FAIR WORK COMMISSION

Matter No.: AM2024/21

Re:

Gender-based undervaluation – priority awards revie

WITNESS STATEMENT OF KERRY STAINES ON BEHALF OF FIRST NATIONS

ADVOCATES AGAINST FAMILY VIOLENCE

I, Kerry Staines, CEO, of First Nations Advocates Against Family Violence, in the State of

Queensland, say,

1. Background

1. I am the CEO of First Nations Advocate Against Family Violence.

2. First Nations Advocates Against Family Violence is the peak body for the Family

Violence Prevention and Legal Services (FVPLS) sector. Our primary role is to support

advocacy and policy reform, ensuring that the voices of our grassroots workers and

organisations remain central to the national agenda. We provide critical support to our members, who are specialist legal and non-legal workers at the frontline of

delivering prevention and legal services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

affected by Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV).

3. Our work is dedicated to eradicating family violence, specifically through a gender-

based lens, that reveals DFSV predominantly affects women and children. It is crucial

to clarify that we advocate for this as a gender-based issue, not an Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander issue, countering misconceptions that it is unique to or

contained within Indigenous communities.

4. The peak body itself comprises 10 staff members, organised into two streams:

a. Policy work; and

b. Member engagement.

5. Our office is registered in Alice Springs, but our staff, including myself (based in

Queensland), work remotely from home, based in locations nationwide.

6. Our member organisations have a significant national presence, operating over 30

office locations across the country and conducting outreach to more than 250

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Aboriginal communities. They have representation in every state and territory. The size of these member organisations varies greatly, with some employing between 5 and 11 staff, while others have over 150 employees.

- 7. Our member organisations provide a wide range of services, encompassing both legal and non-legal work, crucial for offering a wrap-around, holistic support service that is culturally safe. The non-legal staff constitute a larger proportion of our workforce and are predominantly First Nations people from within the communities they serve.
- 8. Common roles within our sector include:
 - a. Caseworkers.
 - b. Community engagement workers.
 - c. Counsellors.
 - d. Cultural advisors.
 - e. Principal Legal Officers
 - f. Lawyers
 - g. Paralegals
 - h. Court Advocates
 - i. Community Legal educators.
 - j. Justice navigators.
 - k. Financial counsellors.
 - l. Managers of services.
 - m. Aunties, or people of cultural significance, who are vital for community engagement and trust.
- 9. Our members' services extend to supporting clients and their entire families through critical incidents, not solely instances of violence, but also events like suicide. The services are characterised by:
 - a. Building trust over long periods through repeated visits and deep engagement, especially in regional and remote communities. This can involve spending a week travelling to and staying in a community.
 - b. A holistic model of service delivery where cultural support and cultural supervision by First Nations staff is crucial to the delivery of this model, to maintain trust and service quality.

- c. Acting as a "one-stop shop" for all community needs, developing strong referral pathways, and providing continuous support to clients for months, years, or even a lifetime.
- d. Operating beyond standard working hours, as staff phones "never turn off," reflecting a profound cultural obligation to community care, often unfunded.
- e. Undertaking high-risk activities, such as driving alone or in pairs to extremely remote locations with no mobile phone reception.
- f. Accompanying clients to court, where staff are exposed to harassment, verbal abuse, and physical violence, including reprisals.
- g. Providing court support, a service often not offered by other legal systems providers. This involves navigating complex cases, from obtaining domestic violence orders (**DVOs**) to fighting for the return of children and addressing instances where individuals have been misidentified as perpetrators. The most difficult cases, where other legal aid services have exhausted their resources or cannot provide court support, are frequently referred to our sector, often with minimal time for preparation before hearings.

