Julie Ballangarry:

This episode was recorded on the lands of the Turrbal people and also on the lands of the Bunuba people. Giina to F! It!. Giina is from the Gumbaynggirr language. My language. It's a friendly welcome. Hi, I'm Julie Ballangarry. I'm a Gumbaynggirr/Dunghutti woman and a researcher who specializes in Indigenous policy. I'm also part of the Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition. F! It! Is a podcast created by the International Women's Development Agency that brings feminist and First Nations approaches into the foreign policy conversation. We'll be exploring these emerging approaches to foreign policy by drawing on the knowledge and experience from First Nations peoples and feminists from within the space. Traditionally, their voices have been excluded from the discussion and decision-making. But we say F! It!, we want to live in a better world, one where we are part of the conversations about re-imaging global systems, one that mutually benefits all.

The Australian government has committed to both domestic and international strategies for gender equality. And while we don't yet have an explicit feminist foreign policy, gender is seen as being central to Australia's foreign policy, international development, humanitarian action, trade and security efforts. Intersectionality is vital for advancing gender equality. This means that discussions around gender equality must include the voices of diverse women, girls, and gender-diverse people to reflect the nature of and systemic barriers to achieving gender equality. First Nations women, girls, and gender-diverse people's voices need to be centered in discussions and decision-making spaces. However, too often we have been excluded or underrepresented with our collective knowledge and experience as First Nations women not recognized as a valuable resource.

Today we have June Oscar AO, a proud Bunuba woman from the remote town of Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia's Kimberley region. She will share her knowledge and insights around elevating and centering First Nations women, girls, and gender-diverse people's voices. June has committed her life's work to advocating for Indigenous rights, social justice, and women's issues. In 2017, June was appointed as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner for the Australian Human Rights Commission, the first Aboriginal woman to be appointed to the role in 30 years. At the beginning of a term, June launched the multi-year project, Wiyi Yani U Thangani, meaning Women's Voices in the Bunuba language. The objective of Wiyi Yani U Thangani is to elevate the voices, strengths, and knowledges of First Nations women and girls, knowing that we as First Nations women hold the solutions to drive transformative positive change.

In March 2024, the seven-year project and the end of June's term as commissioner, manifested in the First Nations Gender Justice Institute and Change Agenda, a black print for transformation. At F! It!, we believe that there are many lessons that can be learned from the Wiyi Yani U Thangani, particularly how our First Nations gender justice lens can help transform Australia's approach to foreign policy. June, thank you so much for joining us today.

June Oscar:

Thank you.

Julie Ballangarry:

Could you introduce yourself to our listeners and tell us some defining moments or moment on your journey to your role as a leading advocate for First Nations women?

June Oscar:

[Bunuba language 00:03:45]. My name is June Oscar. That's my European name. My Bunuba name is [inaudible 00:04:03], and I'm Bunuba and Ngarinyin from my grandparents, and I'm speaking to you from Bunuba country people. [Bunuba language 00:04:14]. This is the land of the Dango Wara Wara people, and I'm speaking to you all from their country today.

My focus has always been about empowering our people to be who we are as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, that we are respected for our identity, that we are respected for our humanity and our rights to be who we are. We all know the history of this country and the denial of our identities, our linguistic heritages, our cultural heritages, our Indigenous heritages. And so my focus has always been to advocate and elevate our voices on all of those issues that impact us daily, which is our reality, and to help others appreciate and respect and understand and be informed when they are considering issues and supports for our benefit, that they are properly informed and are not just making decisions that impact our lives without our voices, without our input. That is our human right to be part of the conversation, the decision-making that's targeted towards us for our benefit. And we all know that that hasn't been the case for our people in this country for decades.

And so my focus has been in the role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner to grab that opportunity to elevate our voices. And this time to elevate the voices of First Nations women and girls on the issues that matter to them.

Julie Ballangarry:

That was absolutely amazing response and so inspiring. When we talk about advocating for First Nations women, I know that you've spoken very passionately about our care aspect, and I'm just wondering how has your Bunuba culture shaped your philosophy and how you went about your role as the Social Justice Commissioner and the project that you led?

June Oscar:

I absolutely believe, and I know that I would not be the person that I am today to hold the knowledge that I hold if it wasn't for the way that my mother and grandmother and my Bunuba family taught me. So they were my first teachers and their teachings on everything about life at the developmental stages, from infancy to childhood to young adult, to a woman, and to a mature age person, their teachings have always remained. So in my early part of my life, they instilled in me the understanding of who I am and what is important in the life of me as a Bunuba woman or as a female. Then growing into womanhood, what were the things that were fundamental and were the foundational principles that all of our teachings and learnings were based upon? And that was taught to me out on country, on Bunuba country.

