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

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

Submitted by: Humanitarian Advisory Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender equality is not only a values-based commitment; it is a strategic imperative for Australia's national security, economic resilience and regional leadership. When viewed through intersectional analysis, meaningful participation and locally led leadership, gender equality strengthens humanitarian effectiveness, improves civilian protection, reduces security risks across climate and digital domains, and delivers measurable economic gains.

To translate intent into impact, Australia needs to institutionalise intersectional practice across humanitarian action, invest in women's rights organisations through equitable and flexible partnerships, and drive coherence across the Women, Peace and Security agenda, protection of civilians, localisation commitments and cyber initiatives.

Embedding gender equality across Australia's statecraft in the Indo-Pacific delivers economic and security dividends, and aligns with DFAT's International Development Policy (2023) and its Performance and Delivery Framework (PADF). To translate intent into impact, Australia should:

  (i)   **institutionalise** intersectional practice in humanitarian action;
  (ii)   **resource** women's rights organisations (WROs) through equitable, multi-year partnerships; and
  (iii)   **drive** coherence between the Women, Peace & Security (WPS) agenda, Protection of Civilians (PoC), locally led development and localisation commitments, humanitarian and cybersecurity initiatives. These steps are consistent with DFAT's International Gender Equality Strategy (2025), Humanitarian Policy (2024), and the PADF's tiered indicators and country/regional Development Partnership Plans (DPPs).[1]

RESPONSE TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

1) Economic and national security benefits of realising gender equality, and how integration across foreign policy supports this objective

There is robust evidence that closing gender gaps increases productivity and growth, which in turn expands fiscal space for security and resilience investments. Industry-level studies find that sectors with higher female employment grow significantly faster in countries with lower gender inequality and OECD modelling similarly shows substantial potential gains in long-term growth from increasing women's labour force participation and reducing labour market gaps across advanced economies.[2] Foreign policy that integrates gender equality therefore supports economic security and stability in partner countries, including food systems and labour markets, by unlocking women's productivity and entrepreneurship, with macro-level effects on GDP and food security. Embedding gender equality in Australia's diplomacy, development and security cooperation aligns with the Second National Action Plan on WPS (2021–2031), which positions women's participation as central to peace, stability and recovery.[3]

Recommendation:

  1.   **Make gender equality an explicit approach** in how Australia responds to crises, builds resilience and strengthens peacebuilding efforts.

HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP

2. **Recognise the security threat that gender-inequality poses** and show global leadership in supporting women's rights and gender equality in the places where it is most difficult, like in Afghanistan.

2) Evidence linking gender equality to growth and prosperity, including in food security and labour markets

Evidence links gender equality to higher productivity, competitiveness, and inclusive growth. Closing gender gaps in agrifood systems alone could raise global GDP by ~1% (≈US$1 trillion) and reduce food insecurity by 45 million people. At the sector level, reducing gender inequality enables more efficient allocation of female labour, yielding higher value-added and labour productivity.[4] DFAT's program settings support this approach: the *International Gender Equality Strategy* elevates women's economic equality and inclusive trade; Australia has reinstated the target that 80% of all development investments will address gender equality and requires new investments ≥$3m to include gender objectives, an accountability lever that can be applied across portfolios.[5]

However, these gains depend on principled approaches that centre rights, participation and safety. Our joint research with UN Women on COVID-19 responses found that WROs played critical operational roles – mobilising at community level, filling service gaps, and providing technical advice, yet were underrepresented in strategic forums that set policy and budgets. When women and WROs are meaningfully included, responses are more targeted and efficient; when excluded, responses miss diverse needs, undermining equity and effectiveness.[6]

Recommendations:
3. **Fund WROs at the grassroots level** through already existing platforms with proven results such as Women's Fund Asia and the Pacific Feminist Fund. Partner with these WROs to track women's participation and empowerment, providing data to shape future programs.
4. **Require inclusion of WROs in policy dialogues** and sector working groups (health, food systems, labour), with budgeted participation support, ensuring that situational and structural barriers to women's safe and meaningful participation are identified and addressed.

