

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

Human Rights Subcommittee — Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative

Creative Women's Association · ABN 54 693 315 043 · May 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's cultural and heritage labour is an unmeasured national economic security asset — and the system that sustains it is approaching a measurable tipping point. Women perform 76% of Australia's unpaid labour, within an economy conservatively valued at \$650 billion annually. Australia's fertility rate reached a record low of 1.51 in 2023 — far below the 2.1 replacement rate. Women initiate two-thirds of all divorces, rising to nine in ten among college-educated women. These are not cultural trends. They are physiological signals from a population that has been required to carry an unsustainable load without infrastructure, measurement, or institutional protection.

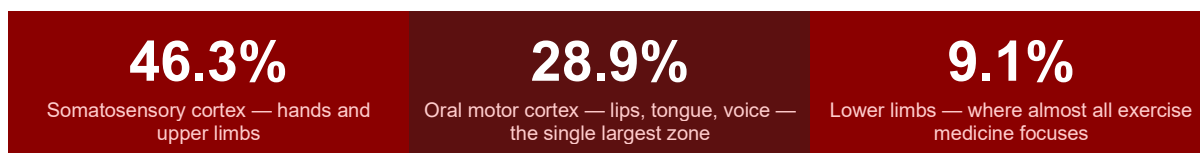
This submission makes three interconnected arguments. First, that women's physiology — from hormonal autonomic cycling through menstruation, through the structural demands of pregnancy, labour, and breastfeeding, to the chronic allostatic burden of unremunerated care work — constitutes a sustained physiological load with serious and measurable health consequences. Women with the highest allostatic load have a 64% increased cancer risk. Women comprise 83% of Takotsubo stress cardiomyopathy cases. The heart breaks because the load was never measured, never protected against, and never stopped. Second, that the hand-based and vocal cultural practices women have performed throughout human history are not incidental to their health — they are documented neurophysiological regulation mechanisms that activate the vagus nerve, improve Heart Rate Variability, and return the autonomic system toward parasympathetic balance. Homeostasis is peace. Third, that Australia has no legislative framework to recognise, protect, or invest in these practices or the women who transmit them.

The full physiological evidence base is presented in CWA Policy Paper: Thomas, P. (2026) Women's Physiology, Cultural Practice, and the Neuroscience of Peace. Creative Women's Association. This submission draws on that paper and makes five specific recommendations.

1. WOMEN'S PHYSIOLOGY, CULTURAL PRACTICE, AND THE NEUROSCIENCE OF PEACE

1.1 The Cortical Foundation

Human hands and the human brain co-evolved. A 2025 evolutionary biology paper (Baker, Barton and Venditti, Nature, 2025) established that across primates, longer and more dexterous thumbs strongly correlate with larger brains — particularly the neocortex governing planning, cognition, sensation, and action. The result is the cortical allocation confirmed by functional MRI (Zeharia et al., Oxford Brain Communications, 2020):



Together, hands and voice account for 75% of the brain's primary somatosensory allocation. The practices that load these zones — hand-based craft, weaving, textile work, singing, oral tradition — are not supplemental to health. On the evidence, they are among the most neurologically significant activities available to the human body. In women carrying the physiological cost of Australia's \$650 billion unpaid economy, they are a clinical intervention that has never been classified as one.

The full evidence chain — from hand-brain co-evolution through female autonomic physiology, vagal regulation, allostatic load, Takotsubo syndrome, and the neuroscience of cultural practice — is presented in Thomas, P. (2026) *Women's Physiology, Cultural Practice, and the Neuroscience of Peace*. CWA Policy Paper. Available at creativewomensassociation.org. The key findings relevant to this Subcommittee's terms of reference are presented below.

1.2 The Physiological Load: What Women's Bodies Are Already Carrying

Before a woman carries a single domestic or care responsibility, her autonomic nervous system is already operating a complex, hormonally driven dynamic. The menstrual cycle produces measurable, phase-dependent shifts in Heart Rate Variability — the accepted biomarker for autonomic nervous system regulation — across every phase, driven by fluctuating estrogen and progesterone (PMC, 2025; PMC, 2020; PMC, 2022). This is the baseline. The care burden does not arrive into a neutral system. It arrives into one already managing complex hormonal autonomic modulation, every month, from puberty to menopause.

