



**Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices)
Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future**

Submission from women in Boggabilla and Toomelah, NSW
Produced with the University of New England and Literacy for Life Foundation
November 2018

“Stand strong, together for better”

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Australian Human Rights Commission
Level 3, 175 Pitt St
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Wiyi Yani U Thangani Submission

On behalf of Literacy for Life Foundation, I am pleased to present this submission for inclusion in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Project.

The Report contains views of women involved in Literacy for Life Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in the communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah, New South Wales.

It has been noted that Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) builds on the legacy of the 1986 *Women's Business Report*. It is also relevant that 2018 is the 30th anniversary of the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Toomelah Report*.

The *Toomelah Report*, released in June 1988, was the culmination of a wide-ranging Inquiry into the social and material needs of residents of Toomelah, Boggabilla and nearby Goondiwindi.

The Inquiry uncovered extensive racism and shone a spotlight on its damaging impact. It found the people of the Aboriginal community of Toomelah were being denied basic rights most other Australians take for granted.

While there have been some hard-won improvements, the fight for basic rights continues today.

Data collected by Literacy for Life Foundation shows 73% of Aboriginal adults surveyed in Boggabilla and Toomelah self-assessed as having low literacy. They have been denied the level of education needed to read to their children, fill out forms or understand instructions on a medicine bottle.

Nationally, it is estimated between 40-70% of Aboriginal adults have low English language literacy.

As you will see in the following pages, lifting literacy has a ripple effect, creating positive change in areas such as health, school education, employment and community safety. And while literacy rates remain low, achieving any real progress in these areas will be very challenging, if not impossible.

The women of Boggabilla and Toomelah who are quoted in this Report are using literacy as a tool to empower. They are empowering themselves, each other and their communities.

Yours sincerely,



Patricia Anderson AO

Director – Literacy For Life Foundation

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1. Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Gomeroi land on which these interviews took place, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

I would also like to thank all the women for sharing their stories and life experiences with me. It is a privilege to get access to your life stories. My sincere appreciation and thanks for being generous with your knowledge and experience.

Dr Rose Amazan

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2. About

This Report was commissioned by Literacy for Life Foundation as a submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission's Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Project. It aims to convey the views of women from the communities of Toomelah and Boggabilla, New South Wales. The women who took part were interviewed by the principal author, a University of New England (UNE) researcher, on a visit of several days to the communities in September 2018. The author has recently joined the UNE team that conducts ongoing evaluation of Literacy for Life Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. Some additional material was provided by Literacy for Life Foundation staff.

3. Executive Summary

Most of the women that participated in this Report were part of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign that has run in Boggabilla and Toomelah from 2017 until 2018.

Many issues were discussed, using the questions that appear on the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Project website as prompts. Topics included the women's challenges, goals and the dreams they have for themselves, their families and their community.

A key point that came across was the wish for women and girls in the communities to fulfil their full potential. Increasing the confidence and self-esteem of women was also central. The respondents see this as an essential part of standing up and being heard.

As staff, students and community supporters of Literacy for Life Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign, there was also a strong focus on literacy. In particular the women said that building their literacy has been very useful for them, making it possible to take several steps forward.

It is recommended that more women and girls are given the same opportunity.

“My beautiful sisters, nothing is impossible. Don't give up on your trainings. Just keep telling yourself that you're a strong black woman. Keep going.”

4. Background

Literacy for Life Foundation is Aboriginal-run not-for-profit that teaches basic reading and writing skills to Aboriginal adults with low literacy. The organisation uses a community-wide campaign approach, engaging local Aboriginal staff and taking direction from local Aboriginal leadership.

Since 2012 The Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign has run in eight communities in New South Wales, with 207 students graduating.

Sixty percent of Literacy for Life Foundation graduates are Aboriginal women.

The Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign targets adults aged 15 years and over (including exempted out-of-school youth) with a literacy level at or below level one on the Australian Core Skills Framework.