2. Workforce profile

- 10. All 10 staff members at our peak body are female, and while some are on contracts, these are aligned with the Social, Community, Health and Disability Services Award 2010 (SCHADS Award).
- 11. Most of the employees within our member organisations are also engaged under the SCHADS Award. While some legal officers may operate under different awards, many of our organisations are registered as Community Legal Centres (**CLCs**) for practical reasons like insurance, and in some areas, like the ACT, legal roles have been aligned under the SCHADS Award.
- 12. A significant proportion of our workforce, particularly in non-legal roles, consists of First Nations people who are embedded within their local communities. These individuals often bring invaluable lived experience and deep cultural knowledge to their roles. For example, non-Aboriginal lawyers often require significant support from Aboriginal Identified staff who may or may not have a legal or other formal qualification, and yet will often have indispensable local cultural knowledge and connections that is relied upon to undertake the work effectively, alongside practical legal and advocacy skills obtained through experience in this context. And, due especially to challenges recruiting lawyers and retaining them long term in 4Rs areas, these Identified local staff are crucial to continuity of case management and service delivery.

- 13. Our sector has many highly trained and experienced individuals, but their qualifications and expertise are often not formally recognised within traditional frameworks. Many possess bespoke qualifications, such as graduate certificates, specialised trauma training from leading experts, or even the equivalent of a Masters, which are not currently acknowledged. There are systemic issues that hinder the formal recognition of cultural safety and community navigation as qualifications, often linked to historical racism and barriers to education for Aboriginal people. Crucially, the cultural knowledge, skills, and expertise that First Nations staff bring, often through lived experience, are fundamental to the service delivery model and achieving cultural safety.
- 14. A particularly vital, yet often formally unclassified, role is that of the Auntie or a person of significant cultural authority. These individuals are the grounding force for an organization within a community; without them, engagement with services would often not occur.

3. Workforce attraction and retention

- 15. Our sector faces significant and persistent issues with workforce shortages, particularly in recruiting and retaining qualified, experienced, specialist legal and non-legal staff in rural, remote, and very remote areas. This is exacerbated by the highly complex and emotionally draining nature of the work.
- 16. Attracting and retaining staff is incredibly challenging due to a multitude of factors:
 - a. <u>Pay Disparity</u>: Our sector struggles to compete with the public service and other legal sectors that offer significantly higher remuneration. For instance, a Principal Legal Officer in a regional location within our sector might earn \$126,000, while a First Nations Policy Officer in Legal Aid Victoria was recently advertised for \$165,000. This disparity forces individuals who want to help their communities into "choosing poverty" as their job.
 - b. <u>Inadequate Allowances and Under-resourcing</u>: Our workers are often not funded for essential allowances like remoteness, air conditioning in tropical climates, satellite phones, or four-wheel-drive training for remote travel. There is also a lack of funding for well-being and check-in services despite the high levels of trauma exposure.
 - c. <u>Burnout and Vicarious Trauma</u>: The systemic under-resourcing of our member services has led to staffing shortages and consequently work overload for existing staff amidst the rising incidence of DFSV nationally. With limited support, and a lack of recognition for the 24/7 nature of their work staff face heightened psychosocial safety (and other WHS) risks and high rates of burnout and vicarious trauma among staff. Many staff are survivors of family

violence themselves, further increasing their personal risk and emotional load. This is literally "killing our people" through increased disease rates and stress.

- d. <u>Lack of Infrastructure</u>: Remote communities, where much of our work takes place, often lack affordable housing, childcare, access to other support, health and essential services, and basic amenities, limited to no tertiary education and training opportunities, creating significant barriers to attracting external staff and to fostering and incentivising local talent. Some organisations have resorted to trying to acquire their own housing for staff, an unfunded necessity.
- e. <u>Limited Career Pathways</u>: There is a lack of clear career pathways and progression opportunities for Aboriginal staff in non-legal roles, with many feeling "stuck at the lower levels" despite services needing people in senior roles. Due to workload demands, as well as the lack of local access to qualifications and training, it can be difficult for services to offer their staff opportunities for obtaining additional formal qualifications; and often they have acquired equivalent or essential practical experience towards a qualification, that many with the qualification do not possess. Professional development allocations are often non-existent.
- f. Unrecognised Cultural Load and Authority: The significant cultural load and responsibilities carried by First Nations staff, particularly experienced workers in roles such as case managers, locally based non-legal court advocates, legal support staff and especially for key cultural authority figures like Aunties, are not uniformly or formally recognised or remunerated. Due to the lack of formal recognition of Cultural Load and Authority in qualification and the awards frameworks, and the inability to therefore systematically incorporate appropriate recognition and payment into formal structures, internal conflicts and disrespect within teams can arise. This lack of embedded recognition and respect in frameworks can generally act as a disincentive for the recruitment and retention.

