Kimberley Girl: Program Outcomes – Summary Report

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1 Introduction

In the words of one former participant, the Kimberley Girl program has become a “rite of passage” for young Aboriginal women in the region.

Produced by Goolarri Media Enterprises, and now entering its fourteenth year, Kimberley Girl continues to change lives for the better. Like its Pilbara counterpart, the program uses popular culture, including the image-making aspects of the fashion industry, to connect with young women on their own terms. Through a catwalk show and an embedded personal development program, participants can imagine and enact positive life choices.

Kimberley Girl encourages personal ambition and community leadership, and utilises family networks to help young women grow and evolve. Private benefits (to the individual) translate into public benefits (to the community and nation) through enhanced employment prospects and the expansion of participants’ ambitions.

In 2011 we conducted a full evaluation of the Kimberley Girl program, involving an in-depth qualitative analysis of the program’s impact on participants’ lives, and an economic assessment of its public and private benefits (Rennie & Potts, 2011). We followed a similar method for this evaluation, which included interviews with 30 participants from the 2016 cohort (the Broome heats and the final including six participants from the Pilbara), and observation of the personal development workshops.

This report confirms many of the findings of the 2011 evaluation. In addition, we delve deeper into what we see as a key element of the Kimberley Girl program: confidence-building. The term “feeling shame” emerged strongly in our 2011 evaluation, but was not well understood in policy and development realms. For this report, we asked the 2016 participants to help us define the term. Participants described what it means to be held back by self-doubt, fear and shyness, and posited theories as to why it is a common and shared feeling amongst so many Aboriginal girls and young women. By digging deeper into the concept of feeling shame, this report provides a fuller account of Kimberley (and Pilbara) Girl’s main benefit – confidence-building – and how this benefit can translate into tangible outcomes.

We also look at a new component to the program, strategies for online safety, in order to demonstrate the program’s responsiveness to emerging challenges. Finally, we discuss the media aspects of the program, which underwent significant change in 2016 due to the production of a feature documentary.

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1 Launched in 1991, Goolarri Media Enterprises (GME) is a Broome-based Indigenous media and communications organisation. GME develops digital content, runs events, and delivers education and training.

2 Kimberley Girl and Pilbara Girl are essentially the same program, run in two different regions. In this report, where we refer to participants or elements from one region only, we use either “Kimberley Girl” or “Pilbara Girl”. We use “Kimberley and Pilbara Girl” to refer to both regions, or to the overall program generally.
2 Keys to the Program’s Success

Kimberley Girl is a personal and professional development program run by Goolarri Media Enterprises. Indigenous women between the ages of 16 and 25 can apply to take part, and are accepted into the program regardless of their background. Although the program is built around fashion modelling and culminates in a catwalk event, appearance is not a selection criterion. One of the reasons for Kimberley and Pilbara Girl’s success is that it does not target young women who are likely to succeed (as many leadership programs do) or those who are disadvantaged (as youth development programs do); all participants are equal in the program and on the catwalk. As a result, participants do not see the program as therapy or diversion, but as an opportunity to rise to their full potential.

Both the heats and the final consist of a week of activities, leading up to the public event. In 2016 participants took part in a variety of workshops, including: positive imaging and affirmations; building resilience and overcoming adversity; anger management; goal setting; health and hygiene; work readiness; and public speaking. In addition, participants took part in various media-related activities, including developing and performing scripts for their video presentation, being interviewed by journalists, and being filmed by the Goolarri crew. These various media outputs are designed to give the audience insight into the lives of the young women, and to showcase their journey during the program.

2.1 High return on investment

Kimberley and Pilbara Girl program alumni are 13 percentage points more likely to be employed than other Indigenous women in the same age range within their regions; 43 per cent of program alumni are currently employed, compared with 30 per cent of the total demographic. While it is difficult to draw a firm causal connection between the program and employment, our qualitative research supports the proposition that participation in the program results in workforce readiness, as well as positive community outcomes.

As outlined in Appendix F (page 36), the benefits of the program greatly outweigh the costs. We estimate the benefits to be in the order of $37,000 per participant, while the costs are approximately $7095 per participant. Kimberley and Pilbara Girl thus yields a significantly positive return on investment.

2.2 Personal development through participation

Kimberley and Pilbara Girl is an unconventional yet successful approach to Indigenous advancement. The program works by helping young women see themselves as role models, particularly to younger girls, which promotes personal ambition and community leadership. The personal development program is delivered in such a way that participants see it as being about developing the knowledge and confidence to do well during the event. They are thus particularly responsive to the messages offered, even if some of those messages are similar to what they might hear at school, or in other youth programs. A former participant observed:
If beauty is how they promote it then, sure, that seems to work in getting girls to participate. But doing the real stuff [the workshops] is where the changes happen.

