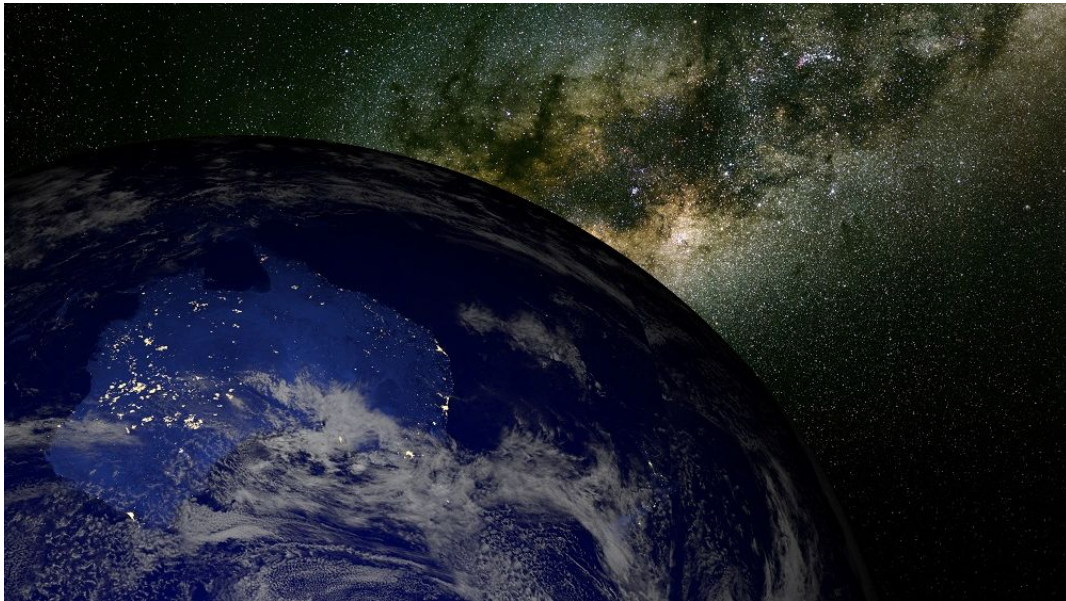


Old inequalities, new space? Women, peace and space security

Posted By [Elise Stephenson](#) and [Cassandra Steer](#) on December 13, 2022 @ 06:00



Senior US Space Force officials visiting Australia have warned that a conflict in space in the next few years is [a very real prospect](#) ^[1]. From Australia's participation in the UN open-ended working group on reducing space threats, to the establishment of the [Defence Space Command](#) ^[2] in January, space security is becoming an increasingly critical focus. To date, however, there's been no overlap between Australia's approach to space security and its commitments to international security through the UN women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. Why? And where are the women in space security?

To truly protect Australia's interests and promote responsible behaviour in space, gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive space security is critical. Indeed, as one of us has [argued](#) ^[3], '[G]reater diversity is needed in the space sector, and this will only be achieved when women feel they are truly part of the structures and institutions that govern space.' This is [as important](#) ^[4] to Australia's nascent but fast-developing space industry as it is to our security instruments and approach to space.

What does gender-inclusive space mean for Australia's foreign-policy and national-security agencies? In short, Australia's ultimate goals and outcomes in space can only be achieved by applying the lessons of the WPS agenda to international cooperation and collaboration in space, by addressing our current framework for foreign policy and national security, and by creating the kind of inclusive space sector we want for the future.

Australia is a signatory to the WPS agenda, first codified in 2000 by UN Security Council resolution 1325. The WPS agenda is underpinned by evidence that women's participation is critical in preventing conflict and building and sustaining peace. There is increasing evidence that women's participation in decision-making results in more durable peace agreements, increased trust and collaboration across political agendas, and more comprehensive and nuanced information gathering to better inform decision-making. In [national security and intelligence](#) ^[5], diversity reduces groupthink, increases the potential range of hypotheses and activities under consideration, and diversifies policy approaches.

