

SECTION 3: Survival, Resilience and Contemporary Issues for First Nations Women

Truth-Telling is key for us as an organisation focused on justice for women in acknowledging the impact past and present injustices have had and continue to have on First Nations women. First Nations women were kidnapped from the Mornington Peninsula during early colonisation, including as sex slaves and slave labour on the Bass Strait sealing stations. At Point Nepean, a women's birthing place and traditional location for ceremonial business and young women's initiation, abductions by sealers of First Nations women commonly occurred (Hansen Fels, 2011). These abductions had devastating effects on many Bunurong / Boon Wurrung families, including today's descendants (Eidelson, 2014b). Violence perpetrated against women continued throughout colonisation. Today, First Nations women suffer higher rates of violence than their non-Indigenous sisters: 3 in 5 First Nations women have experienced physical or sexual violence; are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence, 11 more times likely to die due to assault than non-Indigenous women (*Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Report*, 2020, p.44). Australia has been urged by the United Nations on four separate occasions that it needs to address violence against First Nations women (Koori Mail, Feb. 12, 2020).

The *Bringing Them Home* (1997) report details numerous examples of The Stolen Generation and intergenerational trauma arising from it. The report points out that girls and women were particularly targeted for removal with the aim of controlling the reproduction of First Nations people. The 1950s and 1960s saw the greatest numbers of First Nations children removed from their families to advance the cause of assimilation. Aunty Carolyn Briggs, Boon Wurrung Elder, addressed the 2021 Balnarring Womin Djjeka audience on the pain arising for her personally from government assimilationist policies, and the resultant threat of loss of connection to her culture and identity. Forced removals of children continue to this day. And as the pleas today of the *Grandmothers Against Removals* First Nations women show us, the removal of children by the State constitutes contemporary generation stealing.

The December 2020 report *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices)* released by the Human Rights Commission urges Truth-Telling and challenges us to call out racism. The report examines broad areas of health, housing, justice, economy, employment, and children, with a focus on the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in these areas. Issues addressed include land rights, cultural heritage protection, forced removals, deaths in custody, the age of incarceration, cashless welfare cards, racism, and the government rebuff of the call for a 'Voice, Treaty, Truth', the three pillars defined in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. The report recommends Truth-Telling which includes 'conducting public awareness activities denouncing racism, as experienced by women and girls, and providing tools for community members to take bystander action when they witness racism' (*Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices)*, 2020, p.100).

A SWAN member shares this story: *On International Women's Day, a neighbour was telling me how, after playing golf with her husband in Corowa in the 1970s, she and he had to dine separately in the Club Rooms because the Club segregated men and women. At that time, she would not have known that not far away, Aboriginal women attending Echuca Hospital to give birth were forced to have their baby on the veranda or in a shed. We share injustice as women. But we are also aware of the compound injustices suffered by our Indigenous sisters.*

Defending all women's rights, including those of First Nations People is at the heart of what SWAN does through its Supporting First Nations Group, through our engagement with local communities and gathering places such as Willum Warrain Aboriginal Association and Nairn Marr Djambana Aboriginal Association, and through you, the members of SWAN. It is this goal that propels us forward. SWAN is one group in a swelling movement currently shining a light on the truth. Combating negative images of First Nations people is an equally important part of Truth-Telling. In our Truth-Telling advocacy role we can be reminding non-Indigenous people that we have much to learn from First Nations cultures. The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* (2020) report also celebrates the strength and resilience of First Nations women along with their survival and role in the protection of cultural heritage, their distinct skills, knowledge and potential central to their culture and identity. Being aware of examples of successful First Nations people, especially women, is strongly recommended. Check out: [shareourpride.org.au](https://www.shareourpride.org.au) for examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film directors, actors, designers, artists, politicians, leaders, academics, journalists, medical practitioners, performers, educators, lawyers, musicians, dancers, judges and sports people to learn about many inspiring women. SWAN members are encouraged to create their own list of inspirational First Nations women.

REFERENCES / RESOURCES

- Eidelson, M. 2014b, *Yalukit Willam: The River People of Port Phillip*, City of Port Phillip Publishing, City of Port Phillip, VIC.
- Hansen Fels, M. 2011, *'I Succeeded Once' The Aboriginal Protectorate on the Mornington Peninsula, 1839-1840*, ANU Press, Canberra. **Available at Mornington Peninsula Libraries.**
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, *Bringing them home: report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney; online: <https://ulurustatement.org>
- *Grandmothers Against Removals*, online <https://www.facebook.com/GMAR.GrandmothersAgainstRemovals/>
- *Koori Mail*, newspaper, Lismore, NSW, Feb. 12, 2020, p.5; online: kooriemail.com
- *Share Our Pride* website, <https://www.shareourpride.org.au>
- *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, 2017, National Constitutional Convention, Uluru, online: <https://ulurustatement.org>
- *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Report*, 2020, online: <https://wiyiyaniuthangani.humanrights.gov.au>

If you have any questions or helpful ideas, please contact **SWAN Supporting First Nations Group** via swanwomen@outlook.com. Your feedback and input is welcomed and encouraged.