This demographic is at greater risk of substandard housing, poor health, early mortality, minimal vocational qualifications, long-term unemployment, poverty, domestic and community violence, substance abuse and harm and arrest and incarceration. Their children and grandchildren are also at the greatest risk of poor school attendance, below benchmark performance in literacy and numeracy tests and of leaving school before Year 12.

It is estimated 40 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults have minimal English literacy, a figure that rises to as high as 70 per cent in some remote areas.

Literacy for Life Foundation aims to achieve a significant lift in adult literacy levels in Aboriginal communities, with positive flow-on effects in areas such as employment, school education, justice, community safety, health and wellbeing.

Boggabilla and Toomelah

Literacy for Life Foundation began work in Boggabilla and Toomelah in February 2017, in partnership with the Toomelah Local Aboriginal Land Council and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services. The Foundation was initially contacted by the Department to assist in overcoming some of the barriers and challenges emerging with the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, particularly difficulties faced in the communities due to very low levels of adult literacy.

By December 2018, forty-one students from Boggabilla and Toomelah will have graduated the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. Twenty-eight graduates (68%) are women.

The communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah are located on Gomeri Country in the northern part of NSW. Boggabilla is just 10 km south of the Queensland border town of Goondiwindi, on the Macintyre River. Toomelah is an Aboriginal community a further 13 km south-east along the river. According to 2011 census data prepared for Aboriginal Affairs NSW, there are 123 Aboriginal households in the two communities and a combined Aboriginal population of 600. Of these, 360 people are aged 16 and over.

Literacy for Life Foundation carries out a targeted household surveys in each Literacy Campaign location, with people asked to self-assess their literacy. In Boggabilla and Toomelah, one hundred and thirty-two of the people surveyed (73%) self-identified as having low literacy.

This figure is in line with the Foundation's findings in other Campaign locations. While national literacy data for Aboriginal adults is extremely limited, Literacy for Life Foundation estimates between 40% to 70%

of Aboriginal adults have low literacy. Using the more conservative figure of 40% would give an estimated total of 145 low literate adults across Toomelah and Boggabilla.

While it is difficult to determine the exact level of need, it is clear that low levels of English language literacy present a significant challenge for the communities.

5. Introduction

Since the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign began in Wilcannia in 2012, the University of New England (UNE) has been working collaboratively with Literacy for Life Foundation as Evaluation Partner. UNE has utilised a participatory action research (PAR) framework to conduct regular independent evaluations. In September 2018, the author was invited by The Foundation to record and capture the views of women in Toomelah and Boggabilla so they could be included in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Project.

Ten women were involved, seven of whom shared their views for inclusion in this Report. Ages ranged from mid-twenties to late fifties. Three of the women are facilitators/former facilitators of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign, two of them are former students and the others are community members.

Major discussion themes that emerged included:

- Confidence and Fulfilment
- Making Adult Literacy a Priority
- Empowerment Across Generations
- Trauma and Depression
- Racism
- Isolation
- Sustainable Programs
- Specific Suggestions
- The Power of Women

Below is a summary of these themes, with detail provided by the women in their own words.

6. Confidence and Fulfilment

There seems to be a sense of alienation or rootlessness in some of the young peoples' lives. Many of the women talked about this, for example:

“There's not really anybody or anywhere for them to go to, to talk to. There's not any programs that can deal with young women... they just don't know what to do. Young women in the community...haven't got confidence in themselves.”

However, the Literacy for Life Foundation's Adult Literacy Campaign has gone some way to addressing this, offering a point of identification and hope. Simply put, it gives many a reason to get out, and stay out, of bed in the morning.

"Well, before I started working for Literacy, I'd get up and I'd get my kids ready for school, and I would go back to sleep waiting for them to come home. That was my life, before I started working [for the Literacy Campaign]. But, coming here really helped. Yeah, like, more confidence, self-esteem, and being a role model for my kids."

