



**Australian Government**  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

# **JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE**

## **INQUIRY INTO GENDER EQUALITY AS A NATIONAL SECURITY AND ECONOMIC SECURITY IMPERATIVE**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) Human Rights Subcommittee's inquiry into matters related to gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative.

**Gender equality is a strategic necessity for Australia's national and economic security.** Australia's policy architecture rightly embeds gender equality across foreign policy, defence and development as a core pillar of security.

This approach is critical to building trust with partners, strengthening collective security, and ensuring a safe, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

When women participate fully in labour markets and decision-making, economies become more productive, diversified, and resilient. This drives regional economic stability, attracts investment, and expands trade opportunities for Australia.

Global evidence consistently shows that gender equality is one of the strongest predictors of peace and stability – outperforming wealth or political systems (UN Women, 2025). Countries with higher gender equality experience fewer conflicts, stronger governance, and sustained economic growth.

Inclusive economies reduce poverty, enhance social cohesion, and improve wellbeing – foundations that underpin security and resilience.

**Failing to integrate gender equality and social inclusion into Australia's strategic posture risks undermining our influence and credibility in the region.** Conversely, prioritising gender equality strengthens Australia's leadership, reinforces our alliances, and positions us as a trusted partner in shaping a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Amid intensifying geopolitical competition, climate driven disasters and economic volatility across the Indo-Pacific, countries with inclusive societies are better equipped to maintain stability, protect development gains, prevent conflict and build resilient economies. These outcomes directly safeguard Australia's security, trade and long-term prosperity.

Australia's international development program – working alongside diplomacy and defence – helps address the root causes of fragility and instability, laying the foundations for lasting peace and resilience. Australia's commitment to fully implementing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda strengthens gender equality, reduces instability, and expands economic opportunity. Together, these contribute to the regional stability on which Australia's interests depend.

This submission highlights current work underway to advance gender equality in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. It responds to the rapidly evolving global landscape and highlights Australia's role in promoting stability through inclusive growth.

It also outlines options to further integrate gender equality across all policy domains, and complements DFAT's submission to the JSCFADT Foreign Affairs and Aid Subcommittee on the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict.



### **Terms of Reference**

The inquiry will consider gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative, with particular reference to:

1. The economic security and national security benefits of realising gender equality for every person, and how the integration of gender equality across foreign policy supports this objective;
2. Evidence and data that demonstrates the links between gender equality and economic growth and prosperity, including in food security and labour markets;
3. The international and national security implications of undermining gender equality, including in the context of humanitarian crises and climate change;
4. The role of locally led leadership and decision making in advancing gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda;
5. The Australian government's efforts to advance gender equality and the human rights of women and girls across all aspects of foreign policy, defence and national security;
6. The Women, Peace and Security agenda internationally and Australia's role in promoting and implementing it; and
7. Any related matters.



## CONTEXT AND EVIDENCE

### The Global Context

Gender equality is not just a human right – it is a proven driver of peace, stability and prosperity. Equality unlocks productivity, reduces poverty and strengthens social cohesion – critical foundations for resilience in an era of disruption.

However, progress on gender equality is stalling globally. No country is on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality. At current rates, global parity in economic participation, education, health and political empowerment will take more than 130 years (WEF, 2024). Climate change, conflict and displacement are compounding these inequalities, pushing millions of women and girls deeper into poverty and insecurity.

### Economic Barriers

Economic barriers continue to entrench inequality and suppress growth. Legal restrictions on women's work persist in 178 countries, limiting their economic participation. Globally, women-owned businesses represent only 15–20 per cent of enterprises, and around one billion women remain excluded from formal financial services (World Bank, 2023). 17.6 million low-income women in Southeast Asia lack access to formal financial services, limiting their ability to invest in businesses, education, and climate resilience.

Across the Indo-Pacific, women earn 20–30 per cent less than men and are concentrated in insecure, low-paid jobs, leaving them vulnerable to economic shocks. In addition, two billion women have no access to social protection (UN Women, 2024) even though women's unpaid care burden means they are vulnerable to poverty and precarity across the lifecycle. Ensuring strong social safety net systems can ensure they do not fall into poverty and hardship.

### Labour Force Participation

Globally, women's labour force participation stands at just 61 per cent compared to 91 per cent for men (ILO, 2024). In the Indo-Pacific, the rate is consistently much lower and, in some nations, declining – with women's labour force participation at just 32 per cent in South Asia (among the lowest globally) and 54 per cent in Southeast Asia, compared to men's rates of 77–80 per cent (ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2025).

According to the World Bank (2025) around 43 per cent of working-age women are employed across Pacific Island countries, with about 57 per cent (≈500,000 women) not working, representing a major untapped economic resource that is restricted by women's roles in unpaid care and informal economies and a lack of formal care options. Economic modelling from International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Women (2022) shows investing in the care economy has a multiplier effect, creating almost three times as many jobs as the same investment in construction.



## Unpaid Care Burden

Unpaid care responsibilities are a major constraint: women perform up to three times more unpaid care work than men – equivalent to US\$10.8 trillion annually in unpaid labour (ILO, 2023). This burden keeps approximately 708 million women out of the labour market, perpetuating inequality and reducing productivity (ILO, 2023; UN Women, 2024).

In Australia, women's unpaid labour is worth the equivalent of \$427.3 billion per year, with the average woman doing \$40,092 in unpaid labour per year (Risse, 2025). Men's unpaid work amounts to \$261 billion per year. These structural barriers weaken labour supply, constrain innovation, and undermine economic resilience across entire economies.

## Leadership and Decision-Making

Women remain underrepresented in leadership globally. In 2024, women led only 29 countries and held 27 per cent of parliamentary seats (UN Women, 2024).

Women's representation in political leadership across the Pacific remains among the lowest globally, with many Pacific Island countries reporting single-digit representation and some having no women in parliament at all (UN Women, 2024).

Women are under-represented in decision-making in South Asia, with an average of 15 per cent of national parliaments (UN Women) and just 10 per cent of companies have women senior leadership (IFC, 2025).

In the health sector, women hold only 25 per cent of health leadership roles globally, constraining system responsiveness. Even when women reach leadership roles, they often face violence and discrimination that restrict their participation in public life.

## The Human Cost is High

Globally, almost one in three women (840 million globally) experienced sexual and/or physical violence at least once in their lives, with women from minority and marginalised backgrounds facing even greater risk (WHO, 2025). Almost 57 per cent of women aged 15-49 in the Pacific have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2025). In parts of the Indo-Pacific, prevalence is even higher – Timor-Leste reports that 59 per cent of women experience sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) over their lifetimes. South Asia has some of the world's highest rates of violence against women and girls, with marked impacts on individuals and society (WHO, 2025).

In Australia, SGBV costs \$26 billion a year (KPMG, 2016). Gendered financial abuse is estimated to cost \$10.9 billion a year – with \$5.7 billion of that cost borne directly by victims (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023). Beyond the devastating personal and social consequences, the economic toll is immense: SGBV imposes an estimated global cost of US\$1.5 trillion annually, draining resources and undermining productivity (World Bank, 2017; UN Women, 2020).



These patterns are not only a public health and human rights crisis – they are a catalyst for instability, eroding governance, weakening economies, and undercutting security across the region. By deepening inequality and eroding trust in institutions, SGBV fractures social cohesion, destabilizes societies, and fuels insecurity.

Limited access to health services, including sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services leads to harmful practices and preventable deaths. Unsafe abortions, which account for an estimated 45 per cent of all abortions globally, are one of the leading causes of maternal mortality, causing approximately seven to 11 per cent of global maternal deaths (WHO, 2025 & Creswell et al. 2025). These realities undermine health, education, and economic outcomes across generations and have a major impact on the world's ability to reach the Sustainable Development Goals.

## Peace Processes and Conflict

Despite decades of global commitments, women remain largely excluded from peace processes – an omission that undermines stability and recovery. In 2024, women comprised only seven per cent of negotiators and 14 per cent of mediators globally, and nine out of 10 peace negotiations included no women at all. Only 31 per cent of peace agreements referenced gender provisions, and just two addressed SGBV.