4. Work performed and skills

- 17. In our sector, finding the best person for the job goes far beyond traditional qualifications. We seek individuals who possess a unique combination of:
 - a. <u>Deep Cultural Knowledge and Lived Experience</u>: This is paramount, especially for non-legal staff who are often First Nations people from the communities they serve. They bring an understanding of local customs, kinship structures, community decision-making processes, hierarchies, and protocols. This knowledge allows them to provide culturally safe support, build trust, and

- address complex family dynamics in ways staff from outside areas cannot. Many of our staff are also survivors of family violence themselves, bringing invaluable lived experience that is not recognised in qualifications.
- b. Ability to Build and Maintain Trust: Our work involves repeated visits and building trust and engagement with different cohorts of your community over a long period of time. This skill is not taught in formal courses but is fundamental to effective service delivery.
- c. <u>Holistic and Responsive Engagement</u>: Staff must be able to engage with entire families, not just individuals, and be prepared to respond to a wide range of critical incidents beyond direct violence, such as suicide. This requires immense flexibility and an understanding that their role does not "turn off at the end of the day".
- d. Risk Assessment and Management in Complex Environments: Workers navigate high-risk environments, whether travelling to remote areas, managing high-volume workloads involving trauma exposure, or accompanying clients to court, where they may face verbal abuse, harassment, and actual violence. Understanding the unique risks within a community, for example, if a prominent family is involved in a case, is a critical, often undervalued, skill and emotional load.
- e. <u>Cultural Safety Acumen</u>: The competency to offer Cultural safety is not a static concept but one that is constantly moving. It is determined by the client, not the system. Staff must possess the nuanced skill of understanding diverse cultural groups, kinship relationships, and knowing who is appropriate to engage in different contexts. This is a competency that "has no certificate" but without it our proven and uniquely purposed service model would fail.
- f. <u>Language Skills and Cultural Competency</u>: While translator services are used, a national shortage of Indigenous language translators, particularly for gendersensitive issues, means local language skills are highly valuable, though often unfunded as an allowance.
- g. <u>"Cultural Authority"</u>: The presence of Aunties, or other cultural figureheads who ground our organisations to communities is indispensable. They possess a unique cultural authority and hold the community safety aspects. This authority, while not recognised in colonial hierarchies and structures, is vital for community engagement and decision-making; without their input, initiatives will not be accepted by the community.

5. Response to provisional view

- 18. Overall, the current proposal for a new award is seen as a "flattening" of the classification structure, making it more basic and likely to result in pay reductions, further exacerbating attraction and retention issues. It is seen as taking the sector backwards by exacerbating existing workforce challenges and undermining previous gains.
- 19. Our organisation has the following significant concerns with the Fair Work Commission's provisional view stated April 2025.
- 20. While we agree the SCHADS needs to be improved we disagree with the approach of drawing equivalency with the aged care sector, because it fails to recognise the diversity, specialised nature and complexity of our sector. Our work extends beyond the very narrow scope of "carer" defined in the Aged Care Award, encompassing legal advice and advocacy, financial counselling, case management, psychological services, intense trauma-informed support, community legal education and early intervention and prevention work.
- 21. The classification of everyone within the SCHADS Award as "carers" strips away the recognition of our workforce as highly sophisticated, highly skilled, highly trained, specialised and working in incredibly complex, risky environments. This devalues the profound cultural knowledge, skills, expertise, and lived experience that our predominantly First Nations staff bring to their roles. For example, the notion that an Auntie, who grounds an entire community, with 20+ years of delivering highly complex and therapeutic case management or advocacy could be classified and paid at a low administrative level is deeply disrespectful and potentially destructive to staff dynamics, further entrenching intersectional (race and gendered) experiences of systemic discrimination experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls in most workplaces.
- 22. The transposition of the definition and classifications from the Aged Care Award along with the removal of ERO in the provisional view fails to capture the breadth and intensity of the work performed. It does not account for the unique psychosocial risks associated with navigating family violence within First Nations communities, often involving staff who are survivors themselves. The 24/7 nature of cultural obligations means staff are "on call" like trauma surgeons, but without any formal recognition or compensation for this constant demand. The current structure also neglects the practical risks of remote work, such as driving to isolated areas without communication, and the direct exposure to violence and harassment faced by justice navigators in court settings.
- 23. We also anticipate a real risk of pay reductions rather than pay increases through the proposed "flattening of the whole structure to be far more basic" under the proposed

