

Indigenous Identity and Gender

Cambodian Indigenous women navigate life in the capital



An initiative of 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories



This publication is a collaboration between the Cambodia Indigenous Women Working Group and Women Peace Makers.

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Coming into ourselves

Indigenous women finding strength in a diverse voice

Sreyneang Lock

Indigenous groups in Cambodia face systematic discrimination and resource alienation. With a low cultural emphasis on formal education coupled with different linguistic needs, the gap between them with the majority Khmer population is significant. Environmental and land issues, poverty and lack of education, low political representation, and gender inequality all contribute to barriers that Indigenous women are born with. Put within the context of barriers that women generally face in Cambodia, the double marginalisation of Indigenous women is unique and consists of very particular challenges and experiences.

There are many reasons for Indigenous women to join a collective with other doubly marginalised women. Like our sisters from rural areas who migrated to the city, so many of us did the same. Similarly to our sisters with disabilities, we also experience social discrimination. As our sisters who face violence, we also confront violence in different forms. 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories is an

initiative we came up with over deep conversations in which we realised we have many things in common. Together, our voice is stronger. At the same time, our voice is diverse. This publication explores the voice of Indigenous women made up of many voices by individuals. These individuals include a wide diversity of Indigenous groups, of which Cambodia is home to 24. They include young and older women alike, from different professions, coming from provinces across the country.

When I was 19 years old, I left my Bunong Indigenous community in Mondulkiri province for Phnom Penh in search of knowledge. I was determined to go to university. Of course when you leave your community, you can begin to feel a sense of detachment. A fear that you may lose who you are, your culture, your language, and your identity. There is another way to look at it, however. When I came to Phnom Penh, I also found a vibrant community of Indigenous peoples from other groups in the country.



Sreyneang Loek

Indigenous advocate, aspiring lawyer, and proud member of the Bunong Indigenous community

The Tampuan, Kuy, Jarai, Kreung, Brao, Por, and many others are very present in the city. Although they hold different customs, speak distinct languages, and are culturally different from me and my Bunong community, we find unity through our Indigenous roots. We are one people with many variations. As I strive to keep my Bunong identity strong within me while living away from my homeland, I allow for my Cambodian Indigenous identity to become richer and more diverse in unity with my sisters and brothers.

The voices of the Indigenous women showcased in this work resonate deeply with me. As I read the findings that reflect their conversations with Listeners, I feel both a sense of familiarity and a sense of learning. They speak from their hearts and share their personal opinions based on their many experiences. Like them, I also believe our voice is still not heard in mainstream Cambodian society. I am a fierce advocate of the law and believe that an Indigenous voice in the

legal system, particularly from women, is fundamental to the development of our communities and to the nation as a whole. Although many laws in Cambodia aim to protect Indigenous peoples, the lack of consistent enforcement leaves our people vulnerable. For women, the situation is dire. Our people often do not know our rights, do not know how to access lawyers, and do not know how to report issues like domestic violence to the authorities. For many of us Indigenous women in violent situations, we frequently resort to believing it is simply part of our destiny.

I see Indigenous people becoming scholars, officials in high positions, and even leaders in government. Progress is being made but so much more is needed to ensure our voices are heard by others. All women have a natural strength within. See that strength yourself throughout the pages of this work showing the resilience, independence, and leadership of Indigenous women in so many dimensions and levels.

Facilitative Listening Design Steps

1



Listener recruitment

2



Customising tools

3



Coaching and Training Lab

4



Trial conversation and reflecting

5



Fieldwork and recording

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Info-Space Lab

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Information verification and analysis

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Writing and planning relevant outputs

Design: Valentina Rivero

The Study

This study provides a snapshot into the double marginalisation that Indigenous women in Cambodia face in their communities, in mainstream society, and in their lives. As part of a larger endeavour to capture narratives of intersectionality among Indigenous women, rural-to-urban migrant women, women with disabilities, and women facing violence, this subsection of the study explores the lives, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous women through a qualitative information gathering methodology known as Facilitative Listening Design (FLD). An evolving peace research approach, FLD was chosen for this work largely for its advantage in providing the space for informal sharing on sensitive issues in local community contexts.