Another participant echoed a similar experience:

"I'm always a shy-shy guy, don't mix and mingle very much. But since this year, I look forward to getting up and getting out of bed...to do something. Especially this [the Literacy Campaign], I can't wait for this. I think I'm here before this even starts or opens. I just like coming here because there's something to do, somewhere to go. It's like your home away from home. It just gets me outta of my home because I'm a homebody person."

Having something to do, and to look forward to, is something many in the community struggle with. Therefore, the Campaign makes a small but vital contribution. As one interviewee put it:

"They [women] just need encouragement like 'cause most of our women, they all have kids and they stay home with their babies and rear their kids, [we need] to build their self-esteem, their confidence. To let them know that they can do anything that they want to do in life. ...And encourage them to do things like go for jobs."

Many of the respondents described themselves as being shy, not well educated, as having self-doubt, lacking in confidence and self-esteem, not being outgoing, and of sticking in their own little world. However, during the Literacy Campaign and thereafter, for many a transformation occurs. One participant, a young woman who has been working as a literacy facilitator, put it like this:

"Coming to the Literacy for Life, has opened up a lot of people and they've seen it for themselves, grow with good confidence and skills. A lot of people, like, several of the boys, they said it. They got more confidence. And they actually do. 'Cause one of the boys, they're real shy and didn't really talk to anybody and now he's being on top of things. Saying hello to people he wouldn't usually to."

Another facilitator added that building literacy made people open up:

"So not only seeing ourselves come out of our own shell, we've noticed on and on, in the lessons, that people themselves have been coming out as well. As time goes by, everyone started expressing themselves."

Others in the community also observed the change and the impact of the Literacy for Life Foundation Campaign. One of the female leaders in the community had this to say:

"Some of the people that've done that course, you know beforehand, and then seeing them after, just blows you away. A few of the girls, they're even getting confidence and applying for jobs. They seem really happy when they do the course. It makes you feel so proud to see some of the young girls, you know? That they got there and then they speak to you and they

haven't spoken to you before. Really, Literacy for Life really brings a lot out of the people that do it, just brightens them up, [it] brings them out of their shell. They come a long way."

The same respondent went on to say that *"they [women] need to build their confidence because they have a lot of let-downs in the past."*

The Literacy Campaign inspired women in different ways, by taking one step at a time. As one participant put it *"I had no attempts at working, or anything. I just got tired of sitting around and gave it a go"*. Another participant added Literacy for Life had a *"big impact on my family and my own [life], my wellbeing, it really brings me out of my shell. I really cracked it, smashed it. It makes me proud of myself every time I talk about it makes me want to cry."* This participant was a stay-at-home mum with three kids and says she was extremely shy and the Literacy Campaign brought her out of her comfort zone.

Literacy for Life Foundation's Campaign *"gives them [participants] more confidence, and self-esteem and, then they feel better in themselves... where they can stand up and be heard. I'm more confident and, I'm a bit more outspoken now than I was."* It is a common theme amongst the women.

In a way, participants were expressing that the Literacy Campaign has helped them to better fulfil their potential. In other words, the usefulness of literacy as a tool to get more control over their lives. As another participant put it:

"It's really overwhelming. So much to prove to myself, how far I can take myself. There was a lesson in there about names and what names meant. And, I had a key ring of my name and I definitely didn't think I was that person. Everything I got on my name, it was different, and I used to say "I'm not that person" and then I started reading them and realising maybe I have to be that person. I didn't believe it was me. I used to say...they got that so wrong. And then I said, and I thought, maybe I have to be that person."

Simply put, the women are talking in terms of greater agency and control over their circumstances. It is about their ability to realise their potential and the chance to be able to do things effectively.

