2026 STRONG WOMEN FOR HEALTHY COUNTRY FORUM REPORT

18-20 August, Bawurrbarnda Outstation, Rembarrnga Country, Northern Territory





Artist: Marlaina Braun-Hayes



Jalkie Rickson, Traditional Owner for Bawurrbarnda



Anne Kelly, Traditional Owner for Bawurrbarnda

2026 FORUM LOGO STORY

It's a privilege to introduce Marlaina Braun-Hayes, a young Mayili woman, talented artist and current ranger with Mimal Land Management who designed this year's forum logo.

With the guidance of Traditional Owner Anne Kelly, Marlaina brought the essence of Bawurrbunda to life:

"This logo represents the importance of the billabong, a place of life, connection and culture. The turtle symbolises the totem group, the pandanus represents Rembarrnga county, and the fish reflects the billabong, highlighting its importance as a source of life and the strong connection between Country, people and culture."



Front cover: Mickayla Martin, Tiwi Rangers



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Strong Women for Healthy Country Network (SWHCN) grew from a simple but powerful understanding: when First Nations women come together, share their knowledge and stand alongside one another, they are stronger. It is a place for women to connect across communities and generations, to share stories and cultural knowledge, and to strengthen their vital roles in caring for Country, culture and family.

The story of the Network began with conversations between Rembarrnga, Dalabon and Mayili Elders of Central Arnhem Land. These senior women recognised the importance of having a space where First Nations women caring for Country could come together, learn from one another and support each other through shared challenges and make their voices stronger.

In 2019, this vision became a reality at the first on-Country forum at Bawurrbarnda in Central Arnhem Land. More than 130 women gathered and collaborated to lay the foundations for a Network that would connect First Nations women from across the Northern Territory. It was the beginning of something much bigger, at the heart of this gathering was a shared commitment:

"We are strong Indigenous women of the Northern Territory. We stand united as one strong voice. We commit to a Network that gives equal power to the rights of all our women. Strong women means healthy Country."

Since those early days, the Network has continued to grow, shaped by the women who bring it to life. Four more annual forums were held between 2021 and 2024, creating opportunities for women to reconnect, share knowledge and strengthen relationships across communities. The Message Sticks subcommittee was established to help keep these connections alive throughout the year, linking women, communities and ranger groups beyond the forums themselves.

The Network also developed a Strategic Plan, setting a shared direction for the future. A significant milestone was reached in November 2024 when the SWHCN became a registered Aboriginal Corporation, with an inaugural Board of Directors elected by its members.

This year's sixth annual forum held at Bawurrbarnda, brought the network back to its birthplace, honouring the beginning, celebrating the journey, and shaping the future.

Sharing knowledge on Country

We were welcomed on to Rembarrnga Country by Traditional Owners Anne Kelly, Jalkie Rickson and family members. Our hosts spoke to their Country, blessed us with water, and did a smoking ceremony.

Together with Elders, they led and facilitated the weaving space, sourced local bush dyes, took attendees on a billabong walk and shared stories at night by the campfire. On our last night our hosts closed the forum at Bawurrbarnda, with a traditional Bunggul!





Presentations by and for strong women

206 women gathered for our forum, travelling from remote communities from across the whole of the Northern Territory as well as from neighbouring states, including women working across 23 ranger groups, Elders, healers, artists, community workers, and supporters. We began with heartfelt introductions from different ranger groups, speaking about the work we do and why it is so important to look after Country, culture and community.

This year's forum focus was on Social and Emotional wellbeing, with presentations on:

- Women's Leadership
- Women's health and healthy pregnancies
- Deadly thinking – mental health first aid and suicide prevention
- Strong Women Strong Voices Research Project (Purple Shirts)
- Growing First Nations Exchange Program
- Bidwern Bush Uni – making your work good one for you
- Best Practice Principals for employing women caring for Country
- Strong Women, Safe Elders – What is Elder abuse, how do we stop it and care for our Elders
- Women's Safety Toolkit – Building the caring for Country sector's capacity to respond to the impacts of family, domestic and sexual violence in the workplace

Co-hosted by Strong Women for Healthy Country Program Manager Margie O'Brien and Djungkai for Bawurrbarnda Anne Kelly, attendees listened and participated in engaging activities, movement and dance, and intimate yarning circles.

Working together

The afternoons offered several smaller, more intimate breakout sessions, providing opportunities to participate in projects and collaborations, including Bush Heritage's Seasonal Calendar yarning circle, Digital Women Rangers' photo competition, the launch of our Best Practice Principles for employing women Caring for Country (SWHCN), the Strong Women Rising – Keeping Our Ways Strong kite-making session with TM Creative Consulting, the Strong Voices Research Project with University of Queensland, and Mardrulk's Building Women's Careers in Construction project.

Strengthening our network

Our 2026 forum was an opportunity to strengthen our network, with two brand-new ranger groups in attendance, including one that travelled all the way from Papunya, and 61% of attendees joining the Strong Women Forum for the very first time.

Elders present took part in a yarning circle to discuss their role in our network, while everyone shared ideas about how we can help keep our Elders safe and strong, too.

During our Message Stick Ceremony, we also explained the different layers of our network and reformed our Message Sticks Group. The group will work alongside our directors, acting as a local go-between and strengthening the connection between communities and directors to maintain our Cultural Governance.