Our traditional lands of the Bunuba became pastoral leases, and our people were indentured laborers for the cattle kings who occupied our traditional lands. We lived on country. We had the benefit of living on country in basic shelter, but what people focused on is that they were able to stay together and help strengthen and heal each other by living in that communal way and still accessing country. And all of the conversations, all of the information shared was all in Bunuba.

So I was raised in that environment of language, the richness and vibrancy of the world, of the Bunuba people post the killing times in the 1880s and 1890s where in the Kimberley, my people were part of a resistance against white settlement of Bunuba country, led by Jandamarra, a Bunuba man who worked later in life as a police tracker, and then saw what it was that was happening to country and people. And then he responded by resisting and fighting against white settlement. My people remained on these places of Bunuba country, which were then turned into cattle stations, and they worked on there until kids my age were taken off our parents to attend a school within the township of Fitzroy Crossing and we were all living in dormitories for the boys and girls established by the missionaries and the government. And we remained there for the school terms and returned to our parents on school holiday breaks. And so we again stepped back into the world of the Bunuba and were part of that life again for those holiday times until we were then returned to attend the Western schooling.

Julie Ballangarry:

Thank you. The Wiyi Yani U Thangani implementation framework seeks to utilize a systems thinking and practice approach. Can you tell us a bit more about what that means and why did you feel that this was an important approach to take?

June Oscar:

Well, this is actually the very natural approach that women talk to when they talk about change. So during Wiyi Yani U Thangani engagements, Wiyi Yani U Thangani meaning Women's Voices, women everywhere spoke to the mainstream system or systems as being completely broken and out of touch with our realities, our lived realities and life experiences since colonization. So whenever they spoke about singular issues, they would always go to the root causes of trauma, of poverty, of economic inequalities, of discrimination, of dispossession, of marginalization, and how those root causes, those root-cause conditions stem from colonial structures that fundamentally remain intact today. This is a system that almost exists in opposition to our ways of being, our interconnected and grounded systems, our systems of reciprocity, of inclusion, of respect. And women never said you could resolve an issue with one solution or a silver bullet that would fix everything. They kept saying, we've got to change the system that will resolve a whole raft of issues.

So naturally, when we came to thinking about the implementation of the report, the Wiyi Yani U Thangani report, we knew it couldn't just be about responding to isolated sets of recommendations. To bring about the change in systems women want to see, we had to think about how you make that change happen. So we explored what a practical application of changing systems looks like, and to me, this is very indigenous. This is who we are. Really the process of change is a resurgence in our ways of existing in systems. I think a simple way to put it is the way that Audre Lorde has written about it. You can't use the master's tools to bring down the master's house. And this is a famous writer, philosopher, activist of Afro-American identity. So we need a new, and in our case, a very old tried and tested set of tools to combat the injustices of the current system and construct the systems we know can maintain thriving existences for all of us.

So the Change Agenda has taken this a step further and has begun to set out a process with practices and principles for working, measuring, evaluating, and learning within systems. So we've given this some very serious and considered thought in how do we create the best tools that are based on the knowledges of Indigenous people, of what works? So we Wiyi Yani U Thangani and the Institute for First Nations Gender Justice that we have just established, will put this approach into practice so we can demonstrate the process of systems change as our tools for change in real time and see what outcomes it brings. We know that this would work. We know that this is a new way of approaching and responding to the huge gaps that exists in and across our communities across a whole raft of issues. And it's time that we introduce this new thinking and to convince those who are making decisions about our lives and formulating policies that are targeting these root causes.

Well, it's our responsibility to inform them, and it's their responsibility to be informed so that they're making informed decisions about how best to craft effective and efficient policies that can bring about change on the issues that matter for us as Indigenous peoples and the responsibility of external systems and institutions that have the duty and responsibility of making informed decisions so that there is change. But I think this is now at the right time for the voices of Indigenous women in this country to be listened to.

Julie Ballangarry:

Absolutely. I think a testament to the work that you've done is that you've taken the time needed and listened to the voices, and like you said, you were considered in the approach. And I think that that's really important, and that's a lesson a lot of people and practitioners can learn and governments can learn. Because this podcast focuses in on First Nations foreign policy as well, in terms of Australia's commitment, what does a First Nations foreign policy mean to you as a Bunuba woman? As someone who's worked in forward-facing roles as a social justice commissioner, what does it mean for you?