Another participant echoed a similar perspective, saying *"I was told by a South African worker, that [my name] means life. And so, my life. And I never thought of anything of my life until now."* She went on to say, *"a few years before I started working I read back through my report card from kindergarten. And the teacher actually wrote it out down at the bottom and said, "She is a good role model", and in that early years of my life, I looked at that there and I thought to myself, 'Ah, was this the person I was when I was a kid?' Imagine what I can do now?"*

7. Making Adult Literacy a Priority

The Literacy Campaign participants who were interviewed felt the program had a big impact on them and their family. One had this to say:

"That Literacy for Life is a nice program for 'em to run. 'Cause some of 'em might... [have problems with] read and write... And could be struggling a lot with that. Our Aboriginal people, just gets a bit too much and don't really see any other way sometimes, you know? They think it's hard for 'em, and don't know how to approach people that could help them. Like I said, that Literacy for Life is a good program for

them. ...I've seen it with some because I've done the program myself just to get a certificate. We enjoyed it, lots of fun. Good teachers.”

The same participant went on to say that, *“I didn't really know how to do a proper letter, until I've done that program. That's the best program.”* Because of the Literacy for Life Foundation Campaign this participant was able to go on to do further study in TAFE.

Being literate also has a knock-on effect. By helping mothers and grandmothers, children are also benefiting. This is how one of the women put it:

“One of the other ladies said that she'd like to help her grandkids, read to her grandkids and come to this class. [The Literacy Campaign] helps the children too. The parents feel more confident in reading books and, helping them with their homework and things like that. [Parents are] more engaged with their children's schoolwork, and with their children's lives and things like that.”

Thus, by increasing adult literacy, the lives of children and community members are transformed for the better.

In the Campaign, participants keep coming back to learn. This contrasts with people's experience and relationship with mainstream schooling. It suggests that, with a welcoming and supportive educational setting, distrust of schooling can be surmounted. It was not a dislike of learning, or an inherent incapability, which had previously discouraged many from finishing school. This was echoed in many of the interviews, but one woman put it this way:

“The education system don't seem to be doing really well in educating [our] kids because let's say they're in Year 7. They don't know nothing but they are still moved forward without knowing anything. And then they grow up, they fall out of school about Year 10. Then they have babies.”

She felt these types of experiences have a lasting effect on people, explaining:

“There's a lot of the boys, they're really into fixing cars. But they haven't got the piece of paper to go on and get a job or because they're not the type of people to be in a classroom, sitting. They want to do hands-on stuff. And I know TAFE and all that, you have to be in a classroom for some sort of time. That frightens our community away.”

The Literacy Campaign has given some women an opportunity to *“get an education all over again, catch up on what I missed out on, like, there's a lot of things I don't understand with Centrelink, anything to do with government”*. The women learned how to feel informed about issues and things that happen around them. This has motivated this participant to feel the *“need to be more involved in everything”* and to be more aware of what is going on in the community. Training people to be better information seekers is a hugely empowering legacy in its own right.

Giving people a second chance is also important *“because most of them [young women] fall, drop out of school. We don't know why but we know that they have an impact of trauma in their family, they've lost loved ones or they're going through something that has happened to 'em or and they don't get any help through school, they don't get any help through the clinics.”*

It is worth noting an example that shows even those with significant health problems were keen to make reading and writing a priority when given the chance:

“Since the Literacy for Life program come into the community, it's been good. It helped a lot of people, and when we first started up in the school, we had three ladies in our class. One was diagnosed with Leukemia, and then another lady had a stroke, and then another lady, she had a stroke, a brain tumor and breast cancer in one year. We had all of those ladies in our class. One of them, she's in a wheel chair and she never, ever got to go to school, because she's got problem with her bones and she was always in Far West Hospital until she's like, 16 and she only learned how to read and write. She could not print, but come to literacy [classes], she started to print.”

This is a demonstration of peoples' will to empower themselves.

