



CEVAW

ARC Centre of Excellence for the
Elimination of Violence Against Women

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative

Submitted by:

The ARC Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against
Women (CEVAW)

Date:

January 2026



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January 30, 2026

Parliament of Australia: Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Submission to the Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative.

This submission has been prepared by members of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence against Women (CEVAW). The focus of our submission is on providing research evidence of the benefits of gender equality to national security and economic security and the costs of neglecting gender equality in diplomacy, security, trade and development. Our recommendations aim to build on Australia's current international gender equality strategy and prioritise key actions that can be taken to enhance Australia's foreign security, development and trade policymaking and Australia's leadership in the Indo-Pacific region and world.

The submission also provides details of our ARC Centre of Excellence and online Evidence Platform featuring the research that we are leading in Australia and the Indo-Pacific region.

Please find our submission attached to this letter. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further detail to inform the work of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Kind regards,

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Executive Summary

Gender equality is not only a moral imperative; it is a strategic investment in national security, economic resilience and international stability. Evidence shows that societies with greater gender equality experience lower levels of violence, face reduced risks of violent extremism and are better placed to achieve sustainable economic growth. Gender equality is integral to a values-based foreign policy that advances inclusive principles, human rights, racial equality, religious freedom and mutual respect (True and Ernest, 2024).

Australia's commitment to gender equality demands more than the numerical inclusion of women in leadership or institutions. It calls for balancing state sovereignty with human security, rights protection and preventive diplomacy to promote prosperity and avert armed conflict. Gender equality investments strengthen Australia's alliance-building, diplomatic engagement and crisis response.

Why this matters for Australia now: Australia's strategic environment is increasingly shaped by instability in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, climate-related displacement, conflict-related sexual violence, and intensifying competition over values, governance, and influence. Gender equality is not peripheral to these challenges. It is central to Australia's capacity to promote stability, prevent conflict and exercise credible regional leadership.

This submission, prepared by the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEVAW), brings together leading Australian and international researchers across economics, political science and international relations, public health and development studies. Our evidence draws from:

- The Women's Safety Index (WSI), a cross-national measure developed by CEVAW researchers
- Large-scale surveys across Asia-Pacific countries on gender norms and violent extremism
- Research on climate-smart agriculture, food security, and labour markets
- Studies on religious leadership, conflict-related sexual violence, and humanitarian response
- Research with local women's human rights defenders and advocates
- Analysis of Australia's aid effectiveness and diplomatic engagement

Key evidence demonstrates that:

- Gender equality strengthens national and regional security by enhancing crisis resilience, conflict prevention, and institutional stability
- The economic gains of gender equality are substantial: closing gender gaps in employment and working hours could raise GDP per capita by up to 12 per cent over two decades
- Violence against women is a security issue: hostile sexist attitudes are among the strongest predictors of support for violent extremism
- Climate change and humanitarian crises disproportionately affect women and girls, with gender inequality amplifying vulnerability and slowing recovery
- Locally led leadership, including religious and community leadership, plays a critical but under-utilised role in advancing gender equality and preventing violence
- Australia's credibility and influence in the Indo-Pacific depend on demonstrating leadership through evidence-based, gender-responsive foreign, defence and development policy

Summary of Recommendations

1. Economic and National Security Benefits

- 1.1 Integrate gender equality metrics into all national security assessments and foreign policy strategy documents
- 1.2 Establish cross-government coordination mechanisms linking foreign affairs, defence, development, and women's policy
- 1.3 Invest in research and evidence generation on the security implications of gender inequality in the Indo-Pacific
- 1.4 Leverage gender equality as a competitive advantage in regional diplomacy and trade

2. Links Between Gender Equality and Economic Growth

- 2.1 Support women farmers through targeted access to land, credit, technology, and extension services
- 2.2 Invest in closing gender pay gaps across all industries, with particular focus on non-managerial workers
- 2.3 Embed gender-disaggregated data collection as standard practice across economic sectors

3. Security Implications of Undermining Gender Equality

- 3.1 Integrate gender equality into climate adaptation and disaster preparedness
- 3.2 Ensure gender-responsive humanitarian assistance, including sexual and reproductive health services
- 3.3 Establish minimum service packages for sexual and reproductive health at the onset of crises
- 3.4 Support locally led women's organisations as first responders and sources of stability and democracy

4. Locally Led Leadership and Decision-Making

- 4.1 Develop strategic partnerships with religious organisations for gender equality and violence prevention
- 4.2 Support locally defined approaches to conflict-related sexual violence while ensuring survivor protection
- 4.3 Implement digital safety training for women leaders

5. Australian Government Efforts

- 5.1 Increase gender balance in diplomatic appointments
- 5.2 Include civil society and academic representatives in Women, Peace and Security delegations
- 5.3 Work with regional partners on gender-responsive displacement and protection frameworks

