

**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP** INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

# Indigenous leaders strive to create a brighter future

*"I have to have hope. We all have to be carrying the flame of hope for a better future for our children and grandchildren – for all Australians."*

**JUNE OSCAR AO**



From left, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner June Oscar, lawyer and activist Teela Reid and NITV presenter Shahni Wellington.

**FIRST NATIONS LEADERS**  
**EMILY MCAULIFFE**

In December 2020, the Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) report was released, sharing the hopes, aspirations and challenges of Indigenous women across the country. It was the first time in more than three decades that First Nations women had been consulted nationally, following on from the Women's Business report in 1986.

The multi-year project that culminated in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani report involved consultation with 2294 women and girls in 50 communities across every Australian state and territory. The aim was to gain a clear picture of the communities' strengths, hardships, aspirations, solutions and exercise of human rights from the perspective of women, and to elevate the voices of First Nations women to realms of decision-making. Ultimately, the report will be used to help shape policies and legislation that meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and light the path to a brighter future for all Australians.

The project was led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner June Oscar AO. As the first woman to be appointed to the role, Oscar felt it was important to bring along the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to support them and to empower and enable them to help drive change in Australian policy, structure and systems.

Oscar is just one of many First Nations women who are determined to create a better future for us all.

**JUNE OSCAR AO**

"The key influences in my life have been my grandmother – my mother's mother – and my mother," says Oscar, a proud Bunuba woman, who grew up in Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley. "They taught me who I am as a Bunuba woman and where my country is through my Bunuba language."

Though Oscar could never have imagined that she would one day become Australia's first female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner, she was raised to respect and support people, and this inspired her to work in the social space.

"At an early age, I maintained my passion for working with people, assisting people, and ensuring Aboriginal people were able to understand documents and information [in English], having had the benefit of a Western education," she says.

Oscar progressed into many influential roles, including deputy director of the Kimberley Land Council and chair of the Kimberley Interpreting Service, and was appointed to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 1990, and to the role of social justice commissioner in 2017. She's now using this role to bring about meaningful change for Indigenous women, saying that if she didn't think change was possible, "I wouldn't be where I am".

"[First Nations peoples] have much to offer to the national heritage – to an Australia that is far more tolerant, that doesn't practise discrimination, racial hatred and vilification. And I'd like to see a government that is equally proud to include the voices of Indigenous peoples into policy and legislation that strengthens the social fabric of this country," she says. "I have to have hope. We all have to be carrying the flame of hope for a better future for our children and grandchildren – for all Australians."

**TEELA REID**

Wiradjuri and Wailwan woman Teela Reid is a criminal defence lawyer and activist who is on a mission to dismantle systemic racism. A keen sportswoman, Reid started her career as a PE teacher, but a trip to New York in 2010 as Australia's Indigenous youth delegate to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues made her realise she needed to better equip herself as an advocate to fight for structural change.

"To me, that meant using the legal system as a tool for change to empower my people, because historically the law has oppressed First Nations," she says. "And I thought, perhaps if it can oppress, then it can empower."

After studying law at UNSW, Reid began practising as a lawyer in 2017. She's since been involved in the development of the Uluru Statement from the Heart as a working group leader examining and debating the race power of the Australian constitution at the Sydney dialogue, and is a key driver of the Walama Court proposal – designed to divert Aboriginal people away from the criminal justice system by engaging Aboriginal elders in the decision-making process within the District Court of New South Wales.

Her latest passion project is the Blackfulla Bookclub – an online book club created with fellow lawyer Merinda Dutton (via @Blackfulla\_Bookclub on Instagram). The platform has attracted people of all colours and backgrounds, who are keen to learn more about Australia's history from the perspective of First Nations peoples.

"Our ancestors are the original storytellers," says Reid. "[Blackfulla Bookclub] is about honouring those stories, because they're not just stories, they speak directly to a truth – they speak to our sovereignty and they are inherently linked to the land."

**SHAHNI WELLINGTON**

Shahni Wellington is a Jerrinja woman and presenter on SBS's NITV, and is the new co-host of news and current affairs program *The Point*. Growing up, Wellington always knew she wanted to talk about her culture and people, but wasn't sure how to express it.

When she received a scholarship to attend a private high school, she struggled in the elite education system and returned to the central coast of NSW to complete her schooling at Gorokan High.

Wellington then decided to write about her experiences, which mirrored those of many other young Indigenous people poised as the 'exception to the rule'. "They're plucked from [their community] and given a path to a better life – that's what it's made out to be," she says. "But for me there wasn't that support, cultural sensitivity, or cultural safety for me to actually succeed or do well."

Wellington delivered her reflections as a speech at the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, and it was then that she realised she could use her voice to show her pride in her culture.

Wellington went on to work for the ABC, before becoming a political correspondent for NITV in Canberra, and is now a full-time presenter in Sydney. Despite her success, Wellington admits to moments of self-doubt. "I think any person of colour who finds themselves in a position of power or prestige has an element of impostor syndrome – like whether we deserved it or we just got here because of our background."

However, when put in the context of the big picture, Wellington knows she's part of a much-needed cultural movement. "[Working in Canberra] was really hard on me – being away from family and community and feeling like I didn't belong – but I felt like it was important that we [as Aboriginal journalists] had the coverage and understanding of our own issues that the job required," she says. "I feel like there's been a real shift in knowing that we are the ones that are going to tell our stories from now on."