Submission

Gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative

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Acknowledgements

The National Women's Alliances acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future. We value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on country. This land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. We acknowledge that Australian governments have been complicit in the entrenched disadvantage, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead the design and delivery of services that affect them for better life outcomes to be achieved.

About WwWA

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) represents two key portfolios: National Women's Safety (NWS) and National Women's Equality (NWE). The WwWA connects the critical areas of gender-based violence prevention and the advancement of women's economic equality and leadership, bridging these important policy fields for greater impact. We work with members and stakeholders, including the Australian Government, to provide expertise and advice on gender equality and women's safety.

About NATSIWA

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) is the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia. The leadership team of Directors are Indigenous women each representing States and Territory across Australia. NATSIWA is funded by the Australian Government to bring together the issues and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's organisations and individuals across Australia.

About AMWA

The Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance (AMWA) is led by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), the national peak body representing

Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in partnership with Settlement Services International (SSI) and Media Diversity Australia (MDA). The Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance is the national voice for multicultural women. AMWA advocates for gender equity, representation, and inclusion across all facets of Australian society. Our work is informed by lived experiences, community insights, and evidence-based research to ensure that systemic barriers are addressed, and opportunities for women are unlocked. As an intersectional alliance, we aim to empower women from all multicultural backgrounds to thrive and contribute fully to Australia's prosperity.

About NRWC

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.

About WWDA

Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) is the National Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) and National Women's Alliance (NWA) for women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities in Australia. WWDA is governed, run, led, staffed by, and constituted of, women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities. Our organisation operates as a transnational human rights organisation - meaning that our work, and the impact of our work, extends beyond Australia. WWDA's work is grounded in a human-rights based framework which links gender and disability issues to a full range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Preface

The Alliances appreciate that this inquiry takes place at a time of deep community anxiety and heightened national security challenges. While gender is our remit, we understand it is not the sole consideration in the current environment, however, research has demonstrated that men with more misogynistic beliefs are more likely to express intentions to commit or support violent extremist acts and are more willing to engage in interpersonal violence and violence against women.[1] This makes a gendered lens to national security even more significant.

This submission reflects our long-term commitment to eliminating gender inequality and gender-based violence.

Executive Summary

> *"Gender decides who goes to war and who does not; who is a victim and who is not; who is peaceful and who is not; and who is legitimate within the security discipline and who is not." 2*

The formalised security sector in Australia is significantly gendered, with women making up only 20% of the Defence force in 2021-22. [3] Globally, formal peacekeeping forces remain male-dominated, with women concentrated in junior positions and excluded from senior roles.[4] In particular, women with disabilities are almost entirely absent from crisis governance structures,[5] and few feel represented in leadership at all.[6]

While we recognise efforts that have increased representation from previous years, progress reports[7] on Australia's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2031 (WPS),[8] notably delivered over a year late, lack clear metrics for success. Women's participation is often reported as attendance numbers, without assessing actual outcomes. While gender advisor roles have been designed with the intention to bring gender perspectives into planning and operations, persistent gaps in mandate, resourcing, and training,[9] combined with a lack of performance evaluations, means impact is far from realised. Within the defence sector, responsibility for gender, peace and security has largely been absorbed into human resources rather than embedded in operational decision-making[10] - treating gender as an internal compliance matter and not strategy for peacekeeping and global stability.

However, achieving gender equality in the staffing of the peacekeeping sector will do little if it is not accompanied by a widening of our understanding of national security, which has, in Australia, long been understood through a patriarchal lens. In this framing, women –

especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, migrant and refugee women, women with disability, women living in rural, regional, and remote areas, and other marginalised groups – are largely construed as victims needing protection rather than active contributors. Historically, this logic has justified limits on women's rights. An 1891 editorial, for instance, argued women's suffrage would destroy the family – the "basement of all forms of national security" - and should therefore be resisted.[11] Similar attitudes persist today.

