



INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP: ENGAGING IN THE SYSTEM

A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS IN THE
KIMBERLEY REGION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

2023 | 2024

FUNDED BY:



This analysis is in support of Future Weavers, a Indigenous women's movement building leadership through self-employment and business.

The movement elevates remarkable First Nations women in remote and regional communities across Northern Australia and re imagines self-employment and business as a leadership and social change tool.

Future Weavers is led by Natasha Short and her business, Kimberley Jiyigas, implemented by Maganda Makers Business Club and supported by the Menzies Foundation and Good Return.



Gida Jilanda (“Good Day” in Jaru)

In deep gratitude, I acknowledge the support of my collaborators in this project, the Sir Robert Menzies Memorial Foundation and First Australians Capital. In 2018, after more than two decades devoted to community development and Indigenous advancement for people of my beloved Kimberley region of Western Australia, I took the leap of faith to leave full-time employment and established a new business, called Kimberley Jiyigas (Birds). This decision was fuelled by the courage, passion and determination of many Indigenous women who, like me, saw self-employment as an opportunity to design our own lives, build wealth on our own terms, and use our lived experiences to help achieve better outcomes for the Indigenous people of our region.

For us, wealth means more than just money; it also means creating forms of wealth that strengthen our community and culture. However, the unique challenges we face in the business and capital advisory ecosystem underscore the critical need for specialised support.

Leaving the predictability of a full-time wage, with no guarantee of support or success, is brave and strong, that’s why people who do so, are recognised as leaders in our communities, and we appreciate them. Though I am strongly self-motivated, I am grateful to have found like-minded people who have supported my journey, and have encouraged my success. In addition to creating a business that would achieve the desired outcomes, I wanted to create a legacy piece through a movement that would support other Indigenous women just like me who also desired the freedom that

self-employment provides: the ability to choose and apply my cultural knowledge and connections to projects, work, engagements, that align with our values and obligations to our kin and Country. This is a work that need partners, collaborators and other allies to help achieve the vision.

The Maganda (Tomorrow) Makers Business Club and the Future Weavers, Indigenous Women’s Entrepreneurship Movement came from this seed of an idea. These initiatives play a crucial role in supporting over one hundred women who are members of the Club and hundreds more who are connected to each of them- as mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunties.

I’m especially proud that our Maganda Makers Club in the Kimberley, is not limited to one Community, Tribe or Clan in our region – because we are stronger together! Our club truly represents the beauty and diversity of the ‘Birds’ of the Kimberely. The rapid increase in the number of women starting and contemplating businesses meant that we were quickly overwhelmed with demand for what we thought were mainstream services—trauma-informed business coaching, business plan development, and access to capital, especially for the pre-revenue businesses. We anticipated it would become essential to ‘tap in’ to other actors with specialised skills and resources who could provide business advisory and capital assistance.

Sound easy, right?

Early in my association with my colleagues, we realised we were trying to operate in a huge information vacuum. Why was it so difficult for us to make referrals that didn't boomerang back? Why were so many Club members asking us to replicate services that other organisations already provided, often with exponentially more resources than ours? Where exactly were all the Indigenous business and capital advisory organisations that focused on the needs, motivation, processes and barriers experienced by Indigenous women who wanted to venture? How could we link the various forms of support when the organisations themselves all seem to have difficult targets, assessment and eligibility criteria? What Kimberley groups had made it a priority within their strategic plans to incorporate targeted support to Indigenous owned and operated businesses? How could the Club engage with an ecosystem more accustomed to competition than collaboration?

In our PhD research, my collaborator, Dr Cindy Reese Mitchell (2024), sums it up nicely in writing about Kimberley Aboriginal women:

The problem we have identified is that the Strongbala Woomin process and the cultural economy and entrepreneurship ecosystem are uniquely Indigenous and largely unseen and misunderstood by the mainstream economic development ecosystem. As a result, systems and processes that claim to help Kimberley Indigenous women in business trigger trauma and perpetuate deficient narratives about the capacity of Indigenous women and communities.

This narrative affirms our research and my observations over two decades in Indigenous community development. The system funded to support Indigenous economic development in the country is not fit for purpose.

It does not fully recognise or value the enormous contribution that Indigenous people can bring through business, and how it can effect positive changes in the future. Karen Illes's sensitive analysis and Mitch Torres's case studies from our brave Maganda Makers make this plain.

With our Kimberley-focused movement expanding in the Northern Territory and Far North Queensland, the time for field building is now. Using the words of one of our Kimberley Elders and our club patron, Kankawa Nagarra, it's time to listen with "ears of the heart". It's time to come together, where authentic conversations are facilitated with Australia's first people, and truly listen, and then take action on what Indigenous people have been saying, for a really long time – include us, on our terms!