Collective artwork

We explored themes of motherhood, loss, remembrance, hope, and transformation in our 2026 forum artwork, through two interconnected creative activities. In the first, we created plaster candle holders to honour those who have passed and create an opportunity for collective remembrance. In the second, we painted butterflies as symbols of hope and transformation.

STRONG WOMEN FOR HEA

Time

2019



The Beginning

First forum initiated by Rembarrnga, Dalabon, and Mayili Elders inviting women to meet at Bawurrbarnda in Central Arnhem Land.

- Vision Statement
- Network name established
- 130+ attendees.

2021



Building Connections

Second forum held at Banatjarl on Jawoyn Country.

- Formation of the Message Sticks Group to manage the network's vision
- 260 women attended.

2022



Planning the Future

Third forum held at Inteye Arrkwe on Eastern Arrernte Country.

- Focused on designing a Strategic plan
- 200+ attendees.

LTHY COUNTRY NETWORK

line

2023



Taking Action

Fourth forum held at Pudakul on Limilngan-Wulna Country.

- Focused on taking action on identified priorities
- Rule Book development
- 200+ attendees.

2024



Growing the Movement

Fifth forum held at Crab Claw Island on Larrakia Country.

- Governance focus
- 135 founding members registered
- Board elected.

SWHCN registered with Oric in November and became an Aboriginal Corporation.

2025



Continuing the Journey

Official Strong Women for Healthy Country Network logo finalised – representing members from river Country, desert Country and saltwater Country from across the NT.

WHERE WE TRAVELLED FROM



61% first timers

78% reported an increase in confidence

93% met new women

42 attended for the 2nd time

17 for the 3rd time

4 for the 4th time

2 for the 5th time

6 for the 6th time

Women from 23 ranger groups the gathered at our forum:

Arafura Swamp Rangers

Anindilyakwa Land and Sea Rangers

Djelk Rangers (Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation)

Djurrubu Rangers (Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation)

Garngi Rangers (NLC)

Jawoyn Rangers (Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation)

Kakadu Rangers (Parks Australia)

Kulumindini Rangers (NLC)

Mangarrayi Rangers (Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation)

Mardbalk Rangers (NLC)

Marranbala Rangers (Namultja Aboriginal Corporation)

Mimal Rangers

Minyumai Rangers

Mutjuŋ Rangers (Gong-Dāl Aboriginal Corporation)

Numbulwar Numburndi Rangers (NLC)

Ngurratjuta Kunga Rangers

Tiwi Land and Marine Rangers (Tiwi Resources)

Thamarrurr Rangers

Wagiman Rangers (NLC)

Wardaman Rangers (NLC)

Warddeken Rangers

Yirralka Rangers (Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation)

Yugul Mangi Rangers (NLC)

Women from these organisations joined our forum too:

Arnhem Land Fire Abatement NT Ltd.

Australian Wildlife Conservancy

Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup (Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation)

Bush Heritage Australia

CSIRO

Digital Women Rangers

Environment Centre NT

Flinders University

Job Skills Network

Judith Neilson Foundation

Karrkad Kanjdji Trust

Katherine West Health Board

Mehi Centre

Northern Land Council

Red Dust Role Models Limited

St John Ambulance NT

The Nature Conservancy

Tjuwaliyn-Wagiman Aboriginal Corporation

TM Collective Consulting

University of Queensland

WWF-Australia





WELCOME TO COUNTRY

On Monday 17 August, women from remote communities from across the NT made their journey to Bawurrbarnda on Rembarrnga Country. We were warmly welcomed by Jalkie Rickson, Anne Kelly, and Judy Dalywater, with support from Larrisa Kelly, Danisha Riley, and Jasmin Daly, Traditional Owners and Djungkai for this Country. They performed a water blessing with water collected from the local spring and leaves gathered for the smoking ceremony to welcome us and keep us all safe while on their Country.

"Welcome you guys, family near and far. Thank you mob for coming! Like we're just, I'm just....all the women, ladies, that are here today: thank you all for coming!"

Jalkie Rickson

"Forum here at Emu Springs, Bawurrbarnda, and I'm so proud of you girls came from another settlement, you know, and community."

Anne Kelly

Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Danisha Riley, one of the senior rangers. Yes, like what nana said, Djungkayi. This is Dhuwa Country. Yirritja: im Djungkayi for this area. Djungkayi means – some of you mob know – Djungkayi means you got your policeman next to you. Like we cannot do anything without our policeman, our Djungkayi. Ma, thank you!

Danisha Riley

We are deeply grateful to our forum hosts. They looked after us during our stay, shared stories with us, and took us out walking on their Country.

SWHC Program Manager Margie O'Brien explains the importance of the water blessing and smoking ceremony:

"So just near where we camped, there was a spring, and those water sources carry significant stories, and having a water blessing, that keeps us safe while we're there. We're on other people's Country.

As Aboriginal people, when we travel and we go to someone else's Country, it's still important for us to show respect.

And because we were camping out and we were staying out bush, we want to make sure that we have that protection for us, that we're there on Country."

A huge thank you to our forum hosts, Anne and Jalkie, family members and community for making this such a special and wholesome event.



PRESENTATIONS BY AND FOR STRONG WOMEN

206 women rangers, Elders, healers, artists, community workers, and supporters gathered for our forum. During presentations, we learned more about our network from our Strong Women for Healthy Country Directors, Message Stick Members, Purple Shirts Members, and Program Manager Margie O'Brien.