6. Women, Peace and Security Agenda

- 6.1 Resource the Australian Women, Peace and Security Coalition
- 6.2 Strengthen implementation of Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security
- 6.3 Invest in Indo-Pacific research on Women, Peace and Security, conflict-related sexual violence, and violent extremism
- 6.4 Support grassroots women's organisations as WPS implementers, including in climate and disaster policy
- 6.5 Support women-led organisations to advocate for rights and safeguard civic space in autocracies

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1. 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

Recommendation 1.1: Integrate gender equality metrics into all national security assessments and foreign policy strategy documents

Gender equality enhances national security in several ways. Research across Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines shows that hostile sexist attitudes toward women and support for violence against women are the factors most strongly associated with support for violent extremism. Individuals who support violence against women are three times more likely to support violent extremism – more than any other factor, including religiosity, age, education, or employment status (Johnston et al., 2020a, 2020b; True and Johnston, 2019). Subsequent research has corroborated these findings (Phelan et al 2025; Rottweiler et al 2025).

The Global Women's Safety Index (WSI) shows that countries with stronger foundations in gender equity, protection, and resource access, experience better outcomes during and after crises. Comparative analysis of Haiti and New Zealand following geophysically similar earthquakes illustrates this dynamic: New Zealand's high baseline WSI score enabled rapid, internally driven recovery, while Haiti's low baseline resulted in prolonged institutional breakdown, increased violence against women, and *dependency on external intervention* (Buchhorn et al., *How Safe are Women?* (2026)).

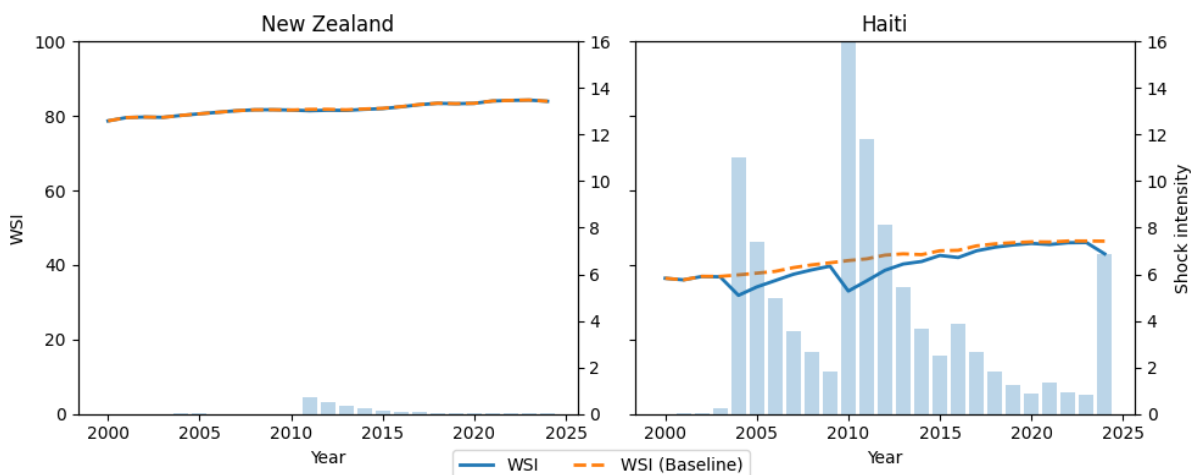


Figure 1: Women's Safety Index in the context of humanitarian crises and climate change (shocks). Haiti experienced severe shocks including conflict in 2004 (affecting 91% of the population) and the 2010 earthquake (affecting 34%), while New Zealand experienced a comparable earthquake in 2011 affecting 6% of the population. Despite similar shock magnitude, different WSI impacts, and recovery trajectories reflect underlying crisis resilience by country.

Recommendation 1.2: Establish cross-government coordination mechanisms linking departments responsible for foreign affairs, defence, development, and women's policy

Countries with higher gender equality tend to have stronger governance, greater institutional credibility, and are more attractive to investors and trading partners. WSI data shows positive associations between gender equity scores and trade openness across Asia-Pacific economies.

Between 2011 and 2015, Australia successfully integrated gender programming into foreign policy through investments in women's leadership and the first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012–18), contributing to successful bids for UN Security Council membership (2013–14) and UN Human Rights Council membership (2018–20) (True and Ernest, 2024). This demonstrates the tangible benefits to Australia's international role and reputation of coordinated whole-of-government approaches to gender equality in foreign policy.

Recommendation 1.3: Invest in research and evidence generation on the security implications of gender inequality in the Indo-Pacific region

The Indo-Pacific region is under-examined in research on gender inequality and security. A scoping review of 203 studies examining the impact of social, political, and environmental events on violence against women in the Indo-Pacific region between 1993 and 2024 found that only seven countries (of 46) informed the most studies, and these were not necessarily the countries most affected by these events (Stenger et al., 2025).

Localised research on the impacts of crises on violence against women is urgently needed to inform gender-responsive policies that can enhance preparedness and protection in the most affected communities. Australia is well-positioned to lead this research agenda given its regional presence and research excellence.

