



Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

20 January 2026

Re: Inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative.

Scarlet Alliance is Australia's national peak sex worker organisation. Formed in 1989, our membership includes sex worker organisations and individual sex workers across unceded Australia. Scarlet Alliance and our member organisations are led and run entirely by past and current sex workers.

We advocate for equality, justice and the highest level of health for past and present workers in Australia's sex industry, using best practices including peer education and community development. Through our work and the work of our member organisations, we have more contact with sex workers and access to sex industry workplaces than any other organisation in Australia.

This submission addresses gender-based violence and HIV prevention among sex workers in the Indo-Pacific region, with particular focus on how investment in sex worker-led initiatives advances Australia's national security, economic security, and commitments under the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. We demonstrate that Australia's proven 2005-2014 leadership in regional sex worker programming should be resumed and expanded to respond to the current international funding crisis threatening sex worker organisations globally.

Scarlet Alliance brings direct experience in regional sex worker capacity building and leadership development. From 2005 to 2014, we partnered with emerging sex worker networks across Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Fiji, providing mentoring, organisational development, and skills training. Through this work, we supported local sex worker organisations to develop governance systems, expand outreach capacity, achieve formal registration, and strengthen their HIV prevention and response activities. These partnerships produced measurable gains in organisational capacity and demonstrated the effectiveness of peer-led, community-centred approaches to addressing both HIV and violence in the region. We remain committed to supporting sex worker-led solutions and are positioned to lead renewed investment in this critical area.

Yours faithfully,



Mish Pony
Chief Executive Officer

Executive Summary

This submission addresses the critical intersection of gender equality, national security, and economic security in the Indo-Pacific region, with particular focus on gender-based violence (GBV) and HIV prevention for sex workers. We demonstrate that investing in sex worker-led initiatives to prevent GBV is essential to Australia's regional security objectives, economic stability, health security, and commitments under the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda.

Key arguments:

- Gender-based violence against sex workers represents a significant but overlooked security and health threat in the Indo-Pacific, with 26% experiencing physical or sexual violence in the past 12 months and HIV prevalence up to nine times higher than the general population[1]
- Criminalisation and stigma create structural vulnerabilities that undermine regional health security, rule of law, and economic development
- Evidence demonstrates that sex worker-led, decriminalisation-focused approaches significantly reduce violence and HIV transmission while strengthening economic security[2][3]
- Australia has strong precedent for supporting sex worker organisations regionally (2005-2014), achieving measurable gains in organisational capacity and HIV response effectiveness
- Current funding collapse (USAID, PEPFAR, and the withdrawal of the Netherlands) threatens 48 million Euros in sex worker programming, creating urgent opportunity for Australian leadership[5]
- Australia must invest in sex worker-led GBV prevention and HIV response across the Indo-Pacific, advancing gender equality as both a security imperative and demonstrating global leadership in evidence-based approaches to vulnerable populations.

Introduction: Gender Equality, Security, and Sex Workers in the Indo-Pacific

Gender equality is fundamental to national and economic security. As the Committee's terms of reference recognise, undermining gender equality has significant security implications, particularly in humanitarian crises and climate change contexts. Sex workers in the Indo-Pacific experience extreme gender inequality, manifested through disproportionate rates of violence, human rights violations, and HIV transmission rates that reflect intersecting stigma, criminalisation, and entrenched gender-based discrimination.

This submission responds to several key themes outlined in the inquiry:

1. The economic security and national security benefits of realising gender equality, and how integration of gender equality across foreign policy supports this objective
2. Evidence and data demonstrating links between gender equality and economic growth, prosperity, and security
3. International and national security implications of undermining gender equality in humanitarian and crisis contexts
4. The role of locally-led leadership and decision-making in advancing gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda



5. Australian government efforts to advance gender equality and human rights across foreign policy, defence, and national security

We demonstrate that addressing GBV against sex workers advances Australia's security interests, strengthens regional stability, and fulfils commitments under Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

The Scale of Gender-Based Violence and HIV Among Sex Workers

Prevalence Data

Sex workers globally face disproportionate rates of violence and HIV. Recent UNAIDS data (2024) shows that 26% of sex workers reported experiencing physical or sexual violence in the past 12 months across 20 reporting countries, and the relative risk of acquiring HIV was nine times higher for sex workers than for people in the wider population globally[1].

