

2026 GOVERNMENT-CIVIL SOCIETY DIALOGUE ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY: SUMMARY REPORT

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACMC	Australian Civil–Military Centre
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASPI	Australian Strategic Policy Institute
CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and others
NAP	National Action Plan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
UGEAFI	Union of Study and Action Groups for the Development of Fizi-Itombwe
UN	United Nations
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year since 2013, Australian government and civil society have come together to discuss the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda through various National Action Plans (NAPs). The 2026 Government–Civil Society Dialogue on WPS took place on Wednesday 6 May 2026, in Canberra, Australia to discuss implementation on [Australia's second National Action Plan \(NAP\) on Women, Peace and Security \(WPS\)](#). The Dialogue included over 120 participants from government, non-governmental organisations, United Nations (UN) agencies, community-based organisations, diaspora groups, academia, practitioners and private sector organisations.

The objectives of the 2026 Government–Civil Society Dialogue on WPS were:

1. To support and enhance the implementation of Australia's NAP on WPS
2. To explore key areas that intersect and are relevant to WPS
3. To strengthen the relationship between and amongst civil society and government agencies in the WPS space, enhancing transparency, coordination and accountability on NAP implementation.

KEY ISSUES AND THEMES

The 2026 Dialogue, held at the midpoint of Australia's second NAP on WPS, took place against a backdrop of intensifying conflict, globally well-organised and well-funded backlash against gender equality, shrinking civil society space, and growing geopolitical fragmentation. Across the day's sessions, several cross-cutting themes emerged:

- The evidence is unequivocal: when women are meaningfully included in peace processes, peace is more durable and longer lasting. Australia has made genuine gains in advancing this principle through flagship regional networks and institutional strengthening, even as women continue to be underrepresented in formal negotiations globally, underscoring both what is working and where the next push for impact should be focused
- Australia is recognised as a trusted and principled regional WPS leader, with strong and growing partnerships across the UN, ASEAN, NATO and the Pacific Islands Forum. Sustaining and building on this leadership will require navigating an increasingly constrained global environment and strengthening coherence between domestic and international policy
- The [Independent Mid-Term Review](#) of Australia's Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2031 affirmed real achievements in advancing women's participation and institutional strengthening, while also identifying clear, actionable opportunities to improve consistency in reducing gender-based violence (GBV), deepen whole-of-government coordination, and evolve monitoring and evaluation frameworks to better capture impact alongside outputs
- Australia has an opportunity to extend its WPS leadership into emerging and fast-moving areas, including technology-facilitated GBV, cyber harms, disinformation, and the intersection of climate change and conflict, building on the strong foundation already established through the NAP
- Government and civil society share a genuine and deepening commitment to partnership, and the Dialogue identified valuable, practical ideas for evolving that relationship from consultation toward more collaborative co-design, a shift many participants are already actively working towards
- Maintaining focus on WPS is a choice, and one that Australia continues to make deliberately and with resolve, even in the face of competing pressures and an increasingly difficult global environment

IDEAS FOR CONSIDERATION

Participants of the 2026 Dialogue were encouraged to generate a diverse range of practical ideas and recommendations for the next phase of NAP implementation. Key themes which emerged from these ideas and considerations were:¹

Translate the mid-term review results into real change

Actively convert findings and recommendations into structural reforms to NAP governance, resourcing and implementation, rather than refining language alone; shift the WPS agenda from a development-centred model to a genuinely security-integrated approach.

Resource and empower civil society as real partners

Establish civil society representation on NAP coordinating working groups, co-design monitoring and evaluation indicators with communities, and ensure that participation, including by survivors, is compensated properly.

Strengthen whole-of-government coordination

Improve alignment and communication across government agencies, introduce gender-responsive budgeting across all government spending (not only official development assistance (ODA)), and establish parliamentary oversight mechanisms for WPS implementation.

Move from inclusion to influence

Stop measuring women's participation and start measuring women's power; mandate women's meaningful inclusion at every level of peace processes, peacekeeping and peacemaking, and leverage Australia's seat on the UN Peacebuilding Commission and UN Security Council bid to champion this agenda globally.

Integrate emerging threats into the NAP

Embed gendered responses to cybersecurity, technology-facilitated violence, and disinformation, into NAP implementation; operationalise WPS within intelligence cycles and mandate gender advisors in all crisis response and peacekeeping operations.

Broaden the reach beyond the converted

Develop outreach strategies explicitly designed to reach those who are unconvinced or unaware, including the wider Australian public, men, and communities with no current knowledge of the NAP; take the conversation into high schools and workplaces, not just policy forums.

Ground implementation in lived experience and local context

Invest in research and engagement at the coalface level, expand meaningful inclusion of First Nations Australians, Pacific, diaspora and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and contextualise the NAP to individual country contexts with practical, measurable targets

¹ Ideas and considerations were put forward by individual participants from government and civil society. No formal endorsement was provided during the forum of any of the recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

The [second Progress Report \(2023–2025\)](#) on [Australia's second National Action Plan \(NAP\) on Women, Peace and Security \(WPS\)](#) outlined the key achievements and challenges for government during the implementation period. They included:

■ **Women's leadership in peace and security is growing but remains insufficient**

Significant progress has been made in supporting women's participation through flagship initiatives like the Pacific Women Mediators Network, Southeast Asia Women Mediators Network, and various fellowship programs. However, women still comprised just 7% of negotiators and 14% of mediators globally in 2024, and no peace agreements in the Indo-Pacific during the reporting period included gender provisions, highlighting the gap between program investment and systemic change.

■ **Reducing gender-based violence requires sustained, multi-layered approaches**

Australia achieved meaningful results in reducing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) through legal reforms, survivor-centred services, and community-level prevention programs across the Indo-Pacific. However, conflict-related sexual violence (CSRV) remains widespread and systematic, with survivors continuing to face significant barriers to justice, and perpetrators rarely held accountable.

■ **Australia is demonstrating regional and global WPS leadership, but the geopolitical environment is increasingly challenging**

Australia has strengthened its multilateral engagement across the United Nations (UN), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and bilateral partnerships, and is widely recognised as a regional leader on WPS. At the same time, a growing global backlash against gender equality, shrinking civil society space, and funding cuts are threatening hard-won gains.