Recommendation 1.4: Leverage gender equality as a competitive advantage in regional diplomacy and trade negotiations

Australia's values-based foreign policy, emphasising gender equality and human rights protections, provides significant soft power advantages in the Indo-Pacific region. The prioritisation of aid-based Pacific engagement, including programmes such as Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (2010–22, AU\$320 million), has distinguished Australia in the context of Chinese competition for regional influence. Chinese aid to the Pacific does not include dedicated bilateral programmes to advance women's rights (Johnson-Freese and True 2021; UN Women, 2016; True and Ernest, 2024).

Failing to recognise the powerful influence of gender equality as a source of soft power and competitive advantage in the Indo-Pacific region risks undermining Australia's foreign policy objectives. Sustained investment in gender equality programming and clear messaging about Australia's commitment to gender equality strengthens its diplomatic positioning and regional influence.

2. Evidence and Data that Demonstrates the Links Between Gender Equality and Economic Growth and Prosperity, Including in Food Security and Labour Markets

Recommendation 2.1: Support women farmers through targeted access to land, credit, technology, and extension services

Equalising women's access to agricultural resources could increase yields on women-managed farms by 20–30%, raise total agricultural output by 2.5–4%, and reduce global malnutrition by 12–17% (FAO, 2011). More recent estimates suggest that improving gender equality throughout agrifood systems could generate US\$1 trillion in global GDP and enhance food security for 45 million people (FAO, 2023).

CEVAW research demonstrates that gender differences in risk preferences and access to resources significantly shape adoption of climate-smart agriculture. Female farmers tend to adopt lower-risk, lower-return practices, while men more often adopt higher-return technologies, with disparities driven by differences in education, access to land, information, and decision-making power (Hailemariam et al., 2024; 2025). Addressing these structural inequalities is critical to enabling women to participate fully in climate-resilient agrifood systems.

Recommendation 2.2: Invest in closing gender pay gaps across all industries, with particular focus on non-managerial workers

The OECD shows that closing gender gaps in employment and working hours could raise GDP per capita by up to 12% over two decades, largely by improving productivity and making better use of skills across the economy (OECD, 2023; André et al., 2023).

In Australia, the gender pay gap has declined from 27.4% in 2015 to 22.8% in 2022, but progress has plateaued. Industry-level patterns reveal uneven progress: sectors with initially larger managerial pay gaps experienced the greatest reductions from 2019 to 2022, while gaps among non-managerial workers generally improved far more slowly and, in some cases, widened (Duncan et al., 2023; Duncan et al., 2025).

CEVAW research shows that behavioural factors, including gender differences in risk preferences and negotiation propensity, contribute significantly to wage gaps. In Vietnam, these factors alone account for nearly one-third of the unexplained portion of wage disparities between men and women (Maitra et al., 2021).

Recommendation 2.3: Embed gender-disaggregated data collection as standard practice across economic sectors

Research shows that only a minority of governments routinely collect and publish sex- and gender-disaggregated data during health emergencies, including data on infection, mortality, economic impacts, and access to essential services (Wenham et al., 2020; Azcona et al., 2020). This data gap limits governments' ability to design effective crisis responses and obscures the unequal impacts of policy decisions on women and men.

During recent health emergencies, including COVID-19, the absence of gender-disaggregated data contributed to crisis responses that unintentionally increased women's economic insecurity, heightened the risk of gender-based violence, and disrupted access to sexual and reproductive

healthcare. These effects were particularly pronounced when non-pharmaceutical interventions such as physical distancing measures and local lockdowns were introduced.

Embedding gender-disaggregated data collection as standard practice would enable more targeted, gender-responsive decision-making during crises. Evidence indicates that when governments understand how containment measures affect women differently, they are better positioned to mitigate economic harm, maintain access to essential health services, and reduce secondary security risks associated with violence and instability (Wenham et al., 2020).

3. The International and National Security Implications of Undermining Gender Equality, Including in the Context of Humanitarian Crises and Climate Change

Recommendation 3.1: Integrate gender equality into climate adaptation and disaster preparedness

The CEVAW Global Women's Safety Index shows that gender equality underpins safety and shapes how states absorb shocks, respond to crises, and recover over time. Where gender equality is weak, crises are more likely to trigger forced displacement, institutional breakdown, dependency on external intervention, and increased rates of violence against women (Buchhorn et al 2026).

Climate change amplifies these risks by increasing the frequency and intensity of shocks, particularly in fragile and resource-constrained settings. CEVAW research demonstrates that extreme drought significantly increases sexual violence against adolescent girls and young women across multiple countries (Hertzog et al., 2025), and that natural disasters increase acceptance of intimate partner violence (Mavisakalyan et al., 2024).

Recommendation 3.2: Ensure gender-responsive humanitarian assistance, including sexual and reproductive health services

Research demonstrates that only a minority of governments collect and share basic, disaggregated sex and gender data on cases of infectious disease, and that non-pharmaceutical interventions (physical distancing, lockdowns) have gendered economic impacts, increase risk of gender-based violence, and reduce access to sexual and reproductive healthcare (Wenham et al., 2020).