Who is willing to suspend their judgements about what economic development should look like in our community and support us as we practice these new nation-building tools of self-determination?

Until next time, take care jali (friend).

Natasha Short
Managing Director
Kimberley Birds
Captain, Maganda Makers Business Club
August 2024

JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

Over the last four years, we have embarked on a journey of discovery with the remarkable Natasha Short and the Maganda Makers Business Club. One important aspect of our work in the Kimberley is the on Country Camps. These gatherings are where the Club engages in its most important work: envisioning the future of its enterprise-led social change movement. It is also a time of tremendous fun, where we nurture the relational bonds of love, trust, and support that power our collaboration.

CHALLENGES AND CANDID CONVERSATIONS

In late 2023, the Menzies Foundation, along with First Australians Capital, Karen Illes and Leah Armstrong, gathered on the Dampier Peninsula with a group of Maganda Makers Business Club leaders.

The purpose of the gathering was to address the challenges we were experiencing in connecting the women in the Club to others in the capital and business advisory ecosystem.

Speaking through tears of anger and frustration, women candidly shared their experiences in accessing business support, grants, networks, and navigating Indigenous body corporates, including native title bodies.

They described a system that is unbalanced and does not tailor itself to their unique venturing context, barriers, and motivations. This gathering was the genesis for this narrative and propels the current phase of our work called Future Weavers.

NARRATIVE APPROACH

As insightfully suggested by Karen Illes, our collaborator in this work, we offer not a report but a narrative and analysis of the current situation. A report implies a position of ‘greater’ knowledge or authority that passes judgement on others. It also places our collaborators, Strong Kimberley Women, as the research subjects whose knowledge needs to be extracted for the benefit of others.

Our intention here is not to pass judgement but to respectfully surface and articulate what Indigenous people have been saying for some time now about their experience with the system ostensibly designed to support them.

This work unpacks these issues with value-aligned actors willing to join us on a journey of change. We aim not to disparage or demean any actor or actors in the Indigenous entrepreneurship ecosystem. We do not consider ourselves above the system.

We, too, are in it and are constrained by it. However, our trusted connection and affiliations with the group of Indigenous female leaders motivate us to use our resources and social capital to support their systems change agenda.

SYSTEMIC ISSUES AND THE ROLE OF THE NARRATIVE

A lack of synchronicity between service providers and beneficiaries is not uncommon in any system.

When you add the complexity of delivering services across language, and culture, and the fact that some clients live in very remote communities increasingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and the challenges only mount.

Despite these limitations, this narrative elucidates a remarkable number of diverse players in the Kimberley who are doing incredible work despite the odds against them.

We speak here of not-for-profit business intermediaries, Indigenous-controlled community organisations, and local governments, to name a few. These are well-intentioned actors for the most part. The problem is not the availability of services but their accessibility and cultural appropriateness.

In other words, the problem is not a lack of services but a lack of trusted connection or pathway that allows entrepreneurship to move easily between and within them.

IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Why does this matter?

The problem is that the main development logic of Indigenous Australia is one of deficiency and disadvantage. A recitation of the challenges faced by Indigenous Australians is not necessary here. However, we believe that a system

intended to address deficits has become complicit in perpetuating those very deficits.

Let us speak plainly—a broken system continues to cause injury to the very people it is meant to help. This cannot stand.

We intend to surface these findings in two ways—first, through this written narrative, and second, and most importantly, through a series of face-to-face ecosystem convening workshops on Country.

In the same way Indigenous women venture with, and on the Country, we contend that decolonising entrepreneurship and economic development must also happen respectfully on and with Country.

COMBINED, THIS WORK IS A PROVOCATION

We aspire to create a highly relational and communal venturing process of Indigenous women that is inextricably and unapologetically, linked to their kinship obligations.

This work offers hope and a once-in-a-generation opportunity for real and sustainable system change that proactively shifts power to Indigenous leaders.

Liz Gillies
Chief Executive Officer
Menzies Foundation
On behalf of Future Weavers
August 2024

CONTRIBUTIONS AND CASE STUDIES

LIVED EXPERIENCE

We engaged Creative Entrepreneurs and Maganda Makers Business Club Ambassador Michele Torres to contribute to this narrative package.

We supported Michele to travel extensively throughout the Kimberley Region and yarn one-on-one with women specifically about their experience in the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

The case studies she has produced are snapshots of long and deeply intimate yarns, usually over many hours, between women in trusted relationships. It is brave in a place as ‘small’ as the Kimberley for women to share such candid narratives.

