded throughout most parts of women’s lives.
- About 60% of women reported caring for someone who was elderly, while over half of the women (55%) reported caring for children. This can include not only their own children but also those of others and grandchildren too. Across the different care groups, a smaller but still substantial percentage of women reported that they were providing care for someone who was sick or living with a disability (40%).
- Women raised how their care work is influenced by ongoing colonial violence, which makes the work harder both for those they care for, and for the women themselves. Trauma widely impacts this work.

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<sup>9</sup> Elise Klein, ‘Unpaid care, welfare conditionality and expropriation’ (2021) 28(2) *Gender, Work & Organisation* 1475, 1476.

<sup>10</sup> The Danish Institute for Human Rights, *Human Rights and Economic Growth* (Report, 7 March 2017) <<https://www.humanrights.dk/publications/human-rights-economic-growth>>; Basah Baglayan et al., *Good Business: The Economic case for protecting human rights* (Report, December 2018).

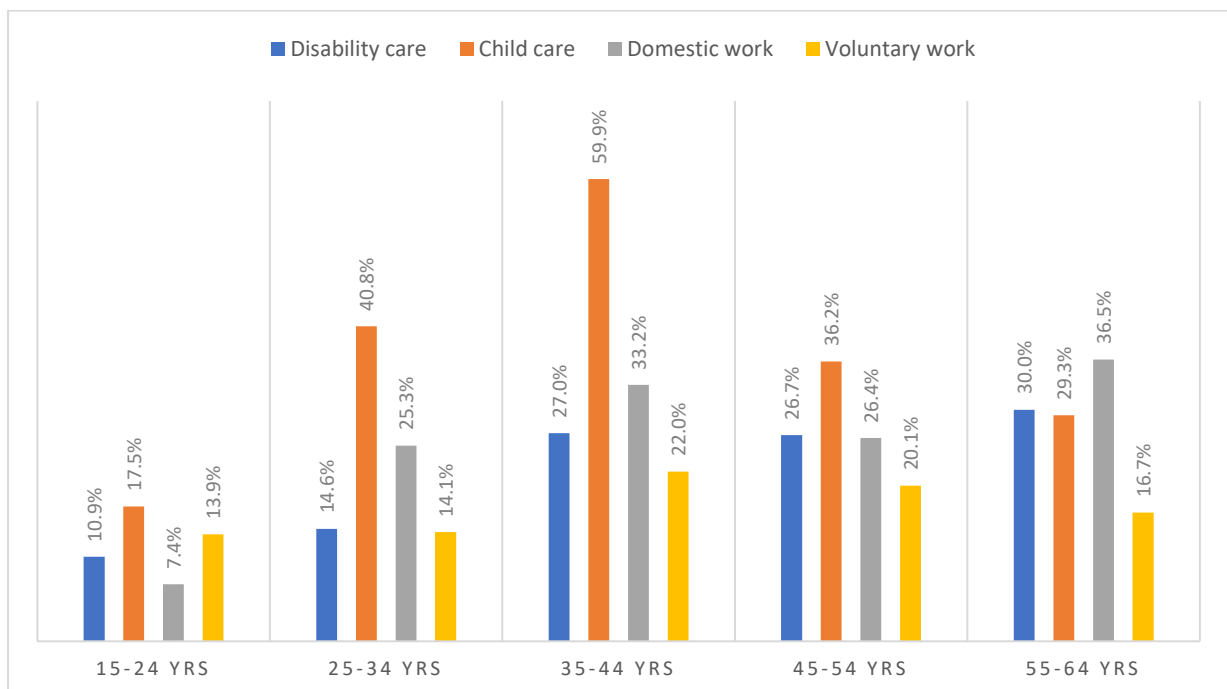
<sup>11</sup> ACT Government, *Wellbeing Framework* (Report, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> Finding provided from interviews with 20 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in the ACT

- Much of the paid work women undertake is paid care work, including work within child protection systems, and/or supporting and advocating for community. Paid work enables ACT women to do the unpaid care work, by providing finances necessary to support their care for others.
- Unpaid care work is often not recognised, with those also engaged in paid care work struggling to balance, including balancing self-care and time for respite.
- Whilst the ACT and specifically Canberra is heralded as one of the wealthiest and most well-educated parts of Australia, we see that the impact of colonisation, racism and intervention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives is not any less than other places in Australia. Indeed, whilst there are government services in the ACT that purport to help with care, most offered are mainstream services and are not safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (and men) to access because of enduring racism.
- Canberra does not have adequate services and supports for women’s care work. Superficially, services and supports may exist but they are not culturally safe and do not work for the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Services that are discussed as safe were Indigenous community-controlled, scarce and very underfunded.

