

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
Ligue internationale des femmes pour la paix et la liberté
Liga Internacional de Mujeres por la Paz y la Libertad
Internationale Frauenliga für Frieden und Freiheit

Consultative Status with United Nations ECOSOC, UNCTAD and UNESCO

Special Consultative Relations with FAO, ILO and UNICEF

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WILPF (Australia) Statement on Survival Day 2008

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples have inhabited the Australian continent and nearby islands for more than 40,000 years. On 26th January 2008, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) congratulates the ATSI peoples on surviving the many afflictions that the last 220 years of white settlement have brought.

WILPF welcomes the new Rudd Government's indication that they will say "Sorry" to the stolen generations. We also welcome Jenny Macklin's consultations with Aboriginal leaders on the form of words.

Because of the huge deficits and history of neglect by governments at all levels over many years, WILPF would like to see greatly increased funds directed towards the needs of Aboriginal Australians. For instance, despite national prosperity, death rates for Aboriginal infants remain three times higher than those for non-indigenous Australians. We concur with Fred Chaney in the joint address with Tom Calma to the National Press Club, 5 July 2007 in his view that: "Australians want no less than equality for Aboriginal people. Australians will tolerate the extra expenditure required if they are confident that it will yield results."

WILPF would like to see increased funding for adequate housing, sanitation, nutrition, education and health programs:

- Increased funding for public housing to reduce overcrowding
- Increased funding so that every Aboriginal child receives a quality education
- Greater numbers of health practitioners in Aboriginal communities
- Greater access to medicines
- Increased measures for the prevention of diseases
- A national health plan for Aboriginal mothers and babies, with outreach antenatal services, home visiting programs and community-based childcare and playgroups
- Funding for programs to tackle family violence and substance abuse, including funding to eliminate the root causes of addictions, funding for sexual assault services, outreach centres, safe houses and resources for legal aid.

All of the above measures would need to be undertaken in genuine and respectful consultation with Aboriginal leadership at the local level.

In 2004, WILPF voiced strong opposition to the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). We believe that there is now an urgent need to replace the role of ATSIC as a “key policy advisor to government and ... to create a path for self-determination for Indigenous peoples”. WILPF calls for the re-establishment of a national body similar to ATSIC. WILPF would also like to see funding provided for the establishment of a national ATSI women’s network.

The Anderson/Wild Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse concluded that the situation in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (NT) amounted to a “national emergency”. We must note however that much of the Howard Government’s Intervention in Aboriginal communities in the NT amounted to a policy of assimilation. We are greatly relieved that the new Government will not abolish the permit system in Aboriginal communities in the NT.

Clearly there was and is a need for urgent action against child sexual abuse in those communities. However a similar degree of child sexual abuse exists in other parts of the Australian community – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - and, while addressing the problems in the NT, it is important to guard against further stereotyping of Aboriginal Australians as if to say that their communities are in some way unique in regard to child sex abuse or domestic violence. They are not. Anything that appears to suggest that this is the case is dangerous, as it adds fuel to the fire of racism that is prevalent in our society and makes real progress in addressing indigenous disadvantage so difficult. Our collective horror of sexual abuse of young children is so strong that people have difficulty in not demonising people who act out such abuse even though it is overwhelmingly the case that most perpetrators were once innocent victims themselves.

Finally, WILPF considers that the promised review of the Federal Government’s Intervention in the NT should be brought forward as many of the measures instituted by the previous government are counterproductive.

*Cathy Picone and Ruth Russell
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26th January 2008*