The Methodology

Facilitative Listening Design is an innovative adaptation of Listening Methodology. It is an “insider” human-to-human centred approach to better understand prevailing dynamics and explore sensitive topics that make for difficult conversations. It encourages deeper critical thinking and leverages the process to bring together groups at odds with each other and find solutions to protracted negative attitudes, stereotypes, or sentiment. It maintains the rigorous procedural and information-checking steps in conducting listening research, but puts a stronger emphasis on gaining relatively in-depth insight

into a topic as a snapshot at a given moment.

The advantage in this context is that it can be carried out quickly and respond to situations in a timely manner. It is also discrete. Conversations can happen in private or can be informal in nature to provide anonymity to the participants. There is no need to connect any recorded information to the individuals who participated as all documentation happens after and away from where conversations took place. The conversational style of information-gathering can be employed nearly anywhere, even in extremely sensitive environments where conducting more traditional research, using audio recording or questionnaires, may not be feasible. With no need for papers or devices, participants can blend into different environments and engage with people simply as people rather than research participants. It can also be adapted to a range of cultural needs and communication styles depending on the context and the groups involved.

The general procedure of a Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) approach was carried out to better understand thoughts and opinions of four doubly marginalised groups including Indigenous women, women with disabilities, rural-to-urban migrant women, and women facing violence. Eight general steps guided the process from design to implementation.

¹ For a detailed understanding of FLD methodology, refer to The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Design For Your Project (October 2017) provided at <http://wpmcambodia.org/project/the-fl-d-handbook>.

The Demographics

This study is a limited subsection of a main study involving 41 conversations with doubly marginalised women. This component includes individual conversations with ten women who are referred to as Sharers. The conversations were carried out by two information gatherers referred to as Listeners. The Listeners come directly from the communities they are seeking to understand. Through the strong network of the Cambodia Indigenous Women Working Group (CIWWG), Listeners connected to their Sharers to engage in conversations with a diverse range of women from the Bunong, Kreung, Kuy, Jarai, and Por Indigenous communities that were now living in Phnom Penh. All Sharers originally came from the provinces that their Indigenous communities considered their homeland. The group was quite young with Sharers being in their 20s or 30s. Many were students, NGO staff, or employees of other companies in the city.

A Profile of our Listeners

The heart of FLD projects is always made up of the Listeners who join not only to listen to their communities, but also to collect information and present to others. For this initiative, Listeners Sinoeurn and Chenda took the lead to reach out to Indigenous women in Phnom Penh and carry out conversations to better understand their experiences of marginalisation. Sinoeurn, a Kuy Indigenous woman from Preah Vihear province works on Indigenous issues with several organisations. Chenda comes from the Bunong community in Kratie province and is a first-year student of law in Phnom Penh and volunteers at the Cambodia Indigenous Women Working Group (CIWWG).

The pair who worked as a team said

that their first time experiencing the FLD approach to listen and gather information was a good learning experience. They noted that FLD created a space of trust between the Listeners and the Sharers who felt safe to share personal perceptions and opinions. Sinoeurn was deeply affected by one of the women she listened to about her experience being harassed as a young girl and living with the stereotype that Indigenous girls can engage in sexual activities as soon as they reach puberty. Sinoeurn wanted everyone to know that this perception is wrong and it is not culturally accepted as some believe. Chenda believes that Indigenous women must come together and stand up to end discrimination and stereotypes both within their own communities and by other non-Indigenous peoples.





The Findings

Initial findings of FLD were analysed by the Listeners themselves based on the data they collected and the themes they heard the most during their fieldwork. Through a process of early analysis, the following findings emerged among the conversations had between Listeners and Sharers.

Indigenous women (Bunong, Kreung, Kuy, Jarai, and Por Indigenous communities)

Emerging themes

1. Women are discriminated against and we are looked down upon for being Indigenous.
2. School is often not pursued due to lack of financial support and discrimination.
3. Lack of access to information, economic burden, inadaptability, and security issues are key concerns
4. We continue to face negative gender stereotypes and discrimination against indigenous women.
5. The lack of appreciation and value from others makes us fear losing our identity.
6. There is a strong desire among us in our community to see women become stronger, achieve more equality, and take on leadership positions.
7. Many of us have experienced physical, mental, economic, and sexual abuse.
8. We need to hide our ethnic identity to be accepted in society

Double marginalisation is real

It was not only my classmates, but also my math teacher who discriminated against me as an Indigenous girl. They all laughed at me and looked down on us. I couldn't get any support from my teacher. He said that Indigenous people are stupid, ugly, and dirty. It hurt me so much.

