



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

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## Acknowledgement of Country

The National Rural Women's Coalition pays our respects to the ancestors, elders and especially the women that are a part of the longest living civilisation on earth, the First Nation peoples of Australia. We acknowledge their strength and resilience. They are the custodians of the land, and we celebrate together their right to continue with cultural practices on the land and water where they live.

## About the National Rural Women's Coalition

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) is a national advocacy organisation representing women in regional, rural and remote (RRR) Australia. We support policies that enhance gender equity, social inclusion, and economic participation, particularly for women and children in under-resourced areas.

We play a critical role in advancing gender equity in health, education, and economic opportunities for women and children in RRR Australia. The NRWC works to amplify the voices of RRR women, ensuring that their unique challenges, such as limited access to services, geographic isolation, and economic disparities are understood, highlighted and addressed through policy advocacy, emancipatory programs and initiatives. By focusing on intersectional barriers like gender, location, and socio-economic status, the NRWC strengthens RRR women's capacity to influence system change, advocating for gender-responsive policies, and economic empowerment initiatives. This work is crucial because RRR women often face greater inequities and have access to fewer resources than their urban counterparts. The NRWC therefore, engages in targeted action essential to achieving true gender equity and social inclusion across Australia.

The NRWC works tirelessly to address systemic disparities in all aspects of women's lives in RRR Australia. We advocate for women, their children, families and communities arguing that gender is not an incidental label which confines and erodes choice, but it is the result of entrenched power structures that marginalise certain people, especially in RRR communities. Addressing these inequities requires targeted policy interventions that actively dismantle structural oppression and promote meaningful inclusion, ensuring that all women in RRR communities, particularly those historically disadvantaged, have equitable access to resources and opportunities.

The NRWC's member organisations are Australian Local Government Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture, National Rural Health Alliance, Women in Seafood and Transport Women Australia Limited.

## Introduction

The NRWC makes this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for their inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative. Our responses are based on how Australia can better contribute to efforts by the international community in advancing and implementing the agenda of advancing gender equality as an important national security and economic imperative. Primary in our submission, is how rural women need to be a focus of advocacy, policy, action and funding to facilitate available benefits of leveraging gender equality for Australia's national and economic security.

While this submission focuses on foreign policy, Australia needs to model actions domestically that are advocated for internationally. Therefore, the links between foreign and domestic policy have been highlighted throughout our submission.

The NRWC thanks the Minister for Foreign Affairs for the opportunity to provide a submission informed by the lived experience of rural, remote and regional women. We thank these women for sharing their expertise and lived experience to inform this submission.

## Terms of Reference

### 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

Realising gender equality delivers clear economic security and national security benefits by strengthening labour markets, productivity, governance and social cohesion. Global evidence shows that restrictions on women's economic participation impose substantial macroeconomic costs. The World Bank estimates that gender inequality in earnings and labour force participation has resulted in losses of up to USD 160 trillion in global human capital wealth, equivalent to more than twice the world's annual Gross Domestic Product.<sup>1</sup> There is also strong evidence linking gender inequality to conflict and instability, with cross-national studies showing higher levels of gender inequality are associated with increased likelihood of internal conflict and political violence.<sup>2</sup>

These dynamics are particularly pronounced in rural and fragile contexts, where women's unpaid and under recognised labour underpins food security, caregiving and community cohesion, and where exclusion from decision-making deepens poverty and vulnerability.<sup>3</sup> In the Pacific, the security case is especially stark, as the most widespread direct physical security threat for the largest number of people is violence against women and girls, with extremely high prevalence across multiple countries.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank Group. (2018). *Unrealized potential: The high cost of gender inequality in earnings*. World Bank.

<sup>2</sup> Caprioli, M. (2005). Primed for violence: The role of gender inequality in predicting internal conflict. *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(2), 161–178.; Hudson, V. M., Ballif-Spanvill, B., Caprioli, M., & Emmett, C. F. (2012). *Sex and world peace*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>3</sup> UN Women. (2015). *Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

<sup>4</sup> Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D). (2023). *What does it look like for Australia to be a strategic partner on Women, Peace and Security with the Pacific*. Canberra.