During COVID-19 across the Asia-Pacific region, there was a 'patriarchal reset' exacerbating women's health and care labour burdens and heightening physical violence against women (Johnston et al., 2023). Women experienced increased rates of gender-based violence, reduced access to reproductive health services, and increased income insecurity.

Recommendation 3.3: Establish minimum service packages for sexual and reproductive health at the onset of crises

A scoping review of 203 studies examining the impact of social, political, and environmental events on violence against women in the Indo-Pacific region between 1993 and 2024 found that health emergencies (particularly COVID-19), armed conflict, and earthquakes consistently heighten all forms of violence against women, especially domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and sexual violence (Stenger et al., 2025).

In Haiti following the 2010 earthquake, women experienced increased rates of intimate partner and sexual violence in the years following the disaster, displacement heightened exposure to harm, and recovery efforts were undermined by weak governance and widespread impunity, including abuses by humanitarian personnel (Weitzman and Behrman, 2016; The Guardian 2018; True 2013).

Policymakers should take three urgent steps during health emergencies when non-pharmaceutical interventions are used: ensure contraceptives are freely available; permit medical abortions at home with online clinical support; and implement a minimum initial service package for sexual and reproductive health to be implemented at the start of every humanitarian crisis including access to contraception, obstetric and newborn care, and safe abortion care (Wenham et al., 2020).

Recommendation 3.4: Support locally led women's organisations as first responders and sources of stability and democracy

Comparative analysis of Haiti and New Zealand following comparable seismic shocks (see Recommendation 1.1) demonstrates the importance of pre-existing gender equality foundations. New Zealand's high baseline WSI score enabled domestic violence services and women's shelters to operate as essential services during the disaster, supported by effective governance, social cohesion, and disaster planning (Collins, 2006; Houghton, 2009). Recovery was rapid and largely internalised.

Local women often detect early warning signs of conflicts and crises in their communities. However, they experience challenges in participating in or leading crisis prevention (ASEAN 2025; CEVAW-The Asia Foundation 2026). Traditional gender norms may undermine their confidence and knowledge to engage with security challenges and become agents of change in their communities.

4. The Role of Locally-Led Leadership and Decision-Making in Advancing Gender Equality and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Recommendation 4.1: Develop strategic partnerships with religious organisations for gender equality and violence prevention

Religious organisations play a significant role in shaping gender equality norms because religion influences beliefs, behaviours and social structures related to gender and sexuality.

CEVAW research analysing Pope Francis's speeches on violence against women from 2013–2022 shows that religious leaders can influence attitudes toward gender-based violence at scale. The study examined all 1,812 papal speeches and their impact across 64 countries, finding that increased exposure to the Pope's statements correlates with significantly lower acceptance of violence against women among Catholic populations globally. The study identifies two key mechanisms: the Pope's speeches make religiosity more salient among Catholics, strengthening adherence to moral values condemning violence, and within days of Pope Francis condemning violence against women, Google Trends data reveal dramatic spikes in searches for 'violence women', 'abuse', and 'sexual abuse' (Mavisakalyan et al., 2025). The findings suggest that incorporating faith-based voices into violence prevention strategies could significantly enhance their effectiveness, particularly in communities with strong religious identity.

Research on Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar demonstrates that religious beliefs, teachings, and institutions play a critical yet ambivalent role in shaping gender-based violence and gender equality norms. While Buddhist doctrines are frequently mobilised to justify gender hierarchies, religious institutions also function as trusted community spaces where women seek support. Buddhist temples and religious leaders hold significant moral authority, making them powerful actors in either reinforcing or challenging harmful norms (Stenger and True, 2024).

Recent research in the Australian Christianity context demonstrates how gender inequality norms present in doctrines, theological teachings, and leadership hierarchies contribute to gender-based violence, particularly intimate partner violence. However, religious organisations in Australia are increasingly eager to take up key evidence and learnings regarding gender equality and are seeking ways to translate gender inclusiveness into their faith-based communities (Wendt and Clarke, 2024; CEVAW, 2025).

The Australian government has focused on supporting and funding women's rights organisations, which is valuable. However, there has been less focus on engaging with religious organisations, which are extremely influential in shaping gender equality norms and represent a key audience ready to translate evidence to their faith-based communities. Strategic partnerships with religious organisations, combined with capacity building for religious leaders through evidence-based advocacy training, can expand the reach and effectiveness of gender equality programming.

Building on this evidence, CEVAW is conducting a large-scale randomised controlled trial in Indonesia testing how gender-norms training delivered by different types of local leaders can shift attitudes and reduce intimate partner violence.

