

## Allison Bernard vanished nine years ago. What came next is an uncomfortably Australian story

*The reaction to the young mother's disappearance is a tragic example of the systematic disregard for Indigenous women, advocates say*



*A tribute to Allison Bernard laid by her family outside the coroners court in Cairns, where an inquest into her 2013 disappearance has been under way*

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A 23-year-old mother of two disappears. She was last seen leaving a remote pub with a stranger. The woman comes from a tight-knit community and loves her family – who instantly suspect foul play.

One might imagine what follows next. Footage of helicopters and extensive ground search operations. Televised appeals and rewards for information. An outpouring of grief and rage. National headlines. Perhaps a true crime podcast series.

But the disappearance of Kowanyama woman Allison Neridine Bernard on the night of 10 February 2013 was met with relative media silence.

Few who lived beyond her Cape York home, where the Mitchell River flows into the Gulf of Carpentaria, would have heard Bernard's family describe the cheeky little girl who grew into a quiet, proud and loving mother. Or know that she was a woman who loved to dance and to swim in the fresh water of her country, or that her favourite flower was the orange hibiscus.

How many saw her family lay those hibiscus around framed photos of Bernard and her family at a court in Cairns this week, where coroner Nerida Wilson ordered police to undertake fresh searches for her body?

The searches are to be carried out at a property on the Archer River quarry, known as the Bend, which was previously the home of the man last seen with Bernard, Thomas Byrnes.

Byrnes has repeatedly denied having anything to do with the disappearance of Bernard who, he says, had come to his home and then “gone walkabout”.

Nearby mine shafts and a dam are to be searched too, at the request of Wilson, who said she would ask the Queensland police commissioner to review the initial investigation into Bernard’s disappearance.

While this week’s hearings have been regularly reported by the local Cairns Post and National Indigenous Television, the lawyer representing Bernard’s family at the inquest, Debbie Kilroy, says other media coverage has been “pretty much nonexistent”.

“Ms Bernard is not the young white woman that the media or police are interested in,” she says.

“If it was a white woman that was disappeared, never to be seen again, there would have been a hell of a lot of resources thrown into that investigation, there would have been national media coverage and she would have been found back in 2013.”

The Queensland police service has previously said it conducted an exhaustive investigation into Bernard’s disappearance and that there was no proof she was killed.

“The Queensland police service acknowledges the coroner’s direction regarding further searches and obtaining opinions from specific experts,” a spokesperson told Guardian Australia.

“These will be carefully considered and acted on in due course.”



*Hannah McGlade says media indifference to violence against Indigenous women is rooted in Australia's colonial past*

But human rights advocate and lawyer Hannah McGlade says the case of Allison Bernard is far from isolated.

The Kurin Minang Noongar woman has spent more than three decades working in violence against Aboriginal women and co-authored an Indigenous femicide case study.

In her home state of Western Australia, where Aboriginal mothers are 17.5 times more likely to be murder victims than non-Indigenous mothers, she is campaigning for a parliamentary inquiry into the killing of Indigenous women and girls.

McGlade says racial profiling works both ways, describing a national pattern of over-policing Aboriginal women as potential offenders, and under-policing them as victims.

She says the violence inflicted upon Aboriginal women is rooted in the colonial view of as them as “sub-human, to be exploited for labour and sexual purposes”.

“This is a long, violent and racist history that has never been addressed in Australia,” McGlade says.

“It’s not a subject that Australia talks about, but this abuse of Aboriginal women was deeply embedded in the national white psyche. This is very much alive.”

An associate professor at Curtin University, McGlade says the media has played “a significant role in normalising systemic, horrific violence” by devaluing the lives of Indigenous women.

“Aboriginal victims of state violence, of murder, of rape, are not given media attention,” she says.

“Sometimes the story doesn’t even make the news, it is not considered newsworthy. This is blatant, overt racism.”

But if much of the general public has been unaware of the disappearance of Allison Bernard for nine years, her unexplained absence is something her family has had to live with every day.

“They don’t know where their mother is,” Kilroy says.

“That grief, you can feel it, it’s palpable.”

She is not convinced the renewed search will find the missing woman. But Kilroy hopes, for the sake of Bernard’s family, it does.

“So Ms Bernard can be taken home and buried cultural ways and her spirit can rest at peace,” she says.

A third sitting of the coronial inquiry is expected towards the end of the year.