June Oscar:

Well, I'm aware that in 2021, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade launched the Indigenous diplomacy agenda to elevate Indigenous issues in our foreign policy, and it is the Australian government's commitment to work in partnership with Indigenous Australians and that it reflects a vision for a world where the rights and traditions of Indigenous peoples are respected. And it's wonderful that in 2022, Australia appointed Mr. Justin Mohamed as the first ever ambassador for First Nations within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. So I do share the government's agenda and its objectives. We live in a interconnected global reality and Indigenous peoples and our knowledges lace the world together through our deeply held and profound ways of understanding and living within the diverse ecosystems of the globe.

In an era of global crisis, particularly with climate change that our knowledges and ways of being is embedded into our international relations and policy agendas, is absolutely critical. The input and participation of Indigenous peoples in these matters that have global relevance is an opportunity for us as particularly Indigenous Australians as the world's oldest continuous civilization on the planet. We have some real insights and opportunities to contribute through our knowledges and our understandings of what can work, what does work, but we need to be engaged with, we need to have the space created for us. And when we look at the appointment of Justin Mohamed as the ambassador for First Nations issues within that space, then here is another way that Commissioner Mohamed can help to elevate the voices and the inclusion of our voices into those discussion. But the real potential of our voices being in Indigenous foreign policy is the uniting of First Nations philosophies of the movements, the knowledge systems, so we can be a part of constructing a sustainable existence for everyone.

I just want to add too, for Indigenous peoples who have been one of the most marginalized groups in the world, and particularly from this space of foreign policy, our ability to come together in international arenas helps us unite around common injustices that we face due to the globalization of colonial patriarchal systems.

Speaking from experience, when I have been at the commission on the status of women at the UN in New York, I have been able to connect about missing and murdered Indigenous women, hearing international stories and advocating for awareness and responses in our own nations. Hearing the movements of others helps us to share knowledge and shine a spotlight back home on these injustices.

Julie Ballangarry:

Absolutely. I'm quite hopeful with the current commitments of the Australian government as this really is a pivotal moment for us to really shape Australia in a united front, a nation-building exercise, you may say, in incorporating our cultures as part of Australia, rather than separate to talking about your processes earlier in the project that you led as the Social Justice Commissioner. There are many key learnings that can be embedded within Australia's First Nations foreign policy.

I wanted to tap into discussing about women's platforms with the UN and so forth. What advice would you give to those working with an intersectional feminist approach about ensuring that First Nations women's voices, girls and diverse peoples are heard and incorporated into international work?

June Oscar:

Coming back to the Wiyi Yani U Thangani report, there's so much there for everyone to learn from. Every page of the report, the implementation framework and the recently released Wiyi Yani U Thangani Change Agenda for First Nations gender justice, holds the voices, the lived experiences of women and girls. It tells us everything about how to live more connected, caring, loving, and sustainable existences. So really encourage those who are working in the space of Indigenous gender issues to reach out and be informed by the report.

There's over 2,000 Indigenous women and girls voices on the issues that impact their lives that others are making decisions, policy, legislation, and program decisions about that impact Indigenous women and girls. In the report, there're visions for the future. It sets out in the outcomes of the Change Agenda, and it covers such relevant topics for our domestic policy and international engagement, including combating climate change, mitigating disasters and adapting and living within extreme climate conditions. Creating culture and country-based economies where the economic wealth and job creation is about benefiting children, women, families, entire communities, and the country.

Women in Wiyi Yani U Thangani speak so powerfully and practically about forming regional councils and platforms to invest and enhance the leadership of young people and other women, supporting pathways into international arenas. This is about carving out a space so our women can be at the decision-making table on all of these issues.

Women also speak to our cultural and governance protocols and healing practices that helps to mediate and recover from conflict, from trauma. Although we do not say it explicitly in Wiyi Yani U Thangani, I believe there is a lot we can learn from Indigenous women when it comes to conflict resolution and exploring peace building and genuine reconciliation processes across the globe. And for those who are working with an intersectional feminist approach about ensuring the First Nations women's voices are heard and incorporated into international work, you should follow the Wiyi Yani U Thangani approach of deep and genuine engagement and listening, of reflection, of sense-making, ongoing participation of women of all backgrounds with diverse lived experiences.