When asked to name their favourite thing about the program, two-thirds of the 2016 participants stated that the catwalk and/or photography sessions were their favourite activity. The program is structured around these two elements, and this format fosters engagement throughout the rest of the program. In addition, two participants stated that “everything” was their favourite aspect of the program. Interview respondents were able to give multiple responses, and other answers included: making friends (8 responses), the personal development workshops (including learning and interacting as a group, 7 responses), and helping others (1 response).

2.3 Recruitment through networks

Since its inception in 2004, the program has built up a loyal following of past participants and their families, who continue to attend the catwalk shows, and act as an important recruitment mechanism. Some return in future years to participate as facilitators and event organisers. As we stated in our previous report (Rennie & Potts, 2011), this endogenous growth, arising from networks of previous participants, is testimony to the value the program is adding to the two regions.

Of the 2016 participants, over one-third (n = 11) entered the program because they had been encouraged to do so by a previous participant:

My sister was in KG last year. And she inspired me – said to do it, it’s a good opportunity to feel good and be a leader. She had a good experience.

Six of the 2016 participants had been encouraged to enter by a family member, four had been encouraged by an employer or teacher, and five had decided for themselves to enter the program. The main reasons given for entering the program were to build confidence (n = 10), to be a role model to others in the community (n = 6) and to make friends (n = 3, including “meeting girls from other places”). One participant said she entered the program “because I was looking forward to being one of them”, demonstrating the way in which the program replicates itself through social status and glamour. Participants are also associated with being proactive and inspiring others:

I entered KG [Kimberley Girl] to show younger girls there is more to life out there, other than drugs and alcohol.
2.4 A flexible and evolving program

The Kimberley and Pilbara Girl program has continued to develop and adapt since 2011. The most significant change is that the heat events now take place in one location within each of the two regions (workshops continue to take place in multiple locations), and participants from both regions travel to Broome for the final event. In 2017 the program will expand, with a new event in the Goldfields region. When asked whether they were happy about coming together for the final, all but one participant stated that this was a good thing, mostly because it meant they met participants from different places, but also because it meant they got to travel (for those who do not live in Broome). Some of the Pilbara participants commented that because their region consists of larger towns with fewer small communities, it was valuable to meet girls who have grown up in communities where life can be significantly different (in both good ways and bad).

Importantly, the change in location has also enabled Goolarri Media Enterprises to put more resources into the workshop program, including hiring professional facilitators for many of the development sessions. By reducing the “roadshow” burden, the Goolarri team was able to put more time and energy into stage production and media outputs, resulting in a better experience for the audience. The only drawback to the 2016 schedule was that the Pilbara finalists experienced a significant gap in time between the heats and final; this meant they lost some momentum compared to the Kimberley participants, who went straight through from one week to the next (see Recommendations section, page 8). The gap between heats and finals for Pilbara participants is unavoidable due to the need to work around the school calendar. Extending the program to ensure greater connection between Goolarri and the participants between events would help ensure equitable experiences and outcomes.

Goolarri Media Enterprises has managed to maintain a diverse set of participants by recruiting from across the regions, and going to extra lengths to ensure that those from outside major centres are prepared for the experience. In 2016, Goolarri continued a partnership with North Regional TAFE, which involved administering a pre-Kimberley Girl program to participants who were not engaged in formal training and/or education (PX2, since 2015). This life-skills training was delivered in two communities, across two days each. In 2016 the impact of this preparatory training was clearly positive, with strong and active engagement by participants from more remote towns and communities.

One significant addition to the 2016 program was a deeper focus on social media and online safety. Goolarri is making greater use of social media to promote the program, which recognises the high use of social media (Facebook in particular) amongst Aboriginal people in both regions. At the same time, participants are encouraged during the workshops to

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3 In previous years, heats occurred in a number of regional locations. For instance, in 2011, Kimberley Girl heats took place in Derby, Kununurra and Fitzroy Crossing, with finalists travelling to Broome for the final event. The Pilbara heats and final were all held in the Pilbara.

4 This follows from our 2011 recommendation.
think carefully about what they post online and to refrain from engaging in cyber bullying behaviours.

From our interviews with participants, we found that young women are experiencing emotional distress as a result of cyber bullying. The particular forms of “relatedness” prevalent in Aboriginal sociality – whereby family and kinship networks come with obligations and responsibilities – mean the consequences of online communication can be significant. These consequences can include inter-family feuds (including potential violence) and social isolation.