■ **Accountability and measurement remain persistent weaknesses**

Across all four NAP outcomes, numerous indicators remain marked as 'data not available', limiting the ability to assess real-world impact. Sustained and flexible funding, stronger monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and deeper civil society engagement (including First Nations Australians, Pacific, diaspora and culturally and linguistically diverse communities), will be critical to translating commitments into measurable, lasting change in the next phase of NAP implementation.

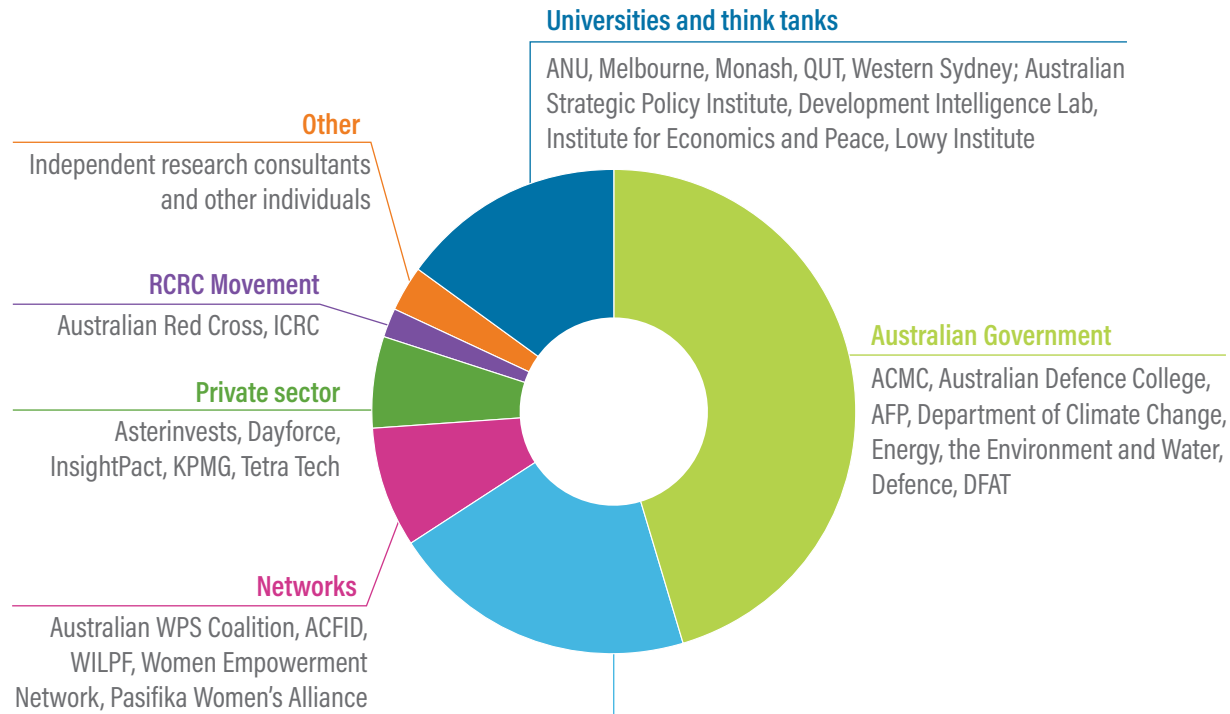
Against this backdrop, the Australian Government and civil society came together to discuss the implementation of the NAP in the 2026 Government–Civil Society Dialogue on WPS, on Wednesday 6 May 2026 in Canberra, Australia. The Dialogue included over 110 participants from government, non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, community-based organisations, diaspora groups, academia, practitioners and private sector organisations (Figure 1).

The objectives of the 2026 Government–Civil Society Dialogue on WPS were:

1. To support and enhance the implementation of Australia's NAP on WPS
2. To explore key areas that intersect and are relevant to WPS
3. To strengthen the relationship between and amongst civil society and government agencies in the WPS space, enhancing transparency, coordination and accountability on NAP implementation.

This report summarises each session of the Dialogue, including key learnings from each panel and discussion session.

Figure 1: Breakdown of organisations represented by participants at the Dialogue



Non-governmental and community-based organisations

ActionAid Australia, Australian Syrian Alliance, Burmese Community Development Collaboration, Centre for Armed Violence Reduction, Creative Home, Girls Run the World, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, International Women's Development Agency, Jesuit Refugee Service, National Foundation for Australian Women, PEN International, RedR, RefugePoint, Tearfund, Thinkateria, UGEAFI, Women For Change, YWCA Australia

Photo: Shutterstock



SETTING THE SCENE

The global WPS agenda continues to be tested by an increasingly complex and contested international environment. Over the past year, armed conflict has intensified across multiple regions, with women and girls bearing a disproportionate burden, as survivors of CSRV, displaced persons, and frontline responders whose contributions remain under-resourced and under recognised². The global pushback against gender equality has hardened, with multilateral spaces becoming increasingly difficult to navigate and funding for women's rights organisations and civil society continuing to shrink. Against this backdrop, the release of [Australia's second Progress Report on the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security \(2023–2025\)](#) provided an important moment of accountability, documenting both the breadth of Australia's WPS commitments and the persistent structural barriers that remain.

At the same time, there are genuine reasons for optimism and resolve. Australia has continued to demonstrate regional and global leadership on the WPS agenda, strengthening partnerships through the UN Peacebuilding Commission, ASEAN, NATO and the Pacific Islands Forum, and investing in locally led initiatives that are delivering tangible results for women and communities across the Indo-Pacific. Australia played a key role in the development and negotiation of the [Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel](#), which aims to recommit efforts to uphold international humanitarian law and to protect humanitarian workers in response to rising number of aid workers being killed and injured whilst delivering lifesaving assistance.

The midpoint of Australia's second National Action Plan (2021–2031) presents a critical opportunity to take stock of what is working, where momentum needs to be renewed, and how government and civil society can deepen their partnership to drive more ambitious and accountable implementation in the years ahead. It is within this context, of mounting global challenges and enduring Australian commitment, that the 2026 Government–Civil Society Dialogue on Women, Peace and Security convened, bringing together diverse voices to reflect on progress, grapple with difficult questions, and chart a shared path forward. Against this backdrop, Dialogue participants heard introductory remarks from leaders from the Australian government and civil society.