This was also an important opportunity for ranger groups and community organisations to share their experiences, showcase their work, and connect with each other.

"Country needs people. We have to share with one another where you come from, doesn't matter who you are. But we've got one blood."

Mali Djarrbal, Arafura Swamp Rangers

"Super fortunate to come to these events and the girls team to be able to see that there's so many women doing the same thing and that working together we can, we can do anything. So really looking forward to the next few days of everyone getting together and sharing stories and strength with all of the girls."

Yolanda Birtwhistle, Anindilyakwa Land and Sea Rangers

"We've been building for, this is coming into our fifth month. So, we're only really new. So very, very stoked to be here. Very proud and honoured. And yes, looking forward to talking with you all and learning."

Jodie Bushby, Ngurratjuta Kungka Rangers

"We couldn't wait to come and see all the familiar faces. We missed a lot of you mob. But yes, we're happy to be here today and I'm happy that it's based here, because we love coming here with work and stuff."

Levina Woodbury, Jawoyn and Mangarrayi Rangers

"I'm a Ranger coordinator and I have five rangers on board, and I like coming out to this Strong Women's forum every now and again and this is my fifth time."

Charmaine Miningirrgirr, Mardbalk Rangers











"I guess we've got a bit of a history with having strong women. I belong also to the Tjuwalyin-Wagiman Aboriginal Corporation. And in 2001 we had the first Aboriginal woman's forum there on my Country, in Tjuwalyin. It's a very sacred place for women. And that was facilitated by NLC. So since then we've been gone on, we've won two Territory NRM Awards in 2022, but this is the first time we've got our own women's ranger group. So I'm happy to be saying that."

Mona Liddy, Tjuwalyin-Wagiman Aboriginal Corporation

"I'm the coordinator for the Tiwi Rangers, and this is the first year that these girls are attending the event, so they're here to soak up as much knowledge as they can. I was a senior Ranger for Mimal for a few years and I'd like to thank all my Elders, especially Mimal Elders that sit on the board as well. You played a big part in shaping me on my journey and I'd like to thank Tiwi Rangers for accepting me on their team."

Jasmin Daly, Tiwi Rangers



Throughout the forum we also joined dedicated sessions to deepen our understanding of topics that are important to us and explore collaboration opportunities.

Strong Women Strong Voices Research Project

Presented by Sheila White from our network; Andrea Andrews from the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup; Rosie Goslett-King and Dr Romola Stewart from WWF-Australia; and Dr Ree Jordan and Brooke Prentis from the University of Queensland

Women in our network are continuing their research partnership with the University of Queensland and WWF-Australia. In this presentation, they shared their work so far investigating ways to make our voices heard on a national level. You can read more about this project on pages 16-17 of this report.

Growing Nations Exchange Program

Presented by Tracy Minniecon and Dr Catriona Elder from TM Collective Consulting

The Growing Nations Exchange Program invited strong women to co-design an exchange with women in northern Thailand.

"The concept explores how Indigenous women from different Countries and cultures might connect through women's leadership, knowledge-sharing, community capability, culture, livelihoods, environmental stewardship and economic empowerment. The presentation shared examples of Indigenous and community-led women's initiatives internationally, before introducing relationships and learning emerging from northern Thailand and the possibility of beginning with a small women's exchange."

Excerpt from TM Collective Consulting's forum reflections report





Workplace responsibilities, rights, and support – making your work good one for you

Presented by Margie O'Brien from our network and Julie Pettett from the Bidwern Butj Uni

In this presentation, Margie and Julie shared strategies to learn more about your employer, responsibilities as an employee, and rights in the workplace. They demystified common policy wording members might come across in different organisations documentation. They also shared key learnings about supporting Aboriginal women in the workplace from Mimal's recent Employment Bargaining Agreement process and adopting the Best Practice Principles guidelines.

Leadership

Presented by Myra Fordham

In this presentation, Myra explored the importance of sisterhood in enabling true leadership. She spoke about how violence, trauma, and mental health issues can isolate women, and the need for healing to be able to be strong together. She generously shared her personal journey with us.

Family, domestic, and sexual violence

Presented by Gemma Langton and Donny Toby from Big Rivers Healing for Our Mob Team in partnership with Katherine West Health Board

The Big Rivers Healing for Our Mob Team presented on a toolkit on how to recognise, respond and keep ourselves and our families safe from family, domestic and sexual violence. Gemma and Donny shared their own survival stories with us. They also spoke about how the Katherine West Health Board is working with Sunrise Health Service, Wurli-Wurlinjang Health Service, and NT Health to support 31 communities, and especially women who move between different communities often. They went through how to recognise different kinds of violence, the importance of yarning about it and reporting it, the dangers of pressuring a person to leave an abusive relationship, and approaches to making a safety plan.

"Behind every strong woman, is a strong woman. You are not alone."

Gemma Langton, Katherine West Health Board

Social emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention

Presented by Margaret Saunders from Deadly Thinking

In this presentation, Margaret introduced us to the Deadly Thinking Program, a social and emotional well-being and suicide prevention program specifically designed by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. She explained how Deadly Thinking workshops create opportunities for our people to come together in a safe circle, sharing stories and wisdom about staying strong in spirit, mind, and heart. These gatherings honour our culture, traditions, and the values of our ancestors. We then spoke with Margaret about how the program could be adapted to reflect the needs and strengths of our own communities.