Pregnancy adds 11.3 to 15.9 kilograms of weight-bearing load. Spinal curvature changes have not returned to pre-pregnancy levels four months postpartum — with longer-term studies needed to determine whether they ever normalise. Hormonal fluctuations predispose up to 56% of pregnant women to chronic low back pain and pelvic girdle dysfunction with long-term risks including degenerative disc disease (PMC, 2025).

Labour is a documented autonomic event. Stress during birth increases sympathetic dominance — measurable through reduced Heart Rate Variability — and suppresses the oxytocin shift that protects fetal oxygen supply. Childbirth-related post-traumatic stress disorder, which 14.2% of women meet full diagnostic criteria for at six weeks postpartum (rising to one in five following caesarean section), produces altered autonomic responses at rest, reduced Heart Rate Variability, and grey matter atrophy in the brain's threat-processing systems. (*Frontiers in Endocrinology, 2021; American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, 2024*)

Breastfeeding's protective oxytocin mechanism — which decreases cortisol and increases parasympathetic function via the vagal nerve — is reduced by stress and suppressed by emergency caesarean section (PLOS One, 2020). A woman who has experienced traumatic birth enters lactation with a suppressed protective system, an elevated sympathetic nervous system, and a spine that has not returned to structural baseline. She is not recovering. She is compounding — immediately, simultaneously — and resumes on average 7 hours and 29 minutes of daily unpaid physical labour (ABS Time Use Survey, 2024). Not sequentially. Simultaneously.

1.3 The Cumulative Consequence

Allostatic load is the cumulative physiological cost of chronic stress — the same instrument used to monitor and protect military personnel, pilots, and aviation crews whose institutional protections exist precisely because sustained physiological load without recovery produces measurable and serious harm.

Women carry higher allostatic load than men from age 17 onward. Unpaid domestic and care work contributes to sustained stress levels beyond what paid employment alone produces. (*ScienceDirect, Allostatic Load and Women's Unpaid Work*)

Caregivers were 33% more likely to develop illness or disability in a subsequent six-year period. Dual caregivers showed the highest allostatic load of all groups, persisting after adjustment for gender, education, income, and lifestyle. (*UK Understanding Society Cohort Study*)

Women in the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation cohort of 3,015 women with the highest allostatic load had a 64% increased risk of overall cancer, independent of demographics, healthy behaviours, and socioeconomic factors. (*SWAN Longitudinal Cohort Study*)

The most clinically stark expression is Takotsubo syndrome — stress cardiomyopathy, broken-heart syndrome. Women comprise 83% of cases (Journal of the American Heart Association, 2025). Approximately 90% of patients are postmenopausal — because reduced estrogen removes its cardioprotective effect on vascular tone and sympathetic stress response, leaving women whose lifetime care burden has already elevated sympathetic activation without their primary biological protection (Pelliccia et al., *Circulation*, 2017; Waqar et al., 2022). The heart breaks because the load was never measured, never protected against, and never stopped.

1.4 The Regulation Mechanism: Hands, Voice, and the Vagus Nerve

The same cortical map that establishes the cost of chronic load also identifies the mechanism of restoration. The practices that activate the hands and voice — craft, weaving, music, singing, oral tradition — are the primary mechanism through which 75% of the brain's somatosensory allocation is loaded and through which the vagus nerve is activated.

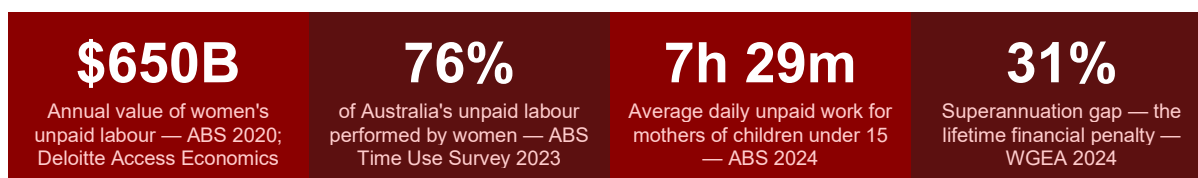
45 minutes of art-making produced measurable cortisol reduction across all age groups and experience levels. Hand-based creative activity produces measurable Heart Rate Variability changes. Group crafting produces physiological synchrony measurable in electrocardiograph and electroencephalograph data. (Kaimal et al., 2016; Haiblum-Itskovitch et al., 2018; Orui et al., 2024)