For Australia, integrating gender equality across foreign policy is therefore central to advancing both economic and national security objectives. Embedding gender equality across diplomacy, development, climate and security policy enables Australia to address structural drivers of insecurity, including women's exclusion from labour markets, access to resources and leadership, while strengthening regional stability and Australia's credibility as a partner. Australia needs to prioritise rural women's security and livelihoods in Pacific engagement, including targeted support for prevention of gender-based violence, rural justice access, and women's economic participation in agriculture and local markets.<sup>5</sup>

Domestically, Australia must reinforce this approach by addressing persistent gender inequality at home, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities. Improving women's access to secure employment, childcare, transport, healthcare and leadership pathways, and recognising the economic value of unpaid and care work, are essential to demonstrating that Australia is practising the same evidence-based approach it promotes internationally. Without domestic alignment, Australia's advocacy for gender equality as an economic and security imperative risks losing credibility.

### Evidence and data that demonstrates the links between gender equality and economic growth and prosperity, including in food security and labour markets

A substantial body of academic and policy research demonstrates that gender equality is a key driver of economic growth and prosperity, with particularly strong effects in rural economies. OECD modelling finds that closing gender gaps in labour force participation and working hours could increase GDP by 8.8 percent across OECD economies by 2060.<sup>6</sup>

Labour market evidence shows that increasing women's participation and improving job quality raises overall economic output and productivity. These gains are especially important in rural and regional labour markets, where workforce shortages, informal employment and reliance on unpaid labour are common, and where women are more likely to work in insecure, seasonal or unpaid roles.<sup>7</sup> Women account for approximately 43 percent of the agricultural workforce in developing countries, yet have systematically less access to land, inputs, credit and technology.<sup>8</sup> The World Bank estimates that if women farmers had the same access to productive resources as men, farm yields 'could increase in developing countries by as much as 2.5 to 4 percent', while the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations states that 'closing the gender gap in agricultural yields' could reduce global hunger by 'as much as 100-150 million people'.<sup>9</sup> Empirical research further shows that

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<sup>5</sup> AP4D. (2023).

<sup>6</sup> Fluchtman, J., Keese, M., & Adema, W. (2024). *Gender equality and economic growth: Past progress and future potential* (OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 304). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

<sup>7</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2011). *The State of Food and Agriculture: Women in Agriculture — Closing the Gender Gap for Development*. FAO.; World Bank. (2012). *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. World Bank.; International Labour Organization (ILO). (2018). *Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture* (3rd ed.). ILO.

<sup>8</sup> FAO. (2011).

<sup>9</sup> World Bank. (2011). *World development report 2012: Gender equality and development*. World Bank.; FAO. (2011).

women's control over income is associated with improved dietary diversity, nutrition, health and education outcomes, strengthening long-term human capital formation.<sup>10</sup>

In the Pacific, where rural women are central to subsistence agriculture and food systems, climate disasters compound constraints as they disrupt education and women's livelihoods, with long-term consequences for economic growth and food security. For example, Plan International's reports note major disasters impact schooling, such as 72 percent of schools being damaged on Tonga's main island from Cyclone Gita, and 47,500 children impacted across multiple countries during Cyclone Harold, with downstream risks to girls' education and future economic participation.<sup>11</sup>

Domestically, Australia should apply this same evidence to rural and regional labour markets, removing structural barriers that limit women's access to training, secure employment, flexible work and leadership in agriculture and regional industries. Strengthening women's participation in Australian food systems and rural labour markets would improve productivity and resilience while reinforcing the economic case Australia advances internationally.

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

Undermining gender equality entrenches poverty, exclusion and inequality, which are well-established drivers of conflict, instability and displacement.<sup>12</sup> States with higher levels of gender inequality are more likely to experience internal conflict and less likely to sustain peace agreements.<sup>13</sup>

In humanitarian crises and climate disasters, gender inequality heightens exposure to gender-based violence, restricts access to sexual and reproductive health services and undermines recovery. Evidence shows that violence against women and children consistently increases during and after disasters, while responses that fail to integrate gender equality are less effective and more likely to entrench long-term dependency and insecurity.<sup>14</sup> Further, research demonstrates that climate and hydro-meteorological disasters are associated with declines in women's economic and social rights, and life expectancy.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Boserup, E. (1970). *Woman's role in economic development*. George Allen & Unwin.; Anderson, C. L., Reynolds, T. W., Biscaye, P., Patwardhan, V., & Schmidt, C. (2021). Economic benefits of empowering women in agriculture: Assumptions and evidence. *World Development*, 144, 105481.; Gupta, S., Pingali, P., & Pinstrup-Andersen, P. (2023). Women's empowerment and nutrition: A systematic review. *World Development*, 164, 106140.

