

# Indigenous Women's Inclusion in the Workplace: Setting the Blak Agenda

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**Abstract:** For generations, Indigenous women have resisted and confronted colonial systems that marginalise us in every sphere of life, including the workplace. Employment inequity is not a neutral gap; it is the outcome of ongoing colonisation, embedded in structures, systems, and organisational cultures. Using Indigenous Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, and Critical Race Theory through an Indigenous standpoint, this research centres Blak women's voices to expose systemic racism, reveal the weight of cultural load, and highlight pathways to self-determined, culturally safe workplaces. Storytelling and yarning—as sovereign knowledge practices—are the heart of this study. Through these stories, we see not only harm, but leadership, resistance, and strength.

**Keywords:** racism, whiteness, race, power and privilege, inclusivity, intersectionality

## Terminology Statement

In this paper, I use the term Indigenous Peoples, this represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of Australia, Indigenous Peoples worldwide (where applicable) and when used in already written literature and government policy. In addition, the terms Aboriginal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are used where needed, as is First Nations. The term Peoples is used to signify that Indigenous Peoples are not one people or Nation, but a collective of Peoples and Nations.

Lower case in western is used intentionally to decentre colonial linguistic dominant discourse (Lenette, 2022).

## Situating Myself

As an Aboriginal person, it is important for me to situate myself within this research, as this has a significant bearing on how the research is approached. Standpoint is unique to an individual Indigenous researcher; it has to be actively developed as a particular form of investigation (Nakata, 2002). My standpoint is determined by several things such as my relationality, my life experiences, my age, my gender, my sexual orientation, my community, my Country, my skin colour, my political affiliations, and how I see myself in relation to society. For example, I am a Garigal/Awabakal/Darug woman, living on Gubbi Gubbi Country. I am an Urban Aboriginal woman who has fair skin and am not automatically recognised as Aboriginal and, at times, I have to legitimise my Aboriginality. I grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney on Darug Country. I come from the most socio-economically disadvantaged group in Australia. I am 61 years old, was married and am now widowed, and I have a 36-year-old son. My cultural identity as constructed from all of the above is fragmented, however, I live in a contemporary world where culture cannot stay the same; it is dynamic and has many configurations (Fredericks, 2004). All of this and more shapes my standpoint and my research.

I identify as an Aboriginal (Blak) woman, and I see things from an Aboriginal woman's perspective, which will not be the same as any other person. Therefore, the way I see and perform research is unique to my Aboriginal standpoint.

## Introduction

"The track behind us is littered with the relics of policies, programs and projects that failed ... mainly because they did not include Indigenous people in making the decisions" (Senator Patrick Dodson, cited in Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, p.4).

Colonisation has shaped every aspect of Indigenous Peoples engagement with the labour market. For Indigenous women, the weight of both racism and sexism compounds this reality. The disadvantage we face is not accidental or individual; it is structured into the very systems that govern workplaces.

Critical Race, Indigenous Feminist, and decolonising scholars discuss ways that global, political, cultural, economic, and political systems and structures of the past 500 years precipitate racialised contemporary realities (Dar et al., 2021), and, despite the vast intellectual history, the academy remains largely devoid of these debates. For more than 30 years, feminist scholars of colour have argued that much feminist scholarship was actually about white, middle-class women, ignoring the reality that the category gender is fundamentally complicated by class, race/ethnicity, and other differences (Acker, 2006).

The post-colonisation history of Australia is premised on white settler entitlement and perceptions of cultural superiority that justifies and normalises systemic exclusion of, oppression of, and racism towards Indigenous Peoples in Australia. In Australia, Indigenous Peoples are the most politically, socially, and economically disadvantaged group in many areas, especially in education and employment. However, the policies enacted to redress this have done little to address the disadvantage that Indigenous Peoples face (Davis, 2015; Dawson et al., 2020; Dillon, 2021; Henry & Leroy-Dyer, 2025; Leroy-Dyer, 2022). This is partially due to successive federal and state governments ignoring the dominant political philosophy of self-determination held by Indigenous Peoples. Racist policies and practices still exist within colonial structures, systems, and workplaces, alongside the wilful denial of Australia's racist past (Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Katz, 2017).

In 2009, the Australian Government announced a new initiative, Closing the Gap, to reform and improve the disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in a variety of areas. One such area was employment, committing to halving the employment gap within a decade, that is, by 2018. This target was never met. The interconnecting nature of race, class, and gender have created interdependent and overlapping systems of discrimination and disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Within the colonial structures, systems, and workplaces exists racist, sexist, and social hierarchical policies (where members vary in their level of power, influence, skill, or dominance) and practices that hinder inclusion (Leroy-Dyer, 2016; Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023).

This paper is grounded in Blak sovereignty and Indigenous standpoint. It centres Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing as the foundation for understanding and addressing workplace exclusion. Rather than positioning Indigenous women as subjects of deficit, this work affirms our agency, leadership, and vision for transformation.

## Literature Review

This research draws from three intersecting frameworks:

- Indigenous Feminist Theory highlights sovereignty, self-determination, and the gendered impacts of colonisation.
- Intersectionality illuminates how race, gender, class and coloniality intersect to shape workplace experiences.
- Critical Race Theory exposes racism as systemic and embedded in organisational structures.

These are not abstract tools applied to Indigenous women's experiences; they are ways of naming and theorising what Blak women already know. Together, they provide a critical lens for challenging the structures that maintain exclusion.

## Indigenous Feminist Theory

Indigenous Feminist Theory centres Indigenous sovereignty, decolonisation, human rights, and social justice goals that empower Indigenous women (Liddle, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). It analyses power dynamics both within Indigenous communities and in the colonial structures that shape our lives. Unlike mainstream feminism, it prioritises self-determination and community advancement rather than individual empowerment, highlighting the distinct barriers faced at the intersection of race and gender (Fredericks, 2010; Liddle, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Snyder, 2014).

Indigenous Feminist Theory foregrounds issues such as the devastating consequences of colonisation, the Stolen Generations<sup>1</sup>, forced sterilisation, stolen wages, racism, dispossession, and the struggle for land rights. These

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<sup>1</sup> In Australia, thousands of Aboriginal children were forcibly removed by governments, churches, and welfare bodies to be raised in institutions, fostered out, or adopted by non-Indigenous families, or used as slave labour. They are known as the Stolen Generations (AIATSIS, n.d.)

collective experiences have produced different priorities and political goals for Indigenous women compared to those reflected in mainstream feminist movements (Arvin et al., 2013; Campbell, 2022; Green, 2007; Smith, 2011).