- A 21-year-old Kreung Indigenous woman who moved from Ratanakiri province to study law in Phnom Penh

From the very beginning of their lives, Indigenous women feel the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Many Sharers began with stories from their childhood and as young girls at school. For most Indigenous women in the city, their earlier lives started in rural areas near the homelands of their Indigenous people. Gender roles and ethnic identity appeared to dominate their experiences and their memories.

Discrimination often took form as bullying for Indigenous Sharers. 90% felt that they had been discriminated against simply for being an Indigenous woman. They provided concrete examples from their experiences with students and teachers in public schools. Some were forced not to speak their Indigenous languages in class. They were not allowed to wear their traditional clothing. Others were mocked and teased when revealing their Indigenous identities. Some talked about being

called wild or savage, or alternatively were made to feel invisible as if they did not exist in the group.

In spite of deep-rooted discrimination, some of the Indigenous women Sharers found their own coping strategies and approaches to challenge others in their communities. For example, some said that the barriers they faced in their lives pushed them to improve their own skills and become better in certain areas. One Sharer explained that the difficult experiences she had related to her identity made her seek out a career in the nonprofit world, using that space to focus on Indigenous issues across Cambodia. A student described her longtime goal to push her classmates to understand the reality of Indigenous women, and felt that she was able to contribute to changing their negative perceptions over time until she noticed more understanding in her class.



*“Women
who go far
away from
home are
not good.”*

- A woman sharing a common assumption from her
Indigenous community back in Pursat province

School is a privilege we are usually not offered

In my community, young people have dropped out of school because our families are poor. Our families also tell us that studying far from home is not good since in the end we will become farmers anyway.

-A 22-year-old Jarai Indigenous woman from Ratanakiri who works as a performing artist and author in Phnom Penh

Cost and discrimination are the two most significant barriers that prevent Indigenous girls and women from attending school at all levels, including primary, secondary, and tertiary. This includes prevailing social norms pertaining to gender roles in their own communities as well as perceptions and ethnic discrimination taking place in the wider national system of education.

As young learners, Indigenous girls have difficulty to complete primary and secondary school, often in their provincial hometowns. From an early age, discrimination can be a primary factor for leaving school. Some Sharers discussed moving from school to school to leave the situations of discrimination they directly faced. Others said that simply dropping out of school for many young Indigenous girls is the norm. The cost of going to school also creates a major barrier for primary and secondary students. Lack of family income was cited as one of the factors leading to drop-out among Indigenous girls in poverty.

Higher education is often seen as far beyond reach for the average Indigenous woman. Given that Sharers were based in Phnom Penh, many of them represent the educated portion of Indigenous women who migrate to the capital initially to attend university. Several of them shared their struggles of trying to afford life in the city, away from their families and communities. Even with supports to cover tuition or school fees, the reality of supporting themselves in Phnom Penh was often the biggest challenge. Many young Indigenous women studying in Phnom Penh also shared their predicaments of having to hide their study status from their families, who were being pressured to marry and begin families at a young age. For many, this societal inequality towards girls was increasing the difficulty to attend and continue studies in higher education institutes.



*“If you study,
please be
careful because
when you end
up unable to
get married,
you won’t have
any children to
look after.”*

- A young Kuy Sharer reflecting on what she was told
in her Indigenous community in Preah Vihear province

Trapped without information or support

*I was just a frog in a pond
that could not see the world.*

- A Por Indigenous woman who received support from an organisation to come to the city to study

Indigenous women frequently find themselves in situations where they lack the information and support to make informed decisions. As girls, they are often raised in fear about security issues which cause uncertainty about opportunities. As young women, many are not aware of educational or career possibilities.