Meanwhile, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) continues to be used systematically, undermining recovery and stability. UN Office for Disarmament Affairs research indicates 70–90 per cent of CRSV incidents involve small arms and light weapons (UNODA, 2024). Over 676 million women lived within 50 kilometres of a deadly conflict in 2024 – a 74 per cent increase since 2010 (GIWPS, 2023).

## Crises and Humanitarian Contexts

Crises disproportionately affect women and girls, increasing risks of SGBV, exclusion and poor health outcomes. Globally, 70 per cent of women in humanitarian crises experience SGBV (UNFPA, 2025), and 60 per cent of preventable maternal deaths occur in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (WHO, 2022). Women and girls comprise over 50 per cent of displaced populations, facing heightened risks of exploitation and abuse (UNHCR, 2023) – this has significant impacts for our support to displaced populations in Myanmar and Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

## Climate Change and Disasters

Climate change and disasters disproportionately affect women and girls, deepening gender inequalities. They account for about 80 per cent of those displaced by climate-related disasters and face higher risks of death, illness and resource loss (UN Women, 2022). In the Pacific, South and Southeast Asia, reliance on agriculture and fisheries increases vulnerability to droughts and floods (UNDP, 2021). For instance, droughts in Southeast Asia raised underweight rates among women by 35 per cent and teen pregnancy by 17 per cent (World Bank, 2020).



In the Pacific, 33 per cent of girls reported school damage, while longer trips for essentials heightened SGBV risks (UNICEF, 2021). Disaster contexts heighten sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment risks, with spikes documented after Fiji's 2012–13 floods, Cyclone Ditwah in Sri Lanka (2025), Cyclone Freddy in Malawi (2023), and Cyclone Idai in Mozambique (2019) – including reports of sex demanded in exchange for aid or inclusion on distribution lists (Clugston et al, 2024). These challenges amplify social and economic stress, leading to more SGBV, child marriage, and disrupted SRH services during crises (UNFPA, 2022).

## Unprecedented Disruption and Foreign Aid Cuts

Overlapping crises – geopolitical tensions, increases in humanitarian and protracted crises, climate shocks, health emergencies and economic volatility – disproportionately affect women and girls. Women represent nearly 60 per cent of the world's poor (UN Women, 2023). During COVID-19, women were 1.8 times more likely than men to lose jobs, and unpaid care burdens surged (ILO, 2021), pushing millions out of the workforce. These disruptions compound inequalities and weaken resilience, increasing risks of instability and humanitarian crises.

At the same time, aid budgets face downward pressure. The OECD estimated that global Official Development Assistance (ODA) fell by 6 per cent in 2024 compared to 2023 in real terms (OECD, 2025), and projected a further 9 to 17 per cent cut in 2025 (OECD, 2025). This projected decline is driven by cuts from the major providers of ODA, amongst cuts from other donors. These reductions threaten gender equality programs, risking reversal of hard-won gains in women's economic empowerment, education and protection from violence – particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where gender gaps remain significant.

Global norms and frameworks – such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the WPS agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – provide a foundation for action. Australia is committed to these standards; however, they face growing threats. In countries like Afghanistan and Iran, women and girls are systematically denied basic rights. Elsewhere, coordinated movements seek to roll back progress on gender equality and human rights, often using disinformation to fuel fear and violence – trends linked to broader anti-democratic agendas. These regressive trends not only threaten human rights but also entrench structural gender inequalities, reversing decades of progress and undermining inclusive governance.

## Pushback, Misogyny and Violent Extremism

Efforts to advance gender equality increasingly face organised resistance. Misogynistic narratives and extremist ideologies seek to roll back rights and exclude women from public life. These dynamics are not only a human rights concern – they represent a growing security threat. Evidence shows that gender-based exclusion and violence are linked to higher risks of radicalisation and instability (UN Women & UNDP 2019; OECD, 2023). Research by UN Women and the OECD highlights that societies with entrenched gender inequality are more prone to violent extremism and conflict (UN Women, 2024; OECD, 2023).



Online disinformation campaigns and cyber harassment amplify these risks, eroding democratic institutions and civic participation. A 2023 UN report found that women politicians and journalists are disproportionately targeted by online abuse, with 73 per cent experiencing harassment, often aimed at silencing their voices and undermining democratic processes (UNESCO, 2023). Extremist groups increasingly use gendered propaganda to recruit and radicalise, exploiting misogynistic narratives to normalise violence and authoritarian ideologies (UNDP, 2022).

These trends are not isolated – they intersect with broader anti-democratic movements. Studies show that countries with higher gender inequality are more vulnerable to authoritarianism and political instability (GIWPS, 2023).

## The Cost of Exclusion

The cost of gender inequality is a risk Australia and the Indo-Pacific cannot afford to ignore. When equality is absent, instability deepens and vulnerabilities multiply. Women and children are 14 times more likely to die in disasters without planning that incorporates gender (UNDRR, 2023). Displacement without protection exposes communities to trafficking and violence, perpetuating cycles of fragility. These are not just humanitarian concerns – they are security threats that weaken recovery, governance, and regional stability.

Excluding women or tolerating violence erodes human capital and fuels instability. SGBV predicts political instability, with cascading health, labour, and social impacts across economies (UNICEF, 2020). Economic gaps and gendered labour markets push women and girls toward risky irregular migration or deceptive recruiters. Harmful social norms – such as early marriage and restrictive mobility – combined with lack of documentation, are exploited by organized criminal networks to channel victims into sexual exploitation, forced labour, and smuggling routes.

These crimes threaten regional prosperity and security, generating industrial-scale profits: trafficking for forced labour in the private economy produces an estimated US\$150 billion annually (ILO, 2023), while scam centres generate roughly US\$40 billion globally, with Australians losing US\$2 billion to online scams in 2024 (ACCC, 2024; UNODC, 2024). Financial exclusion of women and girls compounds these vulnerabilities.



## THE CASE FOR ACTION: HIGH RETURNS AND REGIONAL STABILITY

Australia's vision for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific cannot be achieved without closing gender gaps. Gender inequality is not a peripheral issue – it is a strategic vulnerability. Addressing these disparities through targeted foreign, trade, and development policy and partnerships is essential to building resilience and reducing fragility across the region.

Embedding gender equality in foreign policy and security frameworks ensures that limited resources deliver maximum impact. Interventions that strengthen inclusive governance, economic security, and peace are proven to generate higher returns – both in stability and growth. Global evidence shows that societies with greater gender equality experience fewer conflicts, stronger institutions, and sustained economic performance.

Integrating gender equality across critical domains – economic and social development, trade participation, climate adaptation, humanitarian response, peacebuilding, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism, cyber policy, and governance reform – is not optional; it is fundamental to lasting security. Without these measures, exclusion will continue to erode economic resilience, weaken democratic governance, and heighten regional instability.

Gender equality is not an aspirational goal. It is a cornerstone of Australia's strategic vision for a resilient, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific – and a prerequisite for achieving our national interests.

### Economic Imperatives: Growth and Recovery

Closing gender gaps is an economic necessity. Increasing women's participation in the labour force drives productivity, strengthens supply chains and accelerates recovery from economic shocks.

The economic benefits are significant: closing gender gaps could increase annual global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by up to US\$28 trillion (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). McKinsey Global Institute (2018) estimates advancing women's equality could add US\$ 4.5 trillion annually to Asia-Pacific GDP. Closing gender employment gaps would increase Pacific Island GDP per capita by 22 per cent in the long run (World Bank 2022) and grow South Asia's GDP up to 51 per cent (World Bank, 2024).

Domestically, modelling from Deloitte Access Economics shows that abandoning Australia's prescriptive gender norms would boost GDP by an average of \$128 billion annually (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022). Reducing occupational segregation in Australia is critical, given only 21 per cent of occupations are gender balanced and the occupations most likely to be in shortage are highly gender segregated (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025).

Women's full participation drives productivity, diversifies economies and fosters long-term stability. According to IMF analysis, narrowing gender gaps can offset pandemic-related GDP losses and lay the foundation for sustained growth (IMF, 2023). In the Pacific Islands, achieving employment parity would strengthen fiscal resilience and reduce dependency on external aid (ADB, 2022; PIFS, 2023).

Investments in gender equality also deliver measurable returns in productivity and resilience. Policies such as social protection that expand access to childcare and parental leave increase women's workforce participation, driving long-term economic growth (OECD, 2021).