This paradigm critically examines how gender injustice against Indigenous women emerges from colonial policies and patriarchal practices that embed gendered power imbalances (Susack, 2015). Indigenous feminists have long critiqued mainstream feminism for privileging individualism over communal values (Arvin et al., 2013; Liddle, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Snyder, 2014; Susack, 2015). As Waterman, cited in Campbell (2022), observes, mainstream feminism is “whitestream”, focused on gender equality alone, whereas Indigenous feminism centres principles of inclusivity, responsibility, and relationships.

Moreton-Robinson (2000) powerfully argues that white feminists constitute the normative standard of womanhood, benefiting from colonisation. Moreton-Robinson's development of Indigenous women's standpoint theory (2013) addresses the limitations of dominant feminist frameworks, highlighting how Indigenous women's experiences are shaped by complex intersections of race, gender, history, and sovereignty (Standiland et al., 2024). Indigenous Feminist Theory, therefore, affirms a deep connection to Country, Ancestors and all living beings—an element absent in traditional feminist thought (Campbell, 2022; Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

Feminist political thought acknowledges that women's experiences differ and that hierarchies arise from gendered othering (Banerjee, 2016), yet many Indigenous women remain invisible in these frameworks. Similarly, hooks (2014) similarly critiques the way racism, sexism, and class exploitation marginalise Black women, with mainstream feminism often centring whiteness over solidarity. Fredericks (2010) notes that, despite broader women's rights movements, Aboriginal women's societal and economic positioning remains stagnant. This reality reinforces the need to challenge entrenched white patriarchal power structures that continue to exclude Indigenous women (Liddle, 2014).

### **Intersectionality Theory**

As an Aboriginal (Blak) woman, I experience discrimination along multiple axes, particularly race and gender. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), explains how overlapping systems of power produce unique forms of marginalisation, often rendering Black women—and, by extension, Blak women—invisible (Stewart, 2019). Intersectionality recognises that people's lives are shaped not by a single axis of inequality but by multiple intersecting identities, such as Indigeneity, race, gender, class, sexuality, and age (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

This framework enables a deeper understanding of how structural oppression operates across these intersections. Olsen (2018) notes that Intersectionality provides a critical lens for exploring the relational nature of power and identity. In Indigenous contexts, it acknowledges how colonialism intensifies gendered oppression, making Indigenous Feminist analyses inherently intersectional (Snyder, 2014).

Intersectionality can be both a theoretical approach and an analytic tool for examining how identities interact with structures of power. As Banerjee (2016) suggests, Intersectional Indegenic Feminism offers a framework for understanding Indigenous women's lived realities while advancing principles of equity, rights, agency, and empowerment.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory provides a framework for analysing race, power, and privilege in systems and institutions (Rabaka, 2022). Originating in the United States legal academy during the civil rights era, Critical Race Theory examines how racism is embedded in legal, political, and social structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Watson, 2022). It exposes the limitations of traditional liberal approaches that overlook how racism is reproduced daily and structurally (Brown & Jackson, 2022).

Derrick Bell's foundational scholarship established Critical Race Theory as both an academic and activist movement. Beyond law, it has informed disciplines such as education, psychology, and philosophy, where it is used to interrogate whether western thought itself is racially structured (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

A key tenet of Critical Race Theory is that racism is a permanent feature of everyday life, manifesting in both overt actions and subtle gestures. Anti-discrimination laws alone cannot address the harm it causes to Indigenous Peoples (Watson, 2022). Critical Race Theory positions race as a power system that grants privilege to some while disadvantaging others (Wildman & Davis, 2013). It is not only descriptive but transformative, seeking to expose racial hierarchies and dismantle them.

### **Why These Theories**

Twila L. Perry (2010) observes that “the failure of Feminist Theory to engage the intersection of race and gender results in lost opportunities for women from diverse backgrounds to engage more fully in collaborative thinking and action” (p.

252). These frameworks, when brought together, are mutually enriching. They allow us to confront the complexities of identity, the meaning of equality, and to build shared investments in common struggles.

Intersectionality has been applied across multiple disciplines and has significantly advanced Indigenous Feminist and Critical Race Theory scholarship. Its relevance for Blak women in the workplace is profound (Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023). Together, Critical Race Theory, Indigenous Feminist Theory, and decolonising scholarship reveal how global, political, cultural, and economic systems over the past five centuries have created and sustained racialised contemporary realities (Dar et al., 2021). Despite this vast intellectual history, these debates remain marginal within mainstream academic spaces.

Addressing systemic inequality requires rejecting narrow, class-based frameworks in favour of contextualised, socio-structural analyses that foreground race, gender, class, and their intersections. This integrated theoretical approach is critical for understanding and transforming the world of work for Indigenous women.

## **Indigenous Disadvantage in Australia**

Indigenous Peoples are not a homogenous group. Prior to invasion, there were over 600 Nations throughout Australia, each with their own territory, language, and customs (Leroy-Dyer, 2010; 2022). Colonisation has left an indelible mark on Indigenous Peoples, who have experienced economic, psychological, and cultural dislocation with a history of discriminatory practices that have led to a legacy of economic disadvantage (Leroy-Dyer, 2021).

### **Labour Market and Employment Disadvantage**

The labour of Indigenous Peoples in Australia has been exploited since the early years of colonisation. This exploitation has taken various forms such as non-payment and underpayment of wages, indentured labour, withholding and mismanagement of wages, stolen wages, and compulsory redirection of welfare payments and other entitlements (Anthony, 2013; Gunstone, 2017; Leroy-Dyer, 2018; Leroy-Dyer, 2021). As a consequence of this exploitation and discrimination, Indigenous Peoples' labour market outcomes are well below those of non-Indigenous Australians (Biddle et al., 2013; Leroy-Dyer, 2022).

With relatively low rates of employment, Indigenous Peoples have the highest unemployment rate in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2021), only 54.1% of Indigenous Peoples were employed, and non-Indigenous people were 1.4 times more likely to be employed. Dennysmith and Loosemore (2020) note that the employment rate for Indigenous Peoples "has improved by less than a percentage point in a decade". In 2021, the unemployment rate for Indigenous Peoples aged 15 years and over was 12.3%, compared to the unemployment rate for non-Indigenous Australians at 4.3% (ABS, 2021).

Closing the Gap on Indigenous employment disadvantage has been an enormous failure (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). For instance, Target 7: By 2031, increase the proportion of Indigenous youth (15–24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67% is improving, but not on track. Additionally, Target 8: By 2031, increase the proportion of Indigenous Peoples aged 25–64 who are employed to 62% is not on track (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023).