Aunty Serena Williams-Palm, Senior Nggunawal Elder, welcomed us to her traditional lands and encouraged us to further involve First Nations women in the conversations around Women, Peace and Security and build the linkages between the reality in Australia and the situation in other countries where she was worked, such as Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.

Nicola Rosenblum, Director General of the Australian Civil–Military Centre, opened the Dialogue by acknowledging the difficult global environment in which the WPS agenda is operating, and the importance of ensuring that hard-won gains are not lost. She noted that women and girls continue to experience the most acute and disproportionate impacts of conflict and disaster, making the work of this Dialogue more urgent than ever. Ms Rosenblum affirmed the Australian Government's enduring commitment to the WPS agenda. She was clear that



Photo: Aunty Serena Williams-Palm, Senior Nggunawal Elder, delivers the Welcome to Country.

² [United Nations Secretary-General \(2025\). Report on Women, Peace and Security.](#)



Photo: Nicola Rosenblum opens the Dialogue

maintaining focus on WPS is not inevitable, it is a choice, and one that must be made deliberately and repeatedly in the face of competing pressures. Critically, she reflected that government cannot advance this agenda alone, and that the partnership between government and civil society is not a 'nice-to-have' but a necessity. Civil society organisations bring field-based insights, lived experience, and an irreplaceable ability to hold institutions to account, contributions that make WPS implementation more grounded, more responsive, and ultimately more effective. With that spirit of partnership in mind, Ms Rosenblum invited participants to focus throughout the day on practical experiences and concrete outcomes.

Ambassador for Gender Equality Michelle O'Byrne reflected that having a seat at the table is not enough – what matters is that voices are genuinely heard. She spoke to the importance of education and broader public understanding of the WPS agenda, noting that while those in the room bring deep knowledge and expertise, there is a pressing need to have a much bigger conversation with the wider Australian public.

The Ambassador framed the Dialogue as a moment for genuine reflection and frank discussion, held in a spirit of collaboration, with the shared purpose of improving action and outcomes under the NAP. She was unequivocal that this Dialogue comes at a pivotal moment: the WPS agenda is more recognised and more relevant than ever, yet it is simultaneously facing more organised and determined opposition than at any previous point. The world looks very different to when the foundational frameworks of the WPS agenda were established, and our plans must adapt accordingly. Reflecting on her recent participation at Women Deliver and the Commission on the Status of



Photo: Ambassador for Gender Equality, Michelle O'Byrne addresses Dialogue participants

Women, where attendance was notably lower than in previous years, the Ambassador described a well-coordinated, well-funded global pushback against gender equality, drawing on currents of misogyny, disinformation, and extremist narratives. She expressed particular concern about what young people are being exposed to through social media, noting Australia's work with the eSafety Commissioner as one important but insufficient response on its own, and underscoring the need for young people to develop the critical literacy to question what they see and why. This organised anti-rights movement, she argued, is not a peripheral concern; extremist narratives are actively undermining peace and security, eroding democratic institutions, and creating the conditions of instability in which gender equality becomes harder to defend and advance.

Geopolitical fragmentation, a shifting development funding environment, and the growing threat of youth radicalisation all compound these challenges, making the link between the WPS and the Youth, Peace and Security agendas more important than ever to underscore. Nonetheless, the Ambassador was emphatic that the evidence is unequivocal: when women are included in peace processes, peace is more durable; when women lead, communities are more adaptive to climate change; and the persistent absence of women from peace negotiations and policy spaces, despite their presence on the frontlines

of conflict, remains one of the most consequential failures of the current global order. As the world shifts rapidly, she called on all present to assess progress with clear eyes, to recommit to WPS as a strategic imperative, and to go out and speak about this work publicly, because allowing these voices to be silenced in the world is not an option Australia can afford.



Photo: Somoud Al Masri, Chair of the Australian Syrian Alliance, delivers her keynote address

Somoud Al Masri, Chair of the Australian Syrian Alliance, opened her keynote by reflecting on an unexpected question: what is a civil engineer doing at a WPS dialogue? The answer, she explained, came from a pattern she had observed throughout her professional life: women being treated as an afterthought rather than being involved in design, consulted only after decisions had already been made and budgets spent. That frustration drove her to co-design the [7 Switches gender-inclusive design framework with the Champions of Change Coalition](#), now used by UN Women, and taught her a lesson she carried into the room: everyone has a sphere of influence, and change happens when we choose to push from within it.

Everyone has a sphere of influence – and change happens when we choose to push from within it.

Drawing on her Syrian heritage and the remarkable lives of her two grandmothers (one formally educated, one not), both leaders in ways their communities never formally recognised, she spoke to the truth that women have always been leaders, even when systems refuse to see them. Syria, she said, is not an exception but a mirror; it shows what happens when women hold communities together under impossible conditions while being systematically excluded from the peace negotiations and political settlements that shape their futures. The international community, she observed, tends to fund women without following their leadership, making inclusion symbolic and participation performative while leaving power untouched.

Women, Peace and Security is not about adding women to broken systems ... It is about having the courage to change those systems.

Turning to the mid-term review of Australia's NAP, Ms Al Masri urged that it be used not to refine language but to genuinely correct our course. She called on government to be intentional about engaging diaspora women not merely as voices to be consulted but as leaders to co-design policy. She closed by issuing three clear challenges for the day: to move from inclusion to influence, from safe engagement to strategic risk, and from parallel work to shared accountability – because, she concluded, WPS is not about adding women to broken systems, but about having the courage to change those systems entirely (see Annex 2 for a transcript of the full keynote address).

Following these reflections, the various sessions throughout the day aimed to learn from the mid-term review of the NAP, highlight challenges and barriers to NAP implementation from both the perspective of government and civil society, and to share practical recommendations to further boost implementation.

