

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

20 January 2026

RE: Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative

Dear Committee Members

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to highlight the critical role that gender equality plays in strengthening Australia's national resilience, economic growth and social cohesion.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria and Tasmania. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. In Victoria, we represent around 150 community service organisations, students and individuals working across child and family services.

Gender equality as a foundation of economic and national security

Gender equality is fundamentally important to how workplaces function, how caring and family responsibilities are managed, and how communities thrive.¹ Evidence shows how structural gender inequities contribute to entrenched disadvantage and exacerbate vulnerabilities in households and communities, undermining economic stability and national resilience.² This Inquiry provides an opportunity to tease out the role gender equality plays in establishing and maintaining national security.

Evidence shows that inclusive societies and economies are more productive, stable and innovative, while gender inequities in employment, leadership and caregiving pose significant risks.³ The OECD identified how these risks – such as women's lower employment rates, concentration in part-time work and disproportionate unpaid caregiving responsibilities – can reduce lifetime earnings and pension outcomes, increasing the risk of poverty and social exclusion, and constraining overall economic growth.⁴ These dynamics can over time, exacerbate social instability, increasing pressure on justice and welfare systems and undermining long-term national resilience and security.⁵ In Australia, women continue to earn substantially less than men on average and remain underrepresented in decision-making roles, reflecting long-standing structural barriers rather than individual preference.⁶ Women are underrepresented in corporate leadership: for example, women hold only a minority of CEO and executive roles in major Australian businesses.⁷ The underrepresentation of women in key governance and strategic roles has implications for national and economic security if women are not meaningfully represented in national decision making.

The European Union provides a useful example of commitment to embedding gender equity legislative reform across a range of areas – for example, work-life balance, pay equity and transparency, gender balance in corporate leadership - and by seeking to integrate gender considerations through all stages of policy

¹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2018). [The business case for gender equality](#).

² World Economic Forum (2024). [Global Gender Gap Report 2024](#).

³ OECD (2025). [Gender Equality in a Changing World: Taking Stock and Moving Forward](#).

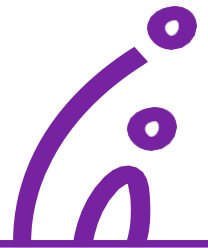
⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) (2024). [Gender Equality Scorecard 2024-25](#); Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2025a). [Average Weekly Earnings, Australia \[ABS Cat. No. 6302.0\]](#).

⁷ WGEA (2024).





development, implementation and evaluation.⁸ Promoting gender equality reinforces the social and economic foundations upon which national security is built.⁹

From a national security standpoint, social cohesion and confidence in public institutions are essential to national resilience.¹⁰ Gender equality reinforces these foundations by reducing structural disadvantage, enhancing families' ability to withstand social and economic pressures, and supporting more equitable participation in care and paid work.¹¹

Reframing gender equality to guide meaningful national security thinking and action

For women to obtain full, equal and meaningful participation in national security decision making, the Commonwealth government needs to do more than support women's participation in peace and security negotiations as part of its foreign policy endeavours.¹² While there are examples of success where women have been instrumental in peace negotiations, these efforts need to be accompanied by a transformative change in Australia's own defence and security institutions.¹³ Implementing a coordinated domestic approach to women's roles in national security requires dedicated resourcing and funding, embedding of gender equality in human rights frameworks, greater institutional accountability and reduced reliance on individual champions.

Structural barriers to women's economic participation & gender inequality in labour markets

Despite progress, gender gaps in pay, workforce participation, and leadership representation are still evident across industries. According to recent statistics, the national gender pay gap remains substantial, with women paid on average between 18.6% and 21.8% less than men.¹⁴

A central driver of these inequalities is the unequal distribution of unpaid care work. Women continue to perform the majority of unpaid caregiving and domestic labour, which constrains workforce participation, limits career progression, and reduces lifetime earnings.¹⁵ Inadequate access to affordable childcare, limited flexibility in workplace arrangements, and insufficient shared parental leave further reinforce these patterns.