award. Where our members are already challenged when trying to compete for recruiting staff this change risks making our sector less attractive, especially compared with other services that offer significantly higher pay for similar expertise. Such a "two-tier pay system" would not only disadvantage existing staff but also severely cripple our already compromised ability to attract new, highly skilled individuals particularly those with senior experience who can supervise juniors, effectively taking the sector backwards.

- 24. We strongly believe the Equal Remuneration Order (**ERO**) must be preserved. The ERO was a transformative intervention that ensured more proper payment and alignment with government standards for our industry. Its removal, along with the elimination of pay points, would dismantle the incremental progression that staff currently rely on and are incentivised by, further eroding the financial stability of our workforce.
- 25. In addition to the above, the proposed changes are in direct contradiction to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Annexed to my statement and marked "KS-1" is a copy of the Closing the Gap National Agreement (CTG). Specifically, the provisional view disregards the following CTG priority reforms:

a. Priority Reform One:

i. Commits the government organisations (which includes the Fair Work Commission) to building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate progress on Closing the Gap. This reform stems from the belief that better life outcomes are achieved when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in policies and services that affect them, marking an unprecedented shift in how governments work by encompassing shared decision-making.

b. **Priority Reform Two:**

- i. Building the community-controlled sector (page 847): Commits to building strong and sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors, acknowledging that these services "achieve better results, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are often preferred over mainstream services".
- ii. Strong community-controlled sector elements (page 850): Specifies that elements of a strong sector include "a dedicated and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce... where people working in community-controlled sectors have wage parity based on workforce modelling commensurate with need," and a "dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model".

iii. Government funding (page 871): Aims to "Increase the amount of government funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services going through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations". Indicators include tracking ACCO contracts and the presence of "strong sector elements" like wage parity and sustained funding.

c. Priority Reform Three:

- i. Transforming government organisations (page 855): Commits to systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to be accountable for Closing the Gap and culturally safe and responsive. This includes identifying and eliminating racism, embedding cultural safety, delivering services in partnership with Indigenous organizations, and increasing accountability through transparent funding allocations. The goal is to employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in mainstream institutions, including in senior and identified positions.
- 26. The current proposal is seen as an active failure to meet these commitments, as it overlooks the unique challenges and needs of the Aboriginal community-controlled sector.
- 27. Annexed to my statement and marked "KS-2" is the commissioned report, "Caring about Care", published in July 2023. This report is relevant to the Fair Work Commission because it explores the scope, nature, value, and experiences of care work performed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, much of which is unpaid or undervalued. It explicitly critiques "mainstream" definitions of care that fail to recognise the holistic Indigenous understanding of care (including for Country, culture, and all living things) and the impact of colonisation on increasing care loads. The report directly addresses the need for better recognition and remuneration of Indigenous women's care work, including "cultural load," and advocates for policy changes to ensure economic security and support for carers.
- 28. Significantly, the report calculates the approximate economic value of unpaid care work by Indigenous women (ranging from \$223.01 to \$457.39 per day), which is currently not paid or adequately recognised.
- 29. The report makes the following recommendations relevant to the provisional decision:
 - a. Recommendation 2 (pages 75-78, 223-224): Calls for government departments to reshape public policy to be gender-sensitive and anti-colonial, centring and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care work as a critical

