

RACISM AT WORK

Policy Briefing for the Race Discrimination Commissioner and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

Action required:

1. **Conduct a Racism@Work Inquiry** under similar Terms of reference as the Australian Human Rights Commission's Respect@Workⁱ Inquiry,
2. **Conduct a review of the Racial Discrimination Act.** As part of the Terms of Reference for this review, include the insertion of racism as a term, and a contemporary definition of racism and anti-racism, and
3. **Seek funding to support extensive consultation** with organisations, peak bodies and people with lived experience, as part of this Inquiry.

Why?

Nine out of ten Australian workers think that **racism** is an issue for Australian organisationsⁱⁱ. This **2022 study** surveyed 1,547 workers from various sectors and organisations across the country and found that **93% believed Australian organisations should take action to address racism** but only **27% said their organisations were being proactive in preventing workplace racism**.

Our recent 2024 researchⁱⁱⁱ shows that:

- **59% of First Nations** workers experienced discrimination and/or harassment at work.
- **Discrimination and harassment** in the workplace have **increased**, particularly for workers such as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers and those from a non-Christian religious affiliation (as well as workers with disability and LGBTIQ+ workers).

Gari Yala (Speak the Truth)^{iv} surveyed **1,033 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers** across Australia and found that Indigenous employees continue to experience significant workplace racism and exclusion and that racism is impacting their wellbeing and job satisfaction. **38%** reported being **treated unfairly** due to their Indigenous background, **44%** reported hearing **racial slurs** and **59%** said they received comments about **the way they look or 'should' look as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person**. Only **1 in 3** had the **workplace support** required when they experienced racism.

A recent Victorian study^v found that 76% of survey respondents experienced racism in Australia, two-thirds of them experienced racism in the past 12 months, **most commonly in employment (57%)**.

The **Scanlan Foundation Mapping Social Cohesion 2023** report found that **social cohesion**^{vi} is **declining** due to global economic pressures, geopolitical conflict and the polarising debate over the Voice referendum.

Despite high levels of support for multiculturalism, this support drops^{vii} when talking about immigrants from India, Ethiopia, Lebanon, China, Iraq and Sudan.

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50% of Indian Australians, 45% of migrants from the Middle East and 46% from African backgrounds said they had been **discriminated** against in the last 12 months based on their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion^{viii}.

Our research^{ix} also shows that workers experiencing **compounded discrimination** due to **multiple marginalising and interlinked characteristics** are more likely to report workplace discrimination and/or harassment. Examples include women who are culturally and racially marginalised, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women, women from a lower socio-economic class and women with disability.

We are a partnership of the Diversity Council Australia, Australian Council of Trade Unions, University of Technology Sydney Business School/Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research. *Attachment (a)* provides a brief description of each of our organisations.

This partnership offers:

- A partnership of Australia's peak trade union body, the employer entity for diversity committed organisations, and well respected academic partners.
- Research and data on the experience of **workplace discrimination and racism of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers – Inclusion@Work Index 2023-2024^x, Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) research^{xi}.**
- **Expertise in employment for First Nations people.**
- Research and data on women experiencing compounded and interlinked marginalisation – **Culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) women in leadership project^{xii}.**
- An **evidence-based organisational framework for anti-racism action** to guide Australian organisations to effectively address racism^{xiii}.

Our expertise and research evidence demonstrate that the current Australian workplace environment fails to address the incidence, commonplace nature and complexity of **racism**.

Our evidence shows that unless racism is acknowledged and dealt with, it will continue to exist in Australian workplaces. There are many factors at play that keep racism in place in organisations however a key issue is the lack of a clear, agreed on, **contemporary definition of racism and regulatory/policy framework**, which includes consideration of race-based societal power.

Much debate about racism in this country lacks authoritative expertise. People with lived experiences of racism are the 'experts'. We found that **centring the voices of people with lived experiences of marginalisation^{xiv}** can help workplaces understand the barriers that exist for marginalised workers and how to overcome them.

We also believe an **intersectional** approach is critical because the experience of discrimination and racism at work is extremely complex. For example, Indigenous women who are carers in our **Gari Yala^{xv}** study experienced 'triple jeopardy' with three aspects of their identity amplifying their experience of discrimination and exclusion at work.

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Recommendations

The Australian government:

1. Conduct an **Inquiry into the experience of racism in Australian workplaces**, under similar Terms of Reference^{vi} as the Australian Human Rights Commission's Respect@Work Inquiry. This review could be conducted pursuant to s11 (1) of the Human Rights Commission Act 1986^{vii}.
2. As part of this Inquiry, review the **Racial Discrimination Act**, including a contemporary definition of racism and anti-racism.
3. Recognise the critical importance of an **intersectional approach** to the Terms of Reference for an Inquiry and to amendments made to the Racial Discrimination Act and other relevant legislation, including the definition of racism.
4. To this end, ensure adequate **funding** is provided for this Inquiry to conduct **consultation** with organisations, peak bodies and people with lived experience.