Vocal cord vibration during singing directly stimulates the vagus nerve, producing a measurable parasympathetic response. Extended exhalation enhances vagal tone by increasing Heart Rate Variability. Group singing increases oxytocin levels and vagal nerve activation. Sustained vocal practices demonstrate measurable improvements in Heart Rate Variability and autonomic balance. (Yuen et al., 2019; Inbaraj et al., 2022; Breit et al., 2018)

Women in chronic care burden, without institutional recognition or recovery protocols, are operating under exactly the conditions that exhaust the social engagement circuit — the most recently evolved autonomic system, operating through face, voice, and language — and sustain chronic sympathetic activation. The practices that restore them are the same practices that have been classified as supplemental, unfunded, and structurally at risk. Homeostasis is peace. A woman whose autonomic nervous system is regulated is more available for economic participation, community contribution, and social engagement. The preservation of the practices that produce that regulation is simultaneously a cultural policy, a health policy, an economic security policy, and a Women, Peace and Security imperative — directly relevant to Terms of Reference 1, 2, 3, and 6 of this inquiry.

2. ECONOMIC SECURITY: FIVE DECADES OF COMMITMENT WITHOUT INFRASTRUCTURE

2.1 The Data



Women perform 76% of Australia's unpaid labour, 71.8% of all primary care (WGEA 2024), within an unpaid economy conservatively valued at \$650 billion annually. A standard paid working day is 7.5 hours. Women who are employed and have children under 15 are working approximately 15 hours of combined paid and unpaid physical labour per day — before accounting for sleep disruption, mental load, or the hormonal autonomic modulation documented in Section 1. The superannuation gap of 31% is the direct, compounding, lifetime financial consequence of that arrangement. 54% of creative practitioners report that the absence of recognised standards prevents them from increasing their income (Australia Council National Arts Participation Survey 2023).

2.2 Five Decades of Commitment Without Infrastructure

<p>1969 — Equal Pay Act (Cth)</p>	<p>Established the principle of equal pay for equal work. Applied only to standard employment relationships. Did not cover freelance, portfolio, informal, home-based, or community creative labour.</p>
<p>1970s–1990s — Participation and Anti-Discrimination Era</p>	<p>Policy focus on access, representation, and legal protection. No national workforce standards introduced for cultural labour.</p>
<p>2000s — Creative Industries and Cultural Policy Era</p>	<p>Growth in cultural funding and participation frameworks. Creative labour continued to operate outside any recognised workforce architecture.</p>

2010s — Workforce Productivity and Gender Equity Strategies	Increased recognition of unpaid labour and care load in policy documents. No certification, classification, or national standards framework established.
2020–2025 — Evidence of Structural Failure	National data confirmed: women dominate unpaid and low-paid creative labour; creative careers do not map to existing education systems; workforce exit accelerates at mid-career; economic and health costs escalate. Despite five decades of equality policy, no national workforce infrastructure for women's creative labour exists.

AUSTRALIAN FASHION COUNCIL — NATIONAL MANUFACTURING STRATEGY: INDUSTRY CONSULTATION FINDINGS (DECEMBER 2025)

"There is currently no consistent framework for recognising skills, experience, or professional practice across the fashion and textile manufacturing workforce. Addressing this gap requires a standards-based workforce architecture that connects skills recognition, production practice, provenance, and long-term retention."

2.3 The Modern Slavery Threshold

When assessed against the International Labour Organization's definition of forced labour — work performed under coercion, without free choice, and without adequate remuneration — the current structural arrangement warrants examination under Australia's Modern Slavery Act 2018. Women cannot opt out of the domestic and care labour structurally assigned to them without catastrophic social, economic, and legal consequences, particularly in households with dependent children. They perform this labour without remuneration, without superannuation accrual, and without the institutional protections afforded to comparable professional roles. This submission draws on the definitional framework to establish that the evidence base now exists to state this with precision — and that what is required is the legislative instrument to convert that measurement into protection.

