

Gender Equality as a National Security, Economic Security, and Human Security Imperative

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative

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Introduction

Gender equality is not only a human rights objective and a core determinant of peace and economic resilience, but also a critical driver of population health and wellbeing. Gender inequality is strongly associated with conflict risk, fragility, forced displacement, and food insecurity (1). In the Indo-Pacific these interlinked dynamics are further amplified by climate change, disaster risk, demographic pressures, and protracted humanitarian crises – placing sustained strain on economic systems, social cohesion, and health security.

Australia has already articulated a robust policy foundation recognising gender equality as integral to peace, prosperity, and stability. This includes Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plan 2021–2031, Australia's Humanitarian Policy, and complementary commitments such as the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy (11, 12). Collectively, these frameworks work as strategic enablers of development effectiveness, regional stability and human security.

This inquiry provides an opportunity to consolidate and elevate gender equality as a national security, economic security, and human security imperative, strengthening whole-of-government coherence across foreign policy, development, defence, humanitarian action, economic diplomacy, and health security. In doing so, it can reinforce gender equality as a national lever that supports economic, systemic and societal resilience in Australia and across the Indo-Pacific.

Finally, at a time when internationally agreed norms, human rights commitments, and the rule of law are increasingly contested, advancing gender equality through Australia's foreign and security policy also serves a broader strategic function. It reinforces Australia's regional and global leadership, supports rules-based cooperation, and contributes to a more stable, prosperous, and secure region.

1. Gender equality, national security and economic security: the global evidence

Substantial global evidence shows that gender equality contributes to more peaceful, prosperous, and resilient societies:

- Countries with higher levels of gender inequality are more likely to experience violent conflict, political instability, and poor governance, while women's participation in decision-making is associated with more durable peace outcomes (1,2).
- Closing gender gaps in labour force participation, wages, and productivity can generate significant GDP gains over time, strengthening national and economic security (3,4).

- Gender equality improves household and community resilience to shocks, including inflation, disasters, and food insecurity, with direct implications for economic stability, social cohesion, and security (1,5,6,9).
- From a security perspective, gender equality functions as a risk-reduction and resilience-building factor, not merely a social policy goal (1,2).

This submission uses the language of gender equality in line with Australia's international legal and policy commitments. At the same time, it recognises that achieving gender equality in practice requires equity-based approaches that account for unequal starting points, intersecting vulnerabilities, and structural disadvantage, particularly in armed conflict- and crisis-affected settings.

2. Indo-Pacific relevance: stability, prosperity, and health security

These dynamics – namely the reinforcing links between gender inequality, conflict and fragility, economic exclusion, health system vulnerability, forced displacement, and food insecurity – are particularly salient in the Indo-Pacific, where many countries face intersecting pressures from climate change, disaster risk, conflict, displacement, and demographic change.

Economic prosperity and development

Women's economic participation is critical to addressing workforce supply and productivity, particularly in ageing or rapidly urbanising economies. In addition, given women's central roles in agriculture, food systems – including SMEs and household nutrition, gender equality is fundamental for food security at household and community levels.

Evidence shows that constraints on women's access to land, finance, education, and markets weaken economic growth and increase vulnerability to shocks, undermining long-term development and regional stability (7).

Health security

Gender inequality is a major driver of poor health outcomes, including higher maternal and neonatal mortality, increased exposure to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services, and disproportionate health impacts during crises and forced displacement (8).

Weak health outcomes erode human capital, strain health systems, and reduce a country's ability to withstand and recover from crises – making gender equality a health security imperative as well as a development priority.

3. The security implications of undermining gender equality

The erosion of gender equality, either through legal rollbacks, exclusion from decision-making, or increased violence, has clear national and international security consequences, particularly in contexts facing humanitarian crises or the compounding effects of climate change.

Climate change: gender inequality magnifies vulnerability to climate shocks, particularly for displaced populations and women with caring responsibilities, increasing risks of social fragmentation and insecurity.