A global systematic review highlighted lifetime prevalence of physical, sexual, or combined workplace violence against female sex workers ranging from 45% to 75%. Among female sex workers in street-based settings, an estimated 32–55% experienced workplace violence in the last year[5].

Indo-Pacific Regional Context

The Indo-Pacific region has the world's second-largest HIV epidemic after sub-Saharan Africa, home to approximately 6.6 to 6.9 million people living with HIV as of 2023-2024, representing around 15% of the global total[6]. The region accounts for about a quarter of annual new HIV infections worldwide, with growing epidemics in Bangladesh, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Laos, and the Philippines.

Available evidence from the region shows high levels of GBV and HIV among sex workers:

Country	Violence and HIV Prevalence
Cambodia	42% experienced police violence, 29% rape by police, 57% financial extortion; HIV prevalence 4.9%[7]
Papua New Guinea	46% reported physical abuse, 50% forced sex; HIV: 14.9% (female sex workers), 23.7% (transgender)[8]
India	Tamil Nadu: Over half of female and two-thirds of male sex workers experienced violence in past 3 months[9]
Indonesia	HIV prevalence 8%; Surabaya: 15.2% among female sex workers[10]
Thailand	HIV prevalence 4.2%[10]
Viet Nam	HIV prevalence 2.5%[10]



Gender-Based Violence as a Security Threat

National Security Implications

Gender-based violence against sex workers constitutes a multifaceted security threat with implications for:

Regional health security: High HIV prevalence among sex workers, compounded by violence that restricts safer practices and healthcare access, threatens regional disease control efforts. Violence directly heightens HIV vulnerability by restricting sex workers' ability to negotiate condom use and access prevention, treatment, and sexual and reproductive health services[11][12][13].

Rule of law and governance: Police perpetration of violence (including rape, extortion, and harassment) undermines rule of law, fosters corruption, and normalises impunity[14]. In Cambodia, 42% of freelance sex workers experienced police violence, with 29% reporting rape by police[7]. This systematic abuse by law enforcement destabilises justice systems and erodes public trust.

Economic stability: Violence and criminalisation force sex workers into unsafe conditions, limiting economic participation and productivity; exacerbating existing gender-based economic inequalities.

Climate and humanitarian vulnerability: Sex workers experience multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination that are compounded during crises. As the Committee recognises, women and girls are disproportionately impacted when crises occur, and gender equality suffers. Sex workers, facing existing marginalisation, are particularly vulnerable during climate disasters and humanitarian emergencies, with limited access to services and increased exposure to violence and exploitation.

National Security Benefits of Addressing GBV Against Sex Workers

Addressing GBV against sex workers advances national security by:

- Strengthening regional health security through reduced HIV and STI transmission
- Supporting rule of law by addressing police violence, corruption, and impunity
- Enhancing economic security through improved economic participation of marginalised women
- Building resilience in crisis-affected communities
- Demonstrating Australian leadership on human rights and gender equality in the region

Economic Security Dimensions

Economic Impacts of Gender-Based Violence

Violence against sex workers has significant economic costs:

Healthcare costs: Violence results in injury, trauma, chronic health conditions, and increased HIV/STI transmission, creating substantial healthcare burdens. Discriminatory healthcare settings further limit access to treatment, compounding health and economic impacts.[2]



Lost productivity: Violence restricts sex workers' ability to work safely and access economic opportunities. Criminalisation forces many into unsafe conditions with little oversight or opportunity for redress, limiting economic participation.[2][14]

Poverty and inequality: Violence perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender-based economic inequality.