Moreover, when Indigenous Peoples are employed, they experience structural racism, discrimination, unconscious bias, sexism, shadeism, culturism, pigeonholing, stereotyping, lack of career opportunities, and exclusion among other things which create an invisible barrier or "white ceiling" (Leon, 2022; Plater et al., 2020). This white ceiling impacts on wellbeing, job satisfaction, career development, and career progression, and often leads to Blak women exiting the workplace. The few that break through the white ceiling demonstrate a form of cultural agility or "cross-cultural code-switching" (Jordan & Leroy-Dyer, 2023; Molinsky, 1999, 2007).

Racism has been identified as one of the determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing at a national level (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022; Bennett, 2014), since racism has an effect on a person's mental health and wellbeing. Racism towards Indigenous Peoples has resulted in incidents of depression and anxiety; it can decrease life satisfaction, increase stress and negative emotional reactions, and has been linked to suicide (Bennett, 2014; Paradies, 2016; Paradies et al., 2015).

Shadeism, a result of colonisation, is a racial stratification system that privileges lighter-skinned Indigenous Peoples over those with darker skin (Hunter, 2007; Plater et al., 2020). Shadeism can cause fair-skinned people to experience

racism twofold, by being overlooked in favour of white people, then being disregarded by Indigenous Peoples as they are not considered sufficiently cultured. In their study, Plater et al. (2020, p.494) found “skin shade and cultural and community connections are powerful and interrelated determinants of workplace success and failure”, and that discrimination based on skin shade was common, especially in the workplace.

Culturism is regarded by race scholars as the functional equivalent of racism, whereby people are discriminated against on the basis of cultural norms (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), constituting “the negative evaluation of cultures deemed different from the dominant culture and can be employed to fill the gap left behind by discredited notions of racial inferiority” (Plater et al. 2020, p. 495). Culturalism isolates those within a workplace who exist inside the dominant group from those who are not in the dominant group—outsiders, similar to insider–outsider theory (Schinkel, 2013). Plater et al. (2020, p. 495) found that while workplaces seem “culturally appropriate”, white colleagues and managers used culturalism to argue that Indigenous employees displayed “self-destructive behaviours” by prioritising cultural obligations over workplace deadlines.

Cross-cultural code-switching is the act of modifying one’s behaviour to be seen as conforming appropriately to the cultural norms of the other dominating culture Jordan & Leroy-Dyer, 2023; Molinsky, 2007. Cross-cultural code-switching is most effective when used strategically to achieve a particular outcome. Cross-cultural code-switching requires a person to function appropriately in a variety of foreign cultural situations, outside of the cultural settings which they were born and raised, often exhibiting behaviour which is in conflict with their own cultural norms, values, and beliefs (Molinsky, 2007). While the “decision to engage in code-switching behaviour is a conscious one, it is a decision that comes with a potential psychological cost, particularly as it requires operating in conflict with deeply held values” (Jordan & Leroy-Dyer, 2023, p. 192; Molinsky 1999, 2007).

In their study, Plater et al. (2020) found that Aboriginal people “sold their soul” so they would “fit” within a workplace. One participant stated, “You’ve heard the term ‘coconuts’, that’s what that refers to. The white managers will welcome you in if you look black but act white” (Plater et al., 2020, p. 495). The study, which was undertaken between 2014 and 2016, conducted narrative interviews to understand what it meant to be a mature-age Indigenous university graduate. Twenty-six graduates aged between 30 and 60 were interviewed; all were working while studying and “all were in roles where identifying as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person was required or strongly preferred due to the nature of their work” (Plater et al. 2020, p. 490).

The participants in this study completed their first university degree as mature-age students, as, due to colonisation, there were no opportunities for them to complete higher education while young. Within a historical context, the study participants’ post-degree workplace experiences, according to Plater et al. (2020), “are inextricably linked to Australia’s colonial past” (p. 490). The participants reported a complete disrespect and disregard for their qualifications, experience, culture, and community in their workplaces. Participants noted that racism was part of their everyday work life, where people acted to undermine and control them.

Racism manifests itself in numerous ways in the workplace. Racism can be direct or indirect, overt or covert, between individuals, on an interpersonal level, or embedded in organisations’ policies, procedures, and practices. Racism can include things such as being treated unfairly because of a person’s “Aboriginality”, racial slurs and comments, appearance racism, being ignored, violence, lack of career or training opportunities, or having racist materials in the workplace (just to name a few) (Cooms et al., 2025; Jones et al., 2023; Leroy-Dyer, 2016; Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023; Plater et al., 2020).

Institutional and structured racism has long-term effects on Indigenous Peoples (Leroy-Dyer, 2016), with studies finding that more than half of Indigenous Peoples experience racism in the workplace, which impacts on wellbeing and job satisfaction (Brown et al., 2020). Ferdinand et al. (2013) found that, of 755 Indigenous Peoples surveyed in Victoria, almost every one of them had experienced racism in the previous 12 months. Biddle et al. (2013) assert that racism could lead to Indigenous Peoples decreasing their labour supply to avoid racial discrimination.

The *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth)* report (Brown et al., 2020), surveyed 1,033 Indigenous Peoples from around Australia about their experiences of racism in the workplace. The results of the survey were alarming. Some of the findings include:

- 28% of respondents felt culturally unsafe at work
- 38% reported being treated unfairly because of their Aboriginality
- 44% reported hearing racial slurs
- 59% experienced racism.

Further, Indigenous Peoples were:

- 2.5 times less likely to be satisfied in their jobs
- 3 times less likely to recommend their place of work to other Indigenous Peoples
- 2 times as likely to look for alternative work within the next year
- less likely to feel supported in the workplace when reporting racism, with 1 in 3 feeling supported.

Several studies conducted on the Australian Public Service (APS) (Bargallie, 2020; Faulkner & Lahn, 2019; Larkin, 2014; Leon, 2022) found that racism permeated the APS and was a contributing factor to the ongoing attrition of Indigenous staff. Larkin (2014) examined how race contributed to the continuing decline of Indigenous Peoples in the APS, and argued that the “APS denies the existence of racism”, however, institutes “a series of colour-blind, benevolent, white programs of special measures designed to address a perceived Indigenous deficit” (p. 11).