Many Sharers that eventually moved to the city to study at a university talked about the period in their home communities prior to leaving to study. Some were completely unaware about what subjects were available to study or how to decide on a major. Given that nearly all Indigenous women in Phnom Penh have migrated from their homeland in different provinces, many arrive in the city with little understanding how to adapt to a new culture and a new environment.

Several Sharers began their stories talking about childhood and the perceptions of insecurity they lived in. In situations that girls wanted to attend school, some were not allowed because their families worried they might face danger. For example, there were strong fears of getting raped if they walked through the forest to get to school. For those having graduated and wishing

to continue on to university, the fears and perceptions of moving to the city was not only an issue for the women themselves, but also for their families.

Indigenous women arriving in the city for school or work believe they lack the right information to do as well as they could. According to some Sharers, the Khmer language was often an initial barrier in their lives and prevented them from reaching out to others outside of their own communities and receiving enough information about their new environment. Like in their home communities, safety in Phnom Penh was something mentioned as a constant fear. For example, pickpocketing was cited as something that they saw and heard about on a daily basis and made them worry. This included even being accused of pickpocketing themselves if they picked up something that another may have dropped. Deciding on which part of the city to live in and where is safest is a big concern for those moving. From the conversations with Indigenous women in Phnom Penh, the findings also demonstrate that the fears and worries they hold onto from their rural communities are ingrained and continue to persist even several years after moving to the city.



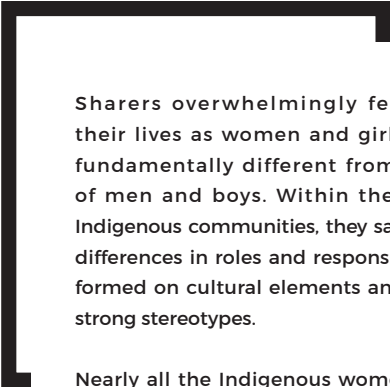
*“A woman
can’t run
away from
the kitchen.”*

- A 28-year-old Bunong woman shares a common perception from her hometown in Kratie province

Gender realities are stark

My own father perpetuated negative gender stereotypes by constantly taking examples from other families in our community. For instance, he'd say "why do you have to study if you know that you'll be relying on your husband anyway? And even if you graduated, you'd still have to work as a farmer."

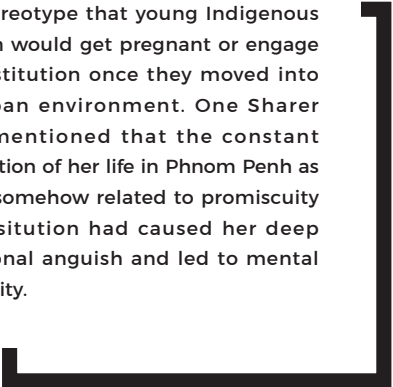
- A Kreung Indigenous woman with nine siblings who was inspired to attend school in Phnom Penh to leave the violence in her family



Sharers overwhelmingly felt that their lives as women and girls were fundamentally different from those of men and boys. Within their own Indigenous communities, they saw stark differences in roles and responsibilities, formed on cultural elements and often strong stereotypes.

Nearly all the Indigenous women who shared their stories and perspectives in conversations with Listeners mentioned the rigid gender stereotypes they faced since birth. These perceptions of how Indigenous women should behave and live their lives were mostly reinforced by their families, communities, and leaders. Most often, they were taught that they had to be a “good wife” and ensure that they had the skills and knowledge to prepare food for their future husbands, assist in farming and cultivation, and support his leadership as the decision-maker and financial leader in the family unit.

Study was generally discouraged for most Indigenous women from a young age. They faced challenges from their own communities who often questioned their academic ambitions by reinforcing power dynamics. Some were told that their husbands would take care of them and study was irrelevant to their futures. Others were told that they needed to prepare for taking care of their future children rather than focusing on study. One underlying perception in many Indigenous communities was the danger of their young women moving to the city to go to university. Several discussed their challenges in navigating the stereotype that young Indigenous women would get pregnant or engage in prostitution once they moved into an urban environment. One Sharer even mentioned that the constant association of her life in Phnom Penh as being somehow related to promiscuity or prostitution had caused her deep emotional anguish and led to mental instability.






“Why do women have to study when they will end up becoming farmers?”

