



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

A stable, peaceful and prosperous region is central to Australia's security and economic wellbeing. Key to this is advancing gender equality.

Women's meaningful participation in decision-making and leadership across security institutions are vital drivers of national resilience and inclusive growth. Conversely, where gender equality is undermined – whether through exclusion, violence or neglect – this creates vulnerabilities that compound during crises such as armed conflict to natural disasters.

Human security is strengthened when women's contributions – both inside and outside formal security architectures – are recognised, resourced and embedded in governance. This includes mobilising women's leadership in community-level peacebuilding and ensuring gender-responsive disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation.

Australia has made important commitments under the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, yet implementation remains uneven and siloed. This inquiry provides an opportunity to continue to embed gender equality systematically across foreign policy, defence and national security, ensuring coherence and accountability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This submission draws on consultations conducted by the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D) with almost 40 experts from Australia and the Pacific region.¹

Recommendations include:

- Australia makes targeted, systematic, long-term investment in civil society organisations to promote opportunities for Pacific women to define and drive their own agendas for peace and security in the region.
- Australia understands and promotes the diverse and significant peace work that is already being done in the region by resourcing and incorporating this into security institutions and decision-making forums.
- Australia implements a coordinated approach across government to promote complementarity and policy coherence across portfolios.

¹ AP4D, *What does it look like for Australia to be a strategic partner on Women, Peace and Security with the Pacific* (Canberra 2023): <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/partner-on-pacific-wps/>

DISCUSSION

The economic security and national security benefits of realising gender equality for every person, and how the integration of gender equality across foreign policy supports this objective

Australia should recognise the opportunities to promote an expanded conceptualisation of human security in context-specific ways and pursue collaboration where the human security goals of Australia and partner countries align. This includes actively promoting inclusive human security, including beyond urban centres, that addresses gender inequality and gender-based violence. Australia should target investments in Women, Peace and Security forums and initiatives designed in collaboration with relevant counterpart agencies in the region.

Australian policy documents and plans recognise that women play a key role in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, rebuilding and stabilisation. Inclusive security processes are more durable and legitimate, with women's participation reducing conflict recurrence and improving governance outcomes.

Gender equality also has proven economic dividends: it drives productivity, strengthens labour markets and enhances food security. In the Pacific for example, women sustain local markets and community safety even during crises, underpinning economic resilience. Gender-responsive climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction also protect livelihoods and accelerate recovery.

Australia's national security community should play a role in championing a human security framing by explaining it and talking about it publicly. This should be supported by opportunities for security and non-security agencies to understand each other better through cross-pollination and training in order to integrate Australia's approach to gender equality across sectors.

The international and national security implications of undermining gender equality, including in the context of humanitarian crises and climate change

Human security and state security are complementary and mutually reinforcing endeavours, not competing paradigms. Insecurity at the individual level undermines national stability, while fragility and conflict at the state level undermine security for individuals. Neither should be viewed as subservient to the other.

The pursuit of gender equality and addressing gender-based violence is foundational to the conception of individual security as a driver of peace and security. This is particularly pertinent in the Pacific, where the security threat that results in direct physical violence for the largest number of people is violence against women and girls.

Security risks and threats are compounded by a lack of participation of women in decision-making. In the security sector, formal security organisations are highly masculinised with deeply entrenched gendered structures that can prevent women's meaningful participation. Past failures of leaders from Australia and the Pacific to acknowledge and incorporate women in peace and security is widely acknowledged as a causal factor in past conflicts in Papua New Guinea, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Fiji. This marginalisation from formal security institutions hides the vital role women have in security more broadly.