Australian women do not experience 'security' in any sense of the word while they also experience high rates of violence and poverty. Achieving security should mean that all Australians, including women, experience safety and economic security as the norm. And yet, women in Australia are exposed to alarming levels of domestic, family and sexual violence, homelessness and poverty. This is particularly true for migrant and refugee women, rural, regional and remote women, women with disabilities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who all respectively experience heightened insecurity, social fragmentation, service limitations, and workforce shortages. Further, each of these cohorts play critical roles in addressing national security challenges, including in food security, agricultural production, disaster response and community cohesion.

This submission recommends ensuring an alignment of domestic and international gender equality strategies, addressing place-based inequalities, developing a gender-responsive migration framework that aims to achieve economic security and safety for migrant and refugee women, legislating a federal human rights act, and supporting community-led solutions to threats to national security including gender-based violence, inadequate labour regulations and climate change.

Alignment of Domestic and International Gender Equality Strategies

Australia's domestic and international gender strategies are poorly aligned, weakening both policy coherence and practical outcomes. National frameworks such as the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032* prioritise safety and economic participation and increasingly recognise intersectional factors. Thus far, these initiatives operate largely in isolation from the WPS agenda. Such separation limits accountability and cross-border learning, reducing the impact of Australia's gender equality efforts.

Integrating a human security approach into future WPS reviews would help close this divide, ensuring that aspects like gender-based violence, caring responsibilities, climate preparedness, and economic conditions are treated as core peace and security issues. Reforming Australia's WPS framework as part of a wider gender-impact assessment of national security policy would drive more coordinated action, strengthening equality and

resilience at home and abroad. This reforming process should promote co-design through locally lead women's voices, partnerships and leadership.

Australian Human Rights Act

Legislating a federal human rights act in Australia

Australia is in urgent need of a national Human Rights Act that will prevent human rights violations and provide mechanisms for complaint and reform when injustices occur. A statement led by Women with Disabilities Australia and jointly signed by all 12 DROs (Disability Representative Organisations), explicitly calls for a national Human Rights Act, following evidence from the Disability Royal Commission showing systemic abuse, lack of accountability and failures of existing anti-discrimination law to prevent harm.

Our members have raised the following concerns in relation to human rights violations impacting women within Australia.

Overincarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are the fastest growing cohort of Australia's prison population,[12] imprisoned at more than 20 times the rate of non-Indigenous women and often subject to harsher penalties for minor, non-violent offences.[13] In 2024, there were over 468,000 Indigenous females imprisoned in Australia – a 20% increase from the previous year.[14] Such high incarceration rates are not a reflection of the character of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, but of the legacy of colonialism: a reflection of high rates of homelessness, family violence, poverty, and inadequate access to essential services. To date, Australia has failed to address these social drivers of incarceration. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap has stipulated a 15% reduction in the incarceration rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, a target that is not gender specific and is not on track to be met by 2031.[15]

Upon release from incarceration, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are sometimes not adequately supported to find stable accommodation, healthcare or sustainable employment opportunities. Recidivism can occur due to these systemic failures, perpetuating intergenerational trauma and community disruption. As disadvantage and distrust grows, disengagement from institutions heightens, eroding social cohesion and mutual legitimacy on which domestic sovereignty depends.

Housing crisis

Australia's housing system is failing to meet its objectives of quantity, diversity, and resilience,[16] contributing to growing economic insecurity among women.