We encourage the reader to explore this data in more detail in [Chapter 3 of the ANU Report](#).

Additionally, data from the 2021 Census reveals that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the ACT do high rates of unpaid work (see Figure 1). There is substantial variation in participation in unpaid work between different age groups. Except for women aged 35-44, the participation rates in unpaid childcare in the ACT are higher than the national rates. Except for women aged 15-24, the participation rates in unpaid disability care are higher than the national rates. Women aged 25-34 years have had the highest rate of participation in unpaid childcare whereas women aged 45-54 years have had the highest rate of participation in unpaid disability care.



**Figure 1:** Does unpaid work (by age and type of work): Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women in the ACT

## ACT Government's Wellbeing Framework

We acknowledge and commend the ACT Government for developing a Wellbeing Framework to support the economic and social wellbeing of people living in the ACT.

We recognise that consultations for the Framework emphasised the need for diverse perspectives, to bring voices into the conversations that are often not heard. Definitions of wellbeing and wellbeing domains, however, definitions should include broader explorations of what this means to different people and how their lived experience and intersectional identities shape their wellbeing. This must include an understanding of care as articulated through a First Nations gendered lens. As discussed, wellbeing and care are interwoven in that they are both core to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's identity and how they experience, act in and understand the world around them. Care and wellbeing must also be understood in the context of other individuals and communities, including men and boys, people living with and caring for those with disabilities, gender-diverse and transgender peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse peoples and those from marginal, vulnerable and unique backgrounds. The importance of ongoing engagement with these different groups cannot be understated throughout all stages of actioning the Wellbeing Framework. We note that with data collection for the Wellbeing Framework, interpretations of linkages and interdependencies of the 12 wellbeing domains will arise, and hope that this data will be made publicly available and easily accessible.

Additionally, we recommend the inclusion of culture as influencing various domains beyond social connection, and identity and belonging. For Indigenous peoples, culture influences all aspects of wellbeing and is core to identity and empowerment. It is therefore integral to all domains and should be considered as a driving force for upholding strong wellbeing. Without connection to culture, such as by practicing language, learning ancestral knowledges and engaging in cultural practices – including caring for Country and kin – personal and collective wellbeing is undermined. This is reflected in a quote in the Wellbeing Framework sharing what wellbeing means to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: “My wellbeing is at its greatest when I’m engaging with my culture and language”.<sup>13</sup>

To measure and evaluate the Wellbeing Framework, considering the diversity of understandings and experiences of wellbeing, we recommend using and/or adapting the approach employed in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice. This way of measuring would suit the Wellbeing Framework's ‘subjective measures’, providing an approach to collect this data. Measurement, evaluation and learning (MEL) within the Change Agenda is an ongoing process across the life of the Change Agenda, built on active dialogue, engagement and feedback with communities. This engagement provides insights about how women feel, sense, hear, and experience change, so actions supporting change can be identified, invested in and better directed toward realising individual and collective wellbeing. The approach centres on and is grounded in the voices of women, as opposed to approaches that focus on

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<sup>13</sup> ACT Government, *Wellbeing Framework* (Report, 2020) 27.

quantitative data bases and reporting – which can be subjectively interpreted, include bias, and make experiences invisible.

## Opportunities to support and recognise unpaid care

Across the AHRC Submission, ANU Research and supporting Wiyi Yani U Thangani resources, numerous recommendations to support care work have been articulated. These recommendations, grounded in the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, are opportunities for action.

