working women's centres

Increasing Indigenous Economic Opportunity
The Future of the CDEP and Indigenous Employment Programs

The Working Women Centres (WWC's) in South Australia and the Northern Territory and the Queensland Working Women's Service are community organisations which support women workers[1] whatever their age, ethnicity or work status by providing a free and confidential service on work related issues. The WWC's work primarily with women who are not represented by a union, their own lawyer or other advocate.

The Working Women's Centre opened in 1979 in South Australia and in 1994 in the Northern Territory and Queensland. All three Centres are small organisations which rely on funding from the Commonwealth (SA and NT), State (SA and Qld) and Territory governments (NT). Many women who contact our Centres work in very precarious areas of work and are both CDEP participants and employees in mainstream employment.

Indigenous women contact WWC's for assistance on a range of work related issues such as; pay and conditions, workplace bullying, termination of employment, discrimination, sexual harassment, assault in the workplace, OHS&W, workers compensation, maternity entitlements, negotiating with their employer and employment contracts. It is the role of the WWC's to provide the necessary support, information, advice and advocacy to women to assist them to resolve their issue at work.

At the NT Working Women's Centre 30% of women who have sought assistance about a work related matter for the 2008 calendar year thus far are Indigenous women. 44% of women, who are recipients of more intensive assistance termed 'case work', are Indigenous women for the same period. These women form a combination of CDEP participants, employees, urban based women and rural and remote women.

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[1] The term worker will be used throughout this submission to refer to both employees and CDEP participants. Where comments pertain only to employees, the term employee will be used. Where comments pertain only to CDEP participants, the term CDEP participants will be used.

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
Darwin NT 0801
mob: 0422 896 551
p: (08) 8981 0655
f: (08) 8981 0433
e: **admin@ntwwc.com.au**
8410 6770

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

Kerriann Dear
Director
Queensland
PO Box 10554
Adelaide Street
Brisbane QLD 4000
mob: 0423 435 285
p: (07) 3211 1440
f: (07) 3211 1449

e: qwws@qwws.org.au

Sandra Dann
Director
South Australia
PO Box 8066
Station Arcade
Adelaide SA 5000
mob: 0409 693 286
p: (08) 8410 6499
f: (08)

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The WWC's also conduct research and project work on a range of issues that women experience in relation to work such as workplace bullying, CDEP, access to child care, RSI, outwork, family friendly practices, OHS&W, work/life balance and the impact of domestic violence on women workers and their workplaces. Although some of the issues have changed for women, the work that we do at the Centres remains consistent with the philosophy since setting up.

The NT Working Women's Centre has recently conducted a consultation project to research the experiences of Indigenous women in paid work. The aim of the project was to focus on community service work of women on remote communities.

The consultation project researched examples of what works and what doesn't in terms of Indigenous women's satisfaction in their jobs and possibilities for the successful recruitment and retention of Indigenous women in remote communities. 68 people were consulted throughout the process. People consulted resided in Darwin, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Nhulunbuy, Nguiu (Bathurst Island), Titjikala, Milikapiti (Melville Island), Ali Curung and Yirrikala.

Whilst the project is not yet completed, this submission draws largely on information and findings established by the NT Working Women's Centre consultation project thus far. This submission also draws on the broader experiences of Working Women's Centres in Queensland and South Australia.

The importance of kinship in employment

Women report to WWC's that kinship plays a major role in workplace relationships and expectations and is sometimes found to be in conflict with the expectations of a non-Indigenous workplace culture. Kinship laws and family obligations are for many women workers of central importance and can not necessarily be over ridden by the demands of a non-Indigenous workplace culture.

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
Darwin NT 0801
mob: 0422 896 551
p: (08) 8981 0655
f: (08) 8981 0433
e: **admin@ntwwc.com.au**
8410 6770

Kerriann Dear
Director
Queensland
PO Box 10554
Adelaide Street
Brisbane QLD 4000
mob: 0423 435 285
p: (07) 3211 1440
f: (07) 3211 1449
e: qwws@qwws.org.au

Sandra Dann
Director
South Australia
PO Box 8066
Station Arcade
Adelaide SA 5000
mob: 0409 693 286
p: (08) 8410 6499
f: (08)

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

This can place Indigenous workers in the very uncomfortable position of either fulfilling cultural expectations and coming into conflict with their supervisor or manager, or fulfilling the expectations of their supervisor or manager and coming into conflict with Indigenous family and community. For example, CDEP participants engaged to work with the NT Department of Family and Community Services are regularly asked by non-Indigenous Family and Community Services employees to liaise with Indigenous client families. Sometimes non-Indigenous employees have no or little understanding of the kinship relationship of their CDEP participant colleagues and can request that they ask questions of, or have contact with, people with whom they are in an avoidance relationship.

WWC's observe that a central factor in the job satisfaction and retention of Indigenous women workers, and non Indigenous workers working in Indigenous communities, is that non-Indigenous employees receive comprehensive and appropriate cultural awareness training that includes an understanding of kinship.