Women experience far greater housing stress than men – they pay a higher share of income in rent, are less likely to own a home, and are overrepresented among low-income renters. More than half of low-income renters experience ongoing rental stress,[17] while fewer than 2% of available properties are affordable for essential workers in feminised sectors such as hospitality, early childhood education or aged care.[18]

Homelessness is becoming increasingly gendered. The rates of women experiencing homelessness continue to rise each year, especially among single mothers, young women, and those fleeing family and domestic violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are almost ten times more likely to be homeless than non-Indigenous women,[19] while non-citizens and women with disability also experience disproportionately high rates of insecure accommodation.[20]

There is a clear absence of climate considerations in existing housing policies within Australia. In 2022, over 70% of homes had an energy rating of three stars or below, and 70% of households reported one or more major building problems.[21] Climate-related disasters and rising temperatures are escalating maintenance and energy costs, pushing more households into financial stress. Women are especially vulnerable when housing stock is lost during climate-disasters, unable to afford a new home and forced to join the 169,000 long waiting list for public housing.[22] For women with disability, a lack of accessible public housing options presents further barriers and longer wait times, often resulting in inappropriate and segregated living arrangements where they are more likely to experience violence.

Addressing the gendered dimensions of housing insecurity is therefore critical to national resilience. Delivering gender-responsive, culturally safe, and climate-resilient housing – through a national housing and homelessness plan – is essential to rebuilding security and strengthening social cohesion.

Threats to National Security and Social Cohesion

Gender-based violence on digital platforms

Digital platforms are increasingly being used to spread misogyny-fueled narratives, creating environments in which harmful attitudes toward women are normalised. These

online spaces shape real-world behaviours and ideas, embedding inequality in workplaces, social spaces, and personal relationships.

Online and offline hate campaigns disproportionately target women from migrant, refugee, and visibly racialised communities,[23] particularly Muslim women, women wearing religious dress, and women engaged in public advocacy. This form of racialised gendered hate functions as a silencing mechanism, discouraging civic participation, leadership, and reporting of violence.

Boys and young men are exposed to misogynistic content through social media algorithms and popular masculinity influencers. Evidence shows that engagement with this material is associated with a higher tolerance for sexism and harassment,[24] and with beliefs that hostility towards women is justifiable.[25] Teachers across Australia are reporting an uptake of gendered harassment, including the dismissal of gender equality as a myth.[26] These early signs of attitudinal division risk entrenching gender inequality and weakening social cohesion over time.

Online misogyny is increasingly recognised as a contributing factor in radicalisation.[27] It shares ideological features with other forms of extremism, including anti-democratic sentiment and conspiracy thinking. These connections make misogyny a destabilising force that can threaten community safety and national security.

Failing to address misogynistic extremism and gendered racism leaves a gap in Australia's national security frameworks and risks normalising exclusion for many marginalised communities. Integrating the prevention of gender-based hatred into policy responses is critical to building national resilience. This requires coordinated action across digital regulation, education and prevention, and the inclusion of gendered analysis in national security and social cohesion strategies.

Inadequate labour rights and skills recognition

Weak labour rights expose women to financial insecurity, limiting their participation in the workforce in a way that ultimately weakens national resilience. Many women continue to be channelled into low-paid, insecure work while men dominate higher-paid positions, sustaining a gender pay gap that locks women out of long-term financial stability. Further, those in casual or part-time roles face insecure hours and limited flexibility, restricting advancement and the flow of skilled labour needed for growth.

Women with disability are especially underrepresented in full-time employment, and the lack of gender-disability data keeps the barriers they experience largely invisible. Migrant and refugee women are further constrained by restrictive visa conditions and fragmented

skills recognition systems, often deskilled and working below their skill level.[28] This systemic underutilisation delays access to stable employment, leaving nearly half of all permanent migrants underutilised at a time of serious workforce shortages and costing billions in lost productivity.

Unpaid care work, disproportionately undertaken by women, remains undervalued in Australia's economy, despite being essential to social and economic functioning. Rural labour markets, such as agriculture, rely heavily on seasonal and insecure work often performed by women. In areas where services are limited and there is prevalent food insecurity, women play a vital role in community service provision. The persistent failure to recognise care as productive labour not only limits women's economic opportunities but also reinforces gender stereotypes about dependency. For instance, women with disabilities are often positioned as solely care recipients rather than contributors.