- aspect of economies. This includes ensuring care work is appropriately rewarded and remunerated, reforming carer payments, increasing social security, recognizing kinship care, and acknowledging caregiving in welfare-to-work programs.
- b. Recommendation 4 (pages 80-82, 247-251): Recommends that public policy be anti-racist, decolonial, and uphold Indigenous self-determination, specifically through strong and sustained resourcing to Indigenous community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) to provide culturally sensitive services and by reducing administrative burdens that impede service delivery. It also calls for addressing racism and coloniality within mainstream services.
- c. Recommendation 6 (pages 86-88, 258-260): Stresses the need to strengthen supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, ensuring they are also cared for. This includes expanding and sustainably resourcing Indigenous community-controlled services (e.g., early years, family, aged care) designed by Indigenous people to be culturally safe and holistic, aligning with Priority Reform 2 of the Closing the Gap agreement.
- d. Recommendation 7 (pages 88-90, 266-269): Urges governments to fully acknowledge and reflect in public policy the intricate links between paid and unpaid care roles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, including appropriate recognition and remuneration for their "cultural load" and ensuring flexible work arrangements and leave. It links to greater investment in ACCOs for culturally appropriate workplaces.
- e. Section 9.5 "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers need care too" (page 254): Discusses the exhaustion and illness experienced by women due to high care loads and emphasizes that support services must be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander designed, owned, run, and community-controlled, in line with Closing the Gap Priority Reform 2.
- 30. Annexed to my statement and marked "**KS-3**" is the Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership Final Report dated March 2024.
- 31. The Final Report critically assesses the National Legal Assistance Partnership (**NLAP**) and makes recommendations for a successor framework Access to Justice Partnership (**A2JP**). It highlights significant issues regarding the remuneration, retention, and working conditions of the legal assistance workforce, especially for staff in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (**ATSILS**), **FVPLS**, and **CLCs**, many of whom are First Nations people providing community-led care. The report explicitly links these workforce challenges to the failure to achieve the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, particularly Priority Reforms Two and Three.

- a. Section 8.7 "Remuneration and other employment conditions" (page 584): States that FVPLS, CLCs, and ATSILS generally pay legal staff significantly less than Legal Aid Commissions (LACs) and other government lawyers, and this pay disparity extends to non-legal workers, which affects attraction and retention.
- b. Recommendation 9 (pages 334-335, 481-483): States that the A2JP must address Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, ensuring legal assistance ACCOs have adequate funding to develop their organisations and people to enhance the scope, scale, quality, and cultural appropriateness of their services.
- c. Recommendation 17 "Rebasing community service providers" (pages 339-340, 555): Recommends resetting funding levels for community sector providers (ATSILS, CLCs, FVPLS) to reflect the true costs of operating sustainable organizations, with priority given to ATSILS and FVPLS. This is intended to ensure proper remuneration and support for staff.
- d. Recommendation 24 "Workforce Strategy" (pages 345-346, 599-600): Calls for the Commonwealth Government to develop a national workforce development strategy for the legal assistance sector to attract and retain a skilled, well-supported, and diverse workforce. This strategy must address remuneration, entitlements (including portable entitlement schemes), professional development, and career pathways.
- e. Recommendation 25 "Remuneration of community legal assistance workers" (pages 347-348, 604-606): Recommends additional Commonwealth funding to increase the remuneration of both legal and non-legal staff in CLCs, ATSILS, and FVPLS to be equivalent to pay in Legal Aid Commissions (LACs), with this funding to be embedded in baseline funding moving forward.
- f. Section 5.3.2 "Priority Reform Two: Building the community-controlled sector" (page 472): Notes NLAP's failure to contribute to building a strong community-controlled sector due to inadequate funding for workforce development, competitive remuneration, high caseloads, and occupational health and safety, leading to burnout risk.
- g. Section 5.3.3 "Priority Reform Three: Transforming Government Organisations" (page 476): Identifies a lack of funding for culturally sensitive services, weak accountability, and insufficient support for trauma-informed workforce models as limitations of NLAP in supporting this reform
- 32. Annexed to my statement and marked "**KS-4**" is the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Community Guide 2020. This guide summarises the voices of First Nations women and girls, emphasising their central role in communities, their extensive care work (often

unseen and undervalued), and the need for structural reform to achieve economic security and equitable participation. It explicitly calls for valuing their knowledge and addressing systemic issues that lead to their economic marginalisation.