Bargallie (2020), using an insider perspective, applied Critical Race Theory to unmask the racial contract that underpins the “absent presence” of racism in the APS. This study showed that, despite claims of fairness, inclusion, opportunity, respect, and racial equality for all, Indigenous employees languished on the lower rungs of the APS employment ladder, and uncovered how racism was normalised in the APS as it is in other “white institutions”.

There have also been several studies on Australian universities (Asmar & Page, 2009; Bunda et al., 2012; Burgess & Leroy-Dyer, 2009; Cooms et al., 2025; Jones et al., 2023; Leroy-Dyer, 2026; Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023; Platter et al., 2020; Wood & Watson, 2018) written from an Aboriginal standpoint by academics who have experienced (or witnessed) racist or other forms of discrimination within the workplace that their “white counterparts” do not experience. This includes lack of, or being denied, opportunities; overt and covert racism from colleagues and students; excessive cultural workloads; being pigeonholed; and having to “prove your worth”; among other things.

Cooms et al. (2025) note that the academy facilitates a hostile worldview for Indigenous Peoples, while Jones et al. (2023) contend that academic institutions are unsafe places where Blak knowledges and ways of being, knowing, and doing are attacked and undermined, and Blak people are often seen as lesser than their white counterparts, with their role in the academy being to “fix” the “Aboriginal problem”, all while enduring continued racism, despite diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in their workplaces.

Studies show that growing numbers of Indigenous Peoples are entering historically white, structurally racist workplaces and experiencing racism—“something more insidious and subtle” than blatant racism (Larkin, 2014, p. 48). According to Larkin (2014, p. 48), “Whiteness materialises as a dominating and pervasive form of racialised power that objectifies and subjectifies Indigenous employees in ways to circumvent and preclude their meaningful participation in the workforce.”

Differing mechanisms of power and racism have been used to control and dominate Indigenous Peoples within the labour market since colonisation, such as denying equal wages, denying the payment of wages, and implementing wage conditions that were akin to slavery (Leroy-Dyer, 2021).

Undeniably, racism disadvantages Indigenous Peoples in the workplace and, although Indigenous Peoples face disproportionate challenges in the workforce due to the ongoing impacts of colonisation and dispossession, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience additional burdens because of their gender” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 3). The experiences of Indigenous women in the workforce aligns with what Intersectionality Theory suggested we would find in their workplaces and work experiences.

## Indigenous Women

Since colonisation, Indigenous women have been seen through the lenses of negative stereotypes in which settler Australians have understood us (Hickey, 2016; Wood & Watson, 2018), manifesting in exclusionary practices. This “cultural analysis” has promoted racist stereotypes of Indigenous women as lazy, non-productive, and unwilling to work (Langton, 2011; Leroy-Dyer, 2021; McGrath & Sanders, 1995; Miller, 1985). These representations are potently embedded in Australian culture, and impact upon the lives of Indigenous women in a myriad of ways.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021), employment rates for Indigenous Peoples in 2018–19 differed markedly by sex. Women have an employment rate of 45%, well below that of their male counterparts at 54%. Primarily, women are employed in low-paying positions in community and social assistance occupations. In addition, the *Gari Yala* report (Brown et al., 2020) noted that women in lower levels in employment also had the lowest levels of support in the workplace.

One potential factor influencing the lower participation of Indigenous women in the workforce is caring responsibilities. Indigenous Peoples have a significantly higher rate of disability, 24% (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023), but lower levels of engagement with services and supports, which results in Aboriginal women taking on significantly more caring responsibilities than men (Brown et al., 2020; Cooms, 2021; Cooms et al., 2022). In addition, Indigenous women tend to take on the role of care giver (Parmenter et al., 2024) more than the non-Indigenous population, and this has a detrimental effect on Indigenous women's entry and participation in paid employment. Further, they are a particularly vulnerable group in the workplace, and are more likely to be culturally unsafe in unsupported employment and have higher cultural loads (Brown et al., 2020).

Australia-wide, more women are being appointed to managerial roles, however, high resignation rates are undermining gender equality gains, while occupational segregation remains a key driver of inequality (Duncan et al., 2025). Indigenous women in Australia are underrepresented in managerial and executive positions in the workforce, and, while the gender balance of 40% female representation on boards has largely been achieved, the inclusion of culturally diverse and Indigenous women has largely been ignored (Women on Boards Australia Pty Ltd, 2022).

Indigenous women report experiencing violence at more than three times the rate of non-Indigenous women, and the physical, verbal, sexual, and emotional abuse suffered is often more severe (Kinnerly, 2022). More generally, Indigenous women experience inequity in economic participation fuelled by racism and discrimination (Cooms et al., 2022; Jordan & Leroy-Dyer, 2023; Leroy-Dyer, 2022), and face greater levels of discrimination, harassment, and unfair treatment in the workplace than any other group in Australian society (Cooms et al., 2025; Leroy-Dyer, 2016, 2021, 2022; Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023) 2023; Leroy-Dyer, 2022). Racism correlates with lower engagement and academic outcomes, especially for Aboriginal women (Rennie, 2018), policies, actions, and attitudes create inequality based on race, creating the power to discriminate against, oppress, or limit the rights of Indigenous Peoples. For Indigenous women, the intersectionality of race and gender compound this discrimination Cooms et al., 2025; Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023).

## Application to the Workplace

From the research available we can ascertain that bias and systemic discrimination of Indigenous women creates inequalities at every stage of the employment cycle, beginning with recruitment and selection, right through to promotion (Brown et al., 2020). In addition, women who identify as Indigenous, “face multiple and compounding disadvantages when participating and progressing in the labour force” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 2).

Rallying against this oppressive control and domination since colonisation, Indigenous women, over the decades, have fought against racial discrimination despite being marginalised by both race and gender in the workplace, giving voice to the issues and challenges particularly regarding inequalities in education and employment (Jordan & Leroy-Dyer, 2023; Leroy-Dyer, 2022).

Socio-economic disparities and the construct of class, gender, ethnic, racial, and other characteristics are reproduced in the workplace, coinciding with increased interest in equity, diversity, inclusion, and gender studies (Acker, 2006;

Ozbilgin et al., 2011; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015) Studies of the production of gender, class, and racial inequalities in workplaces have mostly focused on one of these categories, rarely attempting “to study them as complex, mutually reinforcing or contradicting processes” (Acker-Verney, 2016, p. 442).

The impacts of intersectional disadvantage and discrimination in employment are well recognised by Indigenous researchers and academics, who have highlighted racist assumptions, language and behaviour, isolation and exclusion, and organisations that demonstrate no understanding of Indigenous Peoples or culture (Bennett, 2014; Cooms et al., pending; Cooms et al., 2025; Cooms et al., 2022; Gair et al., 2015; Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023; Paradies, 2018; Paradies et al, 2015; Watego, 2021).