- A Jarai Indigenous Sharer cites a comment she hears in her community in Ratanakiri

Our Indigenous identity needs to be seen and valued

What I am concerned about the most is that we don't get support or understanding from other people because they don't know who we are, our challenges, and our needs. That's why I want to share the values of my culture as much as I can.

- A 20-year-old first-year university student from the Kreung Indigenous community

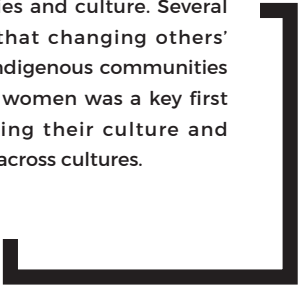


Indigenous women explored double marginalisation additionally through the lens of their ethnic identity and its relationship to the mainstream Cambodian population as well as to other ethnic minorities. The invisibility of their culture and their Indigenous identity was the main aspect that came out on this theme across conversations.

Nearly all Sharers expressed that non-Indigenous did not understand Indigenous culture at all. Specific to culture included traditions, language, and above all, values. Even within Indigenous communities, women conveyed that culture is being lost right at home as Indigenous people “give up” preserving something that is so undervalued in mainstream society. Others felt that many Indigenous people

are not clearly aware of their own needs, and therefore have a difficult time to elaborate them to others outside their communities.

Indigenous women shared personal motivation and desire to express their culture with outsiders. Nearly all said that they want to “spread” Indigenous culture and values beyond their communities. Some felt that in order for others to understand their problems and specific issues, they needed to better understand their communities and culture. Several also conveyed that changing others’ perceptions of Indigenous communities and Indigenous women was a key first step in preserving their culture and communicating across cultures.





*“No need
to study
because a
bachelor’s
degree is not
useful...”*

- A Kuy Indigenous Sharer talks about the response she got from her family when she told them she wanted to study

Indigenous women are the future

I want to see Indigenous women working together and sharing our common problems and needs. Like this, everything will be solved.

- A 21-year-old Kreung Indigenous first-year university student

Women in Cambodia and around the world have been advocating for inclusion in decision-making and leadership. Indigenous women are no different. In Cambodia, Indigenous women are seeking leadership at all levels.

For Sharers, Indigenous women's leadership was associated with future prospects for prosperity and success for Indigenous peoples nation-wide. When talking about leadership, they saw it both at an individual level and a community level. Leadership included young Indigenous women achieving educational dreams and self-empowerment. It also referred to institutional and community leadership with Indigenous women being at the centre. Several Indigenous women talked about the lack of real female leadership in their own communities, and compared the situation with

Indigenous men. Many talked about the need to collectively share their voices in appropriate platforms and in spaces they could convey issues and concerns productively.

Sharers were generally clear about how to make their hopes for Indigenous women's leadership a reality. Many spoke of the need for cooperation and sharing, particularly through platforms and networking among Indigenous women. Some recognised that solutions could be sought together to overcome specific issues faced by doubly marginalised Indigenous women. It was clear that those who supported Indigenous women's mobilisation desired ownership and saw it as a right for their own groups to address their own needs.



*“If women go
to the city,
they’ll just
end up as
prostitutes.”*

- A Bunong Indigenous Sharer talking about her community's attitude towards education who eventually went to Phnom Penh to study business and became a successful financial officer

We face different kinds of violence and abuse

When I got married, I was facing economic abuse. I was being blamed for how I spent money in an inefficient way.

- A 32-year-old Por Indigenous mother who works for an Indigenous organisation

Although very little research has been conducted specifically on violence against Indigenous women in Cambodia, it is important to look at the situation in the general scope of violence in the country. One in five Cambodian women report experiencing physical or sexual violence by their partners. One in three say they have experienced emotional violence. Specific to some Indigenous communities, early practice of marriage has been identified as a traditional practice that can be harmful to women and constitute a form of violence against Indigenous women.²

Sharers told many stories about different forms of violence and abuse including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic. Several talked about

domestic violence in their homes involving their parents or relatives and witnessing it as they grew up. Economic control and abuse was heard in different contexts. Due to financial struggles for many Indigenous groups, some women revealed that the control of money most commonly stayed with the men in the family. Sexual harassment and assault was also discussed, particularly within the workplace and in situations where sexualised stereotypes of Indigenous women were prevalent. In one story, a woman talked about experiencing sexual harassment and violence at a young age and identified a commonly held stereotype that Indigenous girls are fair game to men for sexual advances once they reach puberty.