SESSION 1: REFLECTING ON PROGRESS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR AUSTRALIA'S WPS NATIONAL ACTION PLAN

Panellists:

- Michelle O'Byrne, Ambassador for Gender Equality, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- AVM Lara Gunn, Head Joint Support Services Division, Department of Defence
- Nicola Rosenblum, Director General, Australian Civil-Military Centre
- Marina Simoncini, Manager Global Strategy, Australian Federal Police
- Sarah Newport, Partner, KPMG

Moderated by: Linh Dieu Nong, Senior Program Manager, International Women's Development Agency & WPS Coalition Steering Committee Member

MODERATED PANEL DISCUSSION

Sarah Newport, Partner at KPMG Australia, presented the emerging findings of the Independent Midterm Review of Australia's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2021–2031), commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The review drew on analysis of over 85 documents, consultations with 30 government stakeholders and 11 civil society representatives and assessed progress across all four WPS pillars: prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery. The [findings](#) paint a picture of genuine achievement alongside persistent structural weaknesses and pointed to areas where more ambitious and coordinated action will be needed in the second half of the NAP's implementation.

Australia is considered a leader in the WPS globally and its commitment to advancing movements in this space is recognised. In the light of recent global shifts, Australia should continue to prioritise WPS and solidify its role as a leader.

The government reflection on the review that followed was wide-ranging, with broad acknowledgement across government implementing agencies that whole-of-government coordination is genuinely difficult, requiring sustained political will and the most senior leadership possible to drive real change. Panellists spoke to the importance of on-the-ground engagement, noting that posts, field visits and direct



Photo: Session 1 panel discussion (from left to right) Linh Dieu Nong, Sarah Newport, Michelle O'Byrne, Lara Gunn, Nicola Rosenblum, Marina Simoncini.

partnerships with women's organisations are where practice actually shifts, and directly push back on the transactional critique raised in the review: this work must be driven by values, not process.

■ Output is not impact.

The panel acknowledged that the volume of NAP activity does not necessarily equate to impact, and that the distinction between consultation and collaboration needs to be taken far more seriously. Emerging issues, including the eSafety Commissioner's work, transnational crime, emerging cyber threats such as scam centres, and

Australia's UN Security Council bid, were raised as areas where the WPS agenda intersects with broader priorities and where more ambitious and coordinated action is needed. The session closed with an acknowledgement that Australia can do more, that not all the answers are known, and that the ongoing dialogue between government and civil society is not a courtesy but a necessity.



Photo: Session 1 panel discussion (from left to right) Sarah Newport, Michelle O'Byrne & Lara Gunn

BRAINSTORMING SESSION



We asked each table of participants: **If we reconvene in a years' time, what is one tangible shift you would like to see in how the NAP is being implemented?**

Diverse perspectives included:

1. Strengthening civil society engagement and accountability

The most consistent theme across tables was the need to invest further in genuine co-design and collaboration. Participants called for greater civil society and academic participation in departmental implementation groups, better inclusion of young people and Indigenous voices, and consideration of returning funding of Dialogues directly to the WPS coalition.



2. Resourcing, budgeting and transparency

Participants raised persistent concerns about whether resources will follow the rhetoric, particularly as the WPS agenda expands into security and defence domains where gender-responsive budgeting is less embedded. Recommendations included establishing a dedicated NAP budget, introducing gender-responsive budgeting practices, improving transparency and parliamentary oversight of WPS expenditure, and ensuring that funding reaches civil society organisations and covers the costs of meaningful survivor participation in policy processes.

3. Elevating lived experience and diverse voices

Participants noted that the panel discussions had largely highlighted good news stories rather than confronting harder realities. There was a strong call to invest in research and engagement at the operational level, speaking with those with lived experience rather than only executive stakeholders, and to better understand what happens to community voices as they travel through layers of government before reaching policy. Specific recommendations included greater inclusion of First Nations, Pacific voices and Pacific diaspora communities in Australia, and diaspora communities more broadly, who were identified as an underutilised in informing Australia's WPS agenda.

4. Technology, cybersecurity and emerging threats

Participants emphasised that the WPS agenda must be understood as a whole-of-government issue extending well beyond national security, encompassing technology-facilitated GBV, family violence, modern slavery and data exploitation. Specific recommendations included unpacking the gendered impacts of cyber-attacks on infrastructure, interrogating how artificial intelligence systems trained on patriarchal datasets reproduce harmful outputs, examining how popular apps are weaponised to abuse women, and ensuring that culture, which is not captured in data, is factored into digital policy responses.

5. Whole-of-government coordination and international-domestic coherence

There was strong consensus that coordination between government agencies remains insufficient, including the work undertaken by agencies in both the domestic and the international spaces. Participants also raised the question of whether, given Australia's own increasing security environment, the NAP should be refocused to include domestic peacebuilding and security needs. Recommendations included whole-of-government reporting, parliamentary oversight mechanisms, and joint WPS training across departments in the wake of the mid-term review.

6. Monitoring, evaluation and impact

Participants called for more rigorous, community-informed monitoring and evaluation, with government and implementing partners working alongside civil society to co-design indicators that reflect the impact communities want. There was concern about the quality and peer review of existing data, and a recommendation to move beyond measuring outputs toward understanding genuine impact. The participants called for courageous conversations about program key performance indicators and how to adjust them as priorities and contexts shift.

7. Inclusion, language and power

Several tables noted that the language used in WPS policy and reporting does not always reflect the reality or the voices of the women it concerns. There were calls to avoid 'othering' men and boys and instead bring them meaningfully into WPS discussions, to create structured opportunities for civil society to provide feedback to security agencies on operations that may have unintended negative consequences for women, and to support women not just to participate in organisations but to genuinely influence and make decisions within them.



We then asked through a Mentimeter: **Share 1 priority shift you would like to see over the coming year; and 1 indicator or signal that would suggest this shift is underway**

Suggestions included:



■ Translate the mid-term review into real change

Participants agreed that the findings and recommendations of the mid-term review must be actively translated into NAP implementation. This includes shifting the WPS agenda from its current development and humanitarian framing into the security realm as a genuine imperative. The indicator of progress here would be visible, structural changes to how the NAP is governed and resourced, not just refined language.