Wasserman & Frenkel (2015, p. 1487), note that there have been “a number of empirical studies documenting the organizational experiences of women of distinct social backgrounds”. However, by utilising Intersectionality Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Indigenous Feminist Theory, and incorporating them as praxis, a workplace can move beyond being superficial and one-dimensional to ensure that specific groups are not excluded or marginalised, and this praxis can be used as a valuable tool for critiquing complex dominant systems of control and oppression (Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Museus & Saelua, 2019).

Cooms et al. (pending) note that, despite the systems being set up to destroy us, Blak women have managed to move the system to make space for us, even despite individualistic neoliberal practices. This means we have to work to challenge and dismantle both racism and sexism by decolonising the harmful practices that permeate in the workplace.

The *Gari Yala* report (Brown et al., 2020, p. 24) recommended ways in which an organisation can achieve an inclusive workplace, which include: commit to unearthing and acting on workplace truths, focus on workplace readiness (cultural safety) not worker readiness, recognise identity strain and educate non-Indigenous staff about how to interact with their Indigenous colleagues in ways to reduce this, recognise and remunerate cultural load as part of an employee's workload, focus on sustainable careers and career development.

Leroy-Dyer & Menzel (2023), pose questions employers should consider when creating an appealing workplace for Indigenous Peoples, especially women, which include: Why does the organisation want an Indigenous workforce?; What value does this workforce bring to the organisation?; How can the organisation provide a safe space?; Is the organisation's business model based on exploitation and marginalisation? Does the organisation practice reconciliation the correct way (not tokenistic, but really commit, and truth-telling is an important part of this)?; Has the organisation started to decolonise and de-westernise practices?; Can the organisation ensure that harmful practices of the past have discontinued?; and How can our organisation/this position bring benefit to/build capacity for Indigenous employees/communities?

## Methodology

Indigenous methodologies have emerged as a vigorous and active field of knowledge production that involve Indigenous Peoples from around the world applying their own perspectives and understandings to social research and methodologies (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2010). Indigenous methodologies are an approach based on Indigenous philosophical positioning and epistemology, the interplay between the method and the paradigm, and the extent to which the method is consistent within an Indigenous worldview. They also raise questions about the importance of protocols within Indigenous communities and the necessity to recognise how the methods are transposed. Indigenous methodologies aim to pay due respect to those communities and their teachings in a suitable way, which can then be translated into research (Kovach, 2010). It is a movement towards a more inclusive and culturally acceptable way of doing research for Indigenous Peoples that is culturally appropriate and ethically correct in moving towards the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge about Indigenous Peoples. This approach is based on Indigenous ethics and knowledge that determines how to access knowledge, the tools to gain that knowledge, and the theoretical approaches for conducting research (Porsanger, 2006). An Indigenous methodological approach is not just confined to “disciplines orientated by native studies”; it is also relevant for “fields seemingly unrelated to native life and native ways” (Kahakalau, 2004, p. 20).

## Indigenous Research Perspectives

The history of research for Indigenous Peoples in Australia is tied to colonisation—told through the eyes of the colonisers. Indigenous Peoples did not have a voice and were “dehumanised” as objects of research (Smith, 1999). Cultural practices and norms were distorted and described in ways that reflected the non-Indigenous researchers’ prejudices, beliefs, and values (Smith, 1999). According to Martin (2003, p. 2), “mistreatment of ourselves and our land, marginalisation from structures and governance and development of misguided policy and programs resulting in feelings of distrust, caution, fear of exploitation and misrepresentation” summed up the effects of past research.

Indigenous research theories have been derived from “what it means to be Indigenous” and have not been constructed in isolation from the human and civil rights movements, national struggles, and other theoretical approaches (Smith, 1999). Indigenous scholars have developed theories that focus on decolonising and reframing research practices that enable Indigenous voices to be heard and to ensure truth and vision in Indigenous research.

## Design and Method

This research then forms an extension of the research undertaken for my PhD thesis, which involved six detailed case studies on selected organisations and industries to gather a holistic view of the organisations’ approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. Case studies were chosen because it enabled a holistic, in-depth investigation, while aligning with Indigenous methodologies. The study aligned with the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) code of ethical research and ethical clearance was obtained through university processes.

Yarning and storytelling were employed as culturally informed research methods that allow for greater openness, comfort, and communication, and centring Aboriginal relationality at the fore (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Kwaymullina, 2005; Ullrich, 2019).

Yarning and yarning circles were utilised to allow for in-depth conversations about the lived experiences of the participants. Yarning aligns with Indigenous worldviews as a means of transmitting knowledge (Kovach, 2010) and is a culturally appropriate way to interview Indigenous research participants. Yarning allows the researcher and the participant flexibility, as participants have a high degree of control over the stories they share (Blodgett et al., 2011) through an informal and relaxed discussion relevant to the research. “While the yarn is relaxed and interactive it is also purposeful with a defined beginning and end” (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010, p. 40). By utilising yarning, the researcher is accountable to the Indigenous Peoples participating in the research, as yarning develops a trust between the researcher and participants and assists in building a relationship.

Research is storytelling. We listen to people’s stories through yarning; we reflect on those stories and share them in our research findings. Storytelling is a huge part of Indigenous culture.

## Recruitment and Selection of Participants

As stated above, the thesis encompassed case studies of six organisations. The criteria for choosing an organisation were that they needed to be a large corporation, have locations in urban and rural/remote communities, and have high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment rates. Once the organisations were confirmed, permission was sought to interview/yarn with any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person employed in the organisation.

Potential participants needed to be identified through organisational employment records, and there was a reliance on the organisations to put forward participants. In discussion with senior managers, key criteria for recruitment were that there needed to be a good gender mix (although this paper only relays the stories of women) from varying rural/remote/urban locations where the organisation operated. Each organisation forwarded emails to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, accompanied by the information and consent forms, asking for volunteers for the study. In total, 192 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people chose to participate in the research project. All were involved in yarns or yarning circles.

## Yarning and Data Analysis

Yarns were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were given an identifying code, enabling easy identification of key themes and quotes. Data was analysed using a descriptive coding technique (Punch, 2005), which identified commonalities and attached meaning, allowing the data to be summarised and categorised. The yarns were manually coded using Microsoft Excel, due to the sheer number of transcriptions. Priori and inductive coding (Willis, 2010) was used to analyse the data as it allowed for a more holistic data analysis.