As well as eroding trust and stability, gender inequality undermines legitimacy and effectiveness of responses, leaving gaps in prevention and resilience. For example, there needs to be greater understanding of the gendered impacts of climate change and its implications for climate related loss and damage. When climate change poses threats, adaptation can be gender sensitive and even transformative if adequate attention is paid to gender in analysis and planning.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda internationally and Australia's role in promoting and implementing it

Recognising that the Women, Peace and Security agenda is not an add-on to the security agenda, but is intrinsic to it, there is scope for Australia to progress genuine partnership with the Pacific and support these efforts through greater collaboration. There is also a need to do more within Australian security organisations to promote the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Measures of progress must go beyond the number of women within security organisations to include all the dimensions of peace work. There should be support and resources for the significant contributions women make in identifying security challenges and initiating mediation, peacebuilding and humanitarian responses in local, national and broader regional contexts. This leads to women in these roles having a greater sense of personal security, political and financial support and agency to engage with security actors.

Building on the 2019 Pacific Summit on Women, Peace and Security, Australia can bring key stakeholders together in a way that allows the Pacific to set the agenda and identify forward pathways. In supporting Pacific people to lead on their priorities, Australia can play a facilitating, convening and coordinating role that encourages a genuine voice from the Pacific – seeking to amplify Pacific priorities, rather than lead or direct.

Investing in civil society

There are many civil society organisations and faith-based organisations in the region that are doing significant work in the WPS space. There is a need to give primacy to peacebuilding and conflict prevention in ways that resource and amplify the work of diverse women and their organisations. Targeted, systematic, long-term investment can promote opportunities for women to define and drive their own agendas for peace and security in the region. Explicitly feminist funding models should be considered as a way to do this.

While Australia and Pacific Island countries agree on a human security approach, more attention is needed to put this approach into action, working to provide safety at the individual level through to the country level and across the wider region. Social inclusion programs that respond to the gendered drivers of insecurity and support Pacific women's leadership of initiatives can translate rhetoric into action.

Mapping existing peace work

Australian and Pacific leaders should seek to understand the diverse and significant peace work that is already being done in the region. Much of the peace work being done by Pacific women may sit outside the formal security architecture, because the formal security architecture is male dominated, and because a focus on "traditional" or "hard" security may mask women's participation

in other sectors, from community conflict resolution to climate change adaptation. Peace and security processes need to take a human security approach and be inclusive in order to activate WPS commitments in the Pacific context.

Australia could play a valuable support role in first understanding this work and then amplifying, resourcing and incorporating these ways of working into security institutions and decision-making forums. Mapping who the key organisations are, highlighting connections between organisations and understanding how Australian aid, personnel, operations and support can work with local actors would be valuable.

Effective cooperation and partnership is underpinned by a genuine understanding of current work both within the formal security and law enforcement architecture and informal sectors. As a first step in taking on a greater coordination and facilitation role, Australia can support Pacific actors to map who is doing what, where the gaps are and areas for building relationships over the short, medium and long term. This mapping is valuable in of itself and as a crucial pre-investment in future interventions. Through this mapping, relationships with place-based leaders, including emerging and youth leaders, could be forged and best practice examples identified, upscaled and shared between countries.

Implementing a coordinated approach across government

Australia should implement an interlinked domestic and international focus on WPS by providing complementarity and policy coherence across portfolios. Moving to a more cohesive approach to policy and practice, with dedicated leadership and resourcing, will help ensure that the WPS agenda is consistently and systematically applied to all interventions and the WPS agenda is integrated across development, diplomacy, defence and civil society.

Further efforts are needed to strengthen visibility, monitoring and evaluation of WPS activities across government and opportunities for increasing intra-government engagement need to be identified and pursued. This includes allocating targeted funding and resources to allow for joint planning, better coordination and increased collaboration.

All Australian and regional staff sent to the Pacific for assistance in disaster relief and security incidents need to be trained in WPS principles and held accountable for the impact of their work on WPS. A key part of this accountability should be Pacific-led reviews of assistance that prioritise women's experiences. Australia's institutions need to continue to improve on their operationalisation of WPS commitments, including ensuring security service personnel and those they interact with are safe from harassment, violence and discrimination.

The Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D) creates a new dimension in Australia's international policymaking by bringing together the development, diplomacy and defence communities to achieve new insights, develop new ideas and promote strategic collaboration around shared interests. It is a platform for ideas that encourage more integrated statecraft to maximise Australia's ability to influence regional and global developments.