■ **Resource and empower civil society to be a meaningful partner**

A strong and repeated call was for civil society to be genuinely co-designing and participating in NAP decision-making, with formal representation on coordinating working groups, and critically, to be properly resourced to do so. Participants noted that civil society is too often consulted without being compensated or empowered. Signals of change would include funded civil society seats at implementation tables, translation of the NAP into community languages, and expanded representation from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

■ **Broaden the reach beyond the converted**

Several participants raised a pointed observation that the people in the room were already convinced about the NAP's value. The NAP needs to reach those who are not, including the wider Australian public, men and communities currently unaware the NAP exists. Indicators of progress would include more men present and engaged at forums like this, and outreach strategies explicitly designed to persuade and inform rather than reinforce. There was also a call to share Australia's NAP resources and experiences with other countries in the region.

■ **Take the digital threat seriously and practically**

Participants called for more focus on countering harms in the digital space, specifically on understanding and addressing the root causes of 'manosphere' dynamics, including the role of social media algorithms in radicalising young men and normalising misogyny. There was also a call to reject 'corporate-speak' policy language in favour of plain, accessible communication that reflects how victim-survivors describe their experiences of insecurity. An indicator of progress could be concrete policy action on algorithmic accountability and technology-facilitated violence.

■ **Ground implementation in lived experience and local context**

Participants emphasised the need to move beyond executive-level consultation toward genuine engagement with people with lived experience of conflict, displacement and insecurity. The NAP should be contextualised to individual country contexts with practical, measurable targets to reduce GBV, and its reach should extend beyond Australia to tackle root causes in countries of origin. Budget allocation and resourcing across all government spending, not just ODA, was identified as a critical enabler, alongside parliamentary oversight and the meaningful inclusion of survivors in policy consultations.



SESSION 2: GENDER-RESPONSIVE PEACEBUILDING: CENTRING WOMEN IN CRISIS AND RECOVERY

Panellists:

- Sandra Butoto, Chief Operating Officer, UGEAFI
- Richard Fosu, Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, Monash University
- Diana Sayed, Incoming CEO, YWCA Australia
- Commander Tyson Nicholas, former Strategic Military Adviser at UN Women

Moderated by: Martina Zapf, General Manager, Development Intelligence Lab

Session 2 opened with a recognition that gender-responsive peacebuilding requires moving from problem admiration to action, and that in today's more contested and securitised world, that shift carries real personal, institutional and geopolitical risk. Discussion drew on extensive field experience from conflict contexts including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Haiti and Afghanistan to illustrate what works and what continues to fail. A consistent thread was the critical importance of women's organisations as sources of community intelligence, due to their embeddedness in contexts before, during and after crises, and the dangerous consequences of dismissing their warnings. A participant gave a powerful example from South Sudan: in 2018, women had warned authorities about an impending violent event but were dismissed for lacking sufficient evidence, with catastrophic results.



■ We all want peace, but it's not something we can achieve alone.

Similar lessons emerged from the DRC, where gender-inclusive community assessments led to significantly improved perceptions of UN missions among local populations. The discussion challenged the tendency to treat national action plans as foreign policy tools rather than human rights instruments. Moreover, it pushed back on a narrow understanding of what constitutes intelligence, arguing that community-level knowledge, particularly from women's organisations, must be recognised and acted upon by governments and security actors alike. There was also a pointed challenge to the language used in WPS frameworks, with a call to replace talk of inclusion with more honest language about power-sharing. The participants called for a move beyond lofty aspirations toward accountability for what is actually happening, including naming specific conflicts and crises, and confronting the prevention failures that allow them to escalate.

■ Conflict-related sexual violence should be defined as a weapons system.

The second part of the discussion focused on the gap between policy and practice, and the urgent need for defence and security organisations to move from being gender-responsive to being gender-responsive. Photos pages 14-16: Dialogue participants engaging in Q&A and table discussions.



proactive. It was argued that WPS principles must be operationalised within intelligence cycles, with resources and assets directed toward specific threats including CSRV and civilian protection, rather than treated as a reporting exercise. A recent example from Haiti illustrated the consequences of getting this wrong. A multinational security mission deployed in 2024–25 without gender advisors, women protection advisors, or age and gender disaggregated data, and caused direct harm by destroying the homes of displaced women and girls living in informal settlements.

The discussion also highlighted the perpetual tension between what gets resourced and what gets done, noting that in military and security contexts, short-term triage consistently crowds out the long-term structural change that sustainable peace requires. Climate change, technology companies fuelling anti-rights movements, former colonial powers shaping outcomes, and the weaponisation of women's rights by authoritarian regimes, including the situation in Afghanistan, described as gender apartheid, were all raised as forces that the WPS agenda must confront more directly. The session concluded with a call for Australia to be more accountable – not only championing WPS in multilateral forums, but interrogating its own foreign policy decisions, and ensuring that the voices of women, including those in diaspora communities, are shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

BRAINSTORMING SESSION



We asked each table of participants: **Identify one concrete way gender responsive approaches could be strengthened in your area of work (policy, operations, programming, partnerships).**

Diverse perspectives included:

■ Embed gender into defence, intelligence and security frameworks

Move beyond gender-responsive to gender-proactive approaches across defence and national security. This includes integrating gendered intelligence into defence and national intelligence community cycles, mandating the inclusion of gender advisors in all peacekeeping and crisis response operations, and embedding gender-responsive measures of effectiveness into joint exercises and operations through to 2028. Critically, the language of peace must be elevated within national defence strategy, challenging the entrenched cultural framing of deterrence as masculine and peace as a soft or feminine concern.



■ Fund and resource women-led organisations as central, not peripheral change makers

Women's networks and women-led organisations are already doing peacebuilding – the priority is to leverage, enable and fund them properly. This includes increasing investment in pooled funds that support young women and girl responders in conflict zones, ensuring that advisory and consultative

roles are compensated, and making women-led organisations a core and funded component of civil society infrastructure rather than an afterthought.

■ **Support women's participation at every level of peace processes**

Develop and enforce policy requirements for women's meaningful inclusion – not tokenistic participation – at all levels of peacebuilding, peacekeeping and peacemaking, from national to sub-national. This is particularly urgent in the Pacific, where women are frequently included in name only and do not feel safe to speak in male-dominated spaces. Australia should leverage its seat on the UN Peacebuilding Commission (2025–26) and its bid for a seat on the UN Security Council in 2029 to champion this agenda at the highest levels.