Seven (of 295) respondents reported direct experience of cyber bullying – six as victims, and one as a perpetrator. Of the remainder, all but one saw it as a significant problem and had witnessed it amongst their peers. Almost all (n = 26) felt that the cyber bullying component should stay in the program, and endorsed the way it was dealt with in the workshop (two respondents were not sure, and one felt that it should be removed as she felt distressed talking about it). We provide an in-depth account of the cyber bullying issue and related findings in Appendix E (page 33).

3 Benefits to Participants

The Kimberley and Pilbara Girl program works by appealing to ambition and strength, rather than victimhood. The program is also a vehicle for personal transformation and experimentation, in that young women are given a chance to experiment with their public image.

The benefits of the program are best understood in relation to the lives of the participants, including their aspirations and hardships. Through our conversations with the 30 young women who took part in the research, we built up a portrait of what it is like to grow up in a small town or community in remote North-western Australia.

Some participants were still attending school or TAFE; others were finding it difficult to obtain work; two were young mothers. Their interests ranged from “dressing up” and taking selfies, to outdoor activities such as fishing and hunting. Sport was a significant feature in many of the interviews. Eight respondents mentioned their involvement in cultural activities, including artwork and ceremony.

However, many participants were also troubled by problems in their communities, including alcohol, drugs and family violence. Participating in Kimberley or Pilbara Girl was seen as a pathway to being a positive influence in their community, particularly through becoming a role model to younger siblings.

The main outcome of the program is that it increases confidence, enabling young women to take on the challenges they encounter, and to achieve their goals. By the end of the

5 One participant withdrew her interview statements about cyber safety, leaving 29 responses for this topic.
program, 25 of 30 participants stated during interviews (without prompting) that the program had increased their confidence. While it is possible that participants identify confidence as a main benefit due to frequent reinforcement by facilitators and former participants, we found the shift from shyness to confidence to be visible and tangible. In the words of the 2015 Kimberley Girl winner, Darrylin Gordon:

*The words being “proud of myself” didn’t have any meaning for me before Kimberley Girl and it does now. The first week workshops [heats] teaches you how to be proud of yourself, reminding yourself of who you are and the goals you want to set, how to get there, who you need help from to get there. It has helped me so much.*

For many participants, confidence is also a direct remedy for *shame* – a word used by Aboriginal people to describe a particular attitude and hindrance. According to participants, *feeling shame* involves shyness, anxiety, nervousness, an inability to speak up, lack of confidence, and a reluctance to participate. Some participants saw *shame* as being propagated by peer pressure, and as particularly common in Aboriginal communities. At least two participants implied that it is linked to the effects of colonialism, reflecting that it has to do with feeling out of place in mainstream society and is reinforced by negative images of Aboriginal people in the media. By producing confidence in participants, the Kimberley and Pilbara Girl program is countering *shame* and its significant if unquantifiable effect on individuals, families and communities.

Of the 2011 participants, those who identified confidence as the primary benefit of doing the Kimberley Girl program were more likely to have achieved their stated life goals in 2016 than those who did not name confidence as the primary benefit. What’s more, none of those who reported gaining confidence were unemployed or disengaged five years on (excluding stay-at-home mothers). Some of the 2011 participants have overcome significant adversity, and achieved life goals when all the predictors indicated that they would not. While Kimberley Girl is only one factor that might generate change in the lives of these young women, it could well be a significant factor, given the positive responses from participants. From our analysis, Kimberley and Pilbara Girl participants are more likely to enter the workforce than others in their age and regional demographic.

## 4 Benefits to Community and Region

The Kimberley and Pilbara Girl program increases Indigenous employment. Goolarri Media Enterprises employs 21 Indigenous staff. An additional 22 Indigenous staff were employed specifically for the delivery of Kimberley Girl, including facilitators and mentors.

The program also provides local benefits to business, not only through sponsorship, but also by identifying potential young ambassadors and trainees. For example, during the

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6 Past participants classified as “disengaged” included those who were dealing with homelessness and/or substance abuse, involved with correctional services, and so on.
final, participants were given the opportunity to talk directly to recruitment teams from the police force, Virgin Airlines, and mining company Woodside.

During 2016, past program participants took part in a range of activities, including the Telethon Fundraising Weekend, the Perth Fashion Festival, Pierot’s Model Search, Arousal and Design’s formal makeup course, a three-day Advanced Life Skills Course, talking to teenagers at local high schools, various other public speaking engagements, three front-cover photographs and accompanying articles in West Magazine, and a front-cover photograph for the Broome Visitor Guide. Kimberley and Pilbara Girl is thus raising the profile of local Aboriginal women and generating role models for Aboriginal girls through image-making and positive media events.