Recommendation 4.2: Support locally defined approaches to gender-based violence and insecurity including conflict-related sexual violence while ensuring survivor protection

In 2025 the Australian government provided support to CEVAW to convene over 200 delegates attended the 'Justice Denied: Fighting Widespread Impunity for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)' Conference on 2-3 June 2025, the first international conference specifically addressing the persistence of CRSV in the Indo-Pacific region (CEVAW, 2025b). The conference connected global dialogue on CRSV prevention and survivor-centred responses with the current state of CRSV survivor-centred care and justice in the Indo-Pacific region. CRSV is on the rise despite the international commitments made to address it. Impunity for this violence was already too high in fragile and conflict settings. Yet, safe and accessible supports to survivors are diminishing rather than being expanded.

The Indo-Pacific is a focal point for CRSV learning, activism, and lived experience. Conference participants identified priority actions that represent their commitment to ensure survivor-centred rights, care, dignity, justice and agency across the region. To prevent CRSV, recognising and supporting programs that address social norms, *in partnership with the local rights organisations* is vital. To respond to CRSV, prioritising the distribution and delivery of survivor-centred trauma-informed safe, accessible and inclusive care services while establishing survivor-centred and trauma-informed documentation and investigative processes that involve local organisations is crucial. Australia has an opportunity to invest in research and programs that explore novel documentation and investigation practices that do not endanger, stigmatise or require survivors to repeatedly relive their experiences.

CEVAW research examining conflict-related sexual violence in Papua New Guinea (PNG) reveals the importance of context-specific understanding that is locally owned and defined. While local tribal conflicts exacerbate risks of sexual and gender-based violence, there is limited understanding of how to address these connections. There is danger and uncertainty of

consequences in labelling incidents of sexual and gender-based violence as conflict-related, but there are serious ongoing security, humanitarian, and resource consequences for victim-survivors and those who seek to aid them. The research documents local practices of prevention, response, and documentation being carried out by PNG actors, often at great danger to themselves (Oo et al 2026).

The experience of Myanmar further underscores the importance of locally defined, context-sensitive approaches to conflict-related sexual violence. Since the 2021 military coup, sexual and gender-based violence has been documented in conditions of warfare, protracted conflict, and post-coup repression, where violence operates as a 'message crime' directed at communities rather than isolated individuals. However, as Oo (2025) cautions, labelling these crimes as conflict-related sexual violence can be politically contentious and may heighten risks for survivors, first responders, and civil society organisations operating under conditions of surveillance, retaliation, and impunity. Not all state actors recognise such violence as CRSV, and external labelling may undermine survivor-centred approaches or constrain locally appropriate responses. At the same time, failure to recognise the conflict-related nature of these crimes has serious security, humanitarian, and resource consequences, including barriers to accessing safe care, documentation, and protection.

Supporting locally led prevention, response, and documentation efforts in Myanmar therefore requires careful navigation of political sensitivities while prioritising survivor safety, community trust, and the protection of those working at great personal risk.

CEVAW survey analysis of security challenges in Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia and Laos finds systematic gender gaps in knowledge and confidence to respond to security challenges. Men consistently report higher perceived knowledge than women with the gap more pronounced in Laos than Cambodia in knowing how to *prevent* security challenges, rather than in general awareness of risks. Significantly, survey results from Cambodia show higher knowledge scores among women, particularly regarding the prevention of insecurity and violence, indicating that locally embedded WPS programming can make a difference to gender inequality in access to information.

Across both countries men consistently report greater confidence than women in engaging with security initiatives. This pattern reflects a gender divide in perceived security preparedness and authority. Qualitative research findings illuminate this gap: Women are highly active in everyday security practices where they mediate family disputes, mobilise communities, early-warn and monitor risks. Yet leadership and enforcement, particularly in "hard" security responses, such as patrols, arrests, and engagement with higher authorities, remain male-dominated. Gender inequality has an impact on the effective and timely security responses affecting regional stability and peace (CEVAW 2025-26 <https://asiafoundation.org/program/womens-empowerment/womens-rights-and-personal-security/amplify/>).

Research on Afghanistan provides key lessons on the failure of approaches to gender equality that are not locally embedded, and the importance of Australian support for Afghan women's civil society at all levels. Afghanistan under the Taliban rule since August 2021 represents the world's most severe form of gender oppression, also termed as 'gender apartheid' (Akbari and True 2022). The near-total exclusion of women and girls from public life, education, employment, and political participation has been accompanied by the collapse of formal protection institutions and accountability mechanisms. Systematic conflict-related sexual violence, early and forced marriage, trafficking, and economic exploitation are exacerbated by this institutional vacuum, while survivors are left with little to no access to justice, services, or protection (United Nations 2025). For Australian Foreign Policy, Afghanistan poses both a ongoing regional security challenge and a

critical test of gender equality commitments. Humanitarian assistance through international organisations is deemed ineffective, as the Taliban have diverged aid, and strictly monitor and influence the works of international organisations (Al Jazeera 2023).