<sup>11</sup> Plan International Australia & Plan International Pacific. (2024). *Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region* (Submission No. 27).

<sup>12</sup> Caprioli. (2005).; Hudson et al. (2012)

<sup>13</sup> UN Women. (2015).

<sup>14</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). (2017). *Gender handbook for humanitarian action*. IASC.; UN Women. (2020). *From insights to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

<sup>15</sup> Neumayer, E., & Plümpert, T. (2007). The gendered nature of natural disasters: The impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981–2002. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97(3), 551–566.; Eknor Ackzell, A., Cos-Montiel, F., Estrada, M., & Vélez, F. (2025). *The climate-care nexus: Input to the study on care and support, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 54/6* (UNRISD Working Paper 2025-01). United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

For Australia, these dynamics present direct national security risks, particularly in the Pacific. Australia needs to treat violence against women and girls as a core security priority in Pacific partnerships by funding prevention alongside response; strengthen policing and justice systems; invest in survivor-centred services; and support locally trusted pathways (including community-based organisations) while improving state accountability.<sup>16</sup> Further, Australia needs to ensure gender responsive climate action and climate finance.<sup>17</sup>

Australia's responsibility is heightened as it assumes a leadership role as President of the negotiations for COP31 and in partnership with the Pacific will convene a Pacific-focused Pre-COP in 2026. This process, including commitments to the Pacific Resilience Facility, a Pacific-led climate finance mechanism, presents a unique opportunity for Australia to demonstrate leadership, strengthen regional relationships and advance economic and security interests. However, these benefits will be undermined if gender equality, including the needs and leadership of rural women, is not explicitly embedded in climate finance, adaptation and resilience discussions.

Domestically, Australia must also address these risks at home, especially in rural communities where gender-based violence, climate stress and service gaps are acute. Strengthening gender responsive disaster preparedness, violence prevention and access to justice domestically reinforces Australia's authority to advocate for gender responsive security approaches internationally. Australia's prioritisation of climate policies will build trust with the Pacific and demonstrate we are listening to our Pacific neighbourhood's concerns.<sup>18</sup>

### The role of locally led leadership and decision making in advancing gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Locally led leadership and decision making are pivotal to advancing gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities where women often play central but informal roles in peacebuilding, community safety, food security and crisis response. WPS literature demonstrates that peace and security outcomes are more inclusive, legitimate and durable when women with lived experience of local conditions are meaningfully involved in decision-making.<sup>19</sup>

Internationally, Australia should promote locally led partnerships and decision making, particularly by women, as a core component of its foreign policy approach. Evidence shows that peacebuilding, humanitarian and development interventions are more effective and sustainable when women at the community level, including those in local villages and rural settings, are empowered to lead and shape responses.<sup>20</sup> Further, locally led leadership are essential for rural and Indigenous women and women living in climate affected communities. Strengthening women's leadership at village and community level improves early warning, conflict prevention, disaster response and recovery, while reinforcing social cohesion and trust in institutions.<sup>21</sup> This is even more important in the Pacific, which has the lowest

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<sup>16</sup> AP4D. (2023).

<sup>17</sup> Plan International Australia & Plan International Pacific. (2024).

<sup>18</sup> Plan International Australia & Plan International Pacific. (2024).

<sup>19</sup> UN Women. (2015).

<sup>20</sup> UN Women. (2015).; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023). *Inclusive governance and the Women, Peace and Security agenda*. UNDP.

<sup>21</sup> UN Women. (2015).

women's political representation globally, with just 6 percent of parliamentary seats held by women, while women play vital security roles, such as leading peace movements and sustaining food markets.<sup>22</sup>

Australia should do this by prioritising long-term partnerships with women led and community-based organisations, providing flexible and sustained funding, and embedding co-design and shared decision making into peace, security, humanitarian and climate initiatives. Further, structural barriers faced by rural women, such as limited access to services, childcare, transport, leadership networks and secure employment, must be addressed to enable participation on equal terms.