These measures create a multiplier effect, boosting household incomes, stabilising labour markets, and fostering long-term economic resilience. For Australia, such gains translate into stronger trade prospects, more resilient regional economies and enhanced national security through stability and prosperity. These benefits reinforce Australia's capacity to compete globally and safeguard national security in an era of climate, technological and geopolitical disruption.

The potential impact is significant. Raising women's labour force participation by just 5.9 percentage points could increase GDP by up to eight per cent in emerging and developing economies (IMF, 2023).

Similarly, closing care policy gaps and expanding care services – while ensuring decent work for care workers – could generate nearly 300 million jobs globally by 2035 (ILO, 2022). Having a woman Chief Executive Officer in an Australian ASX-listed company is associated with a five per cent increase in market value; on average, this is worth \$79.6 million (WGEA, 2020).

Companies with gender-diverse executive teams are 21 per cent more likely to experience above-average profitability (McKinsey & Company, 2018). These figures underscore a clear message: investing in gender equality is investing in growth, recovery, and a secure future.

## Trade

Globally, closing gender gaps in trade could boost GDP by up to US\$7 trillion by 2030 (World Bank, 2023). Women-owned businesses engaged in international markets are 3.5 times more likely to expand and create jobs (WTO, 2022). These findings underscore that trade policies that incorporate gender are a lever for economic growth and stability.

Evidence from Australia's trade and development programs shows that gender equality delivers measurable economic benefits. For example, a State and Territory Data Analysis Project revealed female workers employed by businesses producing goods for export reported a median annual income for each job held that was almost double those of women employed by firms not exporting goods in FY2022-23<sup>1</sup> (Austrade SATDA Project).

Multilateral Aid for Trade programs have helped improve labour standards, job security and leadership opportunities for women in sectors such as textiles and agriculture. Initiatives like Better Work support nearly one million jobs across South and Southeast Asia, while UNCTAD's eTrade for Women has trained dozens of women entrepreneurs in digital commerce.

Across the Indo-Pacific, more than 39,000 Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have also benefited from simplified border procedures, financial literacy workshops and digital trade tools – strengthening competitiveness and resilience (UNCTAD, 2024).

## Women, Peace and Security: A Necessity and Opportunity

<sup>1</sup> Note: These median wages can be lower than what is reported in other sources as they are not full-time equivalent pay figures and are derived for each job held rather than reflecting consolidated pay for an individual across multiple jobs. Differences in these median wages between goods exporting businesses and other firms can reflect differences in rates of pay, hours worked, and the number of jobs held.



The evidence supporting the full implementation of the WPS agenda is compelling. Peace agreements involving women increase the likelihood of the agreement lasting at least two years by 20 per cent and fifteen years by 35 per cent (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Agreements signed by women also include more provisions on political reform and achieve higher implementation rates (Krause et al., 2018). Inclusive security institutions improve operational effectiveness, build trust, and strengthen responses to SGBV. These findings confirm that investing in women's participation in conflict and post-conflict settings reduces instability and security threats.

One of the best examples of the impact of gender equality on peace, security and post-conflict recovery is Rwanda's post-conflict reforms. Following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda introduced constitutional quotas, gender budgeting, measures to address SGBV, and sustained investment in women's economic participation. These actions have underpinned stability and growth, with women now holding over 60 per cent of parliamentary seats – the highest globally. While challenges remain, Rwanda demonstrates how inclusive governance and women's leadership drive recovery and resilience.

Women also played an instrumental role in the success of the Bougainville peace process. Their reconciliation efforts helped elevate moderates, strengthened negotiations, and secured unified positions from armed groups. Regional advocacy, including the 1996 Sydney forum, further shaped the design and success of the peace talks (Lees et al, 2015).

Women in Solomon Islands played a critical grassroots role during the Tensions, promoting non-violence, crossing conflict lines to negotiate access to food and services, and helping create the conditions for formal peace talks. Women's groups drew on customary authority, church networks and collective action to support reconciliation, maintain community cohesion and continue peacebuilding in the post-conflict period (Brigg et al, 2015).

Women are also first responders in crises. A CARE survey across 15 conflict-affected countries found that 91 per cent of over 13,000 women surveyed were actively leading community responses – organising food, shelter, health information, and safety measures (CARE, 2023). Seventy-nine per cent worked to make communities safer, and 71 per cent shared health information. Supporting women's grassroots action enables early, survivor-centred responses, easing pressure on health and social systems and strengthening resilience.

## Health, including Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Investment in health advances gender equality, reflecting clear evidence that gender inequalities are linked to health, security, and economic outcomes. Realising the right to health – including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – is essential for women's wellbeing, education and economic participation, and critical during emergencies when women bear disproportionate burdens and face heightened risks of SGBV.

Achieving universal health coverage is fundamental to national security and productivity and cannot be achieved without gender equality. Investing in gender equality delivers significant health, economic and social returns. Every US\$1 spent on family planning generates US\$8.4 in economic benefits through improved health, education, and productivity outcomes (UNFPA, 2023). Similarly, cervical cancer prevention yields up to US\$26 in societal returns for every dollar invested, reducing long-term health costs and improving workforce participation (WHO, 2024).



## Gender in agriculture and finance: securing food systems and household resilience

Approaches that incorporate gender equality in agriculture and finance are powerful tools for stabilising food systems and improving household security. When women have equal access to land, inputs, training and financial services, productivity and incomes rise significantly. Globally, if women farmers had the same access to resources as men, agricultural output could increase by up to 30 per cent, reducing hunger for 150 million people (FAO, 2023).

Studies show that closing gender gaps in agricultural productivity could boost national GDP by 2–4 per cent in some developing countries (World Bank, 2022). Access to financial services is equally transformative: women's participation in savings and credit programs increases household spending on food and education by 10–20 per cent (IFAD, 2021).

In climate-vulnerable regions, financial instruments – such as microinsurance and climate-smart credit – have improved resilience for millions of smallholder farmers, reducing crop loss and stabilising incomes (CGIAR, 2023). These findings underscore that empowering women in agriculture and finance is not only a social imperative but an investment in global food security and economic stability.



# GENDER EQUALITY: A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE ANCHORED IN AUSTRALIA'S POLICY ARCHITECTURE

The Indo-Pacific faces intensifying geopolitical competition, technological change, climate volatility, and economic uncertainty. These pressures demand inclusive, evidence-led and future focused responses. Gender equality is central to this response – it strengthens governance, boosts economic potential and enhances resilience – directly supporting Australia's national and economic security.

## Policy Architecture and Flagship Programs

Australia mainstreams gender equality across diplomacy, defence, trade, development, humanitarian action and emerging domains such as cyber and disarmament. This work is guided by the **International Gender Equality Strategy (IGES)**, **Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality**, and the **Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan (2021–31) (WPS NAP)**, supported by the **International Development Policy**, Australia's **Humanitarian Policy**, and regional strategies including **Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040** and the **Australia–Pacific Partnership Plan 2025–2029**. The Ambassador for Gender Equality provides whole-of-government leadership.

Flagship programs include **Investing in Women**, which has mobilised **\$290 million** for women led SMEs, and **Australian Development Investments (ADI)**, which has financed **over 1 million female micro entrepreneurs** and created green jobs. In the Pacific, **Pacific Women Lead** has enabled **10,003 women** to take leadership roles, supported **108,681** people through social norms programs, delivered **83,923** crisis services, and assisted **24,824** women entrepreneurs. These efforts strengthen supply chain resilience, inclusive governance and regional stability.

## Gender Equality as a Resilience Multiplier

Gender equality is integrated across our health, humanitarian and climate strategies because women and girls are disproportionately affected by crises. Programs such as **Climate Resilient Communities** and **Strengthening Pacific Leadership in International Climate Change Engagement** support women's roles in preparedness and recovery, improving disaster outcomes, food security and reducing SGBV risks – contributing to regional stability in a climate affected Indo-Pacific.

## Operational Levers for Delivery

Australia aligns policy, investment and capability building to drive results, supported by APS and security agency training, and rigorous monitoring and evaluation. These levers translate commitments into outcomes such as expanded financial access for women, improved food security and greater participation in global and regional policy forums.

By seeking to align policy, investment and capability, Australia aims to safeguard national interests while strengthening regional stability and contributing to a more peaceful, prosperous and resilient Indo-Pacific.