Australian foreign policy should therefore prioritise support for locally defined approaches to addressing conflict-related sexual violence while ensuring survivor protection. This requires flexible, long-term funding; protection-centred engagement with informal and diaspora-based organisations; and recognition of Afghan women's leadership as central to gender equality and security. Learning from Australian and other NATO and donor countries presence in Afghanistan means shifting from symbolic inclusion of women to meaningful political solidarity with them, supporting Afghan women's civil society at all levels as architects of peace, justice, and collective security (Akbari and True 2025).

Recommendation 4.3: Implement digital safety training for women leaders

Efforts to advance gender equality in locally led leadership must also address technology-facilitated gender-based violence and violence against women in politics, which undermine efforts to achieve gender parity in leadership. These forms of abuse disproportionately target women in positions of power, creating an environment that discourages women from taking on public or forward-facing roles.

The Pacific region experiences particularly low numbers of women in political leadership, with technology-facilitated abuse contributing to this pattern. Examples from Fiji demonstrate how image-based sexual abuse targets women in politics (Quilty and Flynn, 2025).

Violence targeted at women parliamentarians is prevalent across the Indo-Pacific region and threatens democracy and women's equal participation. For instance, a recent study in Indonesia found that the more visible women become in parliaments, the more explicit and violent the resistance they face (Valerisha and Davies 2026). Australia could support Southeast Asian partners to create suitable policies and mechanisms aimed at preventing violence against women parliamentarians, both online and offline, and building safer, more inclusive political environments for women in leadership in our region.

Building on initiatives introduced elsewhere, such as the International Development Research Centre's pilot training in Jordan, Australia should equip newly appointed women leaders with digital safety and resilience skills.

5. 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

Recommendation 5.1: Increase gender balance in diplomatic appointments

By the end of 2020, women had yet to be appointed as ambassadors to four of the ten largest overseas posts: the United States, United Kingdom, Indonesia, and Thailand (True and Ernest, 2024). Gender-balanced leadership in advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and gender equality norms is essential for Australia's credibility and effectiveness in promoting these values internationally.

Analysis using the Global Women’s Safety Index (WSI) is consistent with a positive association between higher women’s safety scores and higher official development assistance (ODA) per capita for the 50 largest aid recipients globally. Countries with stronger women’s safety outcomes tend to be situated in contexts where per-capita aid levels are higher, consistent with the idea that higher per-capita aid can support investments in institutions, social services, and gender-focused programmes (Buchhorn et al., 2026). Australia should continue to prioritise gender-responsive development cooperation.

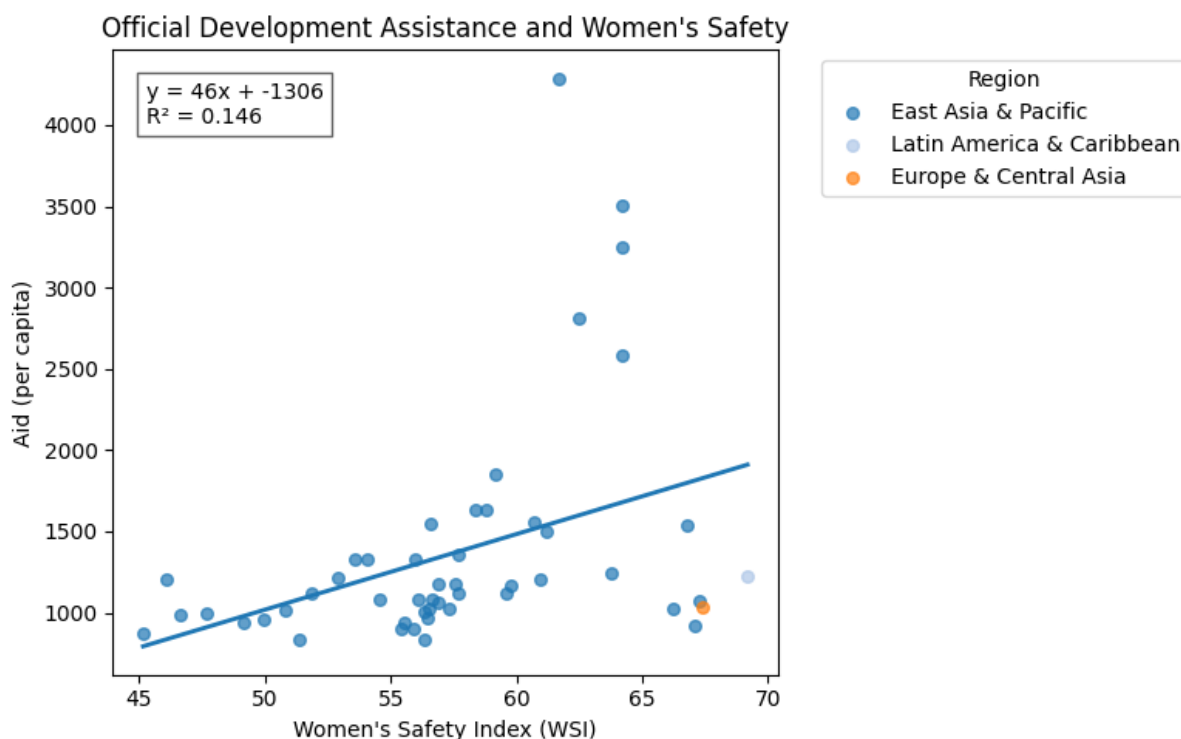


Figure 2: Official Development Assistance (ODA) per capita and Women's Safety Index (WSI) scores.

