



Centre for
Contemporary
Histories



Hon Shayne Neumann MP
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Mr Neumann,

Re: New inquiry into gender inequality as a national security and economic security imperative

It is reassuring to see that DFAT that the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda is being revisited as a national security priority. In response to Point 5: it is important that the Committee reflect on how past national security initiatives have inadvertently fostered gender inequality and gender-based violence, at home and abroad. Recognising Australia's historical contributions to gender inequality and violence can help us avoid these harms in the future.

For example, Australia was an enthusiastic participant in the 'Coalition of the Willing' in the US-led war and occupation of Iraq. As has occurred in many other places, Iraqi women experienced a gender 'backlash' in the aftermath of war as a result of the intense association between aggression, militarism, and masculinity that occurs in conflict settings: by 2005, 'the level of everyday experienced violence is even greater now than during the period of formal military intervention'.ⁱ The war also undermined significant progress in women's liberation in Iraq: after experiencing increasing educational and employment opportunities throughout the latter half of the twentieth-century, UN sanctions in the 1990s, followed by the US-led invasion in 2003, decimated women's participation in public life.ⁱⁱ These were unintended consequences of the war, but they are still a largely unacknowledged cost of a war and occupation that Australia was party to.

The war also created the context for the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The policy of de-Ba'athification deliberately marginalised Sunnis in Iraq, while efforts at 'nation-building' fostered sectarianism by dispersing power along ethnic and religious lines. These decisions, implicitly condoned by Australia as a key participant, fuelled the creation of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which eventually evolved into ISIS, who in the 2010s seized territories across Iraq and Syria and imposed a strict fundamentalist vision of sharia law, including child and forced marriage, rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced sterilization.ⁱⁱⁱ In fostering ISIS, the war in Iraq further damaged national security by increasing the overall threat of terrorism exponentially around the world, including in Australia.^{iv}

Even where gender security is ostensibly a goal of war, there is the danger of treating gender equality as a 'tool, not a principle' of military endeavours.^v For example, 'Twenty-Eight Articles', a 2006 guide to

counterinsurgency that is still widely disseminated across US and allied militaries, recommends ‘co-opting neutral or friendly women...win the women, and you own the family unit. Own the family, and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population’.^{vi} Yet instrumentalising gender equality, rather than recognising it as a goal in and of itself, will undermine it. Under the occupation in Iraq, for instance, many women-led programs and organisations struggled to gain legitimacy because they were perceived to be part of a ‘Western plot’.^{vii} As Australian women involved in Afghanistan have acknowledged, ‘some of us are questioning our own part in Afghanistan’s recapture by the Taliban and whether our presence ultimately made the situation worse for women or girls, rather than better’.^{viii}

We must also consider the broader costs of militarism to women. Australia is presently planning to invest in five military bases in the Philippines, reflecting increased cooperation and strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific between the two countries. Historically, foreign military bases have become hubs for gender-based violence.^{ix} This history is particularly relevant in the Philippines, where sex trafficking, sexual abuse, and modern slavery are strongly linked to the historic and contemporary presence of US military forces. While US military bases in the Philippines were closed in 1992, in part because of their impact on local women and girls, exploitation has continued into the 21st century, both through the sex work industry responding to US soldiers in the Philippines under the ‘Visiting Forces’ arrangement, and through the trafficking of Filipina women to South Korean ‘juicy bars’ servicing US bases.^x These violations occur despite the US Code of Military Justice prohibiting serving members from soliciting sex work.^{xi} Australia must understand and work to mitigate the risk of gender-based violence on and around overseas bases, including by establishing and enforcing laws to hold its members to account.

From 2012, the ADF adopted Gender Advisors to respond the kinds of issues raised in the above paragraphs. Originated by NATO, Gender Advisors are specialists tasked with integrating gender perspectives into ‘all phases of a military operation or mission’.^{xii} Yet scholars who interviewed Gender Advisors found that they were often ‘appointed from junior ranks’, without experience or handover, and tended to be ‘under-resourced and excluded from decision-making’.^{xiii} These findings suggest that gender perspectives are not considered a priority and are devalued by the military – in fact, there is a widespread perception that being a Gender Advisor is ‘a setback to a military career’.^{xiv} Furthermore, despite a rhetorical shift toward emphasising Gender, Peace, and Security in the ADF, observers have highlighted that the actual responsibilities for the mandate have been reassigned to human resources, ‘distancing this work from operation spaces’.^{xv} Centring gender perspectives, and properly resourcing and rewarding those who undertake this work, is needed to properly implement the ADF’s Gender, Peace, and Security mandate.

Finally, to promote gender equality around the world, Australia must address issues of gender inequality within the institutions responsible for carrying out Australia’s national security. The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide found that over 50% of female serving members had experienced ‘unacceptable



behaviour' within the last 12 months. It also found that sexual violence was significantly unreported.^{xvi} These findings are not reflective of an institution that is equipped to foster gender equality in other parts of the world. It is paramount that all serving members are protected from gender-based violence, and that perpetrators are prohibited from serving, at home or abroad.