- a. "Cross-cutting Themes" (page 791): States that First Nations women are the "social fabric of communities and the glue that holds everything together" and are "social and economic innovators, primary carers... they lead trauma recovery work and run organisations and businesses". It notes that much of their work and knowledge is "unseen and undervalued".
- b. "Pathways forward: Thriving communities and sustainable economies" (page 828): Recommends actions to ensure economic safety and security, including sufficient welfare payments and ending punitive income management.
- c. Point 5 of "Pathways forward: Thriving communities and sustainable economies" (page 831): Advocates for addressing "intersectional barriers impeding the employment of First Nations women and girls" by adopting special measures, identified positions, and proactive measures to ensure their safety and respect. This includes recognizing their cultural obligations and protocols, providing cultural awareness training, and investing in activities promoting workplace rights.

6. Implementation of a new classification structure

- 33. Implementing the proposed classification structure would present significant difficulties, such as:
 - a. <u>Pausing Implementation for Consultation</u>: We urge for the pausing of implementation to allow for sector-specific consultation and refinement. The specialist nature of our workforce should underscore the necessity for rigorous consultation to avoid a discriminatory and arbitrary result.
 - b. Rigid and Misaligned Classifications: The rigid classifications proposed threaten to seriously undermine current efforts to avert an existing crisis in workforce supply for our sector, particularly for regional and remote areas which already face unique factors like overcrowding and housing shortages for workers. The aged care benchmark is completely inappropriate for roles involving financial counselling, legal advocacy, or trauma-informed support, which require specialist qualifications, high level competencies and deep cultural understanding.
 - c. Failure to Recognise Cultural Load and Lived Experience: The failure to explicitly recognise cultural load and lived experience as equivalent to formal qualifications is a critical flaw. This is not merely a matter of fairness but essential for the effective functioning of our services, as demonstrated by the

- Murdoch University's cultural workload allowance which sets a precedent for this recognition.
- d. <u>Undermining Cultural Authority and Creating Internal Conflict</u>: The prescriptive and inflexible classifications actively facilitate "lateral violence" by devaluing cultural authority figures (like Aunties) who may hold lower formal classifications but possess immense community responsibility and leadership. This creates governance problems when attempting to reconcile traditional community structures with colonial organisational frameworks, and further entrenches systemic racial discrimination.
- e. <u>Erosion of Protections and Development</u>: The proposed changes will negatively impact superannuation rates, leave, and allowances compared to other sectors. There is also a complete lack of provisions for career pathways or professional development allocations for Aboriginal staff, further entrenching them in lower-level roles despite their critical contributions and potential for leadership.
- 34. The proposed changes to the Award structure in the provisional view is fundamentally misaligned with the realities of the FVPLS sector. It fails to recognise the complexity, risks, skills, and profound cultural responsibilities of our workforce, particularly for First Nations people. We strongly advocate for the preservation of current ERO rates, a pause in implementation, and the development of a nuanced classification structure that genuinely reflects the diversity of roles, values lived experience and cultural authority and supports the attraction and retention of staff dedicated to eradicating family violence.
- 35. In conclusion, while we agree the SCHADS needs improvement to enhance gender equity, and to better enable recognition of Cultural load and Cultural competency, we urge a more methodical approach including appropriate consultation, to avoid significant, long-lasting impacts of detriment and regression on our sector.

11 September 2025

Kerry Staines

Annexures

KS₁

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KS 2

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KS3

Mundy, W. (2024). *Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020–2025: Final Report*. Attorney-General's Department, Australian Government. (https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/publications/independent-review-national-legal-assistance-partnership-2020-25)

KS 4

Australian Human Rights Commission. (2020). Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future – Community Guide.

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