WWC's also submit that Indigenous women request working partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers so that where kinship responsibilities prevent particular duties being performed by an Indigenous worker, those duties may be performed by a non-Indigenous worker.

The need for two-way mentoring

Many women working in the community services industry report that two-way mentoring is essential in assisting Indigenous workers to understand the expectations of a non-Indigenous workplace. Non-Indigenous employees also reported that they would benefit from mentoring about culture of Indigenous workers. This two-way mentoring is different from cross-cultural training mentioned above, which is also important. Mentoring involves an ongoing two-way dialogue about Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture. It should continue throughout an employment relationship.

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
Darwin NT 0801
mob: 0422 896 551
p: (08) 8981 0655
f: (08) 8981 0433
e: **admin@ntwwc.com.au**
8410 6770

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

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Director
Queensland
PO Box 10554
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Brisbane QLD 4000
mob: 0423 435 285
p: (07) 3211 1440
f: (07) 3211 1449

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Director
South Australia
PO Box 8066
Station Arcade
Adelaide SA 5000
mob: 0409 693 286
p: (08) 8410 6499
f: (08)

It is the experience of WWC's that often non-Indigenous and Indigenous employees working alongside each other, particularly in remote communities, operate under extremely difficult conditions. It is often unrealistic to expect, that in addition to all of the other duties expected of these workers, that they would participate in a mentoring role also.

WWC's submit that in order to facilitate job satisfaction and the retention of Indigenous workers, two-way mentoring ought to be built into the position descriptions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous public service workers rather than adding it on to an already pressured position.

The need to maintain work programs

Women report to WWC's that work performed as CDEP participants gives them meaning and income. Some women, who previously had CDEP in their community, now find that the CDEP program or programs have ceased due to recent Government reform. Women report that this has been very damaging to their communities, that it has resulted in less income for the community, that more people are unemployed and with nothing to do and that this has created a 'big worry' and a 'big sad'.

WWC's submit that as a result of Government reform of the CDEP program it is essential that current CDEP participants are not left without alternative work opportunities. It is essential that CDEP reform results in the transition of current CDEP positions to mainstream employment as opposed to the transition of current CDEP positions to a complete lack of work.

Training needs

It is reported to WWC staff that whilst some young women do not wish to leave their communities to go to regional centres for training for long periods of time, that this is not necessarily the case for short term training. WWC's experience is that some young women recognise it as necessary to leave their home

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
Darwin NT 0801
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f: (08) 8981 0433
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f: (08)

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

community in order to obtain training. What is very important for such young women is that training provided is in a context of returning back to their home community, that the training is relevant and useful and that they are able to maintain connection with community while they are away.

The need for recognition of the skill and responsibility of Indigenous workers

Many women working as CDEP participants perform highly skilled work of high responsibility. Such positions include aged care, child care, managers and those in women's shelters. This is contrary to a perception that CDEP participants perform unskilled labour such as garbage collection or roads maintenance.

Women report to WWC's that a lack of acknowledgement of the level of skill and high responsibility of their work leaves them feeling undervalued and discriminated against. Women have reported that they are paid 'kids money' in their CDEP work. Indigenous women have also reported that they feel undervalued and discriminated against when they as CDEP participants on leave, find that a replacement employee is paid Award wages for exactly the same work.

In order to ensure job satisfaction and retention it is imperative that women workers are appropriately remunerated and acknowledged for the work they perform. It is unacceptable that highly skilled women workers are paid at a CDEP level, especially after an extended period of time.

The importance of understanding workplace rights and access to problem solving services

Increasing workforce participation of Indigenous people in established and emerging communities must also involve increasing workers' understanding of the workplace relations landscape.

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
Darwin NT 0801
mob: 0422 896 551
p: (08) 8981 0655
f: (08) 8981 0433
e: admin@ntwwc.com.au
8410 6770

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

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Queensland
PO Box 10554
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mob: 0423 435 285
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f: (07) 3211 1449

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WWC's support a Government focus on the importance of training and education for young people and their future role in the labour market. However, WWC's believe that integral to the successful and sustaining participation in the workplace is an understanding of the workplace relations landscape. An understanding of the workplace relations landscape includes;

- an understanding of basic workers' rights, especially rights around balancing work and family,
- the difference between the entitlements of CDEP participants and employees,
- where workers can go for help if there are problems or difficulties in the workplace,
- an understanding of discrimination and workplace bullying, and
- basic negotiation and problem solving skills.

Any training program targeted towards young and other Indigenous workers ought to include basic training on the topics listed above. WWC's submit that through their specialised industrial relations assistance to individual Indigenous women, hundreds, if not thousands, of women have been supported to resolve their issues at work amicably and diplomatically so that they can get on with their jobs.

Indigenous women, especially on remote communities, present to WWC's faced with the particularly challenging choice of being forced to find a resolution to their issue at work or leave their place of work and become unemployed. This is because remote communities, due to their small economies, often can not offer alternative employment options.

This is particularly the case for Indigenous women in skilled positions such as Aboriginal Health Workers or Child Care Workers. There is often, on remote communities, only one place of employment for women with such qualifications in their home community. It is essential that such women have access to services such as WWC's in order to find resolutions to their problems at work.

