

LARRAKIA WELCOME TO COUNTRY

Good morning everyone my name is Bilawara Lee - I am an Elder of the Larrakia Nation. I am an authorised Marriage Celebrant and the Australian Aboriginal representative on the International Indigenous Grandmothers Council, whom are acknowledged as the wisdom keepers of the world.

I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me here to do this Welcome today and I thank you for the respect you show us, the traditional custodians of the land we stand on today.

Aboriginal cultures are the oldest continues surviving cultures on Earth. One of the most ancient rituals for the Larrakia is welcoming people to their Country. I take the responsibility of welcoming visitors to my Country very seriously and do this with great pride, as gaining recognition and respect for country and my roles as one of the custodians is very important.

The Larrakia people are the traditional owners of the land and waters of the greater Darwin region, including Darwin Peninsula, the Cox Peninsula, most of Gunn Point, rural Darwin, Darwin harbor and adjacent Islands and land west of the Howard River. There are approximately 2,000 Larrakia people living in the Darwin region.

We have a strong cultural, economic and spiritual relationship with the land and sea, and although our boundaries extend up to 50 km inland we are often referred to as the Saltwater People.

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You are here today for a National women's conference and I see many wonderful women in the room. I would like to share with you some information about Aboriginal women – but remember I speak to you as a Larrakia woman and not as a representative from other Aboriginal Nations.

In traditional society women enjoyed a lot of personal independence and had equal roles and responsibilities with the men. The natural female-male complimentary roles formed the basic unit of Aboriginal society and was the foundation of our family life.

We had complete control over our fertility, our rituals and ceremonies and our daily activities. We had our own traditions of spirituality and magic, which men did not challenge. On a practical level, because of our excellent gathering skills we provided from 80% to 90% of the family's daily food. As with giving birth, the woman's role in providing nourishment was primary, the man's secondary. We should be called gatherer - hunters not the other way around.

Today if you ask any Aboriginal family who the "boss" is - they will tell you that it is the Grandmother or the Mother. What can I say – if you annoy the one who puts food on the table, you could go hungry!

Aboriginal women have an unspoken understanding that we are born spiritual. Men have to undergo rigorous discipline and ritual to gain and maintain that state.

Aboriginal women did not see childbearing as their first primary function in life. We believe it was to maintain harmonious relationships between human and psychic energies within our world. We were responsible for maintaining the harmony and spiritual attitudes and practices that allows Mother Earth to remain a healthy, generous discipline that nourishes and sustains life. In essence we were responsible for "Love Magic".

Today some of us still maintain this attitude in spite of the difficulties of living in a contemporary western society, and I believe this does not have to apply only to Aboriginal women.

Remember, we carry digging sticks not spears – we are women not men. Something forgotten in today's feminism is that we have in ourselves innate powers far greater than any we could derive from emulating men.

To quote an ancient Indigenous song, "Women of the earth, take courage. You carry the teaching of a people who look to you for guidance. Be mindful of your walk."

So my beautiful, strong spiritual sisters, believe that you are responsible for the love and magic between yourselves, your family, friends, communities and Mother Earth and that you have within yourselves what is necessary to succeed.

So it is on that note, it is my privilege on behalf of my Elders and the Larrakia people I welcome you all to *gwalwa daranigki* – Our Land.

I welcome all of you - those of you who have travel long distances to be here - my brothers and sisters from other nations - and especially our dignitaries, honored guests and visitors.

Thank you – and *Mamak*.