In addition to these activities, the public value of Kimberley Girl can also be explained by looking at the socio-economic profile of the participants and the local opportunities they face. As we outlined in our 2011 report, the difference between Kimberley Girl and a (hypothetical) equivalent program conducted with affluent young women living in an Australian city is that the latter venture only results in a reordering of labour market rankings. In other words, those who rise to the top will displace others who will fall lower in terms of opportunities, while the overall participation rate and human-capital set remains the same. By contrast, Kimberley and Pilbara Girl is a “positive-sum-game”, in that each girl who benefits does not displace another girl, and instead may actually cause additional girls to benefit too.

Appendix B (page 14), “Who are the 2016 Kimberley and Pilbara Girl Participants?”, describes some of the hardships participants are facing, or have faced in the past. These stories demonstrate that many young Aboriginal women are falling out of study and workforce participation due to significant hardships. Programs that enable them to see beyond their current situation, and beyond intergenerational disadvantage, are important for raising the wellbeing of individuals and the prosperity of the region.

5 Media Production and Engagement

2016 was a significant year for the Kimberley and Pilbara Girl program, as it involved the production of an 8-part documentary series. Participants were interviewed by the documentary makers in their home communities, both during and after the event, and cameras were a constant presence during the workshops. The documentary is intended for release in 2017, and production was overseen by Goolarri Media Enterprises, in order to ensure that the personal stories disclosed over the course of the program were handled ethically and sensitively. One of our recommendations from the 2011 report was that more energy should be put into the media aspects of Kimberley and Pilbara Girl. The Goolarri team has achieved this with the documentary, which also incorporates personal diary entries by the young women.

We asked the 2016 participants to comment on whether they were happy to have taken part in the documentary series, and the vast majority said they were pleased to have had
their story told. Positive comments included: “I think it’s good to have the doco, recording the girls from different regions and showing the world about the story of the girls and where they come from”, and “It’s a good thing that other people can hear my story.” Some commented that it also helped them with their public speaking and confidence: “In a way it is great because you get to learn how to do public speaking into a camera and you know you are being watched. You step yourself up.”

From our observations, the 2016 participants displayed far more advanced public speaking skills than the 2011 cohort, which was likely an effect of the documentary crew’s constant schooling in how to talk to the camera and generate stage presence. In addition to the documentary, 2016 participants also took part in at least 19 media interviews during and after the event.

The Goolarri organisation’s stage production values are high, and the events continue to attract large crowds, including families who travel from distant towns to support the participants. The final event attracted an audience of 680 people, including the Western Australia Premier, the Honourable Colin Barnett.

6 Participant Feedback

When asked if they had any suggestions for how the program could be improved in future, half of the participant said that they would not change anything. Five felt that the days were too long, or that the program was too full, and felt tired as a result. Conversely, three felt that there was too much waiting around, particularly during hair and make-up sessions, and that there could be more activities scheduled during these times.

Perhaps the most useful suggestion was that the workshops could involve fewer workbooks (activities where participants were required to take notes) and more interactive activities, in order to produce more bonding time between participants. At least one participant had very poor English literacy. The workbook components meant she felt excluded from these activities, despite the fact that support workers were on hand to assist her, including discreetly writing out answers for her.

7 Recommendations

1. The Kimberley and Pilbara Girl program is demonstrating continued success and improvement. The program deserves ongoing and increased support from public and private sources.

2. Goolarri Media has undertaken significant “aftercare” activities since our 2011 report, and we recommend that this focus continue to grow. More can still be done for participants who don’t win or get through to the final. For instance, the 2015 Kimberley Girl winner commented that she hoped to do more engagement with former participants from Halls Creek to ensure they retained positive benefits from the program.
3. Following on from recommendation 2, Kimberley and Pilbara Girl should be regarded and funded as a 12 month program.

4. The Kimberley and Pilbara Girl alumni network should be utilised to organise activities in the regions throughout the year. Some resourcing should be directed at alumni organisers for social events or networking activities. Using social media to keep in touch with alumni is also an effective means of collecting information for future evaluations.

5. Participants are most engaged with workshops when the facilitators tell personal stories and encourage the participants to speak. We recommend that workshop facilitators should be discouraged from reading from a script. While the use of Kimberley Girl alumni as facilitators is an important element of the program, further training of facilitators may be necessary.

8 References


9 Acknowledgements

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