



# **Department of Home Affairs Submission to the Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative**

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence  
and Trade (JSCFADT)

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The Department of Home Affairs ('Home Affairs') welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade ('JSCFADT') Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Imperative.

Home Affairs supports the Inquiry's proposed direction and recognises the ways national security challenges affect individuals differently. Considering gender equality in our policies and programs strengthens Australia's security and resilience. Home Affairs also acknowledges the role of government agencies in advancing gender equality and protecting the human rights of women and girls. Home Affairs is continuing to work to embed these principles in national security efforts, including through its role as an official implementing partner of the Australian Government's *2021–31 Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan* ('the NAP').

National security challenges such as violent extremism, terrorism, cyber threats, climate-related risks, and humanitarian crises, affect people of different genders differently, particularly due to entrenched norms and systemic inequalities.

Home Affairs is Australia's primary domestic security department, with a portfolio remit covering national security, border management, migration, and community resilience – all of which influence peace and security outcomes for women. Home Affairs agencies are often some of the first responders in crises that overwhelmingly affect women. By embedding gender equality into domestic security and migration frameworks, Home Affairs strengthens national and regional resilience and security outcomes while advancing gender equality outcomes.

## **Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan**

The NAP underpins Home Affairs commitment to embedding gender equality in domestic security frameworks and advancing four foundational outcomes:

- preventing conflict and sexual and gender-based violence in fragile and conflict-affected areas;
- promoting women's full and meaningful participation in peace and security decision-making;
- protecting human rights, including reducing sexual and gender-based violence; and
- meeting the needs of women and girls and reinforcing their agency in relief and recovery efforts.

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, established under UNSCR 1325, traditionally associated with defence and foreign policy, has a critical domestic security dimension where Home Affairs plays a pivotal role. The Department will publish the *2025–27 Home Affairs Women, Peace and Security Implementation Plan* in early 2026.

## **Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism**

Misogynistic views are a common thread in extremist ideologies, serving as both motivations for violence and pathways into broader networks. Australia's Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy 2025 highlights gender as a key factor in understanding and preventing violent extremism.

The Strategy commits to:

- improving data collection and reporting to analyse gender-based extremism and grievances targeting women and LGBTQ+ communities;
- incorporating gender considerations into countering violent extremism programs;
- launching the National Support and Intervention Program (NSIP), an ideology-agnostic disengagement program funded at \$85.9 million over three years from 2025–26; and
- expanding Step Together, a national service providing phone, chat and online support to help prevent radicalisation.

Home Affairs also partners internationally to strengthen rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children impacted by terrorism, including capacity-building activities in Indonesia.

## Online extremism and cyber security

In the cyber domain, women (especially female activists, journalists, politicians and leaders) are more likely to experience harassment and targeted attacks. The enablement of technology facilitated gender-based violence has increased exponentially, with one in three Australian women reporting encountering online abuse. Forms of gendered online abuse include hate speech, sexual harassment, technology-facilitated coercive control and gendered misinformation and disinformation. Gendered online abuse also often results in offline violence, including intimate partner violence and family and domestic violence.

Home Affairs addresses gender-based violent extremism online through partnerships with civil society, including Germany's Violence Prevention Network and the Christchurch Call Foundation. Initiatives include:

- a pilot referral mechanism for individuals vulnerable to extremist content online; and
- a 2025 policy forum on misogyny as a pathway to radicalisation, generating practical recommendations for prevention.

## Migration and Humanitarian

Displaced women and children face heightened vulnerability, including increased risk of gender-based violence. These cohorts are also disproportionately impacted by economic and social disruptions.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that women and girls make up around 50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced, or stateless population. Those who are unaccompanied, pregnant, heads of households, disabled or elderly are especially vulnerable.

Conflicts and situations of instability exacerbate pre-existing patterns of discrimination against women and girls, exposing them to heightened risk of violation of their human rights.

The Australian Government works closely with UNHCR to resettle vulnerable women and children in Australia each year under Australia's Humanitarian Program, which is administered by Home Affairs.

Home Affairs embeds gender equality in migration and humanitarian programs to strengthen resilience and economic security. Key initiatives include:

- Humanitarian Program and Women at Risk Visa: Australia maintains 20,000 places in 2025–26 and continues its dedicated visa category for women at risk of persecution. Since 1989, over 32,200 visas have been granted to vulnerable women and their dependants.
- Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program: Funds 103 providers nationally to deliver settlement services. The Women's Safety Package allocated \$26.1 million over three years to boost domestic and family violence support for refugee and migrant women.
- Skilled Migration Programs: Promote gender equality through objective points testing and policy updates, such as flexible work experience requirements to support women returning from maternity leave or with caring responsibilities.

## Cyber Security Workforce

Home Affairs is addressing a projected shortfall of up to 30,000 cyber security specialists to strengthen Australia's resilience against cyber threats. Increasing gender diversity is central to this effort, as women currently represent only 17–20 per cent of the cyber security workforce. Greater inclusion improves operational capability and sustainability.

