

## GENDER INCLUSIVITY: IS THE WESTERN WORLD'S APPROACH MISSING THE ESSENCE OF COMMUNITY? A DEEP DIVE INTO AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES

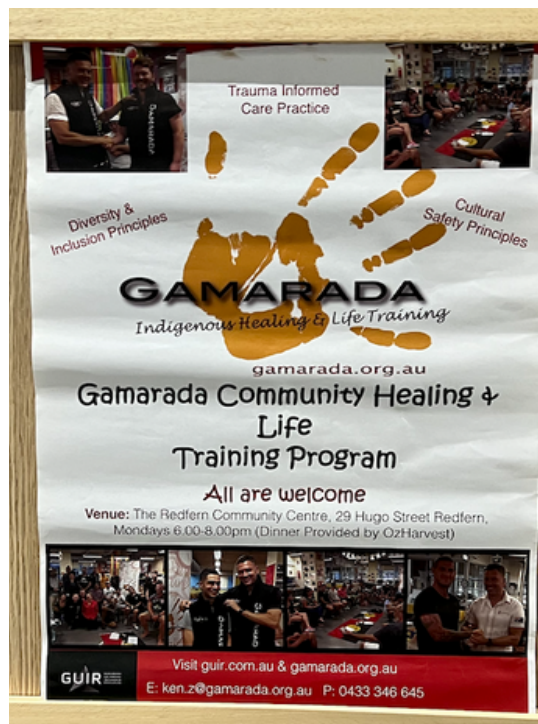
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The Western World defines gender inclusivity by the notion that gender stereotypes do not define societal roles, and all opportunities are open to everyone, regardless of gender. There is a strong desire to reach gender equality by empowering women and girls in their communities, as set forth in Sustainable Development Goal 5. Australian Aboriginal communities share a different perspective on gender inclusion that is based on overall community inclusion, rather than gender specifically.

**The Aboriginal definition of inclusion places the community before the individual and recognizes that a community is incomplete without taking into account every individual within. This sense of community stems from a strong connection to spirituality, culture, and strength that will be discussed in the following article.**

I would like to pay my respects to the Australian Aboriginal community members and leaders who contributed to this article by sharing their lived experiences with me and acknowledge their contributions to deepening my understanding of Aboriginal practices. The lessons of this article are rooted in personal conversations and culture sharing. It should also be noted that the word "Aboriginal" will be used throughout the rest of this article, as this term is in use on the mainland of Australia. This is not to disrespect the Torres Strait Islander people, nor is it meant in any offense. Further, "Indigenous" is considered a negative term to some, therefore all available terms are used.





## IMPACT OF HISTORY & EDUCATION AS A TOOL

Historically, Aboriginal communities in Australia have not been included or accepted in the greater Australian community, resulting in extensive intergenerational trauma and lost culture. Through colonialism, the Stolen Generation has had lasting effects on the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities. Despite historical challenges and injustices, Aboriginal communities exhibit resilience by maintaining and revitalizing their cultural practices.

**The lesson lies in preserving cultural identity as a source of strength, pride, and continuity. It highlights the resilience that can be cultivated through cultural pride and heritage.**

One such example of resilience comes from an educational program for children centered around traditional Aboriginal learning environments. Customarily, Indigenous people learned outside, in the open, through life and community. Education was continuous as a child grew up. It came from family members and elders, clan lore, and daily practices such as gathering food. Teaching was done communally and did not come from one source. In this way, generations learned moral codes, customs, and survival.

The Western model of education is vastly different, making it challenging for Aboriginal students to succeed. A new hybrid model of education has been developed and was described in an interview with Phillip Good, PhD Candidate at Western Sydney University. First, the program approaches schools and explains the importance of its activities. It does not move forward until it has been invited by the school director. Once invited, the first question asked to teachers is: "What do your kids need?" The teachers then proceed to have conversations with students through yarning circles to determine needs, to which the program is tailored. The program works because students are taught in an Aboriginal way, with which they are comfortable (Phillip Good, 2023). The commitment to passing down cultural knowledge from generation to generation is a crucial aspect of Aboriginal communities. Education that encompasses academic learning and cultural teachings is highly valued. It emphasizes the importance of preserving and sharing cultural heritage for future generations.