The Literacy for Life Foundation Campaign was clearly a liberating experience for many. The essence of the program is encapsulated in this story by a middle-aged woman who for the first time feels okay going to the shops, because she has learned how to read the product labels:

“I never liked going to town because you're walking into shops and you can't read and write...people look at you silly. And you automatically know that they're thinking "Oh, dumb ... dumb ..." "A little short changer, there," yeah. Well, I've had a few times in my past, you know where I couldn't explain myself properly for things I wanted. It's like as if I had to go and show them that I could say it. I can go straight to the thing that I'm looking for.”

This is an insight into both the struggles of low literacy and the surmounting of those challenges, through learning to read and write.

8. Empowerment Across Generations

Lifting literacy is seen as very empowering and something that can create pride and strength across generations, by building on the legacy of elders:

“If my grandmother was here today she would be very, very proud of this program, because she was one that couldn't read or write, and she wanted to go back to school. She went back to TAFE actually. And if she known I was part of this she'd be very, very proud.”

This participant's grandmother was an Aboriginal rights campaigner and an advocate for children.

Intergenerational transmission of strength is a powerful force and it seems to be a big motivation for the women in Toomelah and Boggabilla. As one participant put it:

“Our families, past and present, elders too [have] done a lot for our community and realising and growing up with the stories that they told to us. So, we are like them, following in their footsteps and leading the way, like they did.”

Another participant had this to say:

“Our kids really drive us to do and achieve what we can, so they can see what we're doing, so they can step up so, when we're old and grey, to say 'Mum's done this, so I wanna have a go.'”

Children can then see “*how to play that role model.*”

There is real love for the community and for promoting and protecting women in the community. As one participant put it:

“I just love the community. I'd like to see our women take over Toomelah. Rise up. Just to do what our old, old grandmothers and them used to do. I just want to see our women be proud of our land, our place out here, you know? Just to do things out here, to take pride in it, in Toomelah and just keep it a good safe place, clean place.”

It is worth noting here that in the eyes of these women, empowerment is very much connected to culture and community. The individual is always seen to be empowered by, and with, the culture and community.

9. Trauma and Postnatal Depression

Personal trauma was a recurring theme in the interviews:

“There's a lot of things too in the community about trauma. Our loved ones had a lot of trauma, even the women, you know and that sort of stops our community from doing things too. I know that's just not for the women but it's for everyone but, there's no help for trauma, now. We can see our people suffering because of it and we get all of these services out here but none of them actually do anything. That's just another thing on top of what we have to deal..., there's even post-natal depression.”

Postnatal depression was another strong theme in the interviews. A participant had this to say:

“You know what else, this could even have impacted even on postnatal depression. I think that is a big thing, and a lot of these young girls wouldn't know anything about that, you know? So that would be a good program to run.”

10. Racism

Racism was also a common theme. Many of the women said racism contributed to their dropping out of school. As one women put it:

“The teachers just sat us down at the back of the classroom, this is in Gundi [Goondiwindi]. It was good in Bogga, when we went to school in Bogga, but once we got to Gundi school we were just put down the back. They didn't try to help with anything.”

This experience was also documented in the testimony of several witnesses in the 1988 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Toomelah Report*.

Institutional racism interacts with labour market discrimination to further disadvantage the women. As one participant put it:

“A lot of the young girls, they don't get jobs because they can't get jobs in Goondiwindi. They can't get jobs because it's a very racial place. A lot of young girls fall out of school, you know leave school.”

11. Isolation

There is a lack of programs to help young women, especially young mothers, with various issues (sexual assault/abuse, postnatal depression, trauma, dealing with loss, etc.). In a way, Literacy for Life Foundation tries to fill in the gaps that exist and it has become the proxy program which deals with some of these issues. Women not having the help needed to tackle some of the important issues in the community was a common theme in the interviews:

“A lot of them, being young and all, I suppose they all keep bound. There's not a lot of room for them to move to. There's no facilities. There's no preschool or schooling or day care or anything for people like them [with a young family and low literacy]. There's a lot of little ones missing out. Just to see them have a little bit more to do with school and, or education. Because they never had very much of that, I don't neither.”

