



Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade – Foreign Affairs and Aid Sub-Committee (JSCFDAT)

Inquiry into gender inequality as a national security and economic security imperative

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The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the UN's global development network, active in 170 countries and territories. UNDP works with governments, civil society, and the private sector to reduce poverty, strengthen governance, build resilience, and prevent conflict. Australia has been a long-standing partner, supporting UNDP programs that address root causes of inequality in the Indo-Pacific and globally. Through programs that strengthen institutions, empower communities, and promote human security, UNDP contributes to both immediate stability and long-term peace. Gender equality and women's empowerment are central to the work of UNDP, as we recognize gender inequality as a roadblock to human and sustainable development.

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Summary

Gender equality is a gamechanger for UNDPs work on governance, climate change, peace, and economic growth. UNDP's new Strategic Plan (2026-2029) is designed to focus on delivering change at a systems level, through integrated solutions driven by national priorities. Gender equality serves as one of the three key accelerators of progress that powers UNDP's strategic objectives. We are working on key initiatives, such as:

- **Digital Innovation for Women's Agency (DIWA)** – An economic empowerment initiative working on digital and AI skills and systems for women and girls in Asia and Pacific. The project also works on addressing technology facilitated gender-based violence in the region.
- **Climate Resilient Care Societies** initiative that works to inform the design of inclusive, climate-resilient care societies that reduce women's unpaid care burden, expand their access to decent paid care work and broader economic opportunities, and strengthen community resilience to climate change. This includes application of the Care Georeferencing Tool.
- **Quanomics**, our flagship initiative to dismantle economic structures that generate and perpetuate gender inequality, by building expertise and supporting partners that want to transform their economies to work better for everyone.
- **The Gender Equality Seal** is UNDP's global certification programme supporting organizations to accelerate institutional transformation towards gender equality results. The Seal process triggers transformative actions for gender equality across public institutions, development organizations, and private sector companies.
- UNDP has developed a **10-Point Action Agenda for Advancing Gender Equality in Crisis Settings** (10PAA), a roadmap to guide its development programming towards results that will help transform and advance gender equality in crisis contexts and

achieve the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The 10PAA highlights the components of an integrated framework needed to support a whole-of-system approach.

UNDP welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this important inquiry. The overall themes outlined within the terms of reference are all important and interconnected, and UNDP would like to **submit evidence and make a case for support in the following two areas:**

- The links between gender equality and economic growth and prosperity, including in food security and labour markets*

The Asia-Pacific region is positioned to have large macro-economic gains from making better connections and investments between gender equality and economic growth models. All countries across the region have low levels of female labour force participation- a barrier for gender equality but also a bottleneck for economic growth. Data from a McKinsey report evidenced that advancing women's equality across Asia-Pacific could add US\$4.5 trillion annually to regional GDP by 2025 ($\approx +12\%$ vs business-as-usual).¹ A more recent report also mirrors this sentiment in the Pacific, where it is estimated that increasing women's workforce participation could boost GDP per capita by over 20 percent across Pacific countries.² The low levels of female labour force participation stem from underlying social norms, leading to women being crowded in the informal or lower paid job markets, inadequate and hostile work environment, as well as women's unpaid care burden. For instance, regionally, women perform four times more unpaid care work than men, and in Nepal this is as high as six times.³ UNDP has been working in this area at various levels. For instance, UNDP Malaysia is working with partners to build a business case for the care economy and to reframe care as essential social infrastructure and a public good; and in India, UNDP is boosting female labour force participation through robust community based and industry led care provision and strengthening the urban care ecosystem.

Asia-Pacific is the most disaster-prone region- facing rising floods, droughts, and heat due to climate change. Women are hit hardest, due to higher poverty, job losses, and increased gender-based violence. A 1°C rise in temperature links to a 4.7% rise in intimate partner violence.⁴ On the flip side, gender equality can also be a direct and measurable pathway towards food security. For instance, with equal access to land, inputs and services, women's farm yields could rise exponentially, thus raising agricultural productivity and reducing food insecurity. UNDP recognizes the importance and centrality of gender equality, with its Strategic Plan 2026-2029 positioning gender equality as a powerful accelerator for inclusive, climate-resilient food systems and through the Nature Pledge which supports countries to achieve biodiversity goals through systemic shifts in value, finance, and policy, with gender equality at the core. Specifically in Asia-Pacific, UNDP is expanding a gender-responsive portfolio, placing women at the center of national climate and biodiversity strategies and scaling impact and integrating gender goals into its climate and agrifood initiatives.

To capitalize on these connections highlighted above, support and investments for policy and legal reform are required to remove barriers to women's economic engagement, and introduce

¹ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>

² <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099061125000029992/pdf/P506957-7d26eb99-0110-4068-8a06-4ddf3304488.pdf>

³ UN Women, 2024

⁴ <https://spotlightinitiative.org/publications/colliding-crises-how-climate-crisis-fuels-gender-based-violence>

positive measures that provide skilling and prepare women to be part of the future workforce. There is an urgent need to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work through scaling public and private investments towards a public care infrastructure. Women farmers as the backbone of the region's agricultural economy need to be supported with farm extension services and access to finance. And finally, a focus on better data and evidence to create a compelling business case for gender equality as a cost-effective and optimal strategy for economic growth and food security is needed.

The role of locally-led leadership and decision making in advancing gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda.

Women's leadership is an essential ingredient in advancing gender equality goals and the WPS agenda. Women are most often at the frontlines and are able to detect early-warning signs of conflict and instability. They also play an essential role in leading community level conflict prevention and social cohesion efforts, yet their leadership role remains mostly invisible and unrecognized.

We also know that while women play these critical roles in peace and security agendas as well as disaster preparedness and response, their voices are absent from formal decision-making spaces. For instance, women average at only 7-9 per cent of negotiators in peace processes. UNDP developed and managed a regional project: N-Peace, which ran for over a decade, serving as a regional platform for women peacemakers. The N-Peace initiative supported local women leaders with trainings and capacity building support, and with dialogue platforms for policy advocacy at the national and local level. It also served as a regional women peacebuilders advocacy network, facilitating coalition building and learning among diverse women local leaders and providing broad outreach and recognition through a regional peacebuilders awards initiative. UNDP is thankful to the Australian government for its generous support for the N-Peace initiative. UNDP is now embarking on a new initiative- She Leads-which will focus on strengthening women's contributions to peace processes and conflict resolution, advance their contribution through economic empowerment and support governance structures to optimize women's participation in recovery efforts.

There is a need to ensure that all development projects, conflict prevention, humanitarian and disaster responses engage local women as key informants as they are trusted within their communities and can help development assistance align with culturally relevant and real needs on the ground. An examination is needed of how much funding is reaching local women's organizations and support their capacity and growth with trainings, skilling and access to finances. Investing upfront in women's local leadership will help to improve development and humanitarian efforts, and will advance the overall progress on gender equality and the WPS agenda.

UNDP is grateful for its long-standing partnership with and support from Australia, especially in advancing the gender equality agenda. We are looking forward to new opportunities of collaboration which can scale up and create transformative changes for women and girls while driving economic growth and ensuring security goals.