Humanitarian crises: gender inequality exacerbates the impact of armed conflict and forced displacement and undermines recovery and resilience. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) increases sharply during conflict and displacement, reinforcing cycles of trauma, instability, and intergenerational harm. Despite legal recognition of violence against women and girls, the use and

occurrence of rape is described as an epidemic, and in some contexts, endemic. SGBV has severe adverse and long-lasting individual and societal impacts, both during and post-conflict.

Forced displacement: gender-blind responses contribute to unsafe migration pathways, heighten the risk of exploitation for women and marginalised groups, and weaken community resilience. These risks are compounded by structural injustices, particularly when families lack essential documents such as registration papers, marriage and birth certificates, or records required to access social protection. During flight, documents are often lost or left behind, and women are disproportionately affected when such documentation never existed in the first place. In situations of forced displacement, the absence of reliable documentation constraints how data and evidence can be generated and used, reinforcing the need for equitable, gender-responsive protection measures that reflect displacement realities (6).

Conflict, fragility, and statelessness further exacerbate the multiple and intersecting forms of violence experienced by women and girls. Humanitarian settings pose significant challenges to maternal and child health, including unsafe living conditions, limited access to healthcare, and restrictions on movement. The complexities of statelessness and forced displacement are also associated with higher prevalence of child marriage and increased incidence of early pregnancy and motherhood. Children born of sexual violence in conflict settings face cascading harms, not only from the circumstances of their conception but from legal and social systems that fail to recognise their rights, entrenching intergenerational gender inequality and long-term vulnerability.

Australia's Humanitarian Policy explicitly recognises that future crises will be more protracted and complex, requiring anticipatory and sustained approaches that address gendered risks as part of stability and prevention efforts (10). To operationalise this commitment, it should be reinforced through strengthened investment in and support for critical system enablers, including access to healthcare, protection of the social determinants of health, and accessible, gender-responsive reparative justice and legal systems.

4. Locally led leadership and the Women, Peace and Security agenda

Global and regional evidence consistently shows that locally led women's leadership improves peacebuilding, humanitarian outcomes, and accountability. Australia's WPS National Action Plan 2021–2031 provides a strong framework for policy-shaping and regional influence.

Civil society networks, particularly women's rights defenders and peacebuilders, have played a central role in advancing multi-track diplomacy and shaping regional approaches to peace and security in Asia. Initiatives such as Aman ki Asha, which brought together feminist activist networks across India and Pakistan, illustrate the strategic value of sustained, cross-border civil society engagement in building trust, generating context-specific knowledge, and informing policy debates.

While the locally led Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has benefited from increased global attention and dialogue, these debates continue to be shaped by structural biases linked to race, class, and geography. Even where connections between the global North and South have strengthened, power asymmetries continue to influence whose voices are heard and whose priorities shape policy agendas. This dynamic is evident across WPS processes, where international forums often set the terms of engagement, and women from the global South do not always have equitable access, visibility, or influence. More privileged or internationally visible actors – including some from the global South – are more likely to be included, while many grassroots women peacebuilders and rights defenders remain overlooked.

Evidence from research on gender equality, conflict prevention, and human security demonstrate that excluding diverse women's perspectives weaken security outcomes, as policies that fail to reflect local gender dynamics are less effective in preventing conflict, building trust, and supporting long-term stability. Addressing these gaps represents a critical opportunity to strengthen the WPS agenda, ensuring it is grounded in a wider, more representative range of lived experience and better equipped to deliver durable peace and security outcomes (1,2).

5. Australia as a Regional Leader in Financing Gender Equality in the Indo-Pacific

Recent U.S. funding cuts are significantly undermining efforts to advance gender equality, peace, and security across the Asia-Pacific region. There is growing evidence of the far-reaching consequences of the closure of USAID-supported programmes in critical areas such as HIV/AIDS response and prevention, disease outbreak preparedness and response, and the service delivery capacity of women-led and women's rights organisations (13). These disruptions have multiplier effects, exacerbating gender inequalities and weakening already-strained health, protection, and social systems.

