

# What do peace and security mean to diverse women in Australia?

Findings from a consultation by the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security  
December 2022

## BACKGROUND

The Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security (the Coalition) is a non-partisan and independent alliance of civil society organisations, networks, and individuals working to advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Members build evidence for and understanding of best practice, raise awareness, facilitate dialogue, and support women's rights partners in Australia, through their networks across the Asia-Pacific region, and globally.

The Coalition is in the process of delivering a multi-year project, funded by the Australian Civil Military Centre, designed to support civil society dialogue and engagement on WPS as part of the implementation of Australia's Second National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security (2021-2031). The first phase of the project involved a consultation to explore understandings of peace and security amongst women and gender diverse people in Australia, how perceptions of peace and security have been shaped by the changing national and global context, and what action diverse communities want to see the Australian Government take to build a safer and more peaceful world. The responses gathered through the consultation process have yielded a rich seam of data, which is outlined in this report and will inform the second phase of the project, aiming to generate detailed recommendations to inform the implementation and monitoring of Australia's second National Action Plan on WPS.

Consultation with, and the leadership of, women and gender diverse people is a fundamental underpinning of the WPS agenda. Action to secure peace and security is strengthened when it draws from diverse knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, and the Australian Government has explicitly committed to support women and girls' capacity to speak out, be heard, innovate, and drive change. From the consultation findings, it is clear that intersectional and intergenerational analysis is crucial to informing and advancing the WPS agenda as the lived experiences and perspectives of women are impacted by factors such as their age, race, ethnicity, location and residential status. Despite this, too often, decisions are taken without a proper examination of how diverse women experience and understand these issues.

## ABOUT THE CONSULTATION

Over October and November 2022, 215 women and gender diverse people volunteered to take part in the consultation, which was framed around three core questions:

Q1. What do peace and security mean to women and gender diverse people in Australia? What do they mean to you?

Q2. How have your perceptions of peace and security shifted in recent years and why?

Q3. What are the top three things you would like the Australian Government to do to build peace and security?

148 people took part in small-group discussions, or 'Listening Circles', hosted by the Coalition and its members in a range of spaces including universities, women's groups, community centres, and online. An additional 67 took part in an online survey, which was distributed through Coalition partners, outreach to diverse women's organisations and networks, and through the Coalition's mailing list and social media channels.

Invaluable support was offered by Coalition member organisations representing women and gender diverse people from marginalised communities, to explore the intersectional determinants of perspectives on peace and security. As a result, more participants from outside of the membership of the Coalition took part than in previous years. 44% of participants were from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and 28% were from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. 19% were under the age of 35, with 6% of those between the ages of 18 and 24, and 37% were over the age of 65. Given child protection concerns, the Coalition did not actively seek participants under the age of 18 and none took part. 51% of participants lived in Victoria and New South Wales, with the remainder distributed across Tasmania, Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. There were no participants from the Northern Territory.

Only 8% of respondents identified as living with a disability, 8% lived in rural areas, and only 2% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Given the lack of resources available to and competing demands on the time of the organisations that represent women in these communities, the Coalition will give further consideration to how best to support their engagement with the WPS agenda, ensure our efforts align with their campaigns and concerns, and, going forward, ensure their perspectives better inform the next phase of the project.

*"Listen to what Indigenous people want and need and give them a voice that is embedded in the structures of power." - Survey participant*

## Overview of Results

### What do peace and security mean to women and gender diverse people in Australia?

Responses to the consultation encompassed issues perceived as more 'traditional' security concerns, such as war, conflict, militarization, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but also looked beyond these to more personal and communal aspects of security. Participants described peace as far more than just the absence of war and recognised that peace and security, while interconnected, are not interchangeable. There was a general concern that, while Australia is a largely peaceful place, Australian women and gender diverse people do not always experience peace and security, particularly those facing intersecting and overlapping forms of oppression on the basis of race, age, class, visa status and other characteristics. Intersectional and intergenerational analyses were called for and described as crucial to understanding how diverse women perceive peace and security. There was broad agreement that peace and security are always related to human security, freedom from violence, and the ability to access basic rights. The most commonly cited ideas central to perceptions of peace and security included:

#### 1. Personal freedom and the ability to realise human rights

The majority of participants viewed peace and security as related to both 'freedom from' violence, oppression and fear, and 'freedom to' make choices, live well and realise their rights. Personal safety and freedom from violence, including family and domestic violence, sexual violence, and street and workplace violence and harassment, were raised most often. Younger women were more likely to express fears over violence in public spaces and online, while women from refugee and asylum seeking communities highlighted the impacts of domestic violence to those close to them.