ⁱ [Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report \(2020\) | Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

ⁱⁱ Diversity Council Australia (P. Anderson, V. Mapedzahama, A. Kaabel, and J. O'Leary) *Racism at Work: How organisations can stand up to and end workplace racism*, Diversity Council Australia, 2022 [Racism at Work - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Diversity Council Australia (D'Almada-Remedios, R.) *DCA Inclusion@Work Index 2023-2024: Mapping the State of Inclusion in the Australian Workforce*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia, 2024. [Inclusion@Work Index 2023-2024 - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](#)

^{iv} Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute (Brown, C., DAlmada-Remedios, R., Gilbert, J. OLeary, J. and Young, N.) *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centring the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute, 2020. [dca_synopsisreport_web_0.pdf](#)

^v Peucker, M., Vaughan, F., Doley, J., and Clark, T. (2024). *Understanding reporting barriers and support needs for those experiencing racism in Victoria*. Research report. Victoria University: Melbourne. [Understanding-reporting-barriers-and-support-needs-for-those-experiencing-racism-in-Victoria.pdf \(eccv.org.au\)](#)

^{vi} Dr James O'Donnell. *Mapping Social Cohesion 2023*. The Scanlan Foundation, 2023. [2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report \(3\).pdf](#)

^{vii} Dr James O'Donnell. *Mapping Social Cohesion 2023*. The Scanlan Foundation, 2023. [2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report \(3\).pdf](#)

^{viii} Dr James O'Donnell. *Mapping Social Cohesion 2023*. The Scanlan Foundation, 2023. [2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report \(3\).pdf](#)

^{ix} Diversity Council Australia (V. Mapedzahama, F. Laffernis, A. Barhoum, and J. O'Leary). *Culturally and racially marginalised women in leadership: A framework for (intersectional) organisational action*, Diversity Council Australia, 2023. [CARM women in leadership - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](#)

^x Suggested citation: Diversity Council Australia (R. D'Almada-Remedios), *Inclusion@Work Index 2023–2024: Mapping the State of Inclusion in the Australian Workforce Synopsis Report*, Diversity Council Australia, 2024. [Inclusion@Work Index 2023–2024: Synopsis Report \(dca.org.au\)](#)

^{xi} Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute (Brown, C., DAlmada-Remedios, R., Gilbert, J. OLeary, J. and Young, N.) *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centring the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute, 2020. [Gari Yala \(Speak the Truth\) Gendered Insights - Diversity Council \(dca.org.au\)](#) and [Gari Yala \(Speak the Truth\) - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](#)

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^{xii} Diversity Council Australia (V. Mapedzahama, F. Laffernis, A. Barhoum, and J. O’Leary). *Culturally and racially marginalised women in leadership: A framework for (intersectional) organisational action*, Diversity Council Australia, 2023. [CARM women in leadership - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au)

^{xiii} Diversity Council Australia (P. Anderson, V. Mapedzahama, A. Kaabel, and J. O’Leary) *Racism at Work: How organisations can stand up to and end workplace racism*, Diversity Council Australia, 2022. [Racism at Work - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au)

^{xiv} Diversity Council Australia (Mapedzahama, V., Ojinnaka, A., Deo, S. and O’Leary, J.) *Centring Marginalised Voices at Work: Lessons from DCA’s Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) Women in Leadership Research*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia, 2024. [Centring Marginalised Voices at Work - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au)

^{xv} Diversity Council Australia. Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research UTS. Workplace Gender Equality Agency. Australian Government. *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth)*. Gendered Insights. 2021. [gari_yala_genderedinsights2021.pdf \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au)

^{xvi} [Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report \(2020\) | Australian Human Rights Commission](https://www.humanrights.gov.au)

^{xvii} [Federal Register of Legislation - Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986](https://www.legislation.gov.au)

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ATTACHMENT (a): The Partnership

Diversity Council Australia (DCA): We are the independent not-for-profit peak body leading diversity and inclusion in the workplace. We have over 1,300 member organisations, employing over 2 million Australians, representing almost 20% of the Australian workforce. We provide unique research, inspiring events and programs, curated resources and expert advice across all diversity dimensions to a community of member organisations. We also have a charitable purpose to promote and advance inclusion and diversity through the creation of more diverse and inclusive workplaces. We focus on individuals that have been historically disadvantaged or underrepresented in the labour market.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU): We are the peak body for Australian unions, made up of 38 affiliated unions who together represent about 1.8 million workers and their families. Since our creation in 1927, the ACTU has spearheaded some of the most fundamental workplace struggles in Australia's history. The ACTU's job is to organise working people in their union and to win big, important and permanent improvements to work, workplaces and broader society. Our role as a peak body is to co-ordinate union campaigns, represent workers at a range of government and non-government forums in Australia and overseas, to provide industrial, policy and other support to affiliates, and encourage workers to join their union.

University of Technology Business School (UTS): Our vision is to be a socially-committed business school focused on developing and sharing knowledge for an innovative, sustainable, prosperous economy in a fairer world. Our vision impacts everything we do.

The Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research (Jumbunna) UTS: We are committed to practical innovation and to the development of impact-driven research that benefits industry and the broader Indigenous community, helping shape the world we live in. Jumbunna Research – Strengthening Indigenous Communities aims to produce the highest quality research on Indigenous legal and policy issues and to develop highly skilled Indigenous researchers. Our Vision is to promote, support and embody the exercise and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sovereignty and Self-Determination.