The yarns gave excellent insights into not only the participants but how the participants were “treated” in the organisations. The stories of strength and resilience in the next section, were gathered from participants as part of the doctoral research. These stories were from Blak women employed by the organisations involved in the study.

In the next section, I use an Indigenous methodological approach from Fredericks et al. (2019) and Kovach (2010) to share stories of Indigenous women's experiences, from their perspectives engaging in the western workplace.

## Setting the Blak Agenda – Stories of Strength and Resilience in the Workplace

The yarns shared by Blak women offer much more than personal narratives. They are acts of resistance and living archives of truth-telling that expose how systemic racism, sexism, and colonial workplace structures intersect. Using Indigenous methodologies, storytelling is not merely data; it is a sovereign act of knowledge production. Each story reveals both the harm created by colonial systems and the power of Blak women's leadership and resilience.

### Story 1 – Resistance through Action

*Finding my place within a western workplace has been a struggle for me. As a younger person I worked for an organisation that racially and sexually discriminated against me. After a particular incident that left me mentally broken, with the assistance of my union, I gathered the strength to sue my employer. I lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission and with the Industrial Relations Commission in NSW. My employer, after a long, drawn-out process, settled out of court. The whole experience left me physically and mentally distraught. However, it planted in me the seed to want to change the system, to help others who were suffering in the same way. In my current workplace I am a union workplace delegate and every day I fight for rights to a culturally safe workplace.*

This story reflects how Blak women are often positioned at the intersection of racism and sexism—a key tenet of Intersectionality Theory. As per Snyder (2014), it was clear that colonialism led to a western workplace that intensifies gendered oppression. It reveals the emotional and psychological burden carried when challenging workplace discrimination through colonial legal systems. Rather than being supported through culturally safe mechanisms, the storyteller had to turn to western legal processes that were exhausting and adversarial—with the exhaustion perhaps reflecting the fact that this Blak woman belongs to a “particularly vulnerable group” given the likelihood that work sits within a broader context of care (Parmenter et al., 2024). Instead of receiving culturally safe support, the storyteller had to rely on exhausting and adversarial Western legal processes, amounting to cross-cultural code switching (Jordan & Leroy-Dyer, 2023; Molinsky, 2007).

Yet, this yarn also illustrates sovereignty in action: transforming pain into leadership and collective advocacy. This is a hallmark of Indigenous Feminist praxis, moving beyond the individual to uplift community. By becoming a workplace delegate, the storyteller is actively reclaiming space and authority, challenging the colonial structures that once harmed her.

### Story 2 – The Cost of “Justice”

*There are no winners in this situation. I went to induction training and a couple of the participants in the training made some inappropriate racial comments. I raised that with my manager who initiated a formal investigation. There was a formal investigation, and the allegations were found to be factual. The employee involved was counselled about their behaviour, told to attend cultural awareness training and put on notice that the offensive behaviour would not be tolerated. It was good that the organisation took me and my complaint seriously, however the whole process was really hard. At times I felt like withdrawing the complaint as it was taking its toll on me. I am glad I saw it through but the cost to me—my mental health—was massive but I am still here and I am stronger now and help others who are going through similar stuff.*

This story exposes how even when organisations “do the right thing” procedurally, they fail to address the cultural and personal cost experienced by Indigenous women. The storyteller's fatigue and trauma mirror what Critical Race Theory describes as the *permanence of racism*—where processes appear neutral but are embedded in white systems that reproduce harm (Brown & Jackson, 2022; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The organisation's response, while procedurally correct, did not mitigate the emotional toll or provide culturally safe support mechanisms, revealing the limitations of liberal legal frameworks in addressing systemic racism.

From an Intersectionality Theory perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), this story illustrates how race and gender intersect to produce compounded disadvantage. The storyteller, as a Blak woman, bore the emotional and cultural labour of pursuing justice—a burden not shared by her non-Indigenous colleagues. The process of reporting and enduring an

investigation reflects the *invisible cultural load* that Indigenous women carry, often having to educate, advocate, and endure simultaneously.

Moreover, the experience aligns with Indigenous Feminist Theory, which critiques colonial institutions for failing to recognise Indigenous women's relational and collective responsibilities (Fredericks, 2010; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). The storyteller's resilience and her decision to support others post-incident reflect Indigenous Feminist praxis—transforming personal trauma into collective advocacy. This is not just survival; it is sovereignty in action.

The story also exemplifies cross-cultural code-switching (Jordan & Leroy-Dyer, 2023; Molinsky, 2007), where the storyteller had to navigate western legal and organisational systems that conflict with Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The psychological cost of this code-switching is evident in her mental health struggles, reinforcing the need for trauma-informed, culturally safe responses that go beyond procedural justice.

Ultimately, this yarn underscores a central argument of this paper: that justice within colonial frameworks often comes at a personal cost to Indigenous women, and that true inclusion requires structural transformation, not just policy compliance.

### Story 3 – Everyday Racism and Stereotypes

*I was in the lunchroom and one person said, "You know they are going to run a diversity program, that means they're going to employ a lot of Aboriginal people." I said, "Yes that's right." She said, "Then we're going to have no one turn up for work. I hope they're better than the last three Aboriginal people we employed because they didn't turn up." I said, "Tell me if I'm wrong, but the last young Aboriginal person that worked for us on checkout went to uni at the end of January." She said, "Yes." I said, "Every week you used to come complaining to me about kids that don't turn up for work and people that don't turn up for work on checkouts." She said, "Yes." I said, "So would you like me to stop employing white Australians? Who do I employ?" She said, "Point taken." I said, "Everyone has to be treated on their own merits and people have to be made to feel comfortable." Of course, she didn't know I was Aboriginal, imagine what she would have thought about that.*

This yarn powerfully illustrates how everyday racism operates through casual, seemingly innocuous comments that reinforce deep-seated stereotypes about Aboriginal people. The lunchroom exchange is emblematic of what Critical Race Theory terms *microaggressions*—subtle, routine expressions of racial bias that serve to reinforce dominant power structures and signal exclusion (Brown & Jackson, 2022; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These microaggressions are not isolated incidents but are embedded in workplace culture, shaping perceptions of competence, belonging, and value.

The storyteller's response—calm, strategic, and educative—reflects the cultural agility and cross-cultural code-switching that Blak women often employ to navigate hostile environments (Jordan & Leroy-Dyer, 2023; Molinsky, 2007). This form of code-switching requires Indigenous women to adapt their communication and behaviour to dominant cultural norms, often at the expense of their own wellbeing. It is a survival strategy, but one that comes with a psychological cost, as it demands constant vigilance and emotional labour.