The majority of respondents also stressed the importance of knowing they would be able to access their rights and have access to shelter, food, clean water, education, healthcare, as well as sexual and reproductive rights. Participants stressed the need for strong interpersonal relationships and knowing that their families and communities would be safe and protected into the future, as well as the importance of mental health, spiritual peace, and a sense of harmony.

*“Globally the political situation seems more precarious, climate change more real, and basics like housing and sufficient income for many in Australia [are] at crisis point.” - Survey participant*

## 2. A country and community where everyone is respected, valued and afforded equal rights

Participants expressed difficulty feeling secure in a country that marginalises, exploits, oppresses, or ‘others’ people from particular communities or backgrounds. The majority would feel safer in a society where everyone feels welcome and valued, structural inequalities and discrimination are dismantled, and where difference is celebrated. First Nations, refugee, and asylum seeking communities, in particular, were identified as deserving an equal voice in decision making and to have their rights respected. Concerns were raised about the ways in which Australia’s visa system exacerbates inequalities and structural discrimination by creating different ‘classes’ or tiers of rights for people on different types of visas.

*“Peace to me the freedom to live in harmony with myself, in the community and in the space around me. As a woman and citizen of the world, I feel at peace when my people are healthy and feel safe and secure.” - Survey participant*

## 3. Robust government, civic structures and institutions that promote peace and respect the rights of citizens

Participants wanted to live in a country where it feels like the government is doing its best for its people, cares about them, and in which laws and regulations, governing structures, and civic institutions are robust, respected and honoured by the powers that be. It was felt that in secure and peaceful countries, like Australia, citizens and civil society should be empowered to hold their government to account within a democratic system, afforded freedom of expression, and that diverse citizens should be represented at all levels of decision making and in public institutions. Participants also want to see their government making informed decisions that are expressly designed to have a positive impact on the lives of diverse women and girls.

*“I am ashamed of how we treat refugees, when any of us could be in that situation one day.” - Survey participant*

## 4. Harmony between people and planet

There was a desire to see Australia working beyond its borders to promote peace internationally and regionally, and actively seeking to de-escalate conflict with our neighbours. The majority of participants cited concern about either or both armed conflict and the devastating impacts of climate change and climate disasters. Peace and security were seen as essentially linked to both environmental and ecological protection, conflict resolution without resort to violence, and the end of war. A significant number expressed feeling less safe in a world threatened by nuclear weapons and the global arms trade.

*“Security is knowing that the society and country I live in is outward looking enough to care about people wherever they live; and confident enough to understand that if you treat others (people, states) with distrust and contempt, it provides more fuel for violence and instability.” - Survey participant*

### Spotlight: First Nations Women

Around 2% of participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Responses from First Nations women called for work to promote harmony, unity and the leadership of impacted communities in building peace and security. They advocated for an approach to peacebuilding that recognises and respects cultural difference, the important role of elders and community leaders, and that understands that deployment of police and peacekeeping forces may not be appropriate in marginalised communities with a history of government-sanctioned violence and oppression. Going forward, First Nations participants urged the Government to sign a treaty with First Nations Peoples, institute greater consultation with community leaders, and commit to long-term funding for community organisations working at the local level.

More comprehensive research capturing the views and concerns of First Nations women is available and should be drawn upon, including the [Wiyi Yani U Thangani \(Women's Voices\): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report](#) from the Australian Human Rights Commission. The report considers a range of WPS concerns and proposes three overarching recommendations; a National Action Plan on advancing the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls; conducting a National Summit and establishing a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls Advisory Body; and empowering women's leadership on the ground.

### How have perceptions of security shifted in recent years and why?

An overwhelming majority of respondents described a personal shift in perceptions of peace and security in recent years, with most indicating that that shift had been negative, or that their worry or concern had increased. Less than 10% of participants said their perceptions had remained the same.