## How We Track Progress

Accountability is maintained through the **WPS NAP** performance framework, program level indicators, the **Women's Budget Statement**, **Status of Women Report Card**, and **Working for Women** reporting (baseline published in 2024; reviews in 2029 and 2034).

DFAT's performance reporting tracks progress toward the target that **80 per cent** of development investments effectively address gender equality.

Regional and country level Development Partnership Plans also embed gender equality, disability and social inclusion, monitored through midcycle reviews and global mechanisms such as **CEDAW** and the **Universal Periodic Review**. – Mid-point and end of cycle evaluations of initiatives inform future policy and programs, ensuring continuous improvement and evidence-based decision-making.



## CURRENT EFFORTS

Australia advances gender equality through a whole of system approach that integrates policy leadership, targeted investments and partnerships, underpinned by locally led leadership, flexible financing and context specific, evidence-based programming.

### **Multilateral Engagement – Driving Global Leadership on Gender Equality**

Advancing gender equality through multilateral engagement is a strategic imperative for Australia, as inclusive global norms strengthen stability, economic prosperity and security.

Australia is a recognised leader on gender equality and disability inclusion, leveraging multilateral platforms to embed inclusive standards across human rights, trade, security, digital governance and health, and to ensure women and girls can fully participate in – and benefit from – the international system.

#### Counter Terrorism

As co-Chairs of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Working Group, Australia and Indonesia led development of the ‘Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) Policy Toolkit’ in 2022.

The publicly available toolkit provides practitioners and policymakers with relevant frameworks, good practices, and resources to integrate gender-related considerations into P/CVE interventions, as well as case studies, guiding questions, and recommended resources.

#### Economic Governance

Australia has championed structural reforms in multilateral forums that dismantle barriers to women’s participation. Through the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, we have led initiatives such as the Gender Equality Structural Reform Voluntary Principles, the Care Compact, and the Gender Equality Budgeting Toolkit, which have become benchmarks for inclusive policy design.

Capacity-building projects have trained hundreds of women entrepreneurs and officials in gender-responsive budgeting, care economy reforms and trade practices, enabling women to participate fully in economic growth.

In 2024, Australia spearheaded the development of the APEC Gender Equality Structural Reform Voluntary Principles to support structural reforms across APEC economies. At the World Trade Organization (WTO) Australia co-chairs the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender, which promotes trade policies that incorporate gender equality and improved gender-disaggregated data so that women can share equitably in the benefits of global trade.

Australia is a longstanding supporter of advancing gender equality and mainstreaming gender as a priority in the Group of Twenty (G20). At the 2025 G20 Leaders’ Summit in Johannesburg, Australia supported the Brisbane-eThekwin Goal - a commitment to reduce the gender gap in labour force participation and encourage G20 members to progressively work towards reducing the wage gap between men and women.



### Security and Disarmament

Australia embeds gender considerations into international frameworks such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) to reduce risks of SGBV linked to arms transfers.

In United Nations (UN) disarmament forums, we join cross-regional statements and policy papers on gender mainstreaming across treaties including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.

Through programs such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship and Lise Meitner Programme, supported by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), we build technical capacity and leadership for women in nuclear science and security – advancing WPS objectives in emerging technology and non-proliferation.

### Cyber Diplomacy

The Women in International Security and Cyberspace Fellowship (WiC), co-funded by Australia, has transformed UN cyber negotiations by increasing women's participation and shaping norms for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace.

Through the International Cyber and Critical Technology Engagement Strategy, we promote diversity and ethics in global digital governance, embedding gender equality in responses to evolving threats such as malicious cyber activity and hybrid conflicts.

### Peace and Security Forums

Australia champions gender equality in the United Nations Security Council, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Pacific Islands Forum, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the G20, ensuring it remains central to international agendas.

We have co-chaired global initiatives to prevent CRSV, and support survivor-centred justice through mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court Trust Fund for Victims.

Our investments in UN Women and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and participation in Groups of Friends such as Women in Nuclear at the IAEA, reinforce inclusive approaches to disarmament, peacebuilding and humanitarian response – strengthening accountability for gender-based crimes and amplifying Australia's influence.

### Global Health

Australia partners with the World Health Organization (WHO), UNFPA, Gavi - the Vaccine Alliance, and the Pacific Community (SPC) to advance SRHR, counter misinformation, and secure gender language in international agreements.

These efforts have mobilised funding for women's empowerment and increased women's representation in global negotiations.



Through these platforms, Australia sets global standards, secures commitments and expands women's participation across decision-making forums. Our leadership demonstrates a clear commitment to shaping international frameworks that are inclusive, effective, and aligned with democratic values – delivering tangible outcomes for women and girls worldwide.

## Women, Peace and Security: A Cornerstone of Australia's Foreign Policy and Security Strategy

WPS is a cornerstone of Australia's foreign policy and security strategy, as advancing the WPS agenda promotes stability in the Indo-Pacific and strengthens Australia's influence in global security governance.

The WPS NAP 2021–31 provides a whole-of-government framework – implemented by DFAT, Defence, Home Affairs and the AFP – to ensure women's meaningful participation in peace and security.

DFAT leads whole-of-government implementation of the WPS NAP, as well as invests \$25 million (2022–27) to advance WPS priorities.

Australia's leadership is reflected in flagship initiatives that elevate women's roles in peacebuilding, including the Pacific Women Mediators Network, the Southeast Asian Women Peace Mediators, and support for dialogue processes such as the Tuban Process in Timor-Leste.

Through partnerships with UN Women, Australia supports ASEAN member states to develop and implement their own WPS NAPs, contributing to milestones such as Vietnam and Timor Leste's first NAPs and the Philippines' fourth.

Practical conflict prevention initiatives – such as Mindanao's Bae mediators and early warning systems – have reduced local tensions and strengthened peace processes, while contributions to the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund have supported 188 grants to 293 organisations and provided protection and livelihoods to women human rights defenders across 22 crisis affected countries.

Australia also embeds WPS priorities in regional security frameworks, including through the Pacific Islands Forum's Boe Declaration, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration, complemented by capacity building through the Pacific Security College.

Australia advances survivor-centred responses to CRSV through targeted sanctions, leadership in the International Alliance on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, and support for the Gender Justice Practitioners Hub. These actions strengthen legal frameworks, improve survivor support, and catalyse regional networks to prevent and respond to CRSV – reinforcing inclusive peacebuilding and atrocity prevention.

These initiatives ensure responses to conflict and crisis are inclusive, effective, and aligned with democratic values – delivering both security and equality.

Collectively, Australia's WPS initiatives reduce fragility, counter drivers of violent extremism, and enhance resilience to climate, cyber and hybrid threats – positioning Australia as a global leader in advancing WPS principles and contributing to a stable and secure Indo-Pacific.



## Investing in Women and Inclusive Growth

Investing in women is central to Australia's national interest – driving regional stability, economic resilience and new market opportunities.

Australia supports gender equality in business and finance across Southeast Asia through targeted partnerships that expand financial inclusion, entrepreneurship and job creation.

### Investing in Women

The flagship Investing in Women initiative works with over 188 companies representing more than 1.1 million employees across Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Myanmar. It promotes workplace gender equality through inclusive human resources practices, accountability systems and employer supported childcare, helping address unpaid care barriers.

The program also advances gender lens investing to expand access to capital for women led enterprises, alongside country level initiatives such as more inclusive employment regulation in the Philippines, childcare and HR reforms in Indonesia, and professionalisation of elder care in Vietnam, showcasing how targeted investments unlock economic potential and foster resilience across the region.

### Australian Development Investments

Australian Development Investments (ADI) integrates gender analysis across its portfolio and operates a dedicated 'Investing in Women' window. This has enabled more than one million women microentrepreneurs to access finance, grow businesses and strengthen household resilience.

ADI supported companies have sustained 22,819 jobs (41 per cent held by women) and created 610 green jobs (38 per cent held by women), with 77 per cent meeting 2X Challenge Criteria in 2024, demonstrating a strong commitment to advancing gender equality in leadership, employment, and entrepreneurship. Persistent gaps remain – only 33 per cent of portfolio companies have gender balanced boards and 3 per cent have gender-inclusive sourcing – highlighting priorities for future support.