Women's health, pregnancy, and motherhood

Presented by Dr Sarah Springer and sponsored by DrinkWise

"As a Wiradjuri woman and doctor, I was drawn to the opportunity to connect with women around health, culture and the journeys that shape us. A central reason for my involvement was to bring DrinkWise's strong, clear message about not drinking during pregnancy to the audience. I wanted to share that message in an accessible, respectful way, grounded in my passion for women's health and healthier futures for mums and bubs.

My presentation followed my journey into medicine, the paths my career has taken and the experiences that have shaped my commitment to women's health. I also shared my personal story of birthing away from Country and trying to access culturally safe care. Speaking as both a doctor and a woman who has needed that care allowed me to bring a personal perspective to the conversation."

Excerpt from Dr Sarah Springer's forum reflection report





WORKING TOGETHER

Strong Women Strong Voices research project



These sessions were facilitated by Rosie Goslett-King and Dr Romola Stewart from WWF-Australia; Dr Ree Jordan and Brooke Prentis from the University of Queensland; Sheila White from our network; Andrea Andrews from the Banatajarl Strongbala Wimun Grup; and Vanessa Murray from Mimal.

Strong women in our network are continuing their research partnership with the University of Queensland and WWF-Australia. At our forum, they shared their journey from joining our Message Sticks Group four years ago, to investigating leadership and advocacy pathways for our network as part of a research team.

"And so, we work along all the professors and some of our doctors here from the university to get us there, get you guys there."

Andrea Andrews, Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup



Project partners joined them in explaining how the first two years of research focused on stories from strong women in the Northern Territory, and that this research was awarded an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant in 2024. Over three years the team is funded to draw attention and support to First Nation's women spaces, their leadership, and advocacy on a national level. They will do this by interviewing women caring for Country across Australia and mapping out different funding and advocacy barriers and opportunities.

"There's barriers at the NT level and other state levels. There are barriers at the federal level. And as we move forward, we're going to really explore a lot more of that."

Dr Ree Jordan, University of Queensland

Our forum was an opportunity for us to be part of these important next steps. 22 forum participants joined in the project by yarning as part of an interview. The research team also facilitated a workshop for us to start mapping out the different kinds of funding available to support our caring for Country work, and the barriers to us accessing this funding. We also worked together to map out the different layers of power shaping our lives as women caring for Country and thinking about how we can work together to make our voices heard.

All strong women's stories, perspectives, and insights are important. If you are interested in learning more about the project or even joining in the research by booking a yarn with Purple Shirts Members Andrea Andrews, Vanessa Murray, Sheila White, Gennivea Aplin, Rosie Goslett-King, Bianca McNeair, or Brooke Prentis, you can either contact your local Purple Shirt Member directly or email b.prentis@uq.edu.au; rgking@wwf.org.au; or swhc@mimal.org.au.






STRONG WOMEN FOR









Digital Woman Rangers Photo Competition

This competition was facilitated by Dr Cathy Robinson, Dr Cara Penton, and Dr Justine Murray from the Digital Women Rangers.

The Digital Women Rangers started in 2022 as a collective of women rangers, support staff, and scientists to support Indigenous women to tell stories about Country using data. With support from CSIRO and the Telstra Foundation, the Digital Woman Rangers support women to learn digital skills from each other on Country, in a culturally responsible way.

The Digital Women Rangers became a forum partner in 2023 to help more women connect and share ways we use digital technology to tell stories about Country. This year they organised a photo competition for us!

The Digital Women Rangers Photo Competition provided an opportunity to celebrate how Indigenous women rangers are using digital tools to care for Country.

During the forum, women rangers shared photos and stories showcasing how they use digital tools and data to monitor, manage and tell their own stories about Country.

All ranger groups that submitted a photo received a prize pack, including mobile phones, digital accessories and Digital Women Ranger merchandise generously donated by the Telstra Foundation.

Digital Women Ranger Photo Competition categories:

- **Two-way Learning** – celebrating the exchange of knowledge between Elders and young women, and across Indigenous women ranger groups
- **Digital Women Rangers** – recognising women building digital skills to Care for Country
- **Country through Digital Tools** – showcasing images captured using drones, digital camera traps, or other digital tools
- **Celebrating Women Ranger Networks** – acknowledging the coordinators, Elders, and leaders who support Indigenous women rangers

To learn more about the Digital Women Rangers and connect with them, visit:

healthycountryai.org/women-rangers.php

facebook.com/DigitalWomenRangers





Digital Boss Lady Governance Committee

"Congratulations to the Learning & using digital skills on Country together category winners, Kakadu rangers!"



Sharing knowledge through seasonal calendars

These sessions were facilitated by Kylie Burn, Sara Weir, and Tiahni Adamson from Bush Heritage Australia.

Kylie Burn from Bush Heritage Australia wrote the following reflections for us to share in this report.

The women in our network have deep seasonal knowledge and stories, shared with them by their elders over many generations. Many women, with their ranger groups and Elders, have developed seasonal calendars and associated resources as innovative, cross-cultural tools that support sharing knowledge with their communities, monitoring Country for changes, and supporting our decision making for Country.