*“Climate change is also increasing insecurity in all of our lives - a future with continuous flooding and bushfires creates huge domestic need at the same time that so many countries are struggling overseas with less resources to cope.” - Survey participant*

The reasons given for a shift in perception, in order of most commonly cited, were:

- **Climate change** and increases in the frequency and severity of climate disasters in Australia and overseas, including flooding and bush fires.
- **Global conflict** and concern over the aggression of countries such as China, Iran, Russia and the USA. Many respondents expressed concern over arrangements such as the AUKUS trilateral security pact and Quad Alliances, and worried that Australia might be drawn into conflict as a proxy for other governments.
- **Erosion of trust in government and public institutions**, alongside concern about the influence of cynical and self-interested anti-democratic and anti-rights actors in politics, corporations and the media.
- **Concern that society is becoming less caring and more insular**, exemplified by our treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, the shrinking of social safety nets, and the demonisation of those who rely on them.
- **Insecurity caused by the Covid-19 pandemic** and its continuing fallout, including increased racism and hate-speech experienced by women from Asian and other culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- **Cyber insecurity, the rise of misinformation, and the role of social media** as Australians live more of our lives and share more personal information online.

A significant number mentioned that their faith in government and public institutions had been shaken in recent years, however there was a sense that this was not irreversible and the compact between the Government and its citizens could be mended, depending on the future action political leaders choose to take.

*“It seemed we were all deliberately set on stirring up differences and disagreements, stirring for a fight - provoking angry strong reactions - from individuals and countries. This year I finally feel... that some of our 'leaders' are stepping back from the brink.” - Survey participant*

#### Spotlight: Intergenerational difference

Women over the age of 65 shared that the process of ageing had impacted their perceptions of peace and security - particularly for those living with disability or long-term health issues - stressing the importance of quality public services in feeling more secure. Respondents in this age group discussed issues of peace and harmony more often in their responses than younger women, in particular resolving disagreements without conflict, building stronger relationships at the family and community level, as well as achieving

inner harmony and peace. Older women were also more likely to raise international concerns than other age groups, while also calling for change that covered a broad range of domestic and international dimensions of insecurity.

More women under the age of 24 drew connections between peace and security and a sense of personal and physical safety, including protection from street harassment and gender-based violence, perhaps reflecting the disproportionate impact of these issues on this age group. Younger women were also more likely to directly call out sexism and misogyny, as well as the concept of toxic masculinity; calling for more men and boys to be engaged in ending gender based violence and for more to be done to tackle online abuse. This age group expressed particularly strong compassion and concern for people from marginalised groups, and called for women, particularly those from marginalised communities, to have a greater voice in decision making.

## What actions do participants want the Australian Government to take?

Participants want to see the Government building bridges between domestic and international dimensions of peace and security, calling for greater alignment between Australia's domestic, foreign, and humanitarian policies to address them. Many saw their own security as inextricably linked to that of diverse women across Australia and in other parts of the world, calling for a holistic response from the Australian Government that recognises and responds to the intersecting and compounding nature of insecurity, conflict and crises. The actions participants called for fell under five broad headings:

### 1. Enable all Australians to achieve peace, security and their unalienable rights

Participants want Australia to become a country in which everyone is able to realise their rights, with expanded social safety nets and investment in quality public services such as housing, healthcare, domestic violence shelters, education, and aged care services. However, there was a recognition of the need for an intersectional and intergenerational approach to the provision of such services, and a call for the wellbeing of marginalised communities to be prioritised. Participants particularly want to see increased investment in ending violence against women and girls, and ensuring that the judiciary, police, and security personnel are responsive in addressing gender-based crimes, are trained to support people from diverse cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds, and work in ways that avoid compounding trauma for marginalised communities and groups.

Participants from a wide range of demographics and backgrounds wanted to see much more attention given to realising the rights and addressing the concerns of First Nations, asylum seeking, and refugee women. Desire was expressed for the Government to enact a foreign policy that centres the rights of First Nations peoples, as well as domestic policies that enact the Uluru Statement from the Heart and build

from First Nations understandings of peace and security. This should go hand in hand with a feminist immigration and asylum policy that explicitly aims to reduce harms to diverse women and girls, supports mental health and wellbeing, aids trauma recovery, addresses intergenerational trauma, and enables families to reunite and provide each other with practical and emotional support.