Further, structural barriers to women's financial engagement and recognition are limited by childcare, transport, and leadership barriers. For example, in rural communities, long travel distances to access childcare significantly increase the cost of care and restrict the number of house women can work. Opportunities to access leadership pathways are limited and restrict job mobility and growth.

There is strong support from our membership to strengthen labour rights as a foundation for women's economic security and national security. This includes collecting disaggregated data by visa status, locality, disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, reforming skills recognition, and addressing occupational segregation as part of a broader national economic security strategy.

Climate change

Women bear the largest share of unpaid care and domestic work, a burden that intensifies during and after climate disasters. This strain is particularly evident in regional and rural areas, where traditional gender roles are often more pronounced, services are sparse, and disasters are more prevalent.

In regional and rural areas, women are often first responders and bear the increased care burden left by gaps in disrupted childcare and essential services. After disasters, women often lead ongoing caregiving, recovery, and rebuilding efforts – work that is not formally recognised – or remunerated – in disaster management planning. These pressures contribute to burnout, workforce withdrawal, and long-term financial disadvantage for women.

Climate-related disasters also heighten risks to women's safety. Evidence shows that gender-based violence increases after disasters, driven by crisis conditions like displacement, stress, and the breakdown of support systems.[29] Women and children face elevated risks in evacuation centres that are not designed with safety in mind, including exposure to perpetrators due to administration processes that are not gender sensitive or gender-responsive.[30] These threats undermine women's physical security and restrict their ability to participate in recovery efforts, employment, and decision-making, compounding economic harm. It is widely accepted that the impacts of climate-related disasters expose existing inequalities, and that those who face the greatest levels of risk are those who face the highest inequality in everyday life. For example, the global mortality rate of people with disabilities in climate disasters is up to four times that of people without disabilities.[31]

Despite facing the greatest risks, women are consistently underrepresented in climate policy, disaster governance, leadership and climate-resilient sectors. Many women find it difficult to access training and leadership pathways, something critical to engaging more diversity in disaster response. This exclusion weakens Australia's ability to prepare for and respond to climate challenges, limiting our national resilience. Evidence shows that women – particularly Indigenous women – are vital to effective environmental management and disaster recovery,[32] yet systemic biases continue to treat them as passive actors rather than leaders. Women's voices, leadership and contributions must be prioritised in disaster management to ensure the roles they play are recognised and appropriately remunerated.

Effective climate and disaster responses must involve women in decision-making to fully utilise their knowledge and leadership in adaptation and mitigation strategies. Without this, climate change will continue to erode women's economic security and Australia's overall resilience.

Institutional distrust

Inequitable access to justice undermines trust in public institutions and weakens social cohesion. Women with disabilities and/or those from migrant, refugee, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and rural, regional and remote communities face compounded barriers including language access, cost, lack of anonymity, digital exclusion, and limited availability of culturally safe legal services.

In family violence, migration, housing, and employment contexts, delayed or inaccessible legal remedies increase the likelihood of harm escalating and reduce confidence in state protection. These failures represent not only individual injustice but a systemic risk to

national stability, as communities disengage from institutions perceived as inaccessible or unsafe.

The interaction between national security and inadequate supports can create an environment of fear and surveillance that alienates migrant women with insecure status. Over time, this dynamic corrodes trust in institutions, discouraging civic participation and deepening social marginalisation.

Further contributing to institutional distrust is mis- and disinformation campaigns that are increasingly targeting multicultural communities, particularly during crises, elections, and public health or security events. Language barriers, limited access to trusted multilingual information, and exclusion from mainstream communication channels can amplify fear and inter-community tensions, creating additional barriers to safety for multicultural women. Addressing information integrity through culturally appropriate, multilingual communication strategies is therefore a critical component of national security and social cohesion.

Migration

Australia's migration system is a critical determinant of gender equality, economic security, and social cohesion. Yet current migration laws often leave migrant women vulnerable to violence and economic insecurity by hindering family reunification and blocking access to secure visa pathways.