Economic Security Benefits of Addressing Violence

Evidence demonstrates that addressing GBV against sex workers generates economic benefits:

Improved health outcomes: Decriminalisation and violence reduction programs improve access to healthcare, reducing HIV/STI transmission and associated treatment costs. A Lancet study shows that decriminalisation of sex work would have the greatest impact on HIV epidemics across all settings, averting 33–46% of HIV infections in the next decade.[2][3]

Enhanced economic participation: Safe working conditions and legal protections enable sex workers to participate more fully in the economy, improving livelihoods and reducing poverty.[15]

Labour market efficiency: Recognising sex work as legitimate labour and extending workplace protections improves labour market functioning and reduces exploitation.[16]

Reduced social service costs: Prevention of violence reduces demand for emergency services, justice system resources, and long-term health and social support.

Contributing Factors: Criminalisation, Stigma, and Structural Discrimination

Criminalisation and Punitive Policing

Across the Indo-Pacific, almost all countries criminalise sex work or aspects of it.[17] Criminalisation forces many sex workers to operate without legal protections, often in unsafe conditions with little oversight or opportunity for redress. Criminalisation fosters a culture of impunity for perpetrators, undermines access to justice, and normalises violence against sex workers.

Police are frequently among the perpetrators of violence. Reporting violence is often unsafe, and fear of stigma or punishment prevents sex workers from seeking healthcare for injuries and violence-related concerns.[18] Across the Indo-Pacific region, carrying condoms is often used as evidence of illegal activity, exposing sex workers to harassment, assault, extortion, and illegal detention.[19]

Harmful Gender Norms and Stigma

Globally, 26% of sex workers have experienced stigma and discrimination in the past six months, and 14% have avoided accessing healthcare services due to stigma and discrimination in the past 12 months.[1] Stigma and discrimination constitute major barriers to safety, health, and wellbeing.



Sex workers experience multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination based on sex, gender identity and expression, sexuality, race, migrant status, and criminalised behaviours. Intersecting forms of stigma and discrimination significantly heighten vulnerability to GBV and limit ability to access services and protect health.

Failure to recognise sex work as legitimate labour and the erasure of sex worker voices reinforce stigma and discrimination, contributing to social exclusion and powerlessness. These dynamics are deeply connected to broader patterns of gender inequality, power imbalances, and moral judgment.

Institutional Discrimination

Institutional stigma, particularly in healthcare, policing, and social services, remains one of the biggest barriers to preventing and responding to GBV against sex workers. Stigmatising attitudes lead to limited community support when sex workers face violence. Stigma drives structural discrimination and abuse in health settings, resulting in denial of services, breach of privacy, and physical abuse.

Research from the Hands Off Project found that sex workers who feel discriminated against are significantly more likely to be HIV positive and significantly less likely to access health services and receive regular anti-retroviral HIV treatment.[12] Globally, antiretroviral treatment coverage is low among sex workers, with a global median of 66% receiving treatment among 32 reporting countries, and even lower among sex workers aged under 25 years.[1]

Evidence-Based Solutions: What Works to Prevent Violence

Sex Worker-Led Community Mobilisation

Community mobilisation and peer-led approaches are consistently identified as among the most effective strategies for preventing and responding to violence. Sex worker-led organisations provide trusted entry points for delivering safety information, facilitating peer support networks, providing safe spaces, and connecting individuals to health and legal services.[20]

India case study: In India, a community-led response to violence at all levels was highly successful in reducing violence toward sex workers.[21] The response included working with venue owners to introduce safety measures, decreasing violence by clients. Violence by police decreased significantly after a safe space was established for sex workers to meet, and crisis management and advocacy were initiated with different stakeholders to address punitive practices and violence.[9]

Regional evidence shows that when sex workers organise and lead prevention efforts, rates of violence decline and access to health services increases.[19] Peer leadership strengthens collective power, enabling communities to advocate for rights, challenge harmful norms, and hold institutions accountable.