From an Intersectionality Theory perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), this story highlights how race and gender intersect to produce compounded disadvantage. The storyteller not only experiences racism but must also manage the gendered expectation of emotional restraint and diplomacy. Her labour—correcting misinformation, challenging stereotypes, and maintaining professionalism—is invisible yet essential. It reflects the *double burden* carried by Indigenous women, who are expected to educate others while enduring systemic exclusion.

Indigenous Feminist Theory further illuminates the dynamics at play. The storyteller's intervention is not merely a personal act of resistance but a form of sovereign knowledge production—asserting Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in a space that routinely denies them (Fredericks, 2010; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Her refusal to accept deficit narratives about Aboriginal workers challenges the colonial logic that positions Indigenous people as inherently unreliable or unproductive. This act of truth-telling aligns with Indigenous Feminist praxis, which centres relational accountability and collective empowerment.

Importantly, the story also reveals the impact of shadeism and cultural invisibility. The colleague's assumption that the storyteller was non-Indigenous underscores how fair-skinned Blak women are often erased from dominant narratives, yet still subjected to racism. This duality—being both invisible and hyper-visible—reflects the complex ways in which colonialism continues to shape workplace dynamics. It reinforces the need for organisations to move beyond tokenistic diversity initiatives and engage in structural transformation that embeds Indigenous governance, cultural safety, and relational ethics.

Ultimately, this yarn affirms this paper's central argument: that racism is not confined to formal policy or overt discrimination; it is woven into the everyday fabric of workplace interactions. Addressing this requires more than cultural competency training; it demands a decolonising approach that dismantles the systems enabling such harm and centres Indigenous women's voices, leadership, and sovereignty.

#### Story 4 – Tick-Box Inclusion and Cultural Load

*The cultural awareness that we do here doesn't teach the leaders how to communicate with an Indigenous person. It doesn't teach them or give them an awareness about cultural sensitivities, all the things that they need to operate as a leader with an Indigenous employee. I've had leaders ring me and say, "I've got this problem with this employee, quick deal with it because they're Blak." I can't deal with it; I don't have the authority. It is all well and good for the organisation to have diversity initiatives, but if they don't have good policies and practices in place, then those initiatives are useless and cause more harm to Blak women.*

This story reveals the superficiality of mainstream inclusion practices. Many workplaces treat cultural awareness as a box-ticking exercise rather than a deep, relational commitment to change. The storyteller is positioned as the de facto fixer for all issues involving Indigenous staff, highlighting the cultural load that Blak women disproportionately carry—a concept that is central to both Intersectionality Theory and Indigenous Feminist Theory.

From an Intersectionality perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), this story illustrates how race, gender, and cultural identity intersect to produce compounded disadvantage. The storyteller is not only expected to perform her formal role but also to absorb the additional burden of managing cultural dynamics, educating non-Indigenous staff, and resolving issues that stem from systemic ignorance. This invisible labour is rarely acknowledged or compensated, yet it is essential to the functioning of the workplace.

Indigenous Feminist Theory critiques this dynamic by exposing how colonial institutions shift responsibility for change onto Indigenous women, rather than transforming themselves (Fredericks, 2010; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). The storyteller's experience reflects a broader pattern whereby Blak women are expected to carry the weight of reconciliation, inclusion, and cultural safety—without authority, recognition, or support. This is a form of institutional exploitation that mirrors historical patterns of dispossession and labour extraction.

The story also exemplifies Critical Race Theory's critique of liberal inclusion frameworks, which often focus on procedural fairness while ignoring structural power imbalances (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The organisation's diversity initiatives, while well-intentioned, fail to address the deeper colonial logic that positions Indigenous staff as problems to be managed rather than leaders to be empowered. The lack of culturally informed leadership training and the reliance on Indigenous staff to "fix" cultural issues reflect a system that remains fundamentally unchanged.

Moreover, the storyteller's experience highlights the failure of workplaces to recognise Indigenous governance and relational accountability as valid frameworks for leadership and management. Instead of embedding Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, organisations often default to western managerial models that perpetuate exclusion and harm.

Ultimately, this yarn reinforces this paper's central argument: that inclusion cannot be achieved through tokenistic measures or superficial training. True inclusion requires structural transformation—embedding Indigenous governance, recognising cultural load as legitimate labour, and shifting power away from colonial systems toward Indigenous sovereignty and leadership.

#### Story 5 – Safety through Indigenous Governance

*I work in an identified role and my workspace is primarily First Nations Peoples who work with a strong cultural ethic that allows me to meet my cultural obligations and protect me. There is a strong Indigenous governance and Elders presence. I feel safe in this workplace, safer than I have felt in a very long time, and I feel valued and productive at work and look forward to work every day. I am able to learn from the Elders every day and engage in relational reciprocal relationships. However, outside of my immediate workspace, in the wider organisation I am reminded of how systematic racism permeates.*

This story offers a rare and powerful counterpoint to the previous yarns—a vision of what culturally safe workplaces can look like when Indigenous governance and relational accountability are embedded. The storyteller's sense of safety, value, and productivity is directly linked to the presence of Elders, Indigenous colleagues, and culturally grounded practices. This affirms the central argument of Indigenous Feminist Theory, which prioritises collective

sovereignty, relational ethics, and community advancement over individualistic empowerment (Fredericks, 2010; Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

The contrast between the storyteller's immediate workspace and the wider organisation underscores the fragmented nature of inclusion within colonial institutions. While pockets of safety can be created through Indigenous leadership and governance, they remain vulnerable unless structurally protected. This reflects Critical Race Theory's assertion that racism is not only interpersonal but institutional, embedded in the very architecture of organisations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The wider organisation's failure to replicate the culturally safe conditions of the storyteller's team reveals the limits of diversity policies that do not address power structures.

From an Intersectionality Theory perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), the story highlights how race, gender, and cultural identity intersect to shape workplace experiences. The storyteller's sense of belonging is not just about representation, but about being in a space where her cultural obligations are understood and respected. This is particularly significant for Indigenous women, who often carry additional responsibilities related to care, community, and cultural continuity—responsibilities that are frequently invisibilised in mainstream workplaces.

The presence of Elders and Indigenous governance also reflects Indigenous epistemologies, where knowledge is relational, embodied, and intergenerational. The storyteller's ability to learn from Elders and engage in reciprocal relationships is not a peripheral benefit; it is central to her wellbeing and professional development. This aligns with Indigenous methodologies that view storytelling, yarning, and relationality as sovereign knowledge practices (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Kovach, 2010).