### Women's World Banking

The \$19.9 million partnership with Women's World Banking (2016–2028) is expanding access to savings, credit, micro-insurance, and secure digital financial products – building women's financial security and resilience.

Women's World Banking has surpassed its 2027 target to reach 100 million women globally.

### UN Women Gender Action Lab

The UN Women Gender Action Lab (\$7.1 million, 2024–2028) is driving innovative partnerships to create inclusive workplaces, employer-supported care services, and opportunities in climate tech and the blue and green economies.

Labs in Malaysia and Indonesia have generated strong engagement around family friendly workplaces, with most companies in the Labs actively piloting and advancing substantive actions.



### The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Program

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Program enhances Australia's workforce while delivering economic benefits to Pacific communities through remittances and skills transfer.

PALM incorporates gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) and climate strategies to ensure women and people with disabilities can participate fully, and includes a dedicated SGBV prevention and response framework to safeguard worker welfare and maximise economic gains.

### Other DFAT Women's Economic Empowerment Investments

Across DFAT's broader women's economic empowerment portfolio, targeted investments continue to deliver measurable results.

The Vanuatu Skills Partnership has enabled women to enter male-dominated trades. In Sri Lanka, the Market Development Facility supported Star Mushrooms to expand from 36 to 220 suppliers (80 per cent women), lifting revenue by 200 per cent. In Indonesia, the Impact Investment Exchange's Orange Capital Facility has increased yields by 29 per cent and incomes by 25 per cent for women farmers.

In South Asia, nearly 1,800 women have received Australia Awards scholarships since 2007, while programs in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh support climate-resilient livelihoods, women's leadership, vocational training and microfinance.

## **Leadership and Political Participation**

Women's leadership and political participation are vital to Australia's national interest, strengthening governance, reducing instability and building resilient communities across the region.

### Pacific Women Lead

Pacific Women Lead, Australia's flagship \$170 million investment (2021–26), builds on a decade of work to advance women's leadership, safety and economic participation. Delivered through the Pacific Community, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, women-led civil society organisations and UN agencies, it applies a Pacific-led, intersectional approach across humanitarian response, climate adaptation and economic development.

Its flexible funding enables rapid support during climate-related disasters, while long-term investments promote women's leadership and equitable access to resources – reinforcing inclusive governance and regional stability.

Australia also funds the Balance of Power program (2021–26, \$11.6 million) in Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu to increase women's participation in decision-making and shift gender norms that constrain leadership.

### Australia Awards

Through the Australia Awards, DFAT supports women's leadership and economic empowerment across the Indo-Pacific. Scholarships and skills development enable women to participate fully in public life and economic activity – key drivers of stability and inclusive growth.



The Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing Initiative further builds leadership pathways for Pacific women scholars, ensuring Australia's development investments deliver sustained gains in gender-responsive governance and regional resilience.

## Trade

Embedding gender equality in trade is essential to a more inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific – expanding market access, driving economic growth and reinforcing regional stability. Australia advances this through gender-inclusive trade rules and a suite of targeted programs that support women and women-led businesses to participate fully in regional and global markets.

### The Regional Trade for Development program

The Regional Trade for Development program (\$53.3 million) places gender equality at the centre of trade initiatives by helping women, and women-led enterprises access markets and benefit from regional growth.

The Trade and Gender Equality Incubator (\$5 million) complements this work by piloting innovative approaches to integrate gender considerations into trade policy and implementation.

### Free trade agreements

Australia embeds gender equality in its Free-Trade-Agreements (FTAs). The Australia–United Kingdom FTA – Australia's first with a dedicated gender chapter – supports cooperation to help women led businesses access markets, technology, finance and leadership networks.

The upgraded ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand FTA strengthens cooperation on women's economic empowerment, and the Australia–United Arab Emirates Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement includes commitments to advance women's participation in trade and investment.

As 2025 Chair of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, Australia prioritised inclusive trade, agreeing to develop new cooperative provisions on women's economic empowerment and gender mainstreaming. Australia also advances global consensus through the Inclusive Trade Action Group and the Global Trade and Gender Arrangement.

### Other DFAT trade investments

Programs such as the Better Work initiative have improved labour standards and economic security for women in garment sectors across Asia, creating safer workplaces and pathways to leadership.

Digital inclusion is supported through UNCTAD's eTrade for Women, which equips women entrepreneurs with the skills and networks needed to thrive in the digital economy.

In agriculture, the Standards and Trade Development Facility ensures women benefit from climate sensitive- trade capacity building and compliance with international standards, strengthening diversification and resilience of supply chains.



To advance financial inclusion for women entrepreneurs in Asia and the Pacific, Australia is working with the Asian Development Bank's Trade and Supply Chain Finance Program to enhance enabling access to credit and capital for business growth.

Australia's Funds-in-Trust partnership with the World Intellectual Property Organization has also mentored and trained Pacific women entrepreneurs, including from Indigenous and local communities, to make effective use of intellectual property in their businesses.

Collectively, these programs enhance women's economic participation, improve incomes and build resilience – delivering tangible benefits for regional stability and reinforcing Australia's national security interests. By embedding gender equality in trade policy work and related development programs, Australia is shaping a more inclusive, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific.

## **Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence**

Ending SGBV is essential to building safe, inclusive and resilient societies – strengthening human security, promoting stability, and enabling sustainable development across the region. Australia is driving regional and global efforts to prevent and respond to SGBV through targeted partnerships and evidence-based programs.

The Southeast Asia Gender-based Violence (GBV) Prevention Platform (\$20 million, 2024–29) and the UN Joint Programme on GBV Prevention in Southeast Asia (US\$5 million) work with governments, regional bodies and civil society to advance GBV prevention through evidence-based advocacy, policy reform and programming. These initiatives have already strengthened coordination and built prevention capability across the region.

Through the UN Joint Programme on Essential Services (ESP) – implemented across more than 90 countries by UN Women and 110 countries by UNFPA – survivors now have improved access to health, justice and psychosocial support services. The Empowered and Equal Futures for Girls in Southeast Asia program (\$7.04 million, 2024–29) further contributes to long-term prevention by transforming education systems to make schools safer and more gender-equitable. Governments across the region are adopting the program's gender-transformative diagnostic tool to strengthen policies, shift social norms and improve girls' education and employment outcomes.

## **Health, including Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)**

Australia's health investments advance gender equality as a core priority. Advancing health, including SRHR, is critical to building resilient, inclusive societies – strengthening stability, improving societal wellbeing, enhancing economies, and safeguarding democratic values across the Indo-Pacific.

Programs such as Towards Universal SRHR in the Indo-Pacific Program (TUSIP) delivered 1.5 million SRH services to over 310,000 clients in the first six months of implementation, supporting improved health and economic outcomes.

Partnerships with WHO, UNFPA, Gavi, and SPC strengthen health systems and advance health equity, with Gavi estimated to have vaccinated 279 million children and generated over US\$60 billion in economic benefits between 2021 and 2025 – work that is underpinned by Gavi's Gender Policy.



These investments not only improve health outcomes – they underpin peace, stability, and resilience in the Indo-Pacific by addressing gender-based vulnerabilities and reinforcing democratic norms against anti-rights actors.

## Cyber Security and Digital Inclusion

Embedding gender equality in cyber security and digital governance is essential to shaping a safe, inclusive and resilient digital future – strengthening regional stability, driving innovation, and ensuring diverse voices influence global norms that support Australia's security, competitiveness and leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

Through the Southeast Asia and Pacific Cyber Program, Australia mainstreams gender equality in cyber diplomacy and supports targeted initiatives including the WiC and the Pacific Women in Cyber Internship Framework.

Since 2020, WiC has supported more than 120 women from 55 countries – including participants from 13 Pacific and Southeast Asian countries sponsored by Australia – to engage in UN Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) negotiations and related training, building technical expertise and shaping global cyber governance.

At OEWG's final session in July 2025, women delivered 54 per cent of substantive interventions, including 17 from Australian funded Fellows, up from 37 per cent in 2021.

The Pacific Women in Cyber Internship Framework will provide a standardised, culturally tailored model to help organisations and government agencies recruit and support women entering cyber security careers.