Decriminalisation and Structural Reform

Decriminalisation of all aspects of sex work is essential for preventing GBV as it removes structural barriers that enable violence. Evidence from jurisdictions globally that have decriminalised sex work shows reductions in violence, improved workplace safety, and increased access to healthcare.[2]

New Zealand evidence: Research on New Zealand's decriminalised framework demonstrates that sex workers covered by the legislation are safer and have more rights than sex workers did pre-decriminalisation and compared to those working elsewhere under criminalising regimes.[15] Decriminalisation provides legal rights and removes stress and fear inevitable under repressive policies.

The Lancet study demonstrates that decriminalisation would have the greatest impact on HIV epidemics across all settings, averting 33–46% of HIV infections in the next decade.[3] Human Rights Watch, the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, and extensive research evidence support full decriminalisation as the most effective approach to protecting sex workers' rights.[22][23]

Workplace Safety Measures

Investing in workplace safety is a foundational prevention strategy for work-based GBV. Evidence shows that workplaces with clear safety frameworks, responsible management, supportive co-workers, safety protocols, information on rights, complaint mechanisms, and access to redress significantly reduce experiences of GBV through stronger accountability. These interventions can only be fully realised for sex workers under decriminalisation.

Tackling Institutional Stigma

Building the capacity of services, reforming discriminatory practices, and embedding accountability frameworks are essential to ensure non-stigmatising, rights-based services. Evidence from *The Right(s) Evidence: Sex Work, Violence and HIV in Asia* highlights that when sex workers can access non-judgmental, confidential, and inclusive services, both health and safety outcomes improve significantly.[19]

Alignment with Australia's Commitments

Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy

Investing in efforts to prevent and respond to GBV against sex workers in the Indo-Pacific directly supports Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy, which prioritises ending GBV and advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights through inclusive, locally led approaches.[24]

The Strategy commits Australia to:

- Strengthen partnerships with Indo-Pacific women's rights organisations, institutions and movements
- Increase support to amplify locally driven solutions, including in humanitarian contexts
- Advance approaches that ensure all people benefit, including enabling women's leadership



Addressing GBV against sex workers operationalises these commitments by supporting locally-led, peer-driven responses that centre the leadership and expertise of affected communities.

Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2031 commits to supporting women's meaningful participation and needs in peace processes, reducing sexual and gender-based violence, and supporting resilience, crisis security, law and justice efforts to meet the needs and rights of all women and girls.[25] The WPS Agenda recognises that gender equality is a stronger predictor of peace than a nation's wealth or political system, and that peace agreements are more durable when women are involved.[26] Yet women peacebuilders' leadership remains overlooked, despite clear evidence that their deep understanding of local realities makes them vital to early warning systems, de-escalating conflict, and creating pathways for sustainable peace.

Sex workers are among the most marginalised women in the Indo-Pacific, facing intersecting vulnerabilities during conflict, climate disasters, and humanitarian crises. Supporting sex worker-led organisations advances the WPS Agenda by:

- Enabling meaningful participation of marginalised women in peace and security efforts
- Reducing sexual and gender-based violence through evidence-based, peer-led interventions
- Strengthening resilience and justice systems to meet the needs of all women and girls
- Demonstrating Australian leadership and accountability for WPS commitments

As the Asia-Pacific Regional Convening on Women, Peace and Security (August 2025) emphasised, the WPS Agenda faces challenges from growing conflict and climate crises. Implementation requires connecting climate-gender-justice with WPS and ensuring representation of marginalised groups including LGBTQIA+ people, refugees, and diaspora women.[27]

National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032 extends to international engagement and partnerships, reinforcing action in preventing and responding to GBV.[28] Supporting sex worker-led violence prevention in the Indo-Pacific aligns with Australia's domestic commitment to ending violence while extending this leadership regionally.