3) International and national security implications of undermining gender equality, including in humanitarian crises and climate change

Undermining gender equality increases instability and weakens crisis response. Evidence demonstrates that gendered impacts of climate change, on displacement, livelihoods, and resource conflict, create feedback loops that exacerbate insecurity; integrating gender into climate-security approaches improves peace and resilience outcomes. Analyses of the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus show that persistent gender inequalities are themselves drivers of fragility; failure to address them reduces the effectiveness of humanitarian and peace efforts.[7]

In humanitarian operations, neglecting intersectional needs (e.g., disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age) leads to exclusion and risk amplification. Our Myanmar research highlights that needs analyses often default to age and sex only, missing intersecting factors that shape access and protection – especially in complex crises – thereby lowering aid effectiveness and potentially worsening tensions.[8] DFAT's *Humanitarian Policy* – with priorities on preparedness, response and system reform – endorses protection focused, inclusive, locally led action, creating a strong basis for embedding intersectional analysis across programming in the Indo-Pacific.[9]

Recommendations:
5. **Strengthen climate security programming** by incorporating intersectional gender perspectives and locally grounded qualitative evidence to illuminate how climate impacts intersect with social inequalities and shape peace and resilience outcomes.
6. **Strengthen humanitarian performance frameworks** to better reflect progress on inclusion and equitable, safe access for marginalised groups.

4) The role of locally led leadership and decision-making in advancing gender equality and the WPS agenda

Locally led leadership is essential to effective, legitimate and context-appropriate gender equality outcomes. Locally led leadership is central to DFAT's policy architecture. The *International Development Policy* commits to genuine

Submission by Humanitarian Advisory Group to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative (January 2026)

2

**HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP**

partnership, local leadership and a new civil society funding mechanism; DFAT's Locally Led Development guidance note provides practical direction for shifting power to local actors. The Grand Bargain localisation agenda reinforces direct, quality funding to local responders, including women-led groups and WROs.[10]

Our research during COVID-19 found WROs contributed uniquely to response and advocacy, but faced structural barriers to participation (security risks, logistics, lack of invitations/information). Removing these barriers—through funded participation, adapted meeting practices and two-way accountability—enables transformative leadership rather than tokenistic inclusion.[11]

Recommendations:

7. **Set portfolio-level targets** for "as-direct-as-possible" funding to WROs and local specialist organisations, with overheads and multi-year flexibility.
8. **Require implementers to report on partnership quality** (co-design, decision-making, budget transparency) and WRO satisfaction.

5) The Australian Government's efforts to advance gender equality and the human rights of women and girls across foreign policy, defence and national security

Australia's NAP on WPS sets clear outcomes and the first progress report outlines actions across departments, albeit released later than scheduled. Continued leadership is feasible but depends on resourcing, coherence, and timely reporting. Recent DFAT guidance on locally led development is a positive platform to advance WPS priorities with local partners, and to align with commitments in multilateral fora.[12] Embedding intersectional, locally led metrics, e.g., proportion of funding directly to WROs; participation and leadership outcomes in coordination for a, would deepen accountability for transformative change.

Recommendations:

9. **Link WPS progress reporting to performance systems** in the *International Development Policy*, including metrics for locally led and intersectional practice.
10. **Strategically link WPS and PoC efforts** by using the NAP and implementation plans to connect protection with post-conflict recovery and justice processes.
11. **Recognise and invest in community-led protection strategies** and everyday forms of political agency, especially those outside formal systems.

6) The WPS agenda internationally and Australia's role in promoting and implementing it

Australia can leverage its NAP and convening power to drive integration of WPS with protection, humanitarian and cybersecurity policy agendas. Global policy dialogues increasingly emphasise gender-responsive PoC and civilian harm mitigation; Australia can champion practical guidance and communities of practice that translate WPS commitments into operational tools.

Two recent reports from our organisation map critical intersections:

- **WPS × Protection of Civilians:** Integrating WPS strengthens PoC by ensuring threat analysis, planning and operations account for gendered patterns of harm (beyond CRSV), improving IHL compliance and mission effectiveness.[13]
- **WPS × Cybersecurity / Information Integrity:** Gendered disinformation, online harassment and digitally enabled intimidation undermine women's participation, humanitarian access, and social cohesion in crises. WPS frameworks can inform cyber policy, threat assessments and protection mechanisms—an emerging gap in many national strategies.[14]

Recommendations:

12. **Strengthen Australia's implementation of the WPS Agenda** by investing in gender-sensitive, locally led protection of civilians approaches, supporting women-led community strategies that enhance the effectiveness of protection efforts in resource constrained humanitarian environments.