² See Mauney, C. (2015). Gender-Based Violence in Ethnic Minority Communities: Ratana Kiri Province. Care Cambodia.



*“The reason
I came to
study in
the city is
because I
witnessed
domestic
violence.”*

- A 20-year-old Kreung university student from
Ratanakiri province

Hiding who we are

I was always trying to hide my ethnic identity since the 7th grade because I was bullied by my classmates. My teacher wouldn't allow me to speak my own language and said that Indigenous people are stupid. People laughed at how I looked. It wasn't until I became a member of [an Indigenous organisation] that I could begin to express my identity to others.

- A 24-year-old Jarai Indigenous woman who is the only person in her family to obtain a higher education

Being a minority group making up about 2-3% of the national population, Indigenous Cambodians live in a predominately mainstream Khmer society, particularly outside of their Indigenous communities. For those who live in Phnom Penh, assimilating to the mainstream culture can sometimes involve covering up who they are and where they come from.

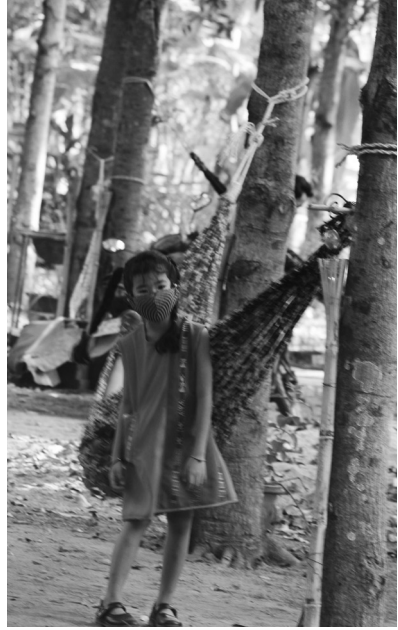
Hiding ethnic identity was a somewhat common theme for Indigenous women. Stereotypes and stigma played a strong role in justifying why many Indigenous women chose to keep their identity a secret. Sharers talked about examples

of women from their communities who would avoid others from the same Indigenous group that might reveal their ethnic heritage. They felt that Indigenous people were often negatively blamed for issues or seen as wild or savage in mainstream society. Those who went to Phnom Penh to study particularly recognised a culture of avoidance in their own communities away from their homelands. Listeners that went out to engage in conversations with their own communities surmised that approximately two out of every ten Indigenous people choose to hide their ethnic identity in an attempt to blend into society.



*“We want
recognition...
that we
are an
Indigenous
group and we
are valued...”*

- A Kreung Sharer conveys her wish to be seen and heard by others
in Cambodia



This initiative would not be possible without the generous support of Voice.



Indigenous Identity and Gender compiles and tells the stories of ten Cambodian Indigenous women in Phnom Penh coming from the Bunong, Kreung, Kuy, Jarai, and Por communities. This study originates from the 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories initiative that brings together doubly marginalised women including those with disabilities, facing violence, having migrated from rural areas to the city, and Indigenous. Originally beginning with the determination of four women facing multiple barriers, this initiative now connects over 40 women, including those whose stories reflect the lives of Indigenous women presented in this work.

This publication showcases the findings of a study led and implemented by Indigenous women in collaboration with other doubly marginalised women. Through the participatory community research approach known as Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), two Indigenous “Listeners” surveyed other Indigenous women (Sharers) in the city using unstructured conversations. They collected data on their experiences and stories about their lives starting from their homeland communities right up to their present contexts living in the capital city.

The voices of Indigenous women in Phnom Penh show a collective challenge for girls to find support to take ownership of their lives and to adapt and thrive in a mainstream society that marginalises their ethnic identity. Throughout the findings, insights are also conveyed by women who choose to share common phrases and stereotypes they faced - even from their own communities - in their journeys towards independence. The Sharers reveal, however, that determination and resilience can provide opportunities to succeed both as a woman, and as one with an Indigenous identity.