Previous Australian Investment and Impact

AusAID Regional Programs (2005-2014)

From 2005 to 2014, the Australian Government (through AusAID, now DFAT) ran regional capacity-building programs in Asia-Pacific in response to HIV/AIDS, including the Australian HIV/AIDS Partnership Initiative (2005-2008), the PNG-Australia HIV/AIDS Program (2006-2010), and AusAID Regional HIV/AIDS Capacity Building Program (2007-2014).



Scarlet Alliance was funded to partner with emerging sex worker networks in Papua New Guinea (Friends Frangipani), Timor-Leste (\$scarlet Timor), and Fiji (Survival Advocacy Network), providing mentoring and capacity development. The program also supported broader regional coordination, including working with Empower Foundation in Thailand, OPSI in Indonesia, and the China Sex Worker Organization Network Forum.

Documented Outcomes

Reports and evaluations of these projects note clear gains in organisational capacity and leadership. It was observed that local sex worker leaders gained confidence in public speaking and advocacy through the "learning by doing" approach.[29]

The programs produced measurable organisational and technical gains:

- Partners developed governance and financial systems
- Improved outreach and advocacy capacity
- Progression from informal groups to formally registered organisations
- Eligibility as sub-recipients of larger funding mechanisms
- Skills transfer and stronger management systems
- Expanded outreach and service links

Independent program documents and partner reviews record these practical outcomes for Timor-Leste and PNG partners supported by Scarlet Alliance, noting that gains contributed to more sustainable, locally led HIV responses in programme sites.

Funding Withdrawal and Impact

After 2014, DFAT began winding down this support. A 2016 Senate inquiry heard that "programs are being wound down, staff are being released and regional offices are being closed," leaving local sex worker groups "deeply disappointed" and warning that cuts were eroding the community HIV response.[30]

This withdrawal represents a missed opportunity. Australia built strong relationships, demonstrated measurable impact, and established proven models for sex worker-led HIV and GBV responses. The current funding crisis facing sex worker organisations globally creates an urgent opportunity for Australia to resume this leadership.

Current Funding Crisis and Opportunity for Australian Leadership

Global Funding Collapse

Data shows that funding to sex worker rights has been persistently low and is currently collapsing. Worldwide, human rights philanthropic funding to sex workers in 2020 totalled only \$18 million USD—0.36% of overall human rights philanthropic funding that year, the smallest amount for any population.[31]

The largest source of funding for sex worker projects in low and middle-income countries has historically been bilateral and multilateral funding for HIV prevention and treatment:



- PEPFAR: USD \$26 million annually (2021-2023) for HIV prevention for sex workers[4]
- Netherlands: USD \$7 million annually (2021-2023) including strategic partnerships[4]
- Global Fund: USD \$45 million annually (2019-2023) for HIV prevention[4]
- Asia Pacific region: USD \$14.3 million (2020) from all sources[32]

This investment was never adequate. A scan of 101 sex worker-led organisations found that 17% receive no funding at all, and the remaining 83% had only minimal funding for basic functioning, jeopardising staff wellbeing, peer support, service delivery, advocacy, core costs, and capacity building.[33] When funded, sex worker groups tend to receive short-term, project-focused funds that don't support organisational infrastructure critical for long-term development and sustainability.

Immediate Threats

The minimal funding available is now under extreme risk:

- PEPFAR was abruptly paused in 2025 and is at high risk of complete cancellation as the U.S. government walks back global public health commitments[34]
- The Netherlands plans to cut foreign assistance by two-thirds by 2027
- An estimated 48 million Euros of sex worker funding is under threat from US and Dutch reductions for the Global Fund[4]
- Overall ODA is projected to plummet by \$62 billion in 2026 due to reductions across 12 donor countries[35]

The Sex Work Donor Collaborative's November 2025 briefing paper, The Threat to Sex Workers from Loss of US and Dutch Foreign Aid Funding, documents the specific impacts of these funding cuts on sex worker organisations globally and in the Indo-Pacific region.[4] The report emphasises that the loss of PEPFAR and Dutch bilateral support, combined with anticipated reductions to multilateral organisations like the Global Fund, threatens the survival of the vast majority of sex worker-led organisations in the region.

