WPS.
AUSTRALIAN COALITION

WPS Listening Circles 2026

Findings Report

What do peace, security and community cohesion mean to women and gender diverse people in Australia?

WPS Listening Circles 2026: Summary Report

This report is issued on behalf of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), a non-partisan, independent coalition of civil society organisations, networks, and individuals dedicated to advancing the WPS agenda in Australia, the region, and globally. It summarises the findings of the Coalition's 2026 consultation with women and gender diverse people across Australia.

Background

In 2026 the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security (the Coalition) returned to communities to ask what peace, security and community cohesion mean to women and gender diverse people, and what they want the Australian Government to do. This follows the 2017 roundtables in every capital city, which helped shape Australia's second National Action Plan on WPS (2021 to 2031), and the 2022 national consultation, which reached over 200 women and gender diverse people.

In our 2022 report, an overwhelming majority of participants said their sense of peace and security had shifted, and for most the shift was negative. Fewer than one in ten said nothing had changed. The 2026 consultation took place amid sharper pressures: climate emergencies, escalating conflict, a backlash against women's rights and growing social division.

The leadership of women and gender diverse people is central to the WPS agenda, and the Australian Government has committed to supporting women and girls to speak out, be heard and drive change. Our 2022 consultation also showed why we need to look at how age, race, location and residential status shape women's experiences. The 2026 listening circles and survey continue that work.

This report summarises what we heard in 2026 and will be provided to the Australian Government to help shape the priority themes of dialogues with the departments responsible for implementing the WPS National Action Plan and other relevant policies.

Who we heard from

About the consultation

Between July and November 2026, over 100 women and gender diverse people took part in the consultation, which explored three core questions: what peace, security and community cohesion mean to you; how your perceptions have shifted in recent years and why; and the top three things you would like the Australian Government to do to build peace, security and community cohesion. Participants came from diverse cultural, linguistic, religious and refugee backgrounds.

Listening circles were hosted in Brisbane and Logan (QLD), Adelaide (SA) and Merrylands (NSW). In Brisbane and Logan, five sessions, in person and online, brought together 62 people from diverse cultural, linguistic, religious and community backgrounds. In Adelaide, 8 multicultural women, including diaspora women, took part in an open conversation. In Merrylands, approximately 17 mothers from refugee backgrounds, from diverse cultural backgrounds including Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq and Ethiopia, discussed what makes them feel safe.

An online survey, sent to our network database of over 200 members and shared through members' wider networks, gathered written responses from NSW, VIC, QLD, SA and the ACT. Respondents were predominantly women aged 18 to 65 and over; just over half were born overseas, and some identified as people with disability. Most lived in metropolitan areas.

What peace, security and community cohesion mean

Across every circle and the survey, participants described peace and security as far more than the absence of armed conflict. They talked about belonging, dignity and control over daily life.

- **Belonging and inclusion.** Safety means being recognised as part of the community and free to take part without hiding who you are. Participants described safe spaces as places where language, accent, dress or faith are not treated as risks.
- **Anti-racism as a foundation.** Participants said peace is not possible without active anti-racism at individual, institutional and structural levels.
- **Rights, laws and opportunity.** Participants linked feeling safe to strong laws, equal rights, employment and support from government and community. As one survey participant put it, safety is "feeling safe, respected and equal".
- **Agency and economic security.** Participants spoke of control over housing, work, movement and access to help. In Adelaide and in the survey, financial independence was named as a precondition for women to leave unsafe situations.
- **Everyday physical safety.** Women described wanting to walk to the shops, use public transport and be in public spaces at night without fear.
- **Human security, not defence.** Several participants challenged narrow, militarised understandings of security, emphasising the importance of community-led, bottom-up approaches over top-down policing and defence frameworks.

Perspectives on the language of social cohesion were more mixed. One participant questioned the term itself, describing it as problematic, while another noted that it is often framed by the media as sameness rather than an acceptance of difference.

How perceptions have shifted, and why

Most participants said peace and security have become harder to feel in recent years. The reasons they gave fall into five groups.