Recommendation 5.2: Include civil society, diaspora and academic representatives in Women, Peace and Security delegations

Unlike other countries, especially in Europe (Norway, Sweden and Germany), the United Kingdom and Canada, Australia does not send academics or civil society representatives to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Focal Point Network for international forums, despite their advocacy and knowledge base. This limits opportunities to expand Australia's foreign policy and international leadership.

The historical underrepresentation of women in the security sector has led to gender bias in law enforcement and an emphasis on hard security approaches to preventing conflict and crises. If women are economically and politically empowered, given space, and encouraged to take active roles in conflict and crisis prevention, the gains for communities and their social cohesion can be significant (True and Eddyono. 2021; CEVAW-The Asia Foundation 2026). Some of the most repressive situations in the Indo-Pacific region provide support for this argument. An extreme example is the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan under the Taliban’s gender oppressive rule, demands a rethinking of diplomacy through the lens of gender apartheid that has eroded all global norms. For Australia’s, the central question is not whether to recognise the Taliban, but how to practice principled diplomacy that

gives voice to Afghan women as political actors, and supports their capacity to drive incremental, ground-up change for women's peace and security.

As research demonstrates, the failure of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan has been structural (Akbari and True 2025; 2024). International efforts, both during the Republic era and since the Taliban's return, have privileged elite, state-centric institutions and externally measurable indicators, while sidelining locally defined security priorities and women's political agency. This approach underestimated the resilience, leadership, and strategic knowledge embedded within Afghan women's civil society, including in exile and diasporas.

Despite unprecedented repression, a resilient WPS network of diverse Afghan women persists on the ground, in the Australian diaspora and across the region. These women lead underground education initiatives, informal employment networks, and transnational advocacy documenting gender persecution and redefining insecurity through lived experience (End Gender Apartheid 2025; True and Akbari 2024). They require political support and material resources to maintain basic services and advocate for gender-equal participation and protection.

Recommendation 5.3: Work with regional partners on gender-responsive displacement and protections frameworks

The situation relating to displacement and trafficking in the Asia-Pacific region is at risk of increasing due to conflict in Myanmar, increased securitisation of borders, and aid funding cuts from the international community leading to severe food insecurity in Bangladesh and cuts to essential services, particularly for gender and reproductive health. The US suspension of refugee resettlement means refugees in Malaysia, Bangladesh, and other countries are without durable solutions (D'Costa and Bell, research in progress).

For refugee women in camps and in urban/rural settings, preliminary findings indicate that living in protracted displacement with no access to rights and protections results in high risk of extortion, including coercion and survival sex, greater stress and financial pressure on the household resulting in greater risk of domestic and family violence, and increased xenophobia fuelling harassment from host community members and targeting by police.

Australia has a crucial part to play in responding, managing, and rectifying the displacement of people in the region, particularly in contexts where displacement has occurred through persecution and conflict. Displacement is only going to worsen with the increased risk of climate-induced displacement.

6. The Women, Peace and Security Agenda Internationally and Australia's Role in Promoting and Implementing It

Recommendation 6.1: Resource the Australian Women, Peace and Security Coalition

Australia should take a lead in the region and globally in supporting grassroots, community-led women's initiatives that promote empowerment, capacity building, dignity, and safety. Evidence-based policy implementation is essential in a context of rising autocracy and anti-gender foreign policy globally.

Civil society organisations play a crucial role in implementing Women, Peace and Security principles at local and national levels. Adequate resourcing enables these organisations to

participate effectively in international forums, conduct evidence-based advocacy, implement programmes, and hold governments accountable to their WPS commitments. As detailed in Recommendation 5.2, strengthening civil society participation in WPS governance expands Australia's leadership role and enhances the effectiveness of WPS implementation.

Recommendation 6.2: Strengthen implementation of Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

In 2016, Australia prioritised gender equality and women's empowerment in multilateral diplomacy, aid and development, and security engagements as part of Australian foreign policy. Australia's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021–2031 outlines a whole-of-government approach developed in consultation with civil society.

However, implementation requires robust monitoring and accountability. Australia's involvement in the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) and commitment to end sexual and gender-based violence in the Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan positions it for a crucial role in humanitarian support, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. This will be particularly important as Australia seeks to demonstrate leadership in multilateral security forums (Davies and True, 2024; Oo, 2025).

To prevent CRSV: Commit to WPS National and Regional Action Plans to identify clear mechanisms and lines of responsibility for CRSV monitoring and reporting.