2.4 The Stepped Economic Participation Model

CWA's Stepped Economic Participation Model is a graduated economic participation framework designed to activate women's workforce entry, cultural enterprise development, and income generation — matched to where each woman is in her economic journey. It is modelled on the Mental Health Stepped Care framework operated by Primary Health Networks across Australia, applying the same principle that need is not uniform and that a single-intensity program leaves the highest-need cohorts behind. The model operates across five levels, calibrated using the Domestic and Care Load Index score as the assessment instrument, and prioritises women furthest from economic participation due to high care load, including First Nations women, women with disability, and women in regional and remote communities.

3. AUSTRALIA HAS NO FRAMEWORK: THE UNESCO AND PROTECTION GAP

Australia has not ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and is not a State Party — confirmed directly by Nicholas Tan, Associate Programme Specialist, Living Heritage Entity, UNESCO (February 2026). The United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, Canada, and New Zealand are all State Parties. Australia has regulatory infrastructure to protect air, water, food safety, and human rights — but no equivalent framework for protecting the cultural knowledge systems and practices that Section 1 of this submission establishes are foundational to the physiological health of the women who carry them.

First Nations women are disproportionately represented among the cultural practitioners whose knowledge is most at risk. Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property — designs, textile traditions, ceremonial knowledge, and heritage craft — is not recognised under Australia's current intellectual property framework as communal property. Without a provenance registration system that records and protects communal ownership, First Nations women's cultural knowledge remains vulnerable to misappropriation. CWA's Heritage Skills Registry and Cultural Practitioner Register include First Nations-specific protocols, to be developed in consultation with First Nations communities and organisations.

CWA proposes the establishment of an Australian Cultural Protection Authority — a statutory body administering the proposed Australian Cultural Work and Provenance Act — as the domestic institutional equivalent of the UNESCO framework. CWA remains eligible to apply for non-governmental organisation accreditation under the Convention even without Australia's ratification, positioning CWA as the institutional bridge pending and following ratification.

4. WHAT CWA HAS ALREADY BUILT

4.1 Three Operational Instruments

CWA has built the operational infrastructure for recognising, classifying, and credentialling women's cultural practice. These are live, publicly accessible, and functioning now. The Australian Cultural Work and Provenance Act would give them statutory recognition. The Australian Cultural Protection Authority would administer them. CWA has already built what both require.

THE HERITAGE SKILLS REGISTRY

CWA's active national register of heritage skill areas across Australian cultural practice — textile arts, weaving, ceramics, natural dyeing, Indigenous craft traditions, food heritage, oral tradition, and related disciplines.

It identifies where skills exist, where they are at risk of loss, and where active transmission is occurring. It is the instrument that maps the sector — the precondition for any other framework to operate.

Without a skills registry, you cannot protect what you have not named.

THE CULTURAL PRACTITIONER REGISTER

CWA's active register of individual practitioners — women whose cultural practice has been documented, whose skills have been assessed, and who are entered into the public record as verified cultural knowledge holders.

It is the equivalent of the Victorian Institute of Teaching's register of accredited teachers. A teacher cannot practise without being on that register. A cultural practitioner currently has no equivalent — CWA has built one.

Registration establishes professional identity, enables credentialling, and creates the evidentiary record on which remuneration entitlements can be documented.

4.2 The Cultural Work Practitioner Classification: A Pay Scale for Cultural Work

The Cultural Work Practitioner Classification is CWA's eight-level classification and remuneration framework — a pay scale for women's cultural work, benchmarked directly against the Victorian Teachers Agreement 2022–2025, because cultural knowledge transmission is teaching work. It meets the same professional criteria, produces the same community outcomes, and requires the same depth of expertise and years of practice.