Bush Heritage facilitators supported breakout sessions focused on seasonal calendars to provide women space to share this work, yarn about important plants, animals, and other seasonal indicators, and to get ideas from other women about how they would like to do this work.

At the session, women yarned about the importance of seasonal calendars in passing on cultural knowledge, keeping language strong, and guiding caring for Country. They highlighted their role in:

- Passing knowledge to the next generation and teaching children what to look for on Country.
- Keeping language and culture strong by connecting seasonal knowledge, stories and Country.
- Understanding changes on Country and climate, through changes in seasonal indicators.
- Guiding cultural practices, including knowing the right time for Ceremony and activities on Country.
- Recording and retaining Elders' knowledge so it can continue to be shared with future generations.

"What time to look for animals, what time to do burning and it tells us good time, season to go out. Good things – checking animals, fruits, bush tucker and the waterways. Looking at wet season, raining, look at – learn the right time. Workshop with ladies, make a plan, right way using that calendar as they go out on Country. The old people used their time, date, year and months. Helps them, what season we find all that animal, using that calendar."

Virginia Nundhirribala, Elder and cultural advisor for the South East Arnhem Land Indigenous Protected Area







Many women shared their journeys in developing seasonal calendars, including why they were created, how they are being used, and the benefits of women being engaged in these projects.

Women highlighted that seasonal calendars capture valuable cultural and ecological knowledge of seasons, plants, animals, waters, and stars. This knowledge guides how we care for Country and practice our culture, reflecting the knowledge that has always been held, lived and passed down, and the important responsibility women have to continue sharing it with future generations.

"That indicator is like a shop sign. When that sign tells us it's open, we know that bush tucker is ready."

Acacia Lewis, Acting VRD Caring for Country Project Officer, NLC

However, there are many challenges that our communities have and continue to endure, such as the ongoing impacts of colonisation, disruptions to cultural practices, and threats to our landscapes like weeds, hot fires and feral animals that has made it increasingly more important to develop resources that support us to preserve our seasonal knowledge.

Rangers across the NT are also using seasonal calendars to guide their work, strengthen monitoring, and support knowledge sharing between Elders and rangers. Here were some examples shared during the session:

- Julie Roy, Yugul Mangi Rangers Assistant Coordinator, shared the Yugul-Mangi Faiya En Sisen Kelenda, and how it supports rangers to understand seasonal changes and guide their work on the IPA.
- Mali, Marcia, and Sylvia, miyalk rangers from the Arafura Swamp IPA, shared their journey of developing their ranger workplan around their Yolŋu Seasonal Calendar. They yarned how this work also evolved into their Plants and Animals Book project, bringing together cultural and ecological knowledge and supporting their Cultural Mapping Program across the clans of their IPA.
- Anne and Priscilla, Elders of the Mimal IPA, shared their Rembarrnga and Dalabon seasonal calendars, yarning with the ladies about the many seasonal indicators they use to monitor the health of Country. Mimal rangers are also now recording this knowledge with Elders for their Seasonal Calendar Website.

Women also shared their concerns about how knowledge can be used by people from outside their communities, including for purposes or reasons that were not intended or agreed to. This highlighted the importance of protecting Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) and the data sovereignty of our communities, ensuring knowledge is shared in the right way, and seeking permission from the right people. Women also emphasised the importance of working with partners and organisations who respect and support these right-way processes.

By the end of the week, women from the Elliott, Ngurratjuta and Ngalurrtju ranger groups had mapped their own seasonal calendars for the first time, starting on their journey of creating their own resources. This provided an important starting point for taking their calendars and ideas back to their ranger groups, where they can continue to develop them and work with Elders to build on and strengthen this knowledge.



Photo supplied by TM Collective Consulting



Strong Women Rising

These sessions were facilitated by Tracy Minniecon and Catriona Elder from TM Collective Consulting.

In these sessions, we learnt about the work of Keep Our Ways Strong Indigenous Corporation in Mparntwe, and were able to participate in Strong Women Rising™ workshops. TM Collective Consulting provided the following reflections on these workshops for us to share in this report.

Strong Women Rising created a relaxed, practical space for women to sit together, make something with their hands, yarn, listen and learn from one another. Using the construction of a kite as the activity, conversations gently explored some of the things that contribute to women's connection and wellbeing: the people, places and experiences that shape us; identity and how we move through the world; communication and being heard; healthy relationships; and the people, knowledge, places and memories we carry with us.

The methodology was intentionally strengths-based and relational. Women were not asked to disclose trauma or difficult experiences. Instead, the activity created space for women to decide what they wanted to share, listen to the experiences of others and recognise the knowledge and strengths already present in the group.

During the forum each presentation had its own purpose and expertise, together they reinforced something important: women's lives cannot be separated into neat boxes. Health, safety, relationships, identity, culture, family, Country, leadership, wellbeing and the systems women navigate are interconnected. That same understanding sits underneath Strong Women Rising.

What happened around the kites

Perhaps the strongest indication of the workshop's impact was what happened naturally around the table. The first Strong Women Rising session was held on the opening day of the Forum. Women were still connecting and settling into the week. It took only one woman sitting down to begin making her kite before others started joining her. The stories shared around the table were warm, funny and real. Women talked while their hands were busy building and decorating. They listened to one another, laughed together and shared experiences from their lives.