Another participant flagged similar issues with young women in the community, stating:

“They don't really know much education. They don't really know what is going on. Basically, they live here, they don't go anywhere else. We have trouble with women having babies, some of them [have] postnatal depression and there's no help for that and some of them don't know where to go to get help and some of them really don't trust anyone to help them. I've seen a lot of that in the young women today.”

Another participant went on to comment on the recurrent theme of not having a strong sense of self-direction/goal setting:

“They probably, don't have anything to do in life. [They] don't really have anything set. Or think that there's nothing out there for them but drugs and alcohol. And trying to get something to hang for.”

12. Sustainable Programs

The women made several recommendations (women's groups, sport activities, etc.) to improve things for women and girls. However, they also acknowledged that there's a lack of sustainable programs and also a lack of communication from the different programs that already exist in the communities. As one participant put it, *“it's just that programs do come up and running and then they get shut down.”* Another participant added, *“we have a lot of service providers come out here but we don't know what they do. So it'd be good if we get people that come here and actually help and get out in the community and help our girls.”*

The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) was highlighted as one such program that came and went. New programs in the community bring hope and facilitate community members taking pride in their community – through cleaning and maintenance of facilities and houses. However, the cessation of such programs decreases the community's morale:

“It was mad when the CDEP. Everybody had appeared the same, took pride in the community, cleaning and doing maintenance. Soon that was taken and everybody went down and nothing to do. Turn to alcohol and drugs.”

It is clear there's a real issue with keeping the momentum associated with the programs after funding runs out and/or the programs leave the community. For example, the Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Program (AACAP), which operated in Toomelah in 2017-18, provided training, such as catering and carpentry. However, the participants were not able to get jobs thereafter. As one participant put it:

"When the AACAP program was here, a lot of the women and even a few men done the catering course...and carpentry. But just like a lot of our community, overall they're experienced, like our older men, they can't get jobs out of it. We live in a little community, I know, we don't want to leave this community but we need to get money at the same time."

Building sustainable programs and having ownership of these programs is critical for the morale and viability of the community. As one participant put it:

"We need to do something that's gonna stay in our community, that we're gonna bring employment to our community. And then you know, keep everything like cash flow and everything within our own community."

The same participant went on to say:

"We need stuff that's gonna be here. Run from Toomelah not other services bringing that in. We need our women to take over that Mums and Bubs and/or Women's Group [run by an external organisation], you know? We need that based here. 'Cause they're based at the school. And not many people go out to the school or trust in the school. But if we had something that's here, of our own, all the time."

For some, schools are part of their trauma, associated with negative experiences and the power structure which contributed to their current state. Thus, it is worth considering running community programs outside the structure of schools.

13. Specific Suggestions

The women had specific recommendations and ideas they would like to see happen in Toomelah and Boggabilla.

In order to strengthen Aboriginal communities and to assure a good future for young Aboriginal women and girls, there is a need to keep building women's literacy skills. As one participant put it:

"If we don't know how to read and write, we won't. We need to know how to read and write to get out in the world and get a job. And a lot of people can't do that because they don't know. You gotta fill in so many forms, and they don't know how to do that. A lot of people, their mothers, their aunties or their sisters [do not know how to] do things like that."

The same participant went on to say:

"They [people with low literacy] feel ashamed in themselves that they don't know how to read and write. If you don't know how to read and write, you won't get anywhere in life. The shame factor I think is the number one on the list. I think people got more shame than confidence and self-esteem."