We encourage you to engage with them with deep respect and recognise our privilege to engage with their unfiltered perspectives and vulnerability.



RESEARCH + ANALYSIS

ECO-SYSTEM MAPPING

This explorative piece was conducted by Karen Illes from Violet and Co, working very closely with the Maganda Makers Business Club.

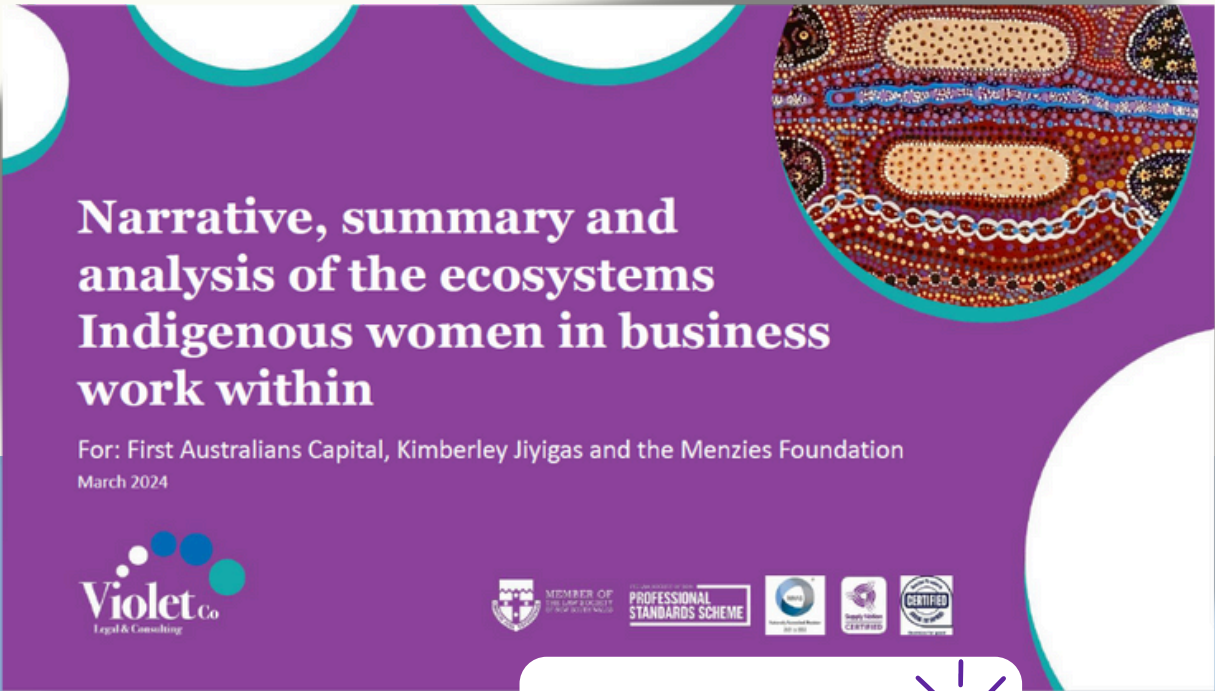
Every month, volumes of research, usually extracted with no attribution or remuneration, are produced about First Nation’s Peoples with little tangible benefit to them. Karen’s acute sensitivity to this is a clear theme throughout her presentation. Rather than starting from a place of deficit, Illes begins with the end in mind.

What would a healthy and supportive ecosystem look like for Kimberley Indigenous entrepreneurial leaders? She suggests that it would be a place where:

- Her experiences as a woman and her family, culture, and community are centred; the offering is not ‘gender agnostic.’
- Indigenous women entrepreneurs are “custodians” of their “table.”
- Ecosystem partners are invited to participate. Rather than imposing Anglo-European business norms and their purpose, the support needs to be tailored and Indigenous-led.
- Long-term relationships involve listening to truth-telling, and acknowledging trauma.
- There is an opportunity for strength-based partnerships.

Furthermore, Karen’s narrative doesn’t treat women’s Indigenous experiences of trauma as the ‘elephant in the room’ whose presence is ignored. She states, “In business, trauma can provide purpose, motivation, empathy, self-empowerment, and healing.” She also suggests from her consultation and experiences that “trauma can be both a handbrake and an enabler to support Indigenous women in their venturing process.”

Therefore, as allies in the system, what are the implications for those of us who walk alongside women? How do we move from being ‘trauma aware or informed’ to actively facilitating micro-therapeutic moments?



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