Research consistently shows that when care responsibilities are unsupported or unevenly distributed, women are more likely to reduce paid work or exit the labour force altogether. Over time, this results in reduced lifetime earnings, lower retirement savings, and heightened economic insecurity, with broader implications for national productivity and economic resilience.¹⁶

Economic modelling suggests that closing gender gaps in workforce participation and pay could significantly increase Australia's GDP, strengthening long-term economic growth and resilience.¹⁷ Policies that support care responsibilities, flexible work, shared parental leave, and recognition of unpaid labour are therefore not only equity measures but critical economic security interventions. Gender-disaggregated data is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these policies and ensuring accountability for progress.¹⁸

National security implications of gender inequality

Humanitarian emergencies and climate-related disasters disproportionately affect women and children, increasing exposure to violence, displacement and economic insecurity.¹⁹ Globally, more than 676 million women and girls live within 50 kilometres of conflict zones, the highest proportion since records began, and

⁸ OECD (2022). [Gender Equality and Social Cohesion](#).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Australian National University (ANU), National Security College (2025). [Thinking about our national security: Community consultation on Australian attitudes to security](#).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Wittwer, J. & Kee-Loo, K. (2025). [Australia treats gender equality as a foreign policy tool, not a principle](#). The Interpreter. Lowy Institute.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) (2024). [Gender Equality Scorecard 2024-25](#); Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2025a). [Average Weekly Earnings, Australia \[ABS Cat. No. 6302.0\]](#).

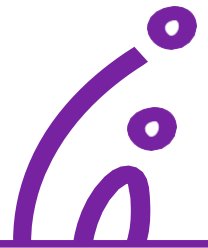
¹⁵ ABS (2025b). [How Australians Use Their Time \[ABS Cat. No. 4153.0\]](#).

¹⁶ Ruppanner, L., Squires, S., Dangar, K. & Gunawansa, M. (2024). [Equal Sharing of Care: Evidence Review](#); Ruppanner, L. (2020). *Motherlands: How States Push Mothers Out of Employment*.

¹⁷ McKinsey Global Institute (2018). [The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia Pacific](#).

¹⁸ Ruppanner, L., et. al (2024); Ruppanner, L. (2020).

¹⁹ UN Women (2025). [How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected](#).



conflict-related gender-based violence has risen sharply in recent years.²⁰ These trends weaken the ability of families and communities to recover from shocks, placing sustained pressure on institutions responsible for safety and recovery.

Where gender equality frameworks are weakened, the community's ability to respond to crisis is significantly reduced, resulting in prolonged instability and increased reliance on emergency interventions.²¹ International evidence demonstrates that societies with higher levels of gender equality experience greater stability and reduced conflict.²² Women's participation in peace and security decision-making has been shown to improve the resilience and effectiveness of peace agreements and recovery efforts.²³

Advancing gender equality through policy

Australia has made strong commitments to gender equality through foreign policy, development assistance and national security frameworks. Gender equality should also be embedded as a core consideration in policy design related to economic participation, safety, crisis preparedness and long-term social investment. Treating gender equality as an add-on rather than a fundamental structural consideration risks undermining outcomes across portfolios.

A whole-of-government approach that recognises the interconnectedness of gender equality, family wellbeing and economic security would enhance Australia's capacity to prevent harm, respond to crises and build long-term resilience. This includes investing in care infrastructure, workforce participation, and leadership pathways, and informing policy decisions with robust gender-disaggregated data and evaluations of what has been implemented.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda provides a valuable framework for understanding the relationship between gender equality and security. While often applied internationally, its core principles of prevention, participation, protection and recovery are equally relevant domestically. Applying these principles within Australia supports inclusive decision-making, strengthens early intervention, and recognises the role of women in sustaining peace and stability within communities.²⁴

Overall

Embedding gender equality into Australia's economic, social, and security policies is a moral and strategic imperative. These reforms will strengthen national productivity, social cohesion and regional influence while reducing long-term economic and security vulnerabilities.

Recognising gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative requires sustained investment in the social foundations that support safety, care and participation across the life course. This includes ensuring that all people regardless of gender, age, ability, or background, can actively participate in economic life, decision-making, and the workforce without structural barriers such as unequal pay and unpaid care burdens. Such participation would strengthen Australia's capacity to prevent harm, respond to crisis, and secure long-term prosperity.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michele Lonsdale

Interim CEO, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

²⁰ UN Women (2025). [Facts and Figures: Women, Peace and Security](#).

²¹ UN Women & UNDP (2022). [Government responses to COVID-19: Lessons on gender equality for a world in turmoil](#).

²² World Bank (2024). [World Bank Group Gender Strategy 2024-2030: Accelerate gender quality to end poverty on a liveable planet](#).

²³ United Nations Security Council (2015). [Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325](#).

²⁴ UN Women Australia (N.D.). [Women Peace and Security Framework Overview](#). Viewed 8 January 2026.