Recommendation 6.3: Invest in research on Women, Peace and Security, conflict-related sexual violence, and violent extremism

Building on the broader crisis and security research gap identified in Recommendation 1.3, targeted investment is needed in Women, Peace and Security (WPS) research in the Indo-Pacific, particularly on conflict-related sexual violence and the prevention of violent extremism. In the past decade alone, acts of sexual and gender-based violence have occurred in the Indo-Pacific in association with warfare (Afghanistan and Myanmar), protracted conflict (Myanmar, Kashmir), political fragility (Bangladesh, India and Pakistan), violent extremism (the Philippines), post-coup violence (Myanmar), inter-group violence (Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands), and crimes against humanity (North Korea) (Davies and True, 2024; Eds. 2019).

Australia is well-positioned to lead this research agenda given its regional presence, research excellence (as demonstrated by CEVAW's work on the links between misogyny and violent extremism detailed in Recommendation 1.1, and the scoping review findings detailed in Recommendation 1.3), and strategic interest in regional security and stability.

Recommendation 6.4: Support grassroots women's organisations as WPS implementers, including in climate and disaster policy

Building on the well-established evidence that climate shocks heighten risks of sexual and other forms of violence against women (see Recommendation 3.1), Women, Peace and Security implementation must be integrated into climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction policy.

Climate change amplifies security risks by increasing the frequency and intensity of shocks. CEVAW research demonstrates that extreme drought significantly increases sexual violence against adolescent girls and young women across multiple countries (Hertzog et al., 2025). Women are more vulnerable to infection as frontline health care workers or carers in the family and community, and women's burdens grow as they take on additional care burdens within the family during crises.

Grassroots women's organisations often act as first responders in crisis situations and have deep understanding of community needs and contexts. Supporting these organisations strengthens the implementation of Women, Peace and Security principles at the local level where impact is most directly felt.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this submission demonstrates that gender equality is integral to Australia's national security, economic prosperity, and regional influence. Where gender inequality persists, the risks are clear: weakened crisis resilience, heightened violence and extremism, greater displacement, and reduced economic productivity. Conversely, investment in gender equality delivers measurable economic returns, strengthens institutions, and supports more effective prevention of conflict and crisis.

For Australia, advancing gender equality through foreign policy, defence engagement, development cooperation, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda is both a strategic necessity and a comparative advantage. Australia's research capability, regional partnerships, and established policy frameworks position it to lead on evidence-based, locally informed approaches that enhance stability and security in the Indo-Pacific.

At a time of rising geopolitical competition, climate risk, and global backlash against gender equality, sustained and coordinated action is required. Integrating gender equality across national security assessments, humanitarian responses, diplomacy, and research investment will strengthen Australia's capacity to respond to emerging threats and to promote a more stable, prosperous region.

CEVAW stands ready to support the Committee through further evidence, expert testimony, and research collaboration, and welcomes continued engagement to inform policy settings that advance Australia's strategic interests through gender equality.

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Appendix A: Unpublished Research

Data & Policy (2025), xx:xx 1–44

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

How Safe are Women? Constructing a Cross-National Index on the Foundations of Women's Safety

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Keywords: safety; Index; equity; protection; resources; disaster; conflict; intimate partner violence; violence against women

Abstract

This paper introduces the Women's Safety Index (WSI), outlining its rationale, purpose, and potential applications. The Index consists of three dimensions: Equity, Protection, and Resources, identified as foundational to women's safety. Key indicators within each dimension are selected based on theoretical relevance and empirical evidence. We detail the statistical methodology and framework used to construct the Index and present validation analyses demonstrating its ability to capture changes in women's safety, particularly in response to external disruptions. The WSI is available on an interactive digital platform, enabling users to explore, visualize, and compare women's safety data across regions and over time.

Policy Significance Statement

Efforts to prevent violence against women (VAW) are often constrained by limited prevalence data, leaving policymakers without a comprehensive picture of women's safety. By shifting focus from incident-based measures to the societal and structural conditions that underpin safety, the Women's Safety Index (WSI) offers a new way to assess protective environments across time and countries. Integrating indicators of these foundational conditions with data on conflict and disaster exposure allows for a more nuanced understanding of how crises disrupt women's safety. This composite approach supports longitudinal and cross-national comparison, helping identify patterns, gaps, and progress in VAW prevention. The WSI provides policymakers, researchers, and advocates with a practical tool to monitor resilience, target interventions, and strengthen the systems that protect women before violence occurs.

Full manuscript not yet published.

About CEVAW

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEVAW) is a seven-year initiative (2024–2030) that brings together leading researchers, policy makers, practitioners and lived experience experts to build the evidence base needed to prevent and eliminate violence against women.

CEVAW's research program spans prevention, systems reform, justice responses and the evaluation of interventions. The Centre is committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, incorporating lived experience expertise, and translating research into policy and practice impact.

Website: <https://www.cevaw.org/>

Evidence Platform: <https://www.cevaw-evidence.org/>

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Suggested citation:

CEVAW (2026). Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative. ARC Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

<https://doi.org/10.26180/31175383>