To keep Aboriginal communities strong, it was recommended by some of the women that more information on the good that people have done/are doing be highlighted. These stories should be made known to all, especially community members, in order to empower and uplift. They can be used as a source of inspiration for people, especially young women. As one participant put it, it is important to know *“who started what and how and show them that it is a fight to get to where they want to be. ‘Cause I didn't know about Susie McGrady. I did not know about her until that day the hall was opened and then I felt, how amazing. More stories of their elders. What they've done, because most would have known in their family, but I didn't know hers, you know.”*

Having programs for young mothers was also recommended:

“They're home and they got babies, but when they want to go out and get a job they haven't got that stuff so, getting them ready for when they need to go for a job interview. We could have more jobs out here for them to do. Not just to stay home and have babies. I know some of them love doing that but what happens when their kids grow up?”

Other programs, such as parenting programs, domestic violence programs, beauty courses, anti-bullying programs and mental health programs were also recommended:

“Mental health. Oh, that one is big. More programs of how to deal with people with mental illness.”

“More on that mental health, that's what we really need is more mental health. ‘Cause lot of 'em being suicidal and how do you talk to 'em and things like that, you know?”

“More programs, would be better to make them [women] feel more confident, lift up their self-esteem and have them build and be a good role model. Not only for their children, but for the community.”

“Have a women's group. A few activities just sitting around, yarning. So their stories come to the table. And arts and craft, cooking.”

“Probably for women, probably beauty [courses]. Cause not, most of them like mucking around with their hair.”

“Our women need more projects, programs in our communities for health and wellbeing. And if we're going to be engaged and committed to stand up, stand strong.”

One of the female leaders in the community recommended having housing and land management training, saying *“we're having trouble now with our houses and partnerships are starting to fall away. I want to try and get Literacy for Life to try and build them young women up to do...real estate or land managers, ...so they can take care of our houses here on Toomelah.”*

Being self-sufficient as a community was also discussed:

“I would like to see the women doing a veggie garden you know, or selling their veggies. Or not even that, just making up veggie packs for the community to hand out. 'Cause it saves them a lot of money, it saves them driving. We got to drive 25km to get some food. And all our community get when we go in there like racial comments and racial looks and they don't help us. We've got all this land we can use.”

14. The Power of Women

Investment to empower women in Boggabilla and Toomelah - whether through education and/or through support services - is critical for positive transformation. The communities have more women role models than men. One woman in the community put it like this, *“women protect more, and they're more of a voice. They've got more opinion and a bigger voice. They take more action than men.”* However, lack of confidence is holding many women back from standing up, or speaking up and being heard. *“That's part of what women should be, is stand up and be heard, and fight for what we believe in.”*

Literacy for Life Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign has created a platform for women who feel left out by the system to change their status quo and be heard. It is clear from the interviews that it is vital to get women mobilised:

“Motivated and get 'em out there, letting them know that they can do these sort of things [working, being proactive, speaking up], encourage them that they can accomplish anything. Instead of getting a boyfriend and having babies.”

Many of the women who went through the Literacy Campaign hope *“to continue to build each other up”*. Others have realised that anything is possible and are in search of their calling. *“I'm still searching, still searching what I want to be and want to do. Being something that will help others.”* Other women had hopes and dreams that their children will be able *“to bail themselves and get off the drugs and alcohol, you know? To do something with their little lives. The opportunities that they got today, we did not have. I didn't have them back in my days because the place was so racist especially going to Windi [Goondiwindi].”*

When asked what changes they would like to see regarding women's situation in the community one woman had this to say:

“How we grow up. How we get treated. How we get spoken to. But the number one thing is coming together. Once you come together, we'd be more powerful.”

These sentiments were echoed by the other women.

15. Conclusion

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Project is an important undertaking.

Some of the women who contributed to this submission were not born when the preceding *Women's Business Report* (1986) and Australian Human Rights Commission's *Toomelah Report* (1988) were written.

But this line, taken from page 75 of the *Women's Business Report*, in a section titled Community-based courses, is still relevant:

“By far the greatest benefit of gaining further education for most of the women who spoke with us was to have more say in what happened in their lives.”

The words of the women of Boggabilla and Toomelah contained in this submission echo that call. And their actions go beyond words. By lifting adult literacy in their communities they have provided a positive example of what is possible.