## Disarmament and Arms Control

Advancing gender equality in disarmament and arms control strengthens Australia's national security by reducing conflict and SGBV risks, reinforcing international norms and expanding the technical expertise needed for nuclear safety and strategic stability.

Australia mainstreams gender across major arms control treaties – including the ATT, Convention on Cluster Munitions, Chemical Weapons Convention and Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. Under ATT Article 7(4), arms export decisions must assess SGBV risk, and Australia's leadership has helped maintain gender provisions in UN resolutions and increase women's participation in disarmament delegations and expert groups.

Australia also supports global nuclear security capability through the International Atomic Energy Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship Programme and Leadership and Management for Performance, which has supported 61 women fellows, including Pacific Island nationals, to build technical and leadership skills in nuclear science and security.

## Climate Action

Integrating gender equality into climate action reduces vulnerability, strengthens resilience and supports inclusive economic growth – building stability and partnerships vital to Australia's security and prosperity in a climate-affected Indo-Pacific. Australia treats gender equality as a resilience imperative, recognising that climate impacts disproportionately affect women and girls.



Through programs such as Climate Resilient Communities, Australia increases climate investments, embeds gender in disaster risk reduction and supports inclusive resilience programming, including research on the gender–climate nexus, practical guidance through the Outcomes at the Nexus handbook, and participation of women and people with disabilities in adaptation and recovery.

Partnerships with Pacific-led and locally driven organisations ensure context-specific and sustainable responses, while climate finance prioritises women-led solutions linked to green and blue economy opportunities. By mainstreaming gender equality across climate strategies, Australia strengthens social resilience, reduces SGBV risks during crises, and reinforces regional security amid escalating climate impacts.

## Humanitarian Action

Integrating gender equality into humanitarian action promotes stability, reduces drivers of conflict and displacement, and reinforces Australia’s reputation as a principled partner delivering inclusive, resilient responses across the Indo-Pacific. Australia’s humanitarian policy and partnerships prioritise preventing SGBV, protecting women and girls, and supporting women-led solutions throughout crisis response.

Examples include the Bangladesh Rohingya and Host Community Humanitarian Program, which strengthens SGBV prevention, SRH services and inclusive leadership. In Afghanistan, humanitarian assistance is focused on supporting women and girls and protecting dignity and rights. In Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh and Indonesia, grants are provided to refugee women-led organisations.

Australia also provides multi-year funding to the International Planned Parenthood Federation’s SRH in Crisis and Post-Crisis Situations program, delivering lifesaving SRH and SGBV services across Asia and the Pacific. Australia co-leads the Global Refugee Forum pledge on gender equality and SGBV protection.

Through its partnership with Women’s Fund Asia, Australia has funded 11 groups led by refugee women, trans, and intersex people in South and East Asia to strengthen leadership, prevent and respond to SGBV, and address exclusion from humanitarian and emergency systems in displaced communities.

## Social Protection: Building Resilience, Equality, and Security

Strong, inclusive social protection systems reduce poverty and inequality, strengthen resilience to economic and climate shocks, and advance gender equality, disability inclusion and human security – key foundations for national security.

By enabling women’s economic participation, reducing unpaid care burdens, improving health and education outcomes and lowering SGBV risks, social protection underpins stable, effective states and contributes to regional security.



Australia supports inclusive social protection across the Indo-Pacific, helping countries including Indonesia, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Fiji and Sri Lanka strengthen national policies and delivery systems. This work expands coverage for marginalised groups – including women and people with disabilities – promotes universal lifecycle approaches, and integrates social protection into climate and multi-hazard responses. Partnerships with UNICEF provide technical assistance, regional analysis and programs that support resilience, SGBV prevention, the care economy and income security for ageing populations.

Impact is tangible: in Indonesia, more than 14,000 marginalised people have gained access to health insurance and cash assistance; Cambodia's health equity fund now supports 4.82 million people, improving maternal health; in Bangladesh, the Social Security Policy Support Program is strengthening national systems with next-generation, climate-resilient frameworks; and in Sri Lanka, governance reforms are improving the reach of social assistance. In Kiribati, investments have reduced poverty from 21.9 per cent (2019–20) to 5.5 per cent (2023–24), with women comprising 51 per cent of unemployment benefit recipients and 59 per cent of old-age pension recipients in 2025.

These measures strengthen women's economic security, value unpaid care and improve outcomes for people with disabilities, consistent with Australia's Disability Equity and Rights Strategy.

## ASEAN

Australia's ASEAN development programs embed gender equality across the Political-Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural pillars through targeted investments and mainstreaming efforts.

The TRIANGLE in ASEAN program (\$24 million, 2015–25; \$15 million, 2026–30) advances gender transformative labour migration systems and supported Thailand's 2024 regulation granting domestic workers rights to minimum wage, maternity leave and protection against dismissal due to pregnancy – improving conditions for thousands of migrant women. ASEAN-ACT (\$80 million, 2018–28) integrates GEDSI into antitrafficking frameworks, leading to GEDSI approaches being included for the first time in national action plans on trafficking in Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, and supporting the release of the ASEAN Guidelines for Addressing Child and Forced Marriage (2025).

The ASEAN Political-Security Partnership (\$10.5 million, 2019–25) promotes women's leadership in security sectors, including research on women in military leadership and strengthening WPS commitments highlighted at the 3rd ASEAN Women Leaders' Summit (2024). Across Aus4ASEAN Futures, 80 per cent of projects (19 of 24) mainstreamed gender equality in the 2024–25 financial year.

Collectively, these efforts strengthen inclusive governance, enhance victim protection, expand women's economic and leadership opportunities and drive policy reforms – reinforcing regional stability and resilience.

## Locally Led Leadership: Driving Inclusive Resilience and Response

Investing in locally led leadership strengthens inclusive governance, reduces reliance on external assistance and delivers lasting, context specific solutions – reinforcing stability and resilience across the Indo-Pacific.



Australia partners with civil society and community driven initiatives such as Pacific Women Lead, Balance of Power, and the Southeast Asia GBV Prevention Platform, which empower women's rights organisations and grassroots movements to lead peacebuilding, climate adaptation and humanitarian response efforts.

#### Accelerate–Investment–In-Women’s-Rights Partnership

The Accelerate–Investment–In-Women’s-Rights (AIR) Partnership builds resilience by funding locally led women’s rights organisations to integrate gender equality into crisis and climate responses.

Through rapid, flexible grants, AIR mobilised US\$30,000 within days of the 2024 Vanuatu earthquake and delivered 14 grants worth US\$139,000 following the 2025 Myanmar earthquake.

AIR also supports climate initiatives, empowering Indigenous women in the Philippines and enabling Fijian women to lead disaster preparedness and sustainable practices.

#### RiseUp! Program

The RiseUp! program fosters young women’s leadership in fragile contexts.

In Myanmar, it has engaged over 300 women aged 18–30, including women with disabilities and single mothers, building skills in leadership, rights advocacy, mental health, climate action and economic empowerment.

Participants now lead community initiatives on SGBV and SRHR, strengthening social resilience.

### **Countering Modern Slavery, People Smuggling and Transnational Crime**

Embedding gender into efforts to combat modern slavery, people smuggling and transnational crime reduces security threats, protects people in vulnerable situations and reinforces regional stability – while safeguarding Australia’s borders and economic resilience. In 2022, 61 per cent of trafficking victims globally were women and girls (UNODC, 2024).

Australia’s approach recognises the link between gender inequality, exploitation and security outcomes. Through initiatives such as the Bali Process’ Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation, the ASEAN–Australia Counter Trafficking Program, and gender-focused policy guides, Australia integrates gender into prevention, victim identification and reintegration efforts.

Programs including TRIANGLE in ASEAN and Better Work improve labour conditions for women, reducing risks of exploitation and forced labour. Research partnerships – such as studies on women’s experiences of forced criminality in Southeast Asia’s scam centres – inform targeted, gender-responsive policies. By addressing gender inequality as a driver of trafficking and smuggling, Australia strengthens resilience, economic security and regional stability.



## COUNTRY-SPECIFIC CASE STUDIES

### Afghanistan

Afghanistan has experienced a severe reversal of gender equality since 2021, with women excluded from public life and denied access to education and employment. This erosion of human rights correlates with insecurity, economic collapse and regional instability.