Aboriginal societies prioritize collective wellbeing over individual interests. This communal approach fosters a sense of belonging, shared responsibility, and mutual support. Strength comes from unity and the importance of considering the broader community in decision-making processes.



Gamarada Indigenous Healing and Life Training Charity, which translates to “Friends on the Journey” in the language of the Gadigal people from New South Wales, is a community organization that provides healing in a variety of ways, including hosting weekly meetings, open to everyone. In this way, the needs and challenges of community members are heard and supported. The organization encourages strength-based solutions by giving every person a voice to introduce themselves and share their background, reason for attending, values, and current challenges. Then, participants are asked how they are dealing with their respective challenges in a positive way to build strength. A guiding principle of these meetings is listening.

**Listening is central to understanding each other, and being listened to is central to healing.**

I was given the opportunity to attend one such meeting, and experienced first-hand the power of being listened to. In sharing my own story and challenges, I became more at peace and accepting of the difficulties I was facing. I felt supported and accepted in a community that is not my own, and am grateful to have been included.

The practice of Dadirri closes every Gamarada meeting. It is a reflection meant to center the individual with the deep spring within them. It emphasizes a respect for nature and a strong sense of community. “All persons matter. All of us belong... we are a people who celebrate together” (Miriam Rose Foundation, 1988). Specifically, it is defined as “inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness,” like contemplation. It is about finding peace through anything and being made whole. The community is not whole unless every person within it is whole. Practicing Dadirri together heals the community by healing every individual, no one is more important than the next. The practice of Dadirri showcases the value of genuine and respectful communication. The lesson is to approach conversations with a willingness to truly understand others, fostering empathy and creating a space where all voices are heard.

This contributes to building more robust, inclusive relationships. During last week’s practice, upwards of 15 people came together to express their conflicts from the week and engage in Dadirri. The central values of trust and willingness to share were exemplified by all members. There was a unique presence and feeling of being “in-the-moment” stemming from the fact that everyone in attendance wanted to be there to contribute to community healing.



The deep spiritual connection to the land is a central aspect of Aboriginal culture. This connection goes beyond a physical presence; it encompasses a profound spiritual relationship. There is an intrinsic link between people and their environment, which emphasizes the need for a sustainable and respectful relationship with nature. At the heart of Aboriginal spirituality is a commitment to releasing worries and realizing there is a need to wait for the seasons in life and approach them with love and understanding.

**There is power and strength in listening and waiting for seasons to pass.** It is a sense of releasing control, waiting so that things can be done with care, not rushing or hurrying through life, and accepting that nothing is more urgent than the current activity. Even when waiting comes with pain, staying united in wait makes the community strong.





Women's business is respected and separated from men's business. Genders have their own spaces and do not interfere with each other.

**Strength comes from the differences that arise from each perspective. It is important to acknowledge and respect the contributions of both women and men, allowing for diverse perspectives and strengths within a community.**

In essence, the lessons from Australian Aboriginal people highlight the significance of community, cultural pride, deep listening, and a holistic perspective on life. These principles offer valuable insights for fostering inclusivity, sustainability, and well-being in diverse societies worldwide.

Aboriginal societies often demonstrate a balanced and respectful approach to gender roles. Women in traditional roles have a great amount of authority, strength, and when needed, are able to stand up for themselves and be heard. In community meetings, women have a powerful and equal voice to share their thoughts, which stems from the cultural emphasis of listening to each other meaningfully. Traditional inclusivity is structured around lore. Communities don't need to accept a modern Western view because they have their own way that has proven successful over the 60,000 years that Aboriginal Peoples have lived on the lands in Australia.

Special gratitude to Gamarada Indigenous Healing and Life Training Charity lead by Ken Zulumovski, Philip Good and All Inspiring Aboriginal Leaders.



All photos gathered from the personal archives of Kamila Ciok and Alimuradova Organization.