*“As I have become older, with many worsening medical conditions, my need to rely on others has increased, and I no longer trust Australian society to care for those of us who have become very vulnerable.” - Survey participant*

## **2. Reposition Australia as a global and regional peacemaker rather than a strategic military partner**

Participants wanted to see the Government realise its commitment to making peacebuilding a priority across Australia’s foreign policy and diplomatic efforts and take a more vocal stance against international human rights abuses, including by adopting an explicit strategy for atrocity prevention. At the same time, there were calls for the Government to de-escalate tensions and improve relationships with Australia’s neighbours, while modelling best practice in the Asia-Pacific region. Significantly increasing direct support to Pacific women’s organisations and peacebuilders was identified as an important way to achieve this.

The Government was encouraged to support and strengthen - while holding accountable - multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, that work towards achieving peace and support human rights. Respondents wanted Australia to follow the lead of partner countries by signing and ratifying the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, committing to reducing Australia’s involvement in the international arms trade, tackling the domestic and international power and influence of the arms industry, and regulating the export of munitions.

*“When tensions build and conflict looks likely, there is never a shortage of resources for tanks and drones and guns. Where is the similar investment in peacebuilding?” - Survey participant*

## **3. Rebalance priorities and restructure departments and processes to enable Australia to become a world leader in global diplomacy, peacebuilding, and mediation**

The need for a better distribution of staffing and resources between Australia’s national security and military priorities and its human security and peacebuilding commitments was repeatedly raised. A significant proportion of participants called for a shift in spending from defence budgets to those that deliver human security and peace, such as the foreign aid budget. Some also called for the creation of a dedicated peace budget. A desire was expressed to see Government departments applying a gender

sensitive and feminist perspective to 'traditional' security issues, such as countering violent extremism, militarisation, defence procurement, and arms trading, while at the same time officially adopting a feminist and decolonial foreign policy framework, including through trade policy and foreign investments.

Participants wanted this shift in priorities to be reflected in the development of new structures and mechanisms, and a range of ideas were offered for how this could be achieved: for example by creating a dedicated Peace Ministry, a Conflict Prevention Unit within DFAT, or creating and resourcing the office of an Ambassador for Women Peace and Security. It was suggested that Australia should have dedicated and fully funded conflict mediation teams, trained and ready to deploy around the region, and that WPS principles should guide Australian humanitarian and military deployments overseas.

*“Stop using the military as a go-to fix for complex problems... People in fatigues shouldn't be... delivering aid to flood-impacted communities. It should be done by trained experts able to work with marginalised and traumatised populations, not people trained to fire guns.” - Survey participant*

#### **4. Respect and recognize the agency of diverse women, girls, and gender diverse people, and enable those most impacted to lead**

There were calls for the Government to recognise diverse women and girls' agency, voice and capacities, provide long-term sustainable funding to women's organisations and movements engaged in peacebuilding, and ensure a greater voice for women in national decision making around security decisions such as whether to go to war. Participants want their leaders to commit to ensuring those most directly impacted by insecurity have the power, resources and influence to address it, adopting an intersectional and intergenerational approach. Key to this, participants called for greater investment in diaspora-led humanitarianism and peace-building, and for marginalised groups to be consulted in the development of monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

*“Listen to women and girls and fund women's organisations that can do the work on the ground.” - Survey participant*

#### **5. Position Australia at the forefront of global efforts to address climate change and insecurity**

The Australian Government was encouraged to lead by example, significantly increasing international investment in reversing climate change while, at the same time, phasing out fossil fuels and investing in renewable resources and systems. Participants wanted to see the Government research and respond to the differential impacts of climate disasters in Australia on women and girls, in particular bushfires and floods. Participants would also like to see their Government leading global and regional efforts to help women

and girls adapt to climate change and prepare for climate disasters, with a focus on support to Pacific nations and women's rights organisations.

*“Improve our migration system to ensure those threatened by conflict and loss of their homes from climate change impacts are able to have a safe and bright future.” - Survey participant*

### Spotlight: Refugee and Asylum Seeking Women

Refugee and asylum seeking women reported feeling safe living in Australia and expressed a deep appreciation for the support they have received from the Australian Government, civil society and their communities. However, many raised concerns, including that, by extending different rights and entitlements to people on different classes of visas, Australia's immigration system compounds difference and discrimination within diaspora communities, leaving some women and gender diverse people less secure and more vulnerable to abuse. Issues faced by women experiencing domestic violence were raised, including those whose visas or status are tied to that of their husbands and those who are not citizens and so have reduced access to shelters, social services and emergency support. This included concerns that many domestic violence shelters are not equipped to support women from culturally and linguistically diverse cultural backgrounds, for example with dietary requirements or interpretation needs.