Australia has responded with over \$267.2 million in humanitarian assistance (2021–25), prioritising SGBV prevention, psychosocial support, and SRH services for women and girls. Additional funding of \$113.4 million to the **World Food Programme** includes \$18.4 million in 2024-25 to support food and nutrition for vulnerable groups, including pregnant and lactating women.

These interventions maintain access to life-saving care despite Taliban restrictions, reducing vulnerability to exploitation and mitigating health crises – critical for community resilience and regional stability. For Australia, these efforts help prevent displacement pressures, strengthen regional security, and reinforce its reputation as a leader in rights-based humanitarian action.

### Bangladesh

The **Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee Skills Training for Advancing Resources** program supports disadvantaged youth, especially girls aged 14–18, with vocational training and job placement. This has improved employment and incomes for young women, reducing vulnerability to trafficking and supporting Bangladesh's transition to middle-income status – important for regional economic resilience and Australia's trade interests.

### Bhutan

Australia's support through the **South Asia Regional Infrastructure Connectivity Training and Networking Services program** has prioritised women's participation in technical training. Bhutanese professionals have leveraged these opportunities to secure leadership roles in the energy sector, boosting confidence and earning potential. These outcomes strengthen economic resilience and inclusive growth in Bhutan.

### Cambodia

Australia's support includes **Cambodia Australia Partnership for Resilient Economic Development**, which helped **33 women entrepreneurs**, created **eight jobs** and mobilised **\$3.6 million** in investment; **Better Work's Gender Equality and Returns** which trained **90 women** for factory supervisory roles; and **ACCESS2**, which assisted **906 SGBV survivors**. Australia also strengthens gender inclusion in customs, law enforcement and WPS implementation – reinforcing governance and stability.



## Federated States of Micronesia

Australia supported the establishment of **APIMAR Safenet**, a referral system connecting a range of service providers, including the police, Attorney General's office and Chuuk Women's Council's. The system enables the police and Attorney General's office to refer women and children experiencing violence to support services, including counselling and advocacy.

## Fiji

Australia provides longstanding support to the **Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM)**, an organisation that provides training to Pacific governments, institutions, agencies, private sector and organisations to support gender analysis and advocacy. As a result of this initial training, Fiji's Ministry of Civil Service requested follow-up support to develop a gender sensitisation training toolkit for the Ministry of Civil Service and capacity building for a cadre of government trainers to be deployed to train other government ministries and departments.

Feedback from Ministry of Civil Service trainers has highlighted increased confidence to provide the training to other parts of government. Subsequently, the Ministry of Civil Service requested FWRM to develop and deliver training to promote a more inclusive and safer workplace, ensuring all civil servants are treated with respect, dignity, and fairness.

## India

In India, Australia supports initiatives that promote inclusive governance and economic empowerment. **The Priya Village Roadshow Network for Enablement and Social Transformation (PVR Nest)** expands 'Pink Centres' under the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, offering safe sanitation facilities, menstrual health products, and vocational training. These centres enable vulnerable women to access income-generating opportunities, reducing economic exclusion and strengthening resilience.

Australia's engagement aligns with India's Women's Reservation Bill (2024), which reserves parliamentary seats for women – an opportunity to deepen partnerships on inclusive governance and democratic stability, reinforcing Australia's strategic interests in South Asia.

## Indonesia

Australia supports the **Australia Indonesia Partnership for Justice 2 (AIPJ2)**, which has integrated gender perspectives into **Law No. 5/2018 on counterterrorism** and subnational action plans in Banten and East Java. These reforms now inform national counterterrorism strategies, improving community trust and reducing radicalisation risks. Under the **SIAP SIAGA disaster risk management program**, women are actively participating in community-based simulations from national to village levels, increasing disaster risk awareness and strengthening local disaster reduction capacities.



Economic empowerment is advanced through the **Australia Indonesia Partnership for Economic Development (Prospera)**, which embeds gender equality in economic policymaking by addressing structural barriers to women's labour force participation. This has strengthened national planning, promoted evidence-based and consultative policy processes, and positioned women's economic participation as central to productivity and inclusive growth.

The **Australia–Indonesia Partnership Towards an Inclusive Society (INKLUSI)** also supports gender equality, disability rights and social inclusion. INKLUSI partners have assisted **1,848 victim-survivors of violence** – including **525 children** and **42 people with disability** – to access counselling, shelter, medical support and legal assistance.

## Kiribati

Australia supports the **Women and Children Support Centre**, assisting **60+ new cases per month** with counselling, legal support and safe accommodation, including through a Survivor Support Fund for essential needs, including food, hygiene products, and transport, which plays a vital role in ensuring access for women and girls.

## Laos

Australia helped create Laos' first **Gender Statistics Division** and doubled gender-relevant Sustainable Development Goal indicators from **37.7 per cent (2020)** to **56.1 per cent (2024)**. Support to the Ministry of Industry and Commerce is strengthening gender-inclusive trade policymaking and FTA implementation. These efforts, alongside advocacy and programs promoting women's leadership and inclusion of vulnerable groups, have transformed Laos' ability to deliver evidence-based, inclusive development policies.

## Malaysia

The **Australia-Malaysia Reform Program** (AMRP), supports economic growth, resilience and governance reform in Malaysia. AMRP's care economy reform work supports Malaysia's care delivery system by focusing on the professionalisation and standardisation of care services and strengthening support for informal care provision. In partnership with the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, Australia supported the development of the National Care Strategic Framework and Action Plan 2026–2030. The most significant achievement for the AMRP in the care economy policy reform to date is the integration of the care economy agenda into the 13th Malaysia Plan (2026–2030), the country's five-year national development blueprint passed by Parliament in 2025.

Australia also supported the New Frontiers in the Care Economy Conference, a platform for dialogue to transform and shape sustainable, inclusive, responsive, and equitable care models for Malaysia and the broader region. It convened policymakers, experts, and partners from across ASEAN and Australia.

## Maldives

Australia focuses on strengthening Maldivian civil society organisations and community groups to advance gender equality and social cohesion. These efforts aim to counter religiously motivated violent extremism, which threatens to exclude women from public life. By promoting inclusive governance and resilience, Australia helps mitigate security risks in a strategically significant maritime region.



## Marshall Islands

Under UNFPA's **Transformative Agenda for Women, Adolescents, and Youth in the Pacific**, the Marshall Islands became the first Pacific country to introduce Family Life Education as early as Grade 4 (ages 9–10), providing students with knowledge and skills on health, rights, gender equality, SRHR. As of **2024, 71 young people have participated**, engaging in education that promotes wellbeing and gender equality, and strengthens social resilience.

## Mekong Subregion (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam)

Australia's **Mekong–Australia Partnership (\$454 million, 2020–29)** embeds gender equality and economic resilience across climate, water security, transnational crime and leadership programs, including UN Women's WE RISE Together (\$9.97 million, 2025–29), which targets procurement systems where women currently access only 1 per cent of a US\$6.9 billion industry, driving reforms in Vietnam and Thailand to expand opportunities for women-owned SMEs. MAP also funds Mekong Elevate (\$10 million, 2024–29) to support ethnic minority women through climate-smart agriculture and local governance, and the Mekong Inclusion Project (\$10 million, 2025–29) to strengthen women's roles in water resource management. More than **400 women-led businesses have been trained**, and regional platforms such as the **Asia Women and River Congress** have boosted women's leadership in economic and environmental decision-making, collectively advancing inclusive development, expanding women's economic opportunities and reinforcing governance norms that support stability across the Mekong subregion.

## Micronesia

Micronesia was the first sub-region to call for a **Sub-Regional Gender Equality Framework** during the 25th Micronesian Islands Forum. The Micronesia Gender Equality Framework (2025–30) promotes meaningful participation, aligns with existing policies, and accelerates progress toward inclusive growth and sustainable development. By embedding gender equality in governance and decision-making, Micronesia strengthens social resilience and economic security, reinforcing regional stability and prosperity.

## Middle East – Lebanon, Jordan, Syria

Australia's partnerships in the Middle East provide lifesaving assistance and protections while strengthening economic security and social stability in crisis contexts. Programs address SRHR, SGBV prevention, child protection and livelihoods, education, training and leadership. Implementing partners also are targeting livelihood and education opportunities for women and girls in vulnerable situations, reducing their reliance on emergency coping strategies.