1. **Fear, scapegoating and polarisation.** Participants described rising anti-migrant sentiment and scapegoating of migrant, Muslim, Jewish and other faith communities, amplified by media, populist rhetoric and online misinformation. Adelaide participants described Islamophobia, antisemitism experienced by their children at school, and free speech being applied unevenly.
2. **Falling trust in government.** Participants pointed to perceived inconsistency in how the government responds to different communities, including the responses to the antisemitism and Islamophobia envoy reports and to the Bondi attack. Australia's foreign policy on Gaza and Israel, the lack of progress on a First Nations treaty and the backlash after the Voice referendum were also raised. Adelaide participants described state and local government as hard to reach.
3. **A narrowing space for dialogue.** Participants described adversarial political rhetoric and a shrinking space for critical public conversation.

4. **Violence against women and online harm.** Several participants said violence against women remains under-addressed, and that social media, including the "manosphere", is driving harm among young people.
5. **Young people and unequal access to support.** Participants linked the loss of young lives in Victoria and Queensland to exclusion, and said services often treat young people as problems rather than people with unmet needs. They also described unequal access to housing, mental health support and legal aid, especially for newly arrived communities.

Adelaide participants raised one issue not heard elsewhere: transnational repression of diaspora women, including surveillance, hacking attempts and being unable to travel safely to see family. They said authorities could not guarantee their safety.

Views were not uniform. One participant said their sense of safety in Australia is unchanged and positive, though they see the world as more dangerous and divided.

Recommendations for the Australian Government

Participants called for visible leadership, accountability and sustained engagement, alongside greater investment in prevention rather than punishment. The following seven recommendations reflect these priorities and the key messages raised throughout the consultation.

1. **Leadership and accountability:** Make social cohesion core government business with clear ministerial responsibility and a local measurement framework (belonging, trust, inclusion, safety). Strengthen independent civil society oversight, including shadow reports to Parliament and open data on gender-based violence.

2. **Anti-racism and institutional reform:** Fully implement the National Anti-Racism Framework with funding and timelines. Act on the Islamophobia envoy's report with the same investment given to the antisemitism envoy's report. Progress a First Nations-led treaty. Require anti-racism and cultural responsiveness training for police, teachers, health workers and government staff.

3. **Safety, trauma and youth:** Move services from trauma-informed to trauma-transformative practice. Invest in safe, youth-designed spaces instead of criminalising responses. Substantially increase investment in preventing violence against women, reaching women with disability, First Nations women, LGBTIQ+ people and migrant and refugee women.

4. **Economic security and access:** Simplify access to housing, mental health, legal aid and employment services, with interpreters and culturally safe models. Support employment and education for migrant and refugee women. Fund ethnic and multicultural organisations and grassroots women's organisations as frontline connectors, with long-term, flexible funding rather than making them compete for it.

5. **Education and prevention:** Embed human rights, anti-racism and peace education across school curricula from an early age, equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to challenge discrimination, address conflict and build inclusive communities.

6. **Listening and women's participation:** Fund ongoing, locally led dialogue that co-designs solutions, and run a national deep-listening exercise with independent facilitators. Ensure women with lived experience and civil society have a role in decisions on peace and security, including National Action Plan implementation. Create safe places for women to speak openly.

7. **Digital and transnational safety:** Recognise transnational repression and online harassment as distinct safety issues and coordinate a government response, including support for victims. Act on online harms affecting young people.

Several survey participants also asked for reform of political integrity settings (donation transparency and caps, penalties for political disinformation, media ownership) and for a review of foreign policy settings for consistency and even-handedness. Others called for greater investment in peacebuilding relative to military spending.

Next steps

The Coalition will draw on these findings, alongside contributions from women and girls around the country, to help shape the priority themes for dialogues with the Australian Government departments responsible for building a safer world for women and girls.

The Coalition will also share the report with Coalition members and the communities who took part, and will keep listening: several participants asked for ongoing dialogue, not one-off consultation.

Thank you to everyone who hosted or joined a circle, completed the survey, and shared their experiences.