To establish a comprehensive approach to Women, Peace, and Security in the future, we must consider how past military and security endeavours have made women and girls less safe. It is crucial that Australia take a long view of any potential conflicts and security initiatives that it might join, and consider closely the likely outcomes and potential costs to civil society and future security.

Yours sincerely,

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ⁱ Nadjie Al-Ali, 'Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi women between dictatorship, war, sanctions and occupation', *Third World Quarterly* 26:4-5 (2005): 742.

ⁱⁱ Perri Campbell and Luke Howie, 'If you're a female, you risk being attacked: digital selves, warblogs and women's rights in post-invasion Iraq', *The Legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 War to the 'Islamic State'*, ed. Benjamin Isakhan (Edinburgh University Press, 2015): 138-151; Al-Ali, 'Reconstructing Gender', 746-751.

ⁱⁱⁱ Benjamin Isakhan, 'The Iraq Legacies and the Roots of the 'Islamic State'', *The Legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 War to the 'Islamic State'*, ed. Benjamin Isakhan (Edinburgh University Press, 2015): 223-235; United Nations in Iraq, 'Report on sexual violence against women and girls committed by ISIL in Iraq', December 2023, https://iraq.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/scgb_report_e-report_en.pdf.

^{iv} Mark Mazzetti, 'Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Worsens Terrorism Threat', *New York Times*, 24 September 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/24/world/middleeast/spy-agencies-say-iraq-war-worsens-terrorism-threat.html>.

^v Jennifer Wittwer and Katrina Lee-Koo, 'Australia treats gender equality as a foreign policy tool, not a principle', *The Interpreter*, 23 October 2005. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-treats-gender-equality-foreign-policy-tool-not-principle>

^{vi} David Kilcullen, 'Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency', *Military Review*, May 2006. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/COIN-Reader-1/Kilcullen-MJ-2006/>

^{vii} Al-Ali, 'Reconstructing Gender', 743. For discussion of how this affects gender relations in the occupied country, see Laleh Khalili, 'Gendered practices of counterinsurgency', *Review of International Studies* 37: 4 (2011): 1476-1478.



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^{viii} Deanne Gibbon, 'Winning the Peace: Profiles of Australian Gender Advisors on Military Operations', Australian Defence Force, 2021. <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/Winning-the-Peace-Profiles-of-Australian-Gender-Advisors-on-Military-Operations.pdf>

^{ix} Keith J. Allred, 'Human Trafficking: Breaking the Military Link', *Connections* 4:4 (2005): 64-67. In Australian history, the nearest example would be Vung Tau, a 'Rest and Relaxation' destination in Vietnam near to the Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat, which became a sex tourism destination during and after the war.

^x Jon Rabirot and Yoo Kyong Chang, 'USFK video links 'juicy bars' with human trafficking', *Stars and Stripes*, 20 December 2012, <https://archive.md/yko3R>; Anna Belle Hoots, 'Severing the Connection Between Sex Trafficking and U.S. Military Bases Overseas', *Fordham Law review*, 88:2 (2019): 733; Catherine Lutz, 'US Foreign Military Bases: The Edge and Essence of Empire', *Rethinking America: The Imperial Homeland in the 21st Century*, eds Jess Maskosky and Ida Susser (Routledge, 2015), 21.

^{xi} Christopher Brown, 'Quit Messing Around: Department of Defense Anti-Prostitution Policies Do Not Eliminate US-Made Trafficking Demand', *ILSA Journal of International & Comparative Law* 17:1, 9 (2010): 169-183. Soliciting sex work is prohibited under Article 13 of the US Code of Military Justice, but recent advice from the UCMJ for US soldiers describing the 'juicy girl trap' also indicates that these issues remain prevalent: Keith Scherer, 'Soju, Songtan, and the Juicy Girl Trap', *ICMJ Lawyers*, 14 November 2025, <https://ucmjlawyers.com/soju-songtan-and-the-juicy-girl-trap/>.

^{xii} Gibbon, 'Winning the Peace', 5.

^{xiii} Witter and Lee-Too, 'Australia treats gender equality as a foreign policy tool, not a principle'; Katrina Lee-Koo et al, "'We're too busy fighting a war to worry about gender' – the operational importance of Gender Advisors in the Armed Forces', *Australian Outlook*, 4 March 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/operational-importance-of-gender-advisors-armed-forces/>.

^{xiv} Eleanor Gordon and Katrina Lee-Koo, 'Military Gender Advisors, Organizational Change, and Transformational Opportunities: The Discrepancy between Policy and Practice', *International Studies Quarterly* 69:1 (2025): <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaf015>.

^{xv} Federica Caso and Susan Hutchinson, 'Australia's Progress on Women, Peace, and Security: A Critical Look at the Latest Report', *Australian Outlook*, 12 March 2025, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australias-progress-on-women-peace-and-security-a-critical-look-at-the-latest-report/>.

^{xvi} 'Volume 3: Military sexual violence, unacceptable behaviour, and military justice', Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, Australian Government, 2024, 139, 3.