At entry level, a practitioner whose work is established and documented is equivalent to a Graduate Teacher — approximately \$75,000. A Senior Cultural Practitioner who mentors emerging practitioners and leads community programs is equivalent to a Senior Teacher — approximately \$103,000. A Master Cultural Practitioner, the bearer of irreplaceable cultural knowledge, is equivalent to a public school Principal — \$155,000 to \$175,000, the Australian equivalent of Japan's Living National Treasure designation. At the highest level, a Cultural Architect who has created or fundamentally transformed sector infrastructure at national scale is equivalent to an Australian Public Service Senior Executive — \$400,000 to \$650,000.

A male principal leading an elite private school in Sydney earns up to \$687,000. This is justified by institutional scale and measurable community impact. A woman who has spent thirty years transmitting irreplaceable cultural knowledge has delivered comparable impact. The difference is not scale — it is that the contribution has never been measured. The Cultural Work Practitioner Classification exists to establish what follows when it is.

Cultural practitioners do work that is simultaneously care work and teaching work — sitting in neither existing award. The Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award covers care labour but does not recognise cultural knowledge transmission. The education framework classifies teaching through accredited institutions but does not recognise non-institutional practitioners. The Classification addresses the gap between them. Entry level is assessed on the basis of actual practice — not assumed. The governing test is Bearer Status: does this practitioner hold knowledge or skill that she transmits to others, or that would be diminished without her continued practice? If yes, the practice qualifies.

4.3 The Act and the Authority

The Heritage Skills Registry, the Cultural Practitioner Register, and the Cultural Work Practitioner Classification form a complete operational system. The Registry maps the skills. The Register records the practitioners. The Classification assigns the level and wage benchmark. Together they are the infrastructure that the Australian Cultural Work and Provenance Act would give statutory force and the Australian Cultural Protection Authority would administer.

The Act is modelled on three comparator frameworks: the Harris Tweed Act 1993 (United Kingdom), which produced 570% employment growth between 2009 and 2014; the Copyright Act 1968 (Australia), which gave statutory recognition to the Australasian Performing Right Association and the Australasian Mechanical Copyright Owners Society; and Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs, which administers the Living National Treasure designation. No equivalent framework exists in Australia for the Cultural Work and Provenance Sector. CWA has already built what the Act and Authority require to operate.

5. FUNDED PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN'S CULTURAL WORK, EQUIVALENT TO TEACHING

The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership's Teaching Excellence Program is fully subsidised by the Victorian Government for teachers across all sectors — government, Catholic, and independent. It is a one-year program for up to 500 teachers per year. Participants receive participation subsidies of up to \$7,000 for casual relief teaching cover, regional travel and accommodation support, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pathways subsidies. Upon graduating, teachers are eligible for a funded Teaching Impact Fellowship.

The Cultural Excellence Program is the direct equivalent for cultural practitioners. The Cultural Impact Fellowship is the direct equivalent of the Teaching Impact Fellowship. The Cultural Work Practitioner Classification provides the career and remuneration framework that the Victorian Teachers Agreement provides for teachers. The comparator is exact and deliberate.

University pathways are increasingly inaccessible for women — HECS-HELP debts exceed \$60,000 for many creative degrees, while full-time study is incompatible with care responsibilities (Universities Australia 2024; Grattan Institute 2023). Vocational education does not recognise the main forms of creative work — freelance, hybrid, micro-enterprise, and community-based practice (Creative Australia Workforce Scoping Study 2025). 54% of creative practitioners say the absence of recognised standards prevents them from increasing their income.

The pathway that exists — the Cultural Excellence Program, the Cultural Work Practitioner Classification, and the Cultural Impact Fellowship — does not depend on a university place. It depends on demonstrated practice, assessed by peers who themselves meet the criteria. It reaches the women the existing systems do not. It requires equivalent funding to the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership's Teaching Excellence Program to function at national scale — available to women in cultural practice across all states and territories, not only Victoria.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1 Measurement and Economic Recognition

That the Australian Government formally develop and adopt the Domestic and Care Load Index, the Invisible Labour Value Index, and the Cultural Work Index as national measurement instruments for women's cultural, care, and domestic labour — integrated into the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey and reportable to Parliament through the Working for Women Strategy annual reporting cycle. That the Government fund a pilot of the Stepped Economic Participation Model as a practical implementation mechanism.