Domestically, Australia needs to demonstrate leadership by strengthening the voice of women in rural communities. Australia has significant progress to make in this area, as it currently ranked 44th out of 153 countries for women's representation in leadership.<sup>23</sup> Locally led initiatives are needed, including local forums, structured consultation, and support for rural women's advocacy and leadership pathways.

### The Australian government's efforts to advance gender equality and the human rights of women and girls across all aspects of foreign policy, defence and national security

The Australian Government has made clear commitments to advancing gender equality and the human rights of women and girls across foreign policy, defence and national security through Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.<sup>24</sup> An Australian development assistance performance target was reintroduced to the Pacific to ensure investments address gender equality, including requiring investments over \$3 million have a gender equality objective.<sup>25</sup>

However, implementation remains uneven, and gender equality is not yet consistently embedded as a core consideration across diplomacy, defence cooperation, climate diplomacy and national security decision-making. Efforts remain over concentrated in development and humanitarian portfolios, rather than integrated into core security, defence or foreign policy decision making.<sup>26</sup> This gap is particularly evident for rural, regional and remote women who face heightened risks yet remain underrepresented in foreign policy and security priorities.<sup>27</sup>

To strengthen Australia's impact, apply the WPS Agenda consistently in security cooperation, including targets for women's participation in security dialogues, policing and justice cooperation, and peace and security programs, as well as invest more heavily in prevention rather than 'protection and participation'.<sup>28</sup> We need to integrate gender equality into strategic security planning and climate diplomacy; strengthening accountability and

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<sup>22</sup> AP4D, 2023

<sup>23</sup> World Economic Forum. (2024). *Global gender gap report 2024*. World Economic Forum.

<sup>24</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). (2023). *Australia's international gender equality strategy*. Australian Government.; Australian Government. (2021). *National action plan on women, peace and security 2021–2031*. Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>25</sup> AP4D. (2023).; DFAT. (2025). *Development cooperation factsheet: Gender equality*. Australian Government.

<sup>26</sup> UN Women. (2015).

<sup>27</sup> UN Women. (2015).

<sup>28</sup> AP4D. (2023).

resourcing for WPS implementation; and ensuring defence and security engagement addresses gendered risks in rural and climate-affected contexts.<sup>29</sup>

Australia should act domestically by embedding WPS objectives across Australia's own institutions, including defence, policing, emergency management.

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

The WPS Agenda provides a critical framework for advancing gender equality, conflict prevention, humanitarian effectiveness and long-term security. Australia has a clear and important role in supporting and implementing this Agenda, as a regional leader in the Pacific and as a country with deep experience of rural, regional and remote contexts. This position gives Australia a unique insight and voice to elevate the perspectives of rural communities, particularly rural women, within international peace and security efforts.

Internationally, Australia should use its leadership in the Pacific and multilateral forums to actively promote locally led WPS implementation, particularly by women at community and village level. Australia should prioritise long-term, flexible support for women led and community-based organisations, recognising their central role in conflict prevention, social cohesion, food security and recovery, especially in rural and climate-affected communities. Australia should also continue to integrate WPS across climate and humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>30</sup>

Domestically, Australia must demonstrate leadership on WPS by strengthening gender equality and women's participation within its own institutions and communities, particularly in rural, regional and remote Australia.

Across both international and domestic contexts, Australia should ensure that WPS implementation moves beyond policy commitments to consistent, well-resourced and accountable practice, with a clear rural and place-based lens.

## Conclusion

Gender equality is fundamental to Australia's economic security, national resilience and regional stability. Excluding women, particularly rural, regional and remote women, from economic participation, leadership and decision-making entrenches insecurity, while integrating gender equality across foreign policy, climate, humanitarian and security frameworks strengthens productivity, social cohesion and crisis preparedness. To be credible internationally, Australia must also address domestic structural barriers and resource locally led, women-driven leadership as a core element of its security and economic strategy.

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<sup>29</sup> DFAT. (2023); UN Women. (2015).

<sup>30</sup> DFAT. (2023).