The following lists recommendations best suited to this Inquiry, and are not exhaustive of those provided in the documents. They include short-term actions as well as long-term systems reforms and must be actioned together in order for sustainable and meaningful change to occur. We encourage engagement with the sources for further details.

**Australian National University, Caring about Care Report (2024) - *The ACT Government has an opportunity to:***

- **Reshape public policy** to be gender sensitive and anti-colonial, including by centring and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care work as a critical aspect of economies
- **Prevent future harms** to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that increase the need for care. Governments at all levels should ensure public policy is antiracist, decolonial, and upholds Indigenous self-determination.
- **Reform child protection systems and procedures** to ensure they uphold the human rights of children, carers, and parents, and to prevent ongoing harms caused by these systems; in the ACT this includes accelerated implementation of all the recommendations of the Our Booris: Our Way Report (2019) – Many of remain unimplemented 5-years post the report<sup>14</sup>.
- **Strengthen and/or create supports** for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers to ensure they are also being cared for
- **Fully acknowledge and appreciate**, as well as reflect in public policy, the intricate links between paid and unpaid care roles undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

**Australian Human Rights Commission, draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy (2023) - *Through the ACT Wellbeing Strategy and other policy instruments to measure and report on unpaid care, and provide support, the ACT Government should:***

- **Collaborate with the emerging research and expertise** from the Australian National University and Wiyi Yani U Thangani First Nations Gender Justice Institute, and draw on this knowledge in the care and support space to inform effective policy
- **Develop tools and strategies to measure** care using a First Nations gender lens

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<sup>14</sup> ACT Government, *Our Booris: Our Way* (Final Report, December 2019) <[https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/1483365/List\\_Our-Booris.-Our-Way-Final-Report.pdf](https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1483365/List_Our-Booris.-Our-Way-Final-Report.pdf)>.

- Take a systems mapping and systems change approach to supporting the full spectrum of care services and provision, from early intervention and prevention through to acute and crisis response forms of care
- **Refocus policy reforms** on investing in prevention and early intervention services
- **Urgently reform social supports and the social security payment system**
- **Invest in the First Nations-led care sector.**

*The submission also defines specific challenges and approaches to overcome them in section 4: Reforming the social support systems (page 25). These are:*

- Embedding a systems reform approach in policy and practice to adequately respond to the needs of unpaid carers
- Refocusing policy interventions on prevention and early intervention to mitigate downstream challenges
- Reforming social support systems to support the true extent of First Nations women's work and break the 'poverty trap'
- Strengthening the foundations of the care and support economy by investing in the First Nations-led care sector. In the ACT this includes development of more Aboriginal community controlled organisations, especially in relation to disability care, and care of people with drug and alcohol issues.

**Wiyi Yani U Thangani Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice (2024) - The ACT Government can provide support through a collective and sustained focus on the following outcomes and their associated actions:**

- **Our Care work is central to the redefining and functioning of systems**
  - defining and measuring the full spectrum of care work
  - constructing economic models that are informed by, support and remunerate care work
  - (re)defining mainstream care services as culturally and gender responsive
- **We are financially secure, safe, free, living and working within meaningful economies**
  - redesigning financial and social systems that elevate and centre us and our communities
  - growing sustainable Country and culture-based economies
  - targeting of systemic inequality and poverty
  - investing in culturally-appropriate financial literacy education and knowledge sharing
- **Systems are caring, safe and enabling across all Countries**
  - reforming social policies to ensure economic, social and cultural wellbeing
  - supporting infrastructure and investment for on Country and culture-based economies
  - developing alternative approaches to punitive interventions
  - sustainably fund models of healing and care work i.e. effectively funding community-controlled models of healing within the ACT such as the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm

