



WOMEN OF COLOUR AUSTRALIA

Championing Australia's Women of Colour

Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission National Anti-Racism Framework

Introduction

Women of Colour Australia (WoCA) is a not-for-profit organisation whose purpose is to support, advocate for and strengthen the lives and experiences of women of colour.

In Australia WoCA recognises the social structures that continually racialised and oppressed women of colour across all aspects of Australian society. Under this perspective, WoCA acknowledges the complexity of this issue beyond individual strategies or capacities to deal with it.

WoCA is committed to the delivery of four key objectives:

- Building and maintaining a credible evidence base for policies, initiatives, and programs targeted towards WoC;
- Engaging with women of colour and allies to understand the opportunities and constraints for WoC in the workplace and in the business space, and leverage data and insights to promote change within workplaces and business spaces;
- Providing access to industry-leading resources that will equip women of colour to succeed in the Australian workplace and business spaces; and
- Creating an active Women of Colour Australia community.

WoCA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the proposed framework on behalf of WoC across the country.

Response

In late 2020, WoCA commissioned the Women of Colour in the Workplace survey. This national survey sought to explore the professional and workplace experiences of women of colour in Australia. Participants included women with diverse cultural identities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

The findings of the survey revealed some confronting truths regarding the systemic racial discrimination experienced by First Nations women and women of colour across all professional settings. Among the findings of the survey were:

- Almost sixty percent of respondents believed that they had experienced discrimination in the workplace;

- Fifty-seven per cent of respondents believed that they had faced challenges in the workplace that were directly related to their identity as women of colour; and
- Forty-three per cent believed that their identity as women of colour was not valued in the workplace.

Many of these women provided disturbing accounts of their experiences of systemic racism, both overt and covert. These included microaggressions, stereotyping, lack of a formal or informal mechanism to reach out when encountering racist experiences, slower and limited opportunities for career progression, lack of recognition, sponsorship, and representation in senior positions.

The survey findings also highlighted critical gaps in existing anti-discrimination frameworks and legislation. While most jurisdictions mandate diversity and inclusion policies in workplaces, only 59 per cent of respondents said their organisation had one and 19 per cent were unsure. Furthermore, findings suggest that the degree to which organisations champion these policies and that to which WoC feel protected by them varies significantly. Only 30 percent of the respondents thought the policy was suitable. And many of the open questions answers pointed to a general perception of seeing these interventions as box-ticking exercises with limited impact.

WoCA broadly supports the principles and outcomes outlined in the framework, particularly concerning the recognition of the multiple forms and layers of racial discrimination in society, as well as the role of intersectionality. In order to address the issues faced by WoC in Australia, it is critical that the framework is based upon an understanding of the intersection of race and gender, as these are intrinsically entangled in the individual's experiences of oppression and discrimination.

The framework appears to have a strong focus on actions to be undertaken by governments, including policy and legislative reform. This is in line with traditional approaches to anti-discrimination policies which view these matters from a legal lens. However, the Nation-state of Australia and its legal apparatus was built under the premises of racial superiority (Arvin, 2018; Farrant et al., 2019; Moreton-Robison, 2020; Synot, 2019, 2020; Watson, 2014). Therefore, to transform the racial inequalities of the present day, it is paramount to recognise the foundations of a system that was built on the usurpation of the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A system that has historically failed First Nations peoples and people of colour. WoCA has largely found that where there are legal requirements in place for organisations, they are often met as box-ticking exercises. These do little to capture individuals' lived experiences of microaggression, as the onus is on the individual to prove that their experiences amount to racial discrimination. While WoCA supports proposed actions to bolster legal protections and national policies for tackling racial discrimination, the organisation is of the view that the framework should have a stronger focus on grassroots community, private sector and individual interventions led by First Nations people and people of colour.. Moreover, the framework should provide practical guidance for organisations seeking to implement structural changes. This could include actions around quotas, recognition of value, mentorship and leadership development opportunities, diversity in leadership, training (bolstering awareness among non-WoC staff) and counselling.

There is a need for an approach aware of the historical conditions in which racial and gender discrimination has existed in Australia. Tackling this issue, which is rooted in unconscious bias and transgenerational belief systems, is an ambitious feat. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars have pointed out the necessity of listening to the stories and lived experiences of First Nations peoples and people of colour before any fundamental transformation can be made (Farrant et al., 2019, Moreton-Robison, 2020, Watson, 2014). There is a lack of data in relation to the current state of affairs around

racism and gender inequality. The first-ever attempt to collect information about the conditions of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women in The Wayi Yani U Thangani Report was only as recent as 2020 (Australian Human Rights Commission Report, 2020). WoCAs' survey was another of this kind, a humble contribution to this much-needed information void in Australian literature. Only by doing this reflective exercise to look inwards will it be possible to understand the individual lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women of colour and move towards an equal place for everyone. In saying this, WoCA particularly supports the framework's focus on robust, nationally consistent data about racism and racial inequality. WoCA also notes that such data should be collected through respectful, trauma-informed and transparent processes.

The more we can understand the conditions and challenges that different groups of our society experience, the easier and more effective it will be to take small, practical actions that seek to empower individuals affected by racial discrimination. WoCA commends the Commission for this new approach to anti-racism in Australia and welcomes the opportunity to participate in the ongoing work to develop and implement the proposed framework.

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