■ **Tackle the root causes of exclusion through culture change**

Investment is needed in evidence-based tools for dismantling deeply embedded cultural norms, including engaging community and faith leaders, involving men as active allies, and ensuring gender balance in research and analysis frameworks. There was particular concern about the growing strength of radicalisation and anti-rights movements, and a call for a consistent, well-resourced voice of moderation to counter these dynamics.

■ **Strengthen the domestic–international link in NAP implementation**

Australia must examine how the WPS agenda connects to its own domestic challenges, including femicide, family violence, firearms regulation, and the treatment of women in immigration detention. An example participants indicated they would like to learn more about is how the Firearms and Weapons Policy Working Group applied a WPS lens. Women caught between categories – survivors of GBV, women in detention, women-headed households displaced by regime change – must not continue to be excluded from the frameworks designed to protect them.

■ **Simplify messaging and broaden the conversation**

The risk of WPS advocacy becoming a conversation among the already converted, and sounding sanctimonious to those who are not, was clearly identified as a strategic challenge. Recommendations included keeping messaging simple and accessible, raising awareness of the NAP within communities, and developing communication strategies designed explicitly to reach and persuade those who are unconvinced or unaware.

■ **Prioritise intersectional and diverse voices**

Recommendations called for safe and amplified mechanisms for the participation of gender-diverse people, young people, minorities and those with lived experience of conflict. This includes prioritising intersectional women's perspectives in all consultations, ensuring that displacement is recognised as a core component of climate-related disaster frameworks, and investing in the gendered understanding of conflict across all relevant government agencies. Participation must be designed to be meaningful and influential, affecting outcomes, not just filling seats.



Photos: Session 2 panel discussion: page 16 Martina Zapf & Sandra Butoto; page 17 top left Richard Fosu & Diana Sayed; page 17 bottom right and page 18, dialogue participants engaging in Q&A and table discussions.

SESSION 3: TECH, TRUST AND INCLUSION: ADVANCING GENDER-RESPONSIVE CYBERSECURITY

Panellists:

- Shwe Shwe Sein Latt, Director, Creative Home
- Nigel Phair, Professor of Cyber Security, Monash University
- Leiataua Lesa Audrey Umuti, Executive Director, Pacific next gen Tech Leader & Matai (Chief of her Clan)

Moderated by: Dr. Rajeswari (Raji) Pillai Rajagopalan, Resident Senior Fellow, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)

Session 3 opened with a framing of the credibility gap facing women in technology, where women in tech feel they must work harder to prove themselves, and that men are promoted on potential while women are judged on past performance alone. The discussion then turned to the ways in which digital technologies are being weaponised as tools of exclusion and control, with examples drawn from contexts where social media platforms have been used to target women journalists, women's organisations, LGBTQ+ communities, and election-related organisations through naming, shaming, disinformation and coordinated harassment campaigns.



Photo: Shwe Shwe Sein Latt during session 3 panel discussion

The scale of the problem was underscored by the reach of platforms in countries where a significant proportion of the population relies on a single social media platform as their primary source of information. This creates conditions in which disinformation spreads rapidly and women's voices are systematically silenced. Against this backdrop, the session explored how people-centred, gender-responsive cybersecurity would work in practice, including the need for mobile mental health and psychosocial support for displaced populations, safe spaces for survivors, and community involvement in decision-making about digital safety tools. Cybersecurity policy should be designed with and for the communities it serves, with adequate budget and technical support to match.

■ **How do we create guardrails rather than roadblocks?**

The session explored the intersection of technology, culture and survival. It raised the question of how digital tools can be used not as instruments of exclusion but as means of preserving what matters most to communities, including language, cultural knowledge and identity. The discussion challenged assumptions that technology is a neutral or universally accessible good, noting that for Pacific communities whose land, culture and very existence face threats from climate change and food insecurity, the question of who controls data and knowledge systems is deeply political. Culture in these contexts is observational and collective, not easily captured in datasets or digital formats designed by and for other contexts, and when communities are displaced or islands disappear, that knowledge risks becoming myth. This led to a broader call for humility and patience from those implementing

technology solutions in the Pacific and other non-Western contexts: observe first, adjust the solution to fit the context rather than the reverse, and recognise that implementers will leave while communities remain. The session closed with a reflection that in Pacific cultures, when hardship strikes, communities do not share their leftovers but their very best. The call to those in the room was to open the door, invite diverse women in, give them a genuine seat at the table, and trust that they will deliver.



Photo: Session 3 panel discussion (from left to right) Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan & Leiatua Lesa Audrey Umuti.

Photo: Shutterstock



CONCLUSION



In the concluding remarks for the day, Rear Admiral (rtd) David Proctor, Deputy Director General APMC, reflected on the day as both a family gathering and a passionate, at times challenging, exchange of ideas, one marked not by disagreement but by a shared and urgent commitment to change. He drew out several threads that had resonated most deeply: the evidence that when women are engaged in peace processes, peace comes faster and lasts longer, and the keynote's powerful reminder that 'admiring a problem' is not enough, you have to step closer.

■ Whakatauki mo te rā nei. He Tōtara wāhi, he kai nā te ahi. [A Tōtara tree split in two is food for the fire]

Admiral Proctor closed with a Māori proverb (above) that calls for unity and collective strength, urging that the passionate internal debates of the WPS community be channelled outward rather than inward, so that the 'tree' stays whole and the message remains powerful. To those in the room, many of whom he acknowledged may be very tired, he offered his final words as both challenge and encouragement: you are the arm that pulls the anchor, the work is not yet done, but you are making headway, and you cannot give up. you are the arm that pulls the anchor, the work is not yet done, but you are making headway, and you cannot give up.

Photos: top left: Closing remarks by David Proctor; bottom of page: WPS Dialogue participants group photo.



ANNEX 1: EVENT PROGRAM

2026 Government-Civil Society Dialogue on Women, Peace and Security: Program

Date: Wednesday 6 May 2026

Venue: QT Canberra, 1 London Circuit, Canberra ACT 2601

Time: 9am–5pm. Registrations from 8:30am.

Each year government and civil society come together to discuss the implementation of Australia's National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). This is an opportunity to bring together government (both implementing/and non-implementing agencies under the NAP) and civil society organisations.