Similarly, organisations or communities that wish to improve their capacity to compete for service delivery, particularly those in emerging and limited

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
Darwin NT 0801
mob: 0422 896 551
p: (08) 8981 0655
f: (08) 8981 0433
e: **admin@ntwwc.com.au**
8410 6770

Kerriann Dear
Director
Queensland
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Adelaide Street
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f: (07) 3211 1449
e: qwws@qwws.org.au

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Director
South Australia
PO Box 8066
Station Arcade
Adelaide SA 5000
mob: 0409 693 286
p: (08) 8410 6499
f: (08)

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

economies, need to also consider the workplace relations landscape and their responsibilities and obligations to workers. It is essential that employers, particularly new employers, have a thorough understanding of employees workplace rights.

Access to problem solving services case study 1 – Rose[2]

Rose is a 52 year old Indigenous woman who had more than 10 years experience in an Indigenous organisation. She was a community worker. Rose came to the WWC because recent 'restructuring' resulted in her hours of work being reduced but the duties required of her were not. As a result she became the lowest paid worker in the organisation. The WWC assisted Rose to write to the non-Indigenous director of the organisation. The letter WWC wrote together with Rose explained the real nature of her job and responsibilities, the cultural context of the organisation and her rights to fair work conditions. There were many outcomes of this negotiation between Rose and her director. Outcomes included that her director agreed to participate in cross cultural training, she was entitled to accrue time in lieu of overtime and her pay and job description would be reviewed. Rose will contact the WWC again if further issues arise in the future.

Access to problem solving services case study 2 – Dorothy

Dorothy is a 32 year old Indigenous community worker. Dorothy had been told for many years by her non-Indigenous manager that she was expected to perform unpaid after hours work because it was part of her responsibility to her community. The WWC explained her rights to her and encouraged her to talk about the issues with her manager. The WWC practised with her what she would say to her manager in a meeting to discuss the issues. Dorothy wrote down some of the important points that she gained from the WWC so as to ensure she wouldn't forget them. Dorothy successfully organised a

[2] Case studies provided are examples of actual stories however some identifying details have been changed to protect the confidentiality of clients.

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
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p: (08) 8981 0655
f: (08) 8981 0433
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8410 6770

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f: (08)

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

meeting with her manager to discuss the issue of unpaid after hours work and to seek an amicable resolution to the problem.

An important point in the case studies above is that in both instances it was not the Indigenous workers who were lacking in skills or ability that caused them to feel unsatisfied in their employment. In both of the case studies it was the non-Indigenous managers that were lacking in management skills and an understanding of workers' rights that led to the workers feeling unsatisfied.

Addressing barriers that prevent access to services and rights

A very good example of facilitating the retention of workers effectively is the specialised industrial relations assistance of WWC's to individual Indigenous women to assist them to resolve their issues at work amicably and diplomatically so that they can get on with their jobs. However, the need for such assistance far outstretches available WWC resources to provide comprehensive services.

Furthermore, in order to maintain a satisfying and healthy job, Indigenous workers require access to a range of services. It is important that barriers to this access are addressed. Barriers include language, health care and housing. Barriers also include practical issues. For example, in remote locations often the only means of external communication is via one public telephone. The public telephone is in a common space and is often out of order. Consequently, and with the prior consent of the client, WWC's are sometimes forced to telephone local community council offices and ask their staff to pass a message to an existing client. This presents obvious issues and barriers to accessing WWC's support including confidentiality, unreliability and time delays.

Addressing barriers to services ensures Indigenous workers' access to the same rights that non-Indigenous people enjoy. A real commitment to ensuring these rights are met, means a commitment to the development of culturally appropriate information, having mechanisms to ensure that workers and employers have effective training and skill development, that accessible and appropriate ongoing

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
Darwin NT 0801
mob: 0422 896 551
p: (08) 8981 0655
f: (08) 8981 0433
e: **admin@ntwwc.com.au**
8410 6770

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

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f: (07) 3211 1449

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South Australia
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Adelaide SA 5000
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p: (08) 8410 6499
f: (08)

support and referral is available to all people and that there are mechanisms in place to address workplace issues when they arise.

Increasing workforce participation requires cultural understanding and self determination

Only services and programs that are developed in consultation and under the direction of community will be economically and socially viable and meet the needs of the communities and workers. The NT Working Women's Centre is aware of the work of the Arnhem Weavers and refers you to the website: http://www.arnhemweavers.com.au/tours-history.htm
The story on this website gives an effective account of how a non consultative non-Indigenous employment program did not work and how a local initiative did.

Furthermore designing and supporting culturally appropriate employment options necessitates an understanding of Indigenous cultures, this includes women's and men's business.

Rachael Uebergang
Coordinator
Northern Territory
GPO Box 403
Darwin NT 0801
mob: 0422 896 551
p: (08) 8981 0655
f: (08) 8981 0433
e: **admin@ntwwc.com.au**
8410 6770

e:wwc@wwc.org.au

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f: (07) 3211 1449

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f: (08)