Ultimately, this yarn affirms that true inclusion is not about assimilation into colonial systems, but about transforming those systems to reflect Indigenous values, leadership, and ways of being. It demonstrates that when Indigenous governance is embedded, workplaces can become sites of strength, healing, and cultural continuity—not just survival.

## Story 6 – Creating Change Off-Country

*I have never felt like I fit in, at my previous workplace they didn't understand my worth. I was the sole Blak person there. They didn't understand my ways of being, knowing, and doing and outwardly mocked me. This was an extremely unsafe place. I left there vowing never to work in an environment like that again. I went to work in workplace that employed just Blak people. This was a safer environment; however, I wasn't able to contribute to my community in the way I really wanted to. I took a chance and applied for the job I am currently in. This was the first time I lived and worked off-Country and for the first year I felt I had made a huge mistake; however, I have been instrumental in creating positive change and a safer work environment, by surrounding myself with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and creating something unique. Although there is still a lot of work to do, I feel that I am making a difference, contributing to my community, and assisting to grow the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women leaders.*

This story exemplifies the transformative leadership of Blak women who, despite systemic exclusion, actively reshape workplace cultures. The storyteller's journey—from unsafe environments to building culturally grounded spaces off-Country—reflects the core principles of Indigenous Feminist Theory, which prioritises collective empowerment, relational accountability, and sovereignty over assimilation (Fredericks et al., 2019; hooks, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Her actions demonstrate that inclusion is not about fitting into colonial systems; it is about reclaiming space and asserting Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

The initial experience of exclusion and cultural erasure in her previous workplace aligns with Critical Race Theory's critique of institutional racism. The mocking of her identity and practices illustrates how colonial workplaces often fail to recognise Indigenous epistemologies, instead positioning Blak women as outsiders or problems to be managed (Bargallie, 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The storyteller's decision to leave and seek safer environments is a form of resistance—a refusal to endure cultural violence.

Her experience also highlights the intersectional burdens faced by Indigenous women. As Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 2011; Museus & Saelua, 2019) suggests, the compounded effects of race, gender, and cultural displacement intensify marginalisation. Working off-Country adds another layer of complexity, as it disconnects Indigenous women from their traditional support systems and cultural obligations. Yet, the storyteller's ability to build community and foster leadership among other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women demonstrates resilience and relational strength—key tenets of Indigenous Feminist praxis.

The creation of a culturally safe space, even in a context of displacement, reflects the power of Indigenous governance. By surrounding herself with other Blak women and embedding Indigenous values into the workplace, the storyteller

challenges dominant organisational norms and reconfigures the workplace as a site of cultural survival and transformation. This aligns with the broader argument that real inclusion requires structural change, not just representation or diversity rhetoric.

Her story also affirms the importance of relationality and intergenerational leadership. By mentoring and supporting the next generation of Indigenous women, she enacts a form of sovereign knowledge transmission that resists colonial fragmentation. This is not just professional development; it is cultural continuity.

Ultimately, this yarn reinforces this paper's central thesis: that Blak women do not merely survive colonial workplaces—they transform them. Through Indigenous Feminist, Intersectional, and Critical Race lenses, this story illustrates how leadership, resistance, and community-building are acts of sovereignty that challenge and reimagine the structures of work.

## Discussion

By analysing these yarns through Indigenous Feminist, Intersectional, and Critical Race frameworks, we move beyond storytelling as anecdote to storytelling as theory, data, and political resistance. These stories speak truth to power; they are not just about inclusion but about sovereignty, justice, and transformation.

These stories demonstrate how Blak women navigate racism, sexism, cultural load, and the white ceiling. They also show that when Indigenous governance and cultural authority are embedded, workplaces can become sites of strength, not harm. Structural racism cannot be solved by training alone; it requires decolonising workplace systems.

The stories together reveal a pattern: colonialism continues to shape workplace dynamics through both systemic and everyday racism. However, Indigenous women do not merely survive these spaces—we transform them.

Through the lens of Indigenous Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Intersectionality, these narratives:

- expose the structural nature of workplace racism
- reveal the invisible cultural load carried by Blak women
- demonstrate the power of Indigenous governance
- show that inclusion cannot occur within unchanged colonial structures.

Real change must start with redistributing power, embedding Indigenous governance, and valuing Indigenous knowledges at every level of the organisation.

The analysis also confirms what Indigenous Feminist, Critical Race, and Intersectionality theorists have long argued: that power must be confronted at its source. Inclusion cannot occur within colonial structures unchanged; it requires redistribution of power, not just diversity rhetoric.

## Conclusion

Indigenous women's experiences in the workplace are not isolated incidents; they are reflections of deeply embedded colonial structures that continue to shape labour market outcomes. This paper has shown that the disadvantage faced by Blak women is not incidental, but systemic, rooted in the intersecting legacies of colonisation, racism, and patriarchy.

The stories shared in this research are not just personal narratives; they are theoretical interventions. Each yarn illustrates how Indigenous Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, and Critical Race Theory operate in real time—exposing the cultural load, emotional labour, and structural exclusion that Blak women endure. These stories also demonstrate resistance, leadership, and the transformative potential of Indigenous governance and relational accountability.

From the union delegate who turned trauma into advocacy, to the woman who built a culturally safe space off-Country, these narratives embody Indigenous sovereignty and collective strength. They affirm what the literature has long argued: that inclusion cannot be achieved within unchanged colonial structures. Cultural awareness training and diversity policies are insufficient when they fail to address the deeper power dynamics that marginalise Indigenous women.

The discussion section highlighted how these stories align with the theoretical frameworks—showing how racism is both overt and covert, how cultural load is invisibilised, and how Blak women are often tasked with fixing systems that

exclude them. These insights reinforce the front-end arguments: that employment inequity is a product of colonisation, and that Indigenous women's inclusion must be grounded in self-determination, not assimilation.

Real inclusion requires more than representation. It demands:

- embedding Indigenous governance and leadership at all levels
- recognising and remunerating cultural load as legitimate labour
- creating culturally safe systems of accountability and redress
- valuing Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing as foundational, not supplementary.

In setting the Blak agenda, Indigenous women are not asking to be included in colonial systems—we are asserting our right to transform them. These stories, theories and practices converge to demand a workplace that reflects who we are, honours our sovereignty, and supports our leadership. Anything less is not inclusion; it is continued colonisation.

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