

# 2023 Evaluation Findings

The First Peoples Program at Oxfam Australia delivers Straight Talk and asked some researchers to talk to women who had been to Straight Talk and hear about their perspectives and the benefits of the program. Data collection took place over 2022–2023. The team ran interviews and focus groups with 21 people. Five end-of-program surveys were reviewed with a total of 115 responses. A sense-making workshop was held with four Straight Talk alumni and they helped develop the findings and choose the recommendations.



## About Straight Talk

Straight Talk is a political participation program open to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The program hosts a National Summit in Canberra and Regional Gatherings across the country. The first National Summit was held in 2009 and nine National Summits have been held. Nine Regional Summits have been held in Cairns, Perth, Broome, Townsville, Melbourne, Alice Springs, Nhulunbuy and two in the Torres Strait. The National Summit brings Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to Canberra for five days to participate in workshops, travel to Parliament House, meet female parliamentarians, and meet 'trailblazers' – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have made outstanding contributions in their fields. Regional Summits provide a more localised focus and are more accessible for women who may find it difficult to travel extensive distances. These events ordinarily last 3-5 days.

## Benefits

**Women told us about the power and joy of connecting with women at the Summit** and being in the presence of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from all over their state or country. Women reported that the personal and professional connections made with other women at Straight Talk have become a source of strength and inspiration. Women have reported continuing to stay connected and reaching out to each other for support for various personal and professional reasons.

**Learning.** Women told us they learned skills for lobbying and advocacy, and improved understanding of how the political system works.

**Intersectionality.** Women told us they had a safe space to consider and discuss their identities as women and as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

**Connecting with the political world.** Visiting political institutions and meeting with parliamentarians demystifies politicians and how Government works. The idea of participating in Government and political processes becomes more accessible. Women reported feeling more motivated to participate in politics and observe political processes.

**Voice and agency.** Women told us that participating in Straight Talk helped them find their voice. They talked about being more outspoken for themselves and others around them.

**Leadership and Advocacy.** Women told us about being involved in various leadership activities since their time in the Straight Talk program. They talked about using skills to implement practical approaches to lead advocacy work in their communities and workplaces.

## How the Program Works

**Support from Program staff.** Women talked about feeling very supported prior to and during the Summits. The Straight Talk coordinator is critical in ensuring that participants walk into the program believing that they will have a safe experience.

**Structure and order of the week.** Women told us that the structure of the events focuses on building participants' confidence, supporting them to participate in activities and ensuring they felt safe during the week.

**Facilitation.** The Summit has a lead facilitator who works with a group of co-facilitators and mentors. The feedback about the lead facilitator, Michelle Deshong, and the co-facilitators, is overwhelmingly positive and seen as a key enabler to the program.

**Cultural safety.** Women consistently reported that Straight Talk is a culturally safe space. Women attributed the cultural safety of the Summit to the facilitation, content, purpose, and exclusive space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

## The Way Forward

**Create an alumni program.** Women want opportunities to stay connected and engaged as change-makers, advocates, leaders, and political actors. Straight Talk alums would like Straight

Talk to create place-based customised programs for First Nations women in their workplaces. Other women have expressed the need for a toolkit with the tools they learned at the Summit to be accessible for them to share with other women in their communities.

**Consider a program for younger First Nations women.** Some women desired leadership and participation opportunities for younger First Nations women at the high school level. A program like this would align with the priorities of Wiyi Yanu U Thangani, which seeks to facilitate girls' access to mechanisms to fight for their rights and interests.

**Create a program that establishes an international connection with other Indigenous groups.** Women reported a desire to establish a program that supports Indigenous women across countries to share and learn. The capacity of Indigenous women to participate in advocacy within international fora could contribute to improved global responses for Indigenous women.

**More time for relationship building and yarning during Summits.** Women acknowledged that time constraints impact the time for yarning and relationships, however, there is a desire for more time for relationship building and yarning in the program.

**Oxfam should build a program for non-Indigenous allies.** Women reported wanting to create culturally safe spaces for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to work together. This could include work on capacity building for non-Indigenous people to become influential allies, supporters, or people walking alongside in solidarity.

**Women support Oxfam's long-term plan to hand the program to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.** Oxfam is handing over the ownership and management of Straight Talk to be led and implemented by First Nations women and this move has support from Straight Talk alumni.