Submission by Humanitarian Advisory Group to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative (January 2026)

3

HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP

13. **Incorporate WPS principles into Australia's cyber diplomacy** and cyber capacity-building, addressing gendered disinformation and protection of women peacebuilders and humanitarians.

7) Evidence from our research on intersectionality, principled approaches, and equitable partnerships

The importance of intersectionality for inclusive humanitarian responses

Our Myanmar work identifies promising intersectional approaches, co-design with communities, tailored needs assessments, attention to cultural and religious dynamics, and partnerships with specialist organisations (e.g., OPDs, LGBTQI+ groups). Yet, most needs analyses still consider gender and age only, omitting intersecting factors like ability, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Larger agencies should form equitable, longer-term partnerships with local specialists to mainstream intersectionality. Priority actions in Myanmar include: invest in enhancing understanding of intersectional approaches and practices that track the impact on inclusion and effectiveness; value and resource local expertise; engage and fund specialist organisations; adapt needs analysis to context with strong qualitative methods; and integrate intersectionality across partnerships and donor strategies.[15]

Principled approach: participation and transformative leadership

UN Women–HAG research found WROs led critical aspects of COVID-19 response and advocacy, but structural barriers (safety, logistics, access to information) limited strategic leadership. Practical actions include recognising and drawing on the expertise of women and WROs, ensuring WRO representation in coordination fora, funding participation costs, adapting meeting schedules, and using gender equality policies as accountability tools.[16]

Equitable partnerships, capacity exchange and quality funding

WROs frequently lack long-term, flexible funding and equitable decision-making power in partnerships. To enable leadership: provide multi-year, core funding; reduce due diligence burdens proportionate to risk; require intermediaries to report on partnership quality; co-design programs; support WROs to access direct funding; and encourage international partners to play complementary, not substitutive, roles. These proposals align with Grand Bargain localisation commitments.[17]

Policy coherence across agendas

Australia can enhance coherence by ensuring gender equality initiatives align with SDGs, locally led development, WPS, PoC and cyber strategies. Specifically:

- Use WPS–PoC intersections to strengthen humanitarian protection and defence engagement.
- Address gendered disinformation and online harms through WPS-informed cyber policy and protection for women leaders in humanitarian and peace processes.
- Integrate gender–climate–security linkages in climate diplomacy and disaster risk reduction within the aid program.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality is a strategic national and economic security imperative for Australia, not a peripheral social objective. Advancing intersectional, locally led gender equality across Australia's diplomacy, development, defence and cyber agendas will strengthen humanitarian effectiveness, bolster food security and labour markets, reduce drivers of fragility and climate-related insecurity, and unlock significant, long-term productivity and growth gains in the Indo-Pacific region.

By resourcing women's rights organisations through equitable, multi-year partnerships and hard-wiring gender-responsive, locally led approaches into implementation of the International Development Policy, International Gender Equality Strategy, Humanitarian Policy and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, Australia can translate existing commitments into tangible protection, peacebuilding and economic outcomes.

Submission by Humanitarian Advisory Group to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative (January 2026)

4

HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP

This submission therefore urges the Committee to support concrete measures that institutionalise intersectional practice, expand direct and flexible funding to WROs, and drive coherence between WPS, protection of civilians, localisation and cyber initiatives, positioning Australia as a principled and effective leader on gender equality, security and prosperity in our region

About us

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) is a social enterprise that combines the passion of humanitarians with the agility and innovation of entrepreneurship. We provide a unique space for training, technical support, thinking, and research that elevates the profile and effectiveness of humanitarian action. Our values guide how and who we work with. We have a niche focus on humanitarian action and a proven track record of delivering high quality advisory services to a range of audiences.

Endnotes

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Submission by Humanitarian Advisory Group to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative (January 2026)

5

HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP

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Submission by Humanitarian Advisory Group to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative (January 2026)

6