## Mongolia

The **Women's Climate Resilience** program (\$2.7 million) has trained nearly 1,000 women entrepreneurs in clean energy and climate-aware business, strengthening economic security and climate resilience. These investments strengthen economic security and environmental sustainability, aligning with Australia's interests in regional stability and climate action.



## Myanmar

Australia integrates gender equality across all objectives of the **2024–2029 Development Partnership Plan**, supporting SGBV and SRHR services, women's leadership, and CRSV response in conflict settings. Locally led organisations drive community-based resilience and inclusive recovery.

## Nepal

Through the **Subnational Governance Program** (\$27 million, 2022–27), Australia has supported community mediation and judicial committees that now include approximately 50 per cent women mediators. This inclusive approach improves dispute resolution, reduces court backlogs and builds trust in governance.

## Pacific Regional

In 2025, Australia supported **the first Pacific CEDAW Technical Cooperation Session**, enabling 13 states parties and 39 CSOs to engage directly with the CEDAW Committee. The session strengthened understanding of Pacific realities and prompted the Committee to explore streamlined reporting for small island states.

The CEDAW session was uniformly praised as a highly motivating and galvanising event, with productive exchanges held between the presenting countries and the CEDAW Committee. Reflecting on the success, impact and depth of engagement, the CEDAW Committee committed to exploring opportunities for further convenings in the Pacific and noting the capacity constraints and context for Pacific governments, the committee will consider streamlined reporting.

## Papua New Guinea

Australia's partnership with Papua New Guinea (PNG) embeds gender equality across security, governance, and development programs to build resilience and stability. Under the Australia – PNG Development Partnership Plan (2024–29), Australia supports initiatives that address SGBV, promote women's leadership, and integrate gender perspectives in climate adaptation, conflict prevention, and digital safety. This includes commitments under the **Australia–PNG Bilateral Security Agreement** to strengthen cooperation on SGBV.

**PNG Women Lead** (\$55 million), inclusive education programs, and gender-sensitive policing and justice reforms are driving systemic change. The **Bougainville Peacebuilding Program and Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation** advances conflict resolution and engages men to prevent violence, while climate-resilient infrastructure and safe houses improve protection and access to justice. Innovative programs – such as the **Pacific Rugby League Partnership** and the entry of a PNG women's team into an Australian elite competition – challenge gender norms, promote leadership, and create economic opportunities beyond sport.

## Philippines – Mindanao

The **Peacebuilding in Conflict-Affected Mindanao 2 program** has increased women's participation in peacebuilding, governance, and economic recovery. The formation of the Bae Mediators – 30 women from Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Moro National Liberation Front has resolved four community conflicts, preventing escalation into violent clan disputes, and earned a UN Women Peace Award in 2025.



Oxfam's support enabled 26 women's organisations to be accredited in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) governance, while The Asia Foundation's Accelerate Program **upskilled 345 women entrepreneurs, tripling their monthly incomes** from PHP 5,000 to 15,000. Nonviolent Peaceforce's Early Warning Early Response system integrates women and youth into BARMM peace and security agendas, and support to the Bangsamoro Normalization Trust Fund has strengthened women's leadership and income stability – showing that peacebuilding reduces conflict risks while driving inclusive economic growth and governance.

## Sri Lanka

The **SheWorks initiative** (Governance for Growth, \$38 million) enabled 12,000 women to gain employment and increased maternity return rates from 61 per cent to 72 per cent, while strengthening workplace protections. This promotes workplace equality and economic recovery, supporting stability in a country critical to maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

## Solomon Islands

UNDP and partners (Solomon Islands National Provident Fund, ANZ Bank, and Telekom) trained **393 women** vendors in business skills; **317 women** accessed tailored financial products; and digital inclusion expanded through 300 SIM registrations. Thirty-five per cent of assessed vendors demonstrated improved financial self-reliance. Policy support through **Progressing Gender Equality in the Pacific II** helped five provinces endorse gender equality policies.

Five out of nine provinces have now endorsed gender equality policies, a positive indication of how gender equality has become a national development priority.

## Timor-Leste

Australia is advancing gender equality in Timor-Leste through a comprehensive approach that links security, governance and economic development. Key initiatives include the **Nabilan program**, which addresses SGBV in partnership with government and civil society, and the **Timor-Leste Police Development Program**, which trains police on SGBV response and supported the launch of the 2024–2028 Gender Strategy. The ADF's **Gender Peace and Security program** engages female members of the Timorese Armed Forces, while humanitarian programs integrate gender-sensitive disaster planning.

Australia also promotes inclusive governance through gender-responsive budgeting and supports rural women's economic empowerment via the Maubisse Declaration. Economic initiatives such as the **Market Development Facility, TOMAK and Female Founders programs** strengthen women-led businesses and participation in agriculture value chains. Health and education programs under the **Partnership for Human Development** improve maternal health, family planning, and female leadership in schools. These efforts aim to reduce SGBV, enhance women's economic security, and build resilience to emerging challenges, reinforcing national and economic security.



## Tonga

Through **Pacific Women Sports Administration Program**, Tonga Rugby introduced gender-balanced board quotas (two of seven seats), boosting participation, increasing women's leadership, and strengthening governance in women's sports. Expanded women's competitions have increased participation. Support to the **Women and Children Crisis Centre** strengthened police engagement, boosting survivor referrals and reviving a One-Stop Crisis Model. These efforts led to a significant increase in police referrals, signaling growing survivor confidence in the system

The Australian Government's **Pacific Women Sports Administration Program (PWSAP)** supports women sport leaders across the Pacific, aiming to boost participation, increase female leadership, and strengthen governance in women's sports. In Tonga, PWSAP supported the drafting of Tonga Rugby's new constitution. A key change in the constitution was the introduction of quotas to increase women's representation at all levels, including on the Board. At least 2 positions on the 7-member Board must now be held by women, with voting rights. Tonga launched a Women's U18 Sevens domestic competition in 2022, and Tonga's first women's fifteens competition, which led to a surge in grassroot recruitments for women plays and sponsorship.

## Tuvalu

Under the **Falepili Union (2023)**, Australia is supporting climate-driven mobility pathways. Through **Women's Environment and Development Organisation Women Delegates Fund**, Tuvaluan women have engaged in global climate negotiations, ensuring representation in decision-making on existential climate risks.

## Vanuatu

The \$10.4 million **Vanuatu Gender Equality Program** strengthens crisis response, leadership and violence prevention. It has expanded counselling and safe-housing, supported young women leaders, and funded national prevalence studies. Local chiefs increasingly refer survivors to services, demonstrating growing community accountability and strengthening social resilience.



## FUTURE DIRECTION: AUSTRALIA'S LEADERSHIP ON GENDER EQUALITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Indo-Pacific faces accelerating disruption – geopolitical competition, climate volatility, technological risks, and economic uncertainty. Gender equality is not peripheral; it is central to resilience. It strengthens governance, drives growth, and equips societies to withstand complex threats. Australia must hardwire gender equality into policy, finance, and capability through three priorities:

1. Stronger evidence and accountability
2. Locally led leadership
3. Integration in emerging domains.

### Evidence and Accountability

Mandate sex and gender-disaggregated data across peace, security, trade, climate, education, and health portfolios, aligned with WPS outcomes. A consolidated results dashboard and routine collection of sex and gender-disaggregated trade and enterprise data across government would improve transparency and inform policy.

### Locally led Leadership:

Expand flexible financing for women's rights organisations and youth movements in development partner countries through rapid grant mechanisms like the AIR Partnership. Scale proven models – such as Mindanao's Bae mediators – and embed survivor-centred services and SGBV prevention in humanitarian and climate responses.

### Integration across the Breadth of Australia's International Engagement:

Step up work to mainstream gender perspectives in cyber governance, artificial intelligence, disarmament, climate finance, health security, and trade. Continue initiatives like the Women in International Security and Cyberspace Fellowship, operationalise gender-sensitive risk assessments under the ATT, and prioritise women-led climate resilience linked to green and digital economy investments.

## CONCLUSION

Gender equality is a strategic imperative for Australia's security and prosperity. Countries that empower women are more stable, prosperous, and resilient. Embedding gender equality across policy, investment, and capability will amplify Australia's influence, strengthen regional stability, and unlock economic potential – ensuring a secure and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

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