**Wiyi Yani U Thangani Implementation Framework (2022) - The ACT Government can support unpaid workers/carers by:**

- **Forming the conditions and policy architecture** to enable the (re)assertion and preservation of women’s antenatal care, collective child-rearing practices and kinship responsibilities
- **Reforming child protection systems** to ensure continuation of care and connection to kin and culture for young people, including: accountability mechanisms to ensure authorities comply with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle; greater transparency around placement decision-making; replacing legal orders for permanent adoption with investment into community-controlled reunification services; and reforming carer assessment processes<sup>15</sup>
- **Guarantee resources for communities** to design and deliver a continuum of care from intervention to recovery, alongside prevention and diversion initiatives - Including gender-sensitive rehabilitation, mental health supports, family violence prevention and supports, and youth and adult diversion
- **Re-designing the social safety net and childcare system** to guarantee access to universal culturally-safe free early childhood education and care, and ensure adequate non-punitive social policy and programs that keep women and children safe and together
- **Ending carer and motherhood penalties** - The care and education provided to children by women is critical to the functioning of a healthy society and must be supported by ensuring access to basic needs and affordable services such as housing, food and child and health care
- **Investing in women’s training in and beyond care work** - Ensure access to training and skills-development for women across all sectors and outside formal employment, with appropriate wrap-around supports. This also includes supports for women providing unpaid work and, if interested, pathways to qualifications and employment
- **Creating comprehensive gender-focused culturally-safe workplace policies**—for instance, by providing childcare within workplaces, family violence leave, cultural leave and flexible working arrangements
- **Recognising care work in and beyond GDP measurements** - Capture the full spectrum of women’s care work, including care for Country and cultural maintenance and record and measure its value to supporting the health, wellbeing and prosperity of society and the national economy.
- **Guaranteeing care for those with disabilities** - Invest in accessible services for all First Nations people with disabilities and health concerns requiring care and provide adequate income and wrap-around services—including respite—for caregivers who provide disability support and health care
- **Ensuring safe, engaged and dignified elder care** - Ensure access and sustainable investment into safe and culturally-appropriate aged care facilities and services,

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<sup>15</sup> This recommendations is also broadly consistent with the recommendations of the *Our Booris, Our Way* report which remains largely unimplemented. See: ACT Government, *Our Booris: Our Way* (Final Report, December 2019) <[https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/1483365/List\\_Our-Booris,-Our-Way-Final-Report.pdf](https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1483365/List_Our-Booris,-Our-Way-Final-Report.pdf)>.

alongside fair income supports and resources for women caring for elders in their homes and on Country.

- **Providing the supports for intimate time on Country** - Ensure women can spend intimate time on Country to provide critical care to Country and care for their families through the practice of culture and the active transference of knowledge

[\*Major priority 9 of the Implementation Framework\*](#) focuses specifically on care and unpaid work.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the devaluing of care work is something that affects all Australian women, but also Australian and global society as a whole. The structures needed to create enabling conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, where they are empowered, safe, and supported to provide care for their families, communities and Countries are missing. We know, as articulated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, that systems change can happen when women's voices are heard and responded to with reciprocity.

While this submission reflects the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, many aspects of these experiences are shared by others. Culturally and linguistically diverse women, including migrants and refugees experience much of the same exclusion and challenges navigating care and support systems as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander providers and receivers of care. Similarly, men and boys are also impacted by the care economy in diverse ways and these experiences should not be lost within discussions of the care economy. By acknowledging and embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's perspective on care and their experiences and barriers within the care sector, there is an opportunity to develop more effective and sustainable models of caring infrastructure that can positively impact the wider Australian society.

In the Wiyi Yani U Thangani 2020 Report: *Securing our Rights, Securing our Future* women describe their caring roles as a major source of strength, but also as a challenge. Ongoing work, supported by all systems actors, including this inquiry by the ACT government, provide a step in the right direction towards eliminating the challenges and highlighting the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's care work. We note that short-term policy changes that seek to support care work must be complemented by more transformational and long-term action that shifts systems away from being punitive and unsafe to enabling, holistic and caring.

Again, we commend the ACT Government for initiating this inquiry into unpaid care, and are hopeful towards seeing meaningful action towards recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's care work. We see this work as fundamental to the realisation of First Nations gender justice, and responding to the needs of women, gender-diverse peoples and all people experiencing marginalisation and vulnerability across Australia.

We look forward to following the outcomes of the Inquiry and seeing meaningful change to support unpaid care in the ACT.