With my time, to start Wiyi Yani U Thangani, I spent an entire year traveling the country and meeting with women and girls where they lived, where they worked, what they held in terms of their memories and their knowledges of place and what's worked for them, what has frustrated and disrupted their right to achieve the outcomes that they aspire to. These women come with such rich lived experiences of how systems worked and how they needed to change, but we didn't just stop at the engagements and writing a huge report elevating their voices, which I've heard women refer to as their Bible. It has their voice in it. We continue to talk to women. We've continued to maintain the connections, and we talk to them in all of our diversity about what we took from the engagements and how we should respond in implementing the report. We've met with organizations across the country. We've hosted roundtables, a policy forum, and we've held numerous focus groups with women with specific intersectional identities who so often get left out of the conversations and are talked about rather than included.

I want to acknowledge that we've really created the safe space for women of trans and gender-diverse mob, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women to feel safe and to be heard and to share of their experiences. We've had the focus groups focusing on women with extra abilities, much as I don't like the word disabilities, but women in that space as well to share of their unique experiences, their strengths, their skills, and their abilities. We have met with women who have been and are incarcerated. We have met with young women and girls and women actively working against the mainstream systems to create change that matters, and women who have experience of violence and are survivors.

So you have to actively go to the intersections to hear directly from those with the lived experiences in order to truly create responsive and nuanced policy. It just cannot happen without effort and energy and commitment, genuine commitment to listen to First Nations women and be informed by them. And it cannot be tokenistic or one-off engagements with a series of imposed questions. It has to be a series and heartfelt encounter that enables women to feel fully empowered to talk from their own positionality.

Lastly, processes should be designed where women can feel ownership of the final outcome, whether that be a policy or a report. They need to see themselves in what's produced. It has to be produced by them, for them. We are far too quick to want to get to an outcome in processes that we've encountered right across this country, so many of us, but the best outcomes are arrived at by engaging in proper participatory processes with those who the outcomes are for.

Julie Ballangarry:

Absolutely, and I think that's such wise advice that you have shared with our listeners. I also think that too often people do take a tokenistic approach without realizing that the processes that we undertake benefit all. And I know that that's a very key part of your philosophy as well. It benefits everybody. I used to be a former teacher June, and one of our saying is, what's good for Aboriginal children is good for all children, and these processes that we're talking about benefit everybody. And so if we can have a rich understanding as Australians united that we're actually all trying to benefit everybody, but by centering First Nations voices in these processes, we're helping people, helping our people progress to live the lives that they want, to have the self-determination that they want and enact and live in the communities how they wish to and build strong communities of that.

It's been really lovely speaking with you, June. I have one standard final question that I ask all of our guests. So our podcast is focused on exploring the emerging approaches to foreign policy that are really about reimagining and remaking global systems to create more mutual benefit. I want to ask you, what is one takeaway for our audience about First Nations and feminist foreign policy that you want to share? What's one takeaway from your work that can be imparted on our listeners today?

June Oscar:

Oh, what an important question. I'd say center First Nations gender justice in international relations. And instead of having conversations about what we can extract and take for our own national interests, we will begin to build into policies and negotiations, care, kindness, love, and inclusivity, and the types of societies we would construct based on that approach. I think that would be world changing. I think the so-called wicked problems that plague the world of inequalities, intersectional discriminations, violence would be resolved with careful consideration and solutions to our greatest challenges that would emerge like never before. So center our voices and global ambitions like the sustainable development goals, and that would enable far greater chances of succeeding.

Julie Ballangarry:

Thank you so much, June, for your time today. I could sit and listen to you. You're very wise, and I value your time as time is one thing that we never get back. So thank you very much for sharing your wisdom, your expertise, and your lived experiences with us and making the world a better place, which is what we all ultimately want at the end of the day, those of us working in this space. So thank you so much.

June Oscar:

Thank you. Thank you for this opportunity, and I hope listeners find something in this yarn that might be helpful and resonates with their thinking. It's always wonderful to share thoughts, and so I thank you for inviting me to be part of this podcast.

Julie Ballangarry:

I personally feel humbled that June shared her knowledge and wisdom with us about processes that can enact transformative change. And while it's not specifically focused on foreign policy, we can learn from her work and how to implement it into the foreign policy space.

And on that note, this is the final episode in our limited series. Thank you so much for joining us on this journey. Please save this podcast so you are the first to hear about future bonus episodes. I'd love to keep yarning with you. In the meantime, you can follow IWDA on social media for updates, including their work as convener for the Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition. And feel free to DM us with any feedback about the podcast. You can also follow me, your host, Julie Ballangarry on social media to follow my research on First Nations and feminist foreign policy. Until next time, yaarri yarraang.

This podcast was executively produced and edited by Paria Tahazadeh and co-produced by myself, Julie Ballangarry, Alice Ridge, Carla Kweifio-Okai, and Annelise Lecordièr.