The Department has highlighted this issue at key forums, including the Women in Cyber Summit and the Quad Cyber Challenge, and is collaborating with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to develop guidance for gender-inclusive recruitment. This framework will outline sector-specific challenges and actionable strategies to attract under-represented cohorts, such as women, and will be published by the end of 2025.

## Gender equality-informed policy development

Home Affairs embeds gender equality principles across policy design and implementation to ensure equitable outcomes and remove systemic barriers. This approach goes beyond individual programs and influences how migration, workforce, and security policies are developed and assessed.

The Department applies Gender Impact Assessments (GIA) to new policy proposals, providing decision-makers with clear insights into how initiatives may affect women and men differently. These assessments have informed a range of reforms, from protection policies for vulnerable women to settlement programs aligned with the Australian Government's Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality.

Recent examples include:

- Skills in Demand visa: Updated work experience requirements to support women returning from maternity leave or balancing caring responsibilities, ensuring part-time or casual work does not disadvantage applicants.
- National Innovation visa (NIV): Introduced a holistic assessment framework that recognises achievements beyond income, accounting for career breaks and other factors that disproportionately affect women.
- Through these measures, Home Affairs ensures that gender equality is not an afterthought but a core consideration in policy development, strengthening participation and resilience across Australia's security and migration systems.

## Gender Equality Action Plan 2021-2026

Home Affairs also embraces the Australian Government's commitment to gender equality through the *Home Affairs Gender Equality Action Plan 2021-2026* (GEAP), building on the department's existing diversity and inclusion framework and broader Australian Public Service *Gender Equality Strategy 2021-26*. The GEAP promotes active consideration of gender-based inclusion through leadership and people management processes – fostering a diverse and inclusive workforce, leading to enhanced decision-making and innovation.

Home Affairs strengthens resilience, advances gender equality, and supports global peace and security by embedding gender equality and broader WPS principles into domestic security and migration frameworks.

Through the implementation of the NAP and commitment to the GEAP and Inclusion Diversity and Equity (IDE) Strategy, we are seeing a growing level of gender equality across Home Affairs' workforce. There are, however, a number of more operational based roles, including those requiring use of force, where men still outnumber women. Home Affairs is looking at ways to address any perceived inequality in such areas, however these primarily appear to be a cultural choice rather than any form of governance bias.

## Departmental Leadership Principles

The Department is committed to gender equality, embedding this principle across leadership, employment and people management guidelines and processes. Equal opportunities in leadership strengthen decision-making and accountability, creating a more representative and high-performing workforce.

Recent analysis of gender balance and leadership trends within the Department of Home Affairs reveals ongoing progress and persistent challenges across national security functions. The *2024 Gender Pay Gap (GPG) Deep Dive* found that while base salaries are now at parity (0% GPG), the overall GPG rises to 7.2% in favour of men when shift penalties, allowances, and overtime are included. This gap is most pronounced in roles dominated by physical work and operational areas such as Marine Command, Regional Operations, and Border Enforcement, where men are overrepresented and receive a higher proportion of penalty payments and hardship allowances.

Despite these disparities in remuneration, women now comprise 53% of the total workforce and have achieved higher promotion rates than men across most pay scale groups, including at the Executive Levels, at 63% in the 2024 calendar year. In leadership, it is notable that our governing body consists of 62% women and we continue to work towards supporting women in accessing leadership opportunities.

## Gender Impact Assessments in Policy Development

As part of the Australian Government's commitment to gender equality, Home Affairs integrates Gender Impact Assessments (GIA) into policy development. These assessments provide decision makers with a clear and transparent understanding of the gendered impact of policy proposals. A range of recent policy development activities demonstrate the integration of GIA, including:

- protection policies for vulnerable women where consideration was given to gender equality;
- policies designed to support refugee integration and settlement that were closely aligned with the Australian Government's *Working for Women, A Strategy for Gender Equality* ('the Strategy for Gender Equality');
- policies developed to support border related services and considerations that were given to the GEAP and the Strategy for Gender Equality; and
- policies developed to strengthen community bushfire preparedness that considered the disproportionate financial impact of bushfires on women.

## Opportunities

Home Affairs is committed to exploring opportunities to further embed gender equality as a national security priority across Australia's domestic security framework and integrating gender considerations into policies and programs, delivering more inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable security outcomes.

Home Affairs will continue to support broader whole-of-government efforts to cooperate and use all available tools to further embed gender security as a national security imperative, including through:

1. considering gender equality across risk assessment and policy planning;
2. strengthening gender-sensitive strategies to address women's roles and gendered drivers of extremism;
3. building institutional capacity through gender competency training and inclusive leadership;
4. enhancing community engagement by partnering with women's organizations and local stakeholders;
5. leveraging gender data for evidence-based policy and program evaluation;
6. integrating gender considerations into migration policy to support economic development and prosperity; and
7. removing or reducing barriers by promoting gender equality settings in safety, anti-discrimination, and child-care access to encourage higher female participation and utilisation in the broader labour market.

Noting the critical importance of embedding gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative, Home Affairs welcomes the scope of the JSCFADT's Inquiry and awaits its findings and subsequent recommendations.