RECOMMENDATION 2 Physiological Load Research — Funded Allostatic Load Validation Study

That the Australian Government fund a cross-sector allostatic load validation study — through the Australian Research Council Linkage scheme, the Medical Research Future Fund, or the National Health and Medical Research Council — applying the same physiological monitoring framework used for military personnel, pilots, and aviation crews to women performing high-load unpaid care and cultural work. The theoretical framework is established in Thomas, P. (2026) Women's Physiology, Cultural Practice, and the Neuroscience of Peace. CWA Policy Paper. Creative Women's Association.

RECOMMENDATION 3 UNESCO Ratification and CWA Accreditation

That Australia ratify the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and become a State Party — and that the Creative Women's Association be supported to pursue non-governmental organisation accreditation under the Convention as the institutional vehicle for Australia's domestic intangible heritage safeguarding framework, pending and following ratification.

RECOMMENDATION 4 Legislation and the Australian Cultural Protection Authority — in Sequence

Part A: That the Australian Government develop and introduce the Australian Cultural Work and Provenance Act as the founding legislative instrument formally naming and recognising the Cultural Work and Provenance Sector in Australian law — establishing provenance rights, the Cultural Work Practitioner Classification pay scale, and the certification framework. Part B: That the Act establish the Australian Cultural Protection Authority as the administering statutory body — with the Creative Women's Association's three operational instruments as its designed institutional foundation: the Heritage Skills Registry (the national register of heritage skill areas and transmission status), the Cultural Practitioner Register (the national register of assessed and verified cultural knowledge holders), and the Cultural Work Practitioner Classification (the eight-level pay scale for cultural work, benchmarked against the Victorian Teachers Agreement). These instruments are live, publicly accessible, and operating now.

RECOMMENDATION 5 Funded Pathways for Women's Cultural Work, Equivalent to Teaching

That the Australian Government fund the Cultural Excellence Program and the Cultural Work Practitioner Classification assessment and credentialing pathway on equivalent terms to the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership's Teaching Excellence Program — including: full subsidisation for participants across all sectors; participation subsidies equivalent to the Teaching Excellence Program's casual relief teaching support (up to \$7,000 per participant); regional travel and accommodation support; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pathways subsidies. Cultural knowledge transmission is teaching work. The practitioners who carry it deserve access to equivalent funded professional development pathways, recognition of prior practice, and credential portability — across all states and territories.

ABOUT THE CREATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

The Creative Women's Association (CWA, ABN 54 693 315 043) is an independent Australian non-governmental organisation, volunteer-led and member-supported, operating at the intersection of cultural policy, economic measurement, and provenance. CWA is based in Geelong, Victoria, and operates at creativewomensassociation.org.

CWA's published frameworks include: the Cultural Work Practitioner Classification (April 2026); the Manual Cortical Load Hypothesis research series WP-001 through WP-003 (April–May 2026); the Policy Paper Women's Physiology, Cultural Practice, and the Neuroscience of Peace (May 2026); the Heritage Skills Registry; the Cultural Practitioner Register; the Stepped Economic Participation Model (May 2026); the Southern Cross Mark certification system; and the proposed Australian Cultural Work and Provenance Act legislative framework.

CWA is currently engaged with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Office of Global Trade Negotiations regarding the Australia–European Union Free Trade Agreement Geographical Indication framework, and has an advance submission before the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties inquiry into the Australia–European Union Free Trade Agreement. CWA submitted a supplementary submission to the Senate Revive inquiry in April 2026, and has notified the Senate Select Committee on Productivity in Australia and the House Standing Committee on Education of its intention to submit.

NOTE ON SUBMISSION COMPLIANCE

This submission has been prepared solely for the purposes of this inquiry and has not been published elsewhere. The arguments presented — including the physiological load analysis applied to the Women, Peace and Security agenda, the modern slavery definitional examination, and the sequenced legislative and funding recommendations — are original to this submission. CWA's Policy Paper (Thomas, P., 2026) and research working papers (WP-001 through WP-003) are publicly available and referenced as supporting material. They are not reproduced in or attached to this submission and may be provided to the Subcommittee on request.