Aid cuts have distinctly gendered effects, often disproportionately harming women and girls due to pre-existing structural barriers to accessing health and education, increased unpaid care burdens, and heightened exposure to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The erosion of women-led service provision and civil society capacity further undermines community resilience, social cohesion, and trust in institutions, with direct implications for stability and long-term security.

In this context, Australia has an opportunity to step up further by addressing emerging financing gaps in support of gender equality, in line with its foreign policy objective of being a credible, trusted, and reliable regional partner. Existing investments and programmes in Southeast Asia and the Pacific could be scaled up to help offset critical shortfalls, particularly by targeting organisations at high risk of closure and supporting the resumption of projects that were prematurely suspended.

The current uncertainty surrounding U.S. development assistance also presents a strategic opening for Australia to deepen collaboration with key multilateral and regional actors, including UN Women and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). At the same time, there is an urgent need to monitor and better understand the rapidly shifting aid and development landscape, including the role of other donors such as Japan, China, and New Zealand, to ensure coherence, avoid duplication, and maximise impact.

Finally, partnerships with academic institutions in Australia and the region could be expanded and resourced to generate timely, policy-relevant evidence on the immediate and longer-term contributions of gender-responsive financing to peace, economic resilience, and health security. Such evidence would strengthen accountability, inform adaptive programming, and support Australia's strategic positioning as a leader in gender-responsive development and security policy.

6. Recommendations

The Committee may wish to recommend that the Australian Government:

1. Integrate gender equality as a core national security and economic security consideration, including in risk assessment, conflict prevention, and regional engagement strategies.

2. Embed gender equality in economic diplomacy, including inclusive trade, women's workforce participation, and support to women-led enterprises in the Indo-Pacific, with targeted and flexible financing to sustain women-led and women's rights organisations in contexts affected by donor withdrawal.
3. Strengthen health security through gender-responsive and inclusive systems, including women and girls with disability, displaced populations, and other marginalised groups, particularly in humanitarian, climate-affected, and displacement settings, recognising gender inequality as a structural determinant of health.
4. Scale locally led women's leadership, with increased, flexible, and sustained support to women's rights organisations and peacebuilders – including those facing acute funding shocks due to shifting donor priorities – by advancing localisation efforts that move beyond consultation toward meaningful power-sharing, resourcing, and decision-making authority for local women's organisations, and by protecting and enabling women human rights defenders and peacebuilders, particularly in fragile and shrinking civic spaces. This should include deeper engagement with intersectional and intergenerational civil society networks, particularly grassroots actors in the global South, whose diversity and expertise make initiatives more contextually relevant and trusted.
5. Enhance the quality of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) implementation, including through training, advisory capacity, and outcome-focused monitoring across Defence, DFAT, and partner institutions, and by embedding gender equality and WPS principles across security cooperation and capability-building activities as core operational and strategic enablers, rather than standalone or ancillary initiatives. This should include deeper collaboration with multilateral and regional partners and strengthened partnerships with academic institutions to generate evidence on security, health, and resilience impacts.
6. Ensure intersectional and gender-responsive protection systems, including access to civil documentation and social protection throughout the displacement cycle, so that evidence, services, and legal recognition support equitable protection and recovery – including practical measures to facilitate access to documentation and protection for displaced women and their families, supported by gender-sensitive data practices that reflect displacement realities and inform equitable decision-making.

Advancing gender equality is not only a moral or legal obligation; it is a strategic investment in peace, prosperity, and population health. At a time of compounding regional insecurity, climate stress, and pressure on humanitarian and health systems, Australia has both the policy foundation and the regional credibility to lead. Treating gender equality as a core national interest—integrated across foreign policy, security, development, and health—will strengthen Australia's contribution to a more stable, resilient, and secure Indo-Pacific.

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