One observer who joined the workshop later reflected:

"The workshop was designed around making and decorating a kite. This format combined with Tracy's inclusive engagement skills to really allow the Indigenous women participants [to] open up and share about parts of their life."

She particularly noticed the ease with which women participated:

"The women spoke freely and produced some beautiful and interesting artworks; there seemed to be no shame in sharing both their art and their life stories. Everyone was super engaged through the whole workshop, and it seemed helpful to them to be able to connect and share with one another."

What was particularly interesting was how participation grew across the three days. After each session, the completed kites were hung around the TMCC stall. Women walking past could see the artwork and words created by other women and hear some of the stories emerging from the sessions.

By the second and third workshops, women were increasingly keen to participate. The kites themselves had become the invitation. And after each session, the installation grew.

One kite became several. Several became many.

By the final day, the kites surrounding the stall had become a powerful visual representation of Strong Women Rising: every kite different, every woman carrying her own story, yet all connected within something much larger.

That is the heart of **Strong Women Rising**.

It is not about asking women to be strong all the time or to carry everything themselves. It is about creating spaces where women can connect, share, listen, laugh, remember, support one another and recognise the strengths they already carry.

One woman can rise. When women create the conditions for one another to rise, something much bigger becomes possible.





Building Women's Careers in Construction

These sessions were facilitated by Kelly Retief and Rebecca O'Brien from Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation; and Aisla Connolly from Job Skills Network.

The Building Women's Careers in Construction project team held interactive workshops for us to celebrate our skills and strengths, explore career pathways in construction, and invite us to help shape the future of this project across Arnhem Land.

During these workshops, many of us shared examples from our own Country of our ancestors' construction techniques such as manufacturing paperbark canoes, building fish traps, making tools from rocks, and weaving dilly bags to hold them. We talked about how the old people strategically chose the right place to set up shelter, looking for higher ground and caves. We also yarned about the important role many women played in setting up outstations during the homeland's movement.

Some Mimal rangers shared their experience working with Mardrulk Contracting Ltd, and the opportunities for women to be part of this social enterprise. We yarned about the importance of upholding Customary Law in the workplace, supporting Indigenous women facing discrimination, and sharing new construction skills with the wider community.

The new Building Women's Careers in Construction project website was launched at our forum, where we can connect with the project team and register our interest in future opportunities. Visit www.womenbuildingcountry.au to find out more!

Our best practice principles for employers of women caring for Country

This session was facilitated by Margie O'Brien from our network.

In this session, we launched our informative poster to share our network's best practice principles! We created these best practice principles across our previous forums, by identifying a wide range of different practices employers can implement to support women in the caring for Country sector. At our previous Message Stick Meetings, we organised these practices into six principles we want our employers to uphold: safe workplaces, women's spaces, equitable training opportunities, flexible workplans, representation in decision-making, and dedicated jobs.

In 2024, the Australian Government's Department of Social Services awarded our network funding to further develop and share this work. In 2025 our Message Sticks Members formed a working group to update our best practice principles, and to develop resources to promote them. They designed our poster, as well as presentation and workshop templates to assist employers to build their own strategy to support women caring for Country at work and measure their organisation's performance against our best practice principles. Today, the Northern Territory Government has included our Best Practice Principals in selected Grants, as guidelines for applicants to consider when making a submission. If you or your organisation would like a copy please contact us directly.





This session was also an opportunity to share ideas to support women from our own workplaces. Both rangers and support staff – including several Aboriginal ranger coordinators and women working interstate – contributed valuable perspectives to this yarn.

"I loved participating in all the workshops; however, two particular experiences left a lasting impression. The first was the best practices workshop, which highlighted the important work of the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network in developing recommendations for safe workspaces where women thrive professionally, while fulfilling personal, cultural and community responsibilities."

Gemma Cadd, The Nature Conservancy



OUR ELDERS' YARNING CIRCLE

This session was facilitated by Margie O'Brien from our network and Nadia Ronay from Mimal.

This session was funded by the Department of People, Sport and Culture, so we could have a space to talk about keeping our Elders safe from abuse.

We opened our yarning circle by considering what our Elders mean to us from a cultural perspective. Not every person who is old is recognised in our communities as an Elder. Our Elders play a distinct role in our societies, keeping our knowledge, stories, cultures, languages, and ceremonies safe and strong for future generations.

We then reflected on the role Rembarrnga, Dalabon, and Mayili Elders have played in initiating our network. We yarned about how Elders in our network have worked to keep us strong. We spoke about ways to respect and care for our Elders, and what happens when these ways break down.

We split into smaller yarning groups, to share our own experiences of our Elders' teachings, what Elder abuse can look like, and how we can protect our Elders. We closed the session by coming back together as a big group and shared what we had discussed.

What do our Elders teach us?

We yarned about the many ways we have learnt from our Elders in our own lives. Our Elders work tirelessly to safeguard and pass on their knowledge about our customary Law, ceremony, songlines, sacred sites, and dancing. They teach us about who we are and where we come from: our Country, Dreamings, kinship, ancestors, cultures, languages, and stories.

They guide us through all chapters of life, teaching us how to bring our babies into the world, smoke them, and care for them. They teach children to be respectful, kind, to stay safe on Country, and to keep learning. They teach us how to gather and safely prepare bush tucker and bush medicine. They teach us how to collect and use weaving materials, bush dyes, and art supplies. They teach us about healing and looking after our spirit. When one of our people passes away, they guide our funerals and burial rites.