The link between these issues and space security may not be obvious at first blush, but satellite services are integral to daily life, whether military or civilian, from telecommunications, financial transactions and the internet to navigation, disaster response, and weather and climate data. One indicator for political stability and peace is ensuring that girls and women have access to education and can independently participate in local economies. This requires access to the internet, telecommunications and other space-based technologies. Without a focus on gender considerations and representation in the space sector, as well as in the design of space missions, we risk excluding the interests and needs of girls and women, undermining peace and increasing the risk of conflict.

In Geneva, where UN arms control and security issues are negotiated, Australia is already known as a leader in advancing the WPS agenda. Australia has advocated for gender-neutral language in the Conference on Disarmament and works closely with regional partners on gender mainstreaming in all security issues, though we don't hear much about it back home. One recent initiative that Australia led coincided with the September working group on reducing space threats. '[For the benefit of all humankind: why space security needs gender perspectives](#)'^[6] was co-sponsored by the Philippines and the UN Institute for Disarmament Research and led to recommendations to ensure the use of gender-neutral language such as 'piloted' or 'automated' rather than 'manned' or 'unmanned' when referring to spacecraft; to ensure greater participation by women diplomats and decision-makers in space security negotiations; and to take into account the disproportionate impact on girls and women when space-based technologies are interrupted, interfered with or attacked in grey-zone and conflict situations. These show early examples of WPS principles in action in space security that could be further built on.

Given that Australia has now committed to a First Nations foreign policy agenda and evidences [an increasingly 'feminist' foreign policy](#)^[7], integrating WPS principles and tools may benefit the space sector in many ways. Australia's [second WPS national action plan](#)^[8] released in 2021 provides a legal and policy framework well suited to space security. The plan foreshadows the need to apply WPS to emerging and cross-cutting issues like climate change, health pandemics and violent extremism. Space security fits strongly within these lines of approved and resourced policy action, and there's an opportunity for Australia to take a lead on explicit application of the WPS agenda to space Security.

Potential WPS mechanisms include engaging in consultations and co-design with those who benefit from a stable space environment and responsible space governance; ensuring basic targets are met regarding women, First Nations communities and other key diversity groups; and embedding a gender perspective in space policy and programming. [Joan Johnson-Freese and Sahana Dharmapuri note](#)^[9] that adhering to and capitalising on existing international and national WPS commitments will provide another avenue in the global pursuit of a more stable and sustainable space environment.

If we take Australia's defence and foreign policy white papers as guides, space security should follow a values-based international activity that advances Australian interests in maintaining a global rules-based order and protecting our democracy, freedoms, equality and our sovereignty. The mandate therefore already exists—the [2017 foreign policy white paper](#)^[10] embeds gender equality as a critical element of foreign policy, stating that 'Australia's foreign policy pursues empowerment of women as a top priority' and 'gender inequality undermines global prosperity, stability and security'.

Ultimately, Australia is proud to have signed all five of the core space treaties, which only a small handful of nations have done. We also have a history of having been norms entrepreneurs in security issues in the past. Since we are now asserting ourselves as a serious space player, it is incumbent on us as a responsible space nation to be proactive about embedding gender perspectives and gender inclusivity domestically in our space sector and internationally in our diplomacy efforts on responsible behaviours in space. The WPS agenda may be one such avenue where we can gain traction in space security.

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[1] a very real prospect: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-02/us-space-force-eyes-australian-real-estate-future-warfare/101724368>

[2] Defence Space Command: <https://www.airforce.gov.au/about-us/defence-space-command>

[3] argued:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349618733_The_Province_of_all_Humankind_-_A_Feminist_Analysis_of_Space_Law

[4] as important: <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/07/28/opinion-getting-diversity-right-in-australias-nascent-space-industry-matters/>

[5] national security and intelligence: <https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/department-news/20465/what-research-says-gender-culture-and-other-forms-diversity-national-security>

[6] 'For the benefit of all humankind: why space security needs gender perspectives': <https://indico.un.org/event/1002352/>

[7] an increasingly 'feminist' foreign policy: <https://academic.oup.com/fpa/article-abstract/16/2/236/5782386>

[8] second WPS national action plan: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/second-australian-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security-2021-2031>

[9] Joan Johnson-Freese and Sahana Dharmapuri note: <https://spacenews.com/op-ed-expanding-space-security-options-through-gender-perspectives/>

[10] 2017 foreign policy white paper: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>