Objectives of the Government-Civil Society Dialogue on WPS:

- To support and enhance the implementation of Australia's NAP on WPS
- To explore key areas that intersect and are relevant to the WPS area
- To strengthen the relationship between and amongst civil society and government agencies in the WPS space, enhancing transparency, coordination and accountability on NAP implementation.

Background resources:

- [Second Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021–2031](#)
- [2023-2025 Progress report](#)

Time	Session
08:30	Registration and Networking Participant arrival, registration, and informal networking
08:55 (5 mins)	Housekeeping and Practical Information <i>Beth Eggleston, Director, Humanitarian Advisory Group</i>
09:00-09:15 (15 mins)	Welcome to Country <i>Aunty Serena Williams, Ngunnawal Elder</i>
09:15-09:20 (5 mins)	Conference Welcome and Scene Setting <i>Nicola Rosenblum, Director General, Australian Civil Military Centre</i> Formal welcome, acknowledgement of dignitaries and partners, and introduction to the Dialogue purpose
09:20-09:55 (30 mins)	Opening Remarks <i>Michelle O'Byrne, Ambassador for Gender Equality</i> Strategic context, objectives, and priorities for advancing Women, Peace and Security
09:55-10:00 (5 mins)	Introduction to the Keynote Speaker <i>Beth Eggleston, Director, Humanitarian Advisory Group</i>

Time	Session
10:00-10:30 (30 mins)	Keynote Address <i>Somoud Al Masri, Chair, Australian Syrian Alliance</i> Somoud Al Masri is a passionate advocate for community, inclusion, and positive change. As Chairperson of the Australian Syrian Alliance, she leads efforts to strengthen advocacy, build cultural understanding, and influence policy that supports Australian-Syrian communities. With a background in civil engineering and decades of leadership experience across the Middle East and Australia, Somoud brings a unique blend of technical expertise and people-focused leadership. She's also a strong voice for gender equity and inclusive design, having served as a Global Ambassador for the Champions of Change Coalition. In 2024, she spoke at the UN Global Compact Leaders Summit in New York, sharing insights on how to create spaces where everyone can thrive. Somoud is driven by a deep belief in the power of community and collaboration to shape a better future—for Syria, for Australia, and beyond.
	<i>Morning tea</i>
11:00 -12:30 (90 mins)	Session 1: Reflecting on Progress and Future Directions for Australia's WPS National Action Plan This session provides a strategic reflection on the implementation of Australia's Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2021–2031) at its midpoint. Drawing on themes emerging from the mid-term review process, it offers a high-level perspective on progress across the four WPS pillars and broader trends shaping NAP delivery. Through a moderated discussion with NAP implementing agencies, the session will explore priorities and perspectives shaping the next phase of the NAP. The discussion looks ahead to future directions and what progress could look like as implementation continues. Panellists: ■ Michelle O'Byrne, Ambassador for Gender Equality, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade ■ AVM Lara Gunn, Head Joint Support Services Division, Department of Defence ■ Nicola Rosenblum, Director General, Australian Civil Military Centre ■ Marina Simoncini, Manager Global Strategy, Australian Federal Police Moderator: Linh Nong, Senior Program Manager, International Women's Development Agency & WPS Coalition Steering Committee Member Format: Presentation on emerging themes from the mid-term review process by Sarah Newport, KPMG; moderated panel discussion; followed by a moderated audience Q&A and table discussions/activity
12:30-13:30 (60 mins)	<i>Lunch</i>

Time	Session
13:30-15:00 (90 mins)	Session 2: Gender-Responsive Peacebuilding: Centring Women in Crisis and Recovery This session will focus on how gender-responsive approaches strengthen conflict and crisis response. Panellists will explore the role of women in peacebuilding, social cohesion, and community resilience, and highlight human-rights-based strategies for addressing inequality and empowering women in crisis settings. Panellists: ■ Sandra Butoto, Chief Operating Officer, UGEAFI ■ Richard Fosu, Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, Monash University ■ Diana Sayed, Incoming CEO, YWCA Australia ■ Commander Tyson Nicholas, former Strategic Military Adviser at UN Women Moderator: Martina Zapf, General Manager, Development Intelligence Lab Format: Moderated panel discussion followed by audience Q&A and table discussions/activity
15:00-15:15 (15 mins)	<i>Afternoon tea</i>
15:15-16:45 (90 mins)	Session 3: Tech, Trust and Inclusion: Advancing Gender-Responsive Cybersecurity This panel will bring together cyber experts and GEDSI specialists to explore the opportunities and risks created by critical technologies. Speakers will focus on human-centred cybersecurity, protecting vulnerable populations, and integrating gender considerations into digital policy and peacebuilding efforts. Panellists: ■ Shwe Shwe Sein Latt, Director, Creative Home ■ Nigel Phair, Professor of Cyber Security, Monash University ■ Leiataua Lesa Audrey Umuti, Executive Director, Pacific next gen Tech Leader & Matai (Chief of her Clan) Moderator: Rajeswari (Raji) Pillai Rajagopalan, Resident Senior Fellow, ASPI Format: Moderated panel discussion followed by audience Q&A and table discussions/activity
16:45-17:00 (15 mins)	Concluding Reflections and Closing Remarks <i>Rear Admiral (rtd) David Proctor, Deputy Director General, Australian Civil Military Centre</i> Key themes from the day, reflections on any next steps, and formal close of proceedings
17:00	<i>Event ends</i>

ANNEX 2: KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MS SOMOUD AL MASRI

Transcript of Ms Somoud Al Masri's Keynote Address at the 2026 Women, Peace and Security Government–Civil Society Dialogue

Thank you for the introduction and thank you to the organisers for bringing us together today.

Before I begin, I want to be honest — it's an honour to be here, and it's also a little uncomfortable.

I'm a civil engineer by training. I work for the No1 Engineering Design firm in the world (Jacobs). And since I was invited to speak here today, I have been asking myself:

What is a civil engineer doing in a Women, Peace and Security dialogue? This question didn't come from insecurity...It came from frustration.

In my engineering work, I kept seeing the same pattern. We would finish designing a piece of infrastructure — a station, a transport hub — build it, open it, celebrate it. And then, sometimes much later, we would test whether it was safe for women.

After the design was locked in.

After the budget was spent.

After the decisions were made.

And I remember thinking: Why are women treated like a test case instead of a design principle?