What can Elder abuse look like?

We shared examples of different kinds of Elder abuse. We spoke of physical abuse, such as hitting Elders, threatening them with violence, or intimidating them with vandalism. We spoke of verbal abuse, such as swearing at Elders, putting them down, and using disrespectful language.

Many of us spoke about financial abuse. Examples we discussed were stealing from their bank account, using up their phone credit, pretending to help them with their banking or payments to take advantage of them, and deliberately confusing them about financial decisions made on their behalf.

We also shared examples of other kinds of exploitation, such as forcing Elders to do childcare, trading their weavings and artworks without proper consent, and humbugging them for bushtucker, bush medicine, or tobacco.

We spoke about isolation and neglect: when Elders are left alone without support to meet their basic needs like eating well, showering, and having access to clean accommodation, clothes and bedding.

We also had important conversations about spiritual abuse, when Elders are not allowed to attend ceremony or speak their own language.

How can we look after our Elders and keep them safe?

As strong women, we care for our Elders by showing them respect, love and support. We spend time with them, listen to their stories, and value their knowledge and their strength. We take our Elders out on Country and help them to keep doing activities they love. We can also bring them bush tucker and bush medicine if they cannot come out bush with us.

Back in our communities, we teach the next generations to respect their Elders. We involve Elders in our children's schooling, and find opportunities for them to mentor young people, and share their knowledge.

We need to keep checking in with our Elders. If they are struggling with shopping, cooking, cleaning or looking after themselves, we need to find them support. For example, we can help them connect with services, and we can talk to family about taking responsibility.

We can help keep our Elders safe by talking about Elder abuse with our families, and speaking up if we see an Elder is being treated in the wrong way. We can also report the abuse to night patrol, or the police.



"Cultural identity, cultural knowledge is practised through rangers managing land, connecting to Country, showing young people learning on Country. And this forum is an example of that."

Melissa Andrews-Wurramarrba, Environment Centre NT



OUR MESSAGE STICKS CEREMONY

Throughout our forum, we were able to learn more about our Message Sticks Group. Message Stick Members shared their experiences during presentations. Posters and handouts also outlined the opportunities and commitments involved in joining the Message Sticks Group. Women at previous forums have asked the Message Sticks Group to:

- maintain communication throughout our network by sharing messages between each other, their organisations, communities, and all strong women in our network
- plan Strong Women for Healthy Country events and activities, such as forums
- work together as a united voice, advocating for women caring for Country and our network
- think of more ways to listen to Elders and support their leadership within our network.

These responsibilities are now set out in our Message Sticks Group Terms of Reference.

Like at previous forums, we had the opportunity to nominate ourselves to be part of the Message Sticks Group. Following the Message Stick Group nomination process designed at our forum at Crab Claw Island in 2024, strong women stepped forward into different roles within our network during our Message Stick Ceremony. Message Stick Members who were unable to make it to our 2026 forum were also contacted to see if they wanted to renominate. Our network's board members also remain part of our Message Sticks Group. In total, 32 strong women are part of our 2026 Message Sticks Group until our next forum:

Stephanie Anderson
Edna Andrews
Melissa Andrews-Wurramarrba
Gennivea Aplin
Emmalena Barrett
Teresa Burrburr
Kerry Anne Campbell
Mary Clark
Corrine Coombes
Mary Crocombe
Jasmin Daly
Jana Daniels
Yvonne Draper
Armani Francois
Enid Gallagher
Marlaina Hayes
Irene Jungawanga
Jody Kopp
Alice Kungiung
Acacia Lewis
Mickayla Martin
Norrie Martin
Shantelle Miller
Vanessa Murray
Karen Noble
Virginia Nundhirribala
Joanne Pomery
Nikita Puruntatameri
Staneil Russell
Anne Marie Waistcoat
Kelly Wauchope
Sheila White

WEAVING

The weaving space was an important part of our forum. Shaded by trees, it was a place to relax, reconnect with family, meet new people, hone our skills, and listen to our Elders telling stories.

Elders Anne Kelly, Priscilla Dalywater, Judy Dalywater, and Norrie Martin collected pandanus for us, with support from Emma Lupin. We also had access to raffia and jewellery-making tools. We learnt about different dyes gathered from the bush and had the opportunity to practise using them.

















BUSH MEDICINE MAKING

Making bush medicine continues to be an industrious part of our forum. This activity was supported by Elders from Mimal in collaboration with the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup.

The Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup promotes cultural wellbeing, healing and sharing. They have played a big role in growing our network, hosting our 2021 forum on their homeland where we started our Message Sticks Group.

"Our goal is to keep passing on our knowledge of bush plants and using bush medijin. By making and sharing our medijin, we also enable our own social enterprise that give women meaningful work and elevate women's healing and culture."

Excerpt from Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup forum program submission

To learn more about the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup and connect with them visit:

www.jawoyn.org.au/banatjarl-wimun-keep-strong

www.facebook.com/Banatjarl









OUR COLLECTIVE 2026 FORUM ART PROJECT

Our art space is an important and ongoing part of our forum, providing a space for women to relax, connect, yarn, share stories and express ourselves through creativity. Each year, participants contribute to a collaborative artwork that reflects the collective experiences, knowledge and spirit of the women attending our forum. Previous collaborative works have included the Gundung Mural from Bawurrbarnda in 2019, the Message Stick Artwork from Banatjarl in 2021, the Circles of Connection from Inteye Arrkwe in 2022, the Dilimin Langan weaving from Pudakul in 2023, and the Handprinted River textile artwork at Crab Claw Island in 2024.