The mental health of migrant women dealing with trauma in the aftermath of conflict, or experiencing isolation and abuse, was a key concern. Refugee and asylum seeking women called for investment in mental health support services, as well as the adoption of a more compassionate immigration policy that grants visas to help women struggling with mental health issues, particularly single women with children, to reunite with friends or family who would be able to support them. Participants also talked about issues faced acclimatising to life in Australia, accessing benefits and services, or dealing with authorities due to language and cultural barriers. It was emphasised that interpreters should be provided whenever people are dealing with complex visa issues or negotiating social safety nets, rather than on request. Some mentioned the compounding impact of insecurity on racism and hate speech directed at women in Australia, for example verbal abuse directed at women from Asian diaspora and other culturally and linguistically diverse communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting the need for a response to disasters and emergencies that is responsive to and proactively seeks to address this issue.

Participants described interactions with police in Australia that were generally positive and made them feel safer, however some suggested that police receive more training on how to work with newly arrived people, negotiate language barriers, and recognise that people may not always understand the rules they are breaking. When young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds run from the police, rather than charging them with resisting arrest, participants felt more questions should be asked about how past interactions with police and military in other countries may have shaped their response.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The findings from this consultation broadly resonate with those from [similar consultations](#) held regularly by the Coalition since 2014, however, many participants expressed a new sense of urgency and fears about an increasingly insecure national and global context.

Three clear themes emerged that warrant additional attention as we move into the projects' second phase:

1. **Interconnectedness**; participants wanted to see much more done to address the links between insecurity and crises at the local, national and international levels, as well as to address the compounding and intersecting nature of insecurity, crises and conflict.
2. **Intersectionality and intergenerationality**; with calls for more attention to be given to diverse women's different understandings of insecurity and how these are impacted by personal experience of intersecting and overlapping forms of oppression on the basis of race, age, class, visa status and other characteristics.
3. **Localisation and agency**; ensuring that those most impacted by insecurity, particularly those whose insecurity is compounded by marginalisation, have the space and resources to lead responses.

Over the next 18 months, the Coalition will build on these important contributions; reflecting further on the priorities that have been identified. With the support of our members, we aim to develop a comprehensive advocacy platform informed by input from civil society partners, colleagues in research and academia, as well as those with lived experience of the issues under discussion. This platform, in turn, will fuel and inform advocacy by the Coalition, its members and partners around Australia's second WPS National Action Plan.

This process has also underscored that while the WPS agenda provides useful tools for women and civil society to lobby and hold their governments to account, general awareness of these instruments is low. The Coalition will continue to work to build the engagement of Australian women on WPS issues, spread awareness of Australia's responsibilities and commitments, and ignite renewed discussion and debate to strengthen civil society responses.

Part of this work will aim to respond to an expressed desire by migrant and refugee communities for additional opportunities to speak and be heard, and for diaspora-led advocacy, and will look at how we can facilitate, and secure resources and space for these efforts. The Coalition will actively aim to strengthen our relationships with and raise the voices of diverse participants, drawing stronger connections between the WPS agenda and the rights and campaigns of First Nations women, women living with disabilities and rural women.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please visit our website at [wpscoaliton.org](http://wpscoaliton.org).

This report was produced by Rowan Harvey on behalf of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women Peace and Security with the support of a working group that included Dr Lisa Carson, Michelle Higelin, Dr Ludmilla Kwitko and Barbara O'Dwyer. It aims to represent the voices of those individuals and organisations that participated in the consultation and is not a representation of the views of all Coalition members. This project was oversighted by the Steering Committee of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on WPS.

The Coalition would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of Katrina Lee-Koo, Melissa Monteiro, Norma Boules, Diana Jacob, Patricia Garcia, Conscila Emilianus, Sara Davies, Janette McLeod, Chris Henderson, and Katherine Tu. We also gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the Community Migrant Resource Centre, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Australia, ActionAid Australia, the Creators of Peace Australia, the HUB Neighbourhood Centre Inala, and HUB Inala Women's Group.

The consultation and report have been funded by the Australian Department of Defence through the auspices of the Australian Civil-Military Centre.

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Suggested Citation: Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace & Security (2022). What do Peace and Security mean to diverse women in Australia?: A consultation by the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security, December 2022.