For a while, I admired the problem. I named it. I analysed it. I pointed at it from the sidelines.

But eventually, I realised something important.

If I genuinely wanted change, admiration wasn't enough...So I stepped closer.

That frustration is what led me to work with the Champions of Change Coalition, codesigning the **7 Switches** — one of the first global genderinclusive design frameworks, now used as a resource by UN Women.

That experience taught me a lesson that has stayed with me ever since: **everyone has a sphere of influence — and change happens when we choose to push from within it.**

This is where I find myself today.

Because once you start seeing systems this way — once you see who they are designed for, and who they quietly exclude — you can't unsee it.

And that lens is what I bring with me into conversations about peace, security, and conflict.

I was born and raised in Syria.

And when I think about Women, Peace and Security — when I think about stability, conflict, and resilience — Syria is not a distant case study for me.

It is personal...It is lived...And it is deeply emotional.

If you want to know whether a society is stable, watch how it treats women.

Not in its speeches...Not in its commitments...But in its systems, its decisions, and its silences.

Syria is often described as an exception — too complex, too difficult, too fractured.

But Syria is not an exception...It is a mirror.

It shows us what happens when women are central to holding communities together — and systematically excluded from the tables where power is exercised.

Syria shows us something else as well.

It reminds us that when systems collapse, when institutions fail, when politics becomes distant or violent — it is often women who hold society together.

Not because they are given power...But because they take responsibility.

And for me, this is not an abstract observation. It's not something I learned from a report or a case study. It's something I grew up watching.

When I think about Syria — about resilience, leadership, and survival — I don't start with negotiations or conferences...I start with my grandmothers.

I had two grandmothers. Very different women, living very different lives — and yet both were leaders in ways that mattered deeply.

One of them was uneducated. She never went to school. She couldn't read or write.

But she created her own system of mathematics to manage the family's finances and farms. She ran complex operations with precision and authority. She was a leader in every sense of the word.

She had five sons and four daughters, and two of her daughters were among the first teachers in their village.

Women in her community would come to her when they were in conflict with their families. When they needed protection. When they needed someone to stand between them and harm.

She had presence. Authority. Respect. Power — without ever being given a title.

My other grandmother was formally educated. She spoke Arabic and French. She lost her husband very early and was left to raise seven daughters on her own.

Society was not kind to her...Raising girls without a man was seen as a failure. A weakness. Something to be pitied — or judged.

But she had a vision for her daughters...She wanted them educated. Independent. Confident. Unapologetic.

And today, those daughters are engineers, doctors, and professors...Strong women, because they were raised by a strong woman.

These two women could not have been more different — and yet they represent the same truth: **women have always been leaders, even when systems refuse to see them.**

The tragedy is not that women like this don't exist...The tragedy is that our systems still do not make room for them.

Syria illustrates this painfully clearly.

Syrian women have led local peace efforts...They have delivered humanitarian responses...They have preserved social cohesion under impossible conditions.

And yet, they remain systematically excluded from formal peace negotiations, political settlements, and reconstruction processes.

The international community often funds women...But it rarely follows their leadership.

Inclusion becomes symbolic...Participation becomes performative...Power remains untouched...And that is not a failure of women...It is a failure of systems.

Despite all the work we keep doing — all the frameworks, all the action plans, all the language — we still have such a long way to go.

And I'll be honest: that reality deeply unsettles me.

Because it's not just about whether *I* will see gender equality in my lifetime...It's whether my daughter will... And that thought shakes me every time.

Delay is not neutral...Delay has a human cost.

That is why moments like the midterm review of Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security matter so much...Not because of reporting...But because of what we are willing to change.

A midterm review is only meaningful if we are prepared to coursecorrect — not just refine language.

Australia has an important role to play — not only internationally, but here at home.

Governments like the Australian Government have a responsibility to ensure that the way we engage with diaspora communities reflects the diversity, capability, and leadership that already exists within them.

Too often, representation becomes narrow. Familiar voices are amplified. The same community leaders are consulted — and the same perspectives are recycled.

And too often, women's contributions sit just outside the frame.

If we are serious about Women, Peace and Security, then government must be **intentional** about who is in the room — and who is missing.

That means actively seeking out diverse women leaders within diaspora communities...Not just to share their experiences — but to shape policy, influence decisions, and codesign solutions.

It means moving beyond consultation and into empowerment...Because if inclusion is left to chance, systems will default to exclusion.

And when women — particularly migrant and diaspora women — are absent from decisionmaking spaces, it is not because they lack expertise or leadership...It is because the system was never designed to reach them.

Intentionality matters...Because representation shapes outcomes...And power, left unattended, reproduces itself.

I didn't become a leader in my community because it was easy...I became a leader because I didn't see many women if any...And I couldn't accept that absence as normal.

Leadership, for women, often comes with a cost.

There are spaces where I ask my husband not to come with me — not because he doesn't support me, but because when he does, people speak to him...And suddenly, I become the plus one...Even though he is the quiet one.

This is not said with bitterness...It's said with clarity.

Because this is how power operates — quietly, subtly, even in progressive spaces.

This is why presence is not enough...Power must be intentional.

So, what needs to shift — now?

I want to suggest three shifts for us to hold onto throughout today.

First: from inclusion to influence.

Women at the table does not mean women shaping outcomes... We must stop measuring participation and start measuring power.

Second: from safe engagement to strategic risk.

Supporting women peacebuilders means backing them when it is uncomfortable — politically, diplomatically, and institutionally.

Third: from parallel work to shared accountability.

Consultation is not collaboration... Engagement is not codecision.

These shifts matter deeply for the conversations we'll have today — on genderresponsive peacebuilding, cyber security and the WPS agenda, and government responses to the midterm review.

They are not separate issues.

Peacebuilding that does not shift power does not last.

Digital spaces are now conflict spaces — and women are on the frontlines.

And reviews that do not lead to change are exercises in comfort.

I want to close where I began — with discomfort...I still feel it. I expect I always will.

But I have learned not to treat discomfort as a signal to step back... I treat it as a signal that I am close to something that matters.

Women, Peace and Security is not about adding women to broken systems...It is about having the courage to change those systems.

And that courage — that intentionality — is the responsibility of everyone in this room.