In 2026, our art space explored themes of motherhood, loss, remembrance, hope and transformation through two interconnected creative activities. In consultation with Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation Director Shantelle Miller, the first involved moulded plaster forms representing the maternal nature of women and humanity more broadly. These works are intended to hold candles and honour those who have passed, creating an opportunity for collective remembrance.

The second activity, conceptually lead by Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation Director and staff member Sheila White, introduced painted butterflies as symbols of hope, transformation and the presence of loved ones carried on the wind. Participants painted individual butterflies, with the vision of bringing them together as a large, site-specific installation. These will be incorporated into a large canvas to be displayed at future forums, allowing this year's contributions to become part of the continuing story of our art space.

Our art space once again demonstrated the powerful role of creativity in building connection and supporting women to feel grounded and present. During the first afternoon, this space became a place where we could pause, sit together, yarn and create. It was a visible moment of calm and connection, reflecting the way art, culture and shared creative practice can bring people together across generations.

Our 2026 art space unfolded in unexpected ways, where the ideas, artworks and contributions created by participants will continue beyond this year's forum. In this way, our art space remains a living and evolving expression of the women, stories, culture and connections that make our forum so meaningful.


STRONG WOMEN FOR
August 2026

OUR SUPPORTERS

We are deeply grateful to the many incredible volunteers who helped make our forum a reality!

We also thank our forum's generous supporters.

"It was inspiring seeing women move between groups; sharing stories and building connections with other rangers through the Network's support and commitment to keeping women connected. This highlights why The Nature Conservancy supports the Network. It plays a critical role in strengthening gender equity, equitable participation in conservation, Indigenous women's leadership, and encouraging the participation of Elders and young women to strengthen empowerment across generations. By strengthening women's participation in ranger programs, the Network helps ensure that women's knowledge, responsibilities and leadership continue to contribute to caring for Country across the Northern Territory."

Gemma Cadd, Conservation Officer, The Nature Conservancy





We are so grateful to our Silver sponsor Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation who plays a vital role in assisting Indigenous peoples to acquire and manage land and sea Country, creating lasting economic, environmental, social, and cultural benefits for communities across Australia. Thank you ILSC!



"I loved walking through the campsite hearing giggles and conversations around the campfires. It was incredible to see how the Forum has evolved over the years from its strong foundation supporting women rangers to elevating women's leadership and tackling issues that matter to women, their families and communities, from family violence and health to caring for Country and creating new economic opportunities. It is so important for funders to recognise and support collectives and networks – their role is critical for women, communities, economic development and conservation efforts."

Hollie Norrie, Director of Programs,
Judith Neilson Foundation

We are equally grateful to our Bronze sponsor REECE Foundation who acknowledges that we work on the traditional lands of First Nations Peoples. REECE are committed to recognising the rights and culture of Traditional Owners, building relationships in our communities, taking steps towards reconciliation, and paying respects to Elders past and present. Thank you REECE!

"Reece was proud to support the Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum. Our relationship with Mimal began through the Mimal Water and Sanitation Project, where Reece, the Reece Foundation and IWSH worked alongside Mimal to deliver a community-led water solution at the Mimal Ranger Base. That relationship is really important to us, and supporting the Forum was a natural extension of our commitment to listening, building genuine long-term relationships and supporting Aboriginal women to connect, share knowledge and continue their important work caring for Country."

Rikki-Lee Madder, RAP Advisor, REECE

"KKT is incredibly proud to support the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network. The 2026 Forum was a wonderful reminder of just how special this Network is. We feel very lucky to play a small part in connecting funding with this important work."

Stacey Irving, CEO, Karrkad Kanjdji Trust



Story of painting and what each symbol represents:

- Blue circle represents the billabong out on Country at Bawurrbarnda
- The Yellow U shapes, facing outwards are the ancestors protecting the billabong and the people from the Country
- The outer U shapes, facing inwards are the women that came to the women summit from everywhere and sat down and spoke about women's things and where they come from and where they work
- The little yellow circles represent the Country and the hills and trees, that the women passed to get to Bawurrbarnda
- The 10 purple circles with the U shapes around the outer part of the painting represent all the campsites
- The footprints represent women walking around and getting to know each other
- The wavy lines represent the women connecting together and sharing stories

"...a big thank you to the organisers, first aiders...the cooks with their dedication on time meals, and the rangers that made everything run smoothly around the camp site. All the people that looked after us, thank you."

Maxine Coombe


WOMEN FOR
COUNTRY

Over 200 women caring for Country across the Northern Territory contributed to the 2026 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum. This report was designed by Carly Cord-Udy with photographs by Milly Hooper and reviewed by Strong Women for Healthy Country Aboriginal Corporation Directors.

How did you feel about the forum being on your Country?

"It was really good and it touched my heart and I feel really good. So good to see other women, makes me proud and happy to see plenty of women from other places."

Anne Kelly



2026 STRONG WOMEN FOR HEALTHY COUNTRY FORUM REPORT