



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

MEDIA RELEASE

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Statement by SNAICC Chairperson Dawn Wallam on the inaugural International Day of the Girl Child

When can our children expect to enjoy the same rights as other Australian children?

The harsh reality is that an Aboriginal baby girl born today — the first International Day of the Girl Child — will face inequality and disadvantage and not enjoy the same human rights as other Australian girls.

At birth, the baby girl will join the most disadvantaged and vulnerable section of Australian society: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Growing up, she will face the triple barriers of race, gender and age.

As an Aboriginal child, she is two to three times more likely to die as an infant or due to injury, and likely to suffer from health problems that are seldom found in developed countries such as Australia.

Her parents are more likely to suffer from poor physical and mental health, including higher levels of stress and anxiety.

She is eight times as likely to be the subject of a child protection substantiation compared with other Australian children. And she will face a disproportionately high chance of being physically or sexually assaulted than non-Aboriginal children.

Later, as an Aboriginal juvenile, she is 24 times as likely to be placed under juvenile justice supervision, and much more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system as a victim or offender.

She is also likely to lack access to quality and culturally-appropriate early childhood services, leading to difficulties in reaching literacy and numeracy requirements in primary school. Her probability of finishing Year 12 is about half compared with other Australian girls, greatly lessening her prospects of employment.

Despite the best intentions of governments in recent years, her family will continue to live in a community under strain from poverty and marginalisation, and lacking the basic resources non-Indigenous Australians take for granted. Resources such as adequate housing free from overcrowding and access to jobs.

SNAICC: The national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

Governments will continue to issue statements on funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs — but how much of that money will actually get to her and her community?

Her plight and those of other Indigenous children will continue to be ignored by most of the mainstream media (through sheer indifference or worse), but will be highlighted by some media keen to exploit her story to push particular political agendas.

All the while, the international community will look at Australia and the status and treatment of its First Peoples with a mixture of confusion and bewilderment.

But it's not all bad news for the Aboriginal baby girl born today. There are signs of improvement, even if it's only in some areas and at a frustratingly slow pace.

She will have an increasing number of female role models as she grows up — there are more Aboriginal female lawyers, doctors, nurses, CEOs, public servants, teachers and academics.

And she will draw inspiration from the countless strong and proud Aboriginal women across Australia who continue to battle the odds, raising children and keeping their communities together.

Governments have made a commitment to make the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children a high priority in the coming years, as well as reduce the levels of disadvantage endured by Indigenous Australians.

Most state and territory governments have recently reformed, or are in the process of reforming, child protection systems that have failed badly to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

So the will is there. But governments need to embrace the idea that the solutions to improving the life of the Aboriginal girl today will centre on proper engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Governments have to empower our communities and organisations so that they can have a meaningful say in the design and delivery of government programs and make decisions about the future. And governments need to be unflinching in their financial and human support — as well as be more transparent and accountable with their funding.

We all need to do better for the sake of all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls — and boys — born today.

Please note: Figures used in this statement are based on publications from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

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