Evidence shows that Australia's partner visa system is characterised by prolonged processing delays, high costs, and administrative backlogs,[33] despite being designed as demand-driven under the Migration Act. These obstacles leave families separated for years and impose significant financial and psychological strain on women and children, undermining their ability to access employment and educational opportunities.

The *Blueprint for Reform* demonstrates that migration law is not neutral in the context of domestic, family and sexual violence, but can actively place women and children at risk. Inadequate recognition of violence perpetrated by extended family members, rigid evidentiary requirements that fail to account for coercive control, unsafe digital visa processes, and the requirement for a relationship to have ceased before protections apply all contribute to an environment in which safety is conditional on visa status.[34] These systemic failures force many women to choose between remaining in violent relationships or facing homelessness, family separation, or forced departure from Australia, despite Australia's commitments under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children* and international human rights frameworks.

Anti-hate legislation with broad definitions and vague evidentiary requirements risks deterring migrant women from reporting violence or engaging in advocacy due to fears of visa refusals or deportation. Both multicultural organisations and women's advocacy groups have cautioned that these reforms expand flawed systems without fixing root failures, possibly heightening surveillance and retaliation risks for marginalised victims rather than ensuring safety.

Reform must prioritise timely and accessible family reunification as well as establish strong and accessible visa protections for women experiencing domestic and family violence regardless of visa category.

Community-led Solutions

Community-led initiatives and decision-making are the foundation of meaningful gender equality, ensuring solutions reflect the lived realities of those most affected by insecurity and exclusion. When local voices shape policy and practice, outcomes are more effective and sustainable.

For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women play an important role as peacebuilders, using truth-telling and cultural knowledge to strengthen community resilience and inform Australia's national security systems. Likewise, multicultural women have long demonstrated leadership through grassroots initiatives that make services like domestic violence support, housing, and childcare more accessible and culturally responsive. Also, rural women continue to operate as the backbone of their communities. However, these contributions are often unrecognised, leaving community-led efforts undervalued and underfunded despite their proven impact. When community expertise is overlooked, policies lose relevance and risk perpetuating gender insecurity.

Integrating the leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, multicultural women, women with disabilities, and those from rural, regional, and remote areas should be central to Australia's gender equality and national security frameworks, ensuring all policies are contextually grounded and inclusive. Training and pathways to training are central to practical enhancement of women's leadership.

Recommendations

1. **Integrate gender equality across national policy frameworks**

Align domestic and international strategies for gender equality by embedding women's safety, economic participation, and family unity goals within migration, settlement, and visa policies. Introduce gender impact assessments across all government decision-making, including national security and anti-hate measures. Ensure representation and decision-making capacity for migrant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women with disability in security and defence sectors.

2. Guarantee human rights and inclusive governance

Legislate a national Human Rights Act, strengthen mechanisms for women's representation, leadership, and participation in community and disaster response decision-making, and ensure that anti-hate and anti-discrimination legislations include procedural fairness and clear safeguards against the misuse of migration powers.

3. Invest in community-led and place-based solutions

Support grassroots organisations, minority groups, and rural, regional, and remote communities through capacity building, fair resourcing, and equitable access to housing, justice, and essential services.

4. Reform migration systems for fairness and inclusion

Overhaul migration frameworks to support family reunification, reduce visa delays, and protect temporary migrants who are victim-survivors. Improve skills recognition and fair remuneration for women in caring, food security, and community roles.

5. Recognise women's contributions in unpaid and insecure caring, food security and community roles.

Strengthen labour rights by acknowledging and remunerating women's contributions in unpaid, insecure, and crisis-response roles and ensure women's leadership and participation are valued and supported across all sectors.

6. Address structural inequality through housing and social investment

Release the national housing and homelessness plan as a cornerstone of women's safety, economic security, and long-term equality, alongside measures to improve access to justice, healthcare, childcare, and essential services.

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