Taken together, these funding changes mean that this already drastically underfunded population has just lost or is poised to lose a majority percentage of its funding. Sex worker organisations support their members with basic services, assist victims of violence through justice systems, provide HIV prevention, testing and care to hard-to-reach communities, and develop communities' voice and political power. Without this funding, these organisations and networks are under great threat of collapse, leaving sex workers without recourse or safety.

Strategic Opportunity for Australia

This funding crisis creates a strategic opportunity for Australia to:

1. Resume proven leadership in regional sex worker programming based on documented 2005-2014 success
2. Fill critical funding gaps left by US and Dutch withdrawals
3. Demonstrate commitment to evidence-based approaches to GBV and HIV prevention
4. Strengthen regional health security at a time of heightened need



5. Advance Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy and WPS commitments through locally-led, peer-driven programming
6. Build on existing relationships and proven implementation models

Australia has comparative advantages: proven track record, established relationships with regional sex worker organisations, demonstrated capacity to achieve measurable outcomes, and policy frameworks (Gender Equality Strategy, WPS NAP) that explicitly support this work.

Recommendations

- 1. Recognise gender-based violence against sex workers as a national and economic security issue** requiring Australian Government attention and investment, given documented links to health security, rule of law, economic participation, and crisis vulnerability.
- 2. Recommend that the Australian Government invest** to support sex worker-led prevention of gender-based violence and HIV response in the Indo-Pacific, building on proven 2005-2014 program models and filling critical gaps created by current international funding collapse.
- 3. Affirm that decriminalisation of sex work is an essential component of gender equality** and security objectives, based on extensive evidence demonstrating that decriminalisation reduces violence, improves health outcomes, strengthens economic security, and advances human rights.
- 4. Call for integration of sex worker-led approaches into Australia's implementation** of the Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan and International Gender Equality Strategy, recognising sex workers as among the most marginalised women requiring support in conflict, humanitarian, and crisis contexts.
- 5. Recommend that DFAT coordinate this investment with existing GBV Platform and HIV programming** to ensure complementarity and maximise impact across the region.
- 6. Encourage ongoing monitoring and evaluation** that centres sex worker organisations in assessing outcomes and informing continuous improvement, building evidence base on effective security-oriented GBV prevention.
- 7. Support Australian diplomatic engagement** to promote evidence-based approaches to sex work, GBV prevention, and HIV response in regional and multilateral forums, leveraging Australia's demonstrated expertise and commitment to locally-led solutions.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence against sex workers in the Indo-Pacific represents a significant but overlooked security threat with implications for health security, rule of law, economic stability, and humanitarian resilience. Extensive evidence demonstrates that sex worker-led, decriminalisation-focused approaches effectively reduce violence and HIV transmission while strengthening economic security and human rights.



Australia has strong precedent for regional leadership in this area, with documented success in sex worker-led programming from 2005-2014. The current international funding collapse creates both urgent need and strategic opportunity for Australia to resume this leadership, advancing gender equality as both a security imperative and a human rights commitment.

Investing in sex worker-led GBV prevention and HIV response would operationalise Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy, National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, and National Plan to End Violence while demonstrating global leadership in evidence-based approaches to vulnerable populations. This investment advances economic and national security by strengthening health security, supporting rule of law, enhancing economic participation, and building resilience in crisis-affected communities.

We urge the Committee to recognise addressing GBV against sex workers as integral to gender equality as a security imperative, and to recommend Australian Government investment in sex worker-led solutions that advance security, prosperity, and human rights across the Indo-Pacific.

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