

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

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Peace Institute

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The Japan Institute of
International Affairs
(Secretariat)

RIPS

Research Institute for
Peace and Security

No. 308

11 October 2024

PROMOTING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA: PROSPECTS FOR JAPAN'S INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

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Summary: Three strategies are proposed for effectively promoting the Women, Peace and Security (hereinafter referred to as WPS)¹ Agenda in Japan and internationally:

- (1) It is important to identify women as “change agents” in conflict prevention/resolution, disaster recovery and development, and to enhance their leadership and participation in decision-making through international cooperation.
- (2) It is also crucial to promote women’s participation in decision-making and leadership not only during crises but also in peacetime through gender-equitable social transformation and collaboration with male leaders and advocates.

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- (3) Women in Japan participate less in decision-making and leadership across the political, economic, and social spheres than do women in many other countries. Strengthening partnerships among diverse stakeholders, both women and men, through international cooperation can create a synergistic effect, boosting gender equality and women's empowerment in both Japan and developing countries through exchanges of knowledge and experiences.

Introduction

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), unanimously adopted in 2000, emphasizes the importance of promoting the equal participation of women, protecting them from sexual violence, and advancing gender equality in all efforts related to international peace and security. To implement the resolution, Japan formulated its first National Action Plan in 2015 and has been actively pursuing its goals through diplomacy and international cooperation.

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), responsible for implementing Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA), operates with a focus on the concept of "human security." As the core principle guiding all of JICA's activities, human security emphasizes "the rights of all individuals to live in dignity and free from fear and want." Achieving human security requires actions that prioritize gender equality and diversity.

JICA has promoted gender equality and women's empowerment in developing countries for more than 30 years, starting with its establishment of an office dedicated to such initiatives in 1991, and actively supports a wide range of projects meant to bolster women's peace and security in all kinds of crises. One of these efforts has been to strengthen the capacities of several ASEAN countries to prevent trafficking in persons, which has escalated rapidly amid economic globalization. To protect and reintegrate trafficking survivors, JICA has collaborated with other countries and promoted inter-regional cooperation networks.

JICA also actively supports projects that safeguard women's peace and security in conflict- and disaster-affected areas. These projects aim to improve the education, health, and livelihoods of single mothers, women from ethnic minorities, and women and girls who are either refugees or internally displaced. Since the Japanese government approved its first National Action Plan for the implementation of WPS in 2015, these projects have been monitored and evaluated with a focus on promoting peace and security for women. Notably, Japan's National Action Plan on WPS stands

out among those of other countries as it also addresses disaster response/prevention and climate change.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that women and girls have too often been perceived merely as victims or passive beneficiaries in peacebuilding and disaster response programming. Over time, JICA has come to understand the importance of identifying women as “change agents” who can play equal and proactive roles alongside men in fostering peace and security, and of encouraging their participation in decision-making and leadership. To further promote the WPS agenda effectively in line with the policy of the Japanese government, the author believes it is important to advance the following three strategies.

Three Strategies for Promoting the WPS Agenda

Strategy 1: Fostering women’s participation in decision-making and leadership as change agents

When societies face turmoil and crisis due to conflict, climate change, natural disasters or the spread of infectious diseases, social vulnerabilities become more pronounced, and vulnerable populations are forced into even more difficult situations. In particular, the peace and safety of women and girls are often gravely threatened in societies where traditional social norms enforce fixed gender roles along with gender-based discrimination and exclusion. Women and girls can also suffer from compounded discrimination, prejudice, and violence due to the intersectionality² of social and economic class, ethnicity, age, and other attributes. However, it is equally true that women do not merely endure passively in their communities and societies. In many countries and regions, women play key roles in managing the health of their families and maintaining livelihoods. Beyond serving their communities on the frontlines of medical care, nursing care, and education, women also make significant contributions to peacebuilding, infectious disease control, disaster prevention, and recovery from conflicts and disasters.

As a disaster-prone country, Japan has learned from its own experiences with tsunamis, typhoons, and earthquakes—including the Great East Japan Earthquake—that society is better prepared for disasters and recovers more quickly when women are actively involved in managing evacuation centers and participating in disaster prevention activities. From Japan’s experience, JICA has learned that the key to success in peacebuilding and disaster response efforts is to view women as “change

agents,” not merely as “beneficiaries” or “assistants” in recovery and development. It is essential to foster women’s leadership and promote their participation in decision-making in areas such as conflict prevention and resolution, peace and security maintenance, disaster risk reduction, and all aspects of reconstruction and development.

Strategy 2: Increasing women’s participation in decision-making and leadership during peacetime by creating a gender-equitable society in collaboration with male leaders and advocates

In the context of promoting the WPS Agenda, the author would also like to emphasize the importance of promoting women’s participation in decision-making and leadership during peacetime. As Akiko Domoto, a former member of the Japanese House of Councillors and former governor of Chiba Prefecture, once said, “[Crises often reveal social distortions and expose inequalities and discrimination that are invisible in times of peace.](#)” The risks faced by women and girls during crises stem from the fixed gendered division of labor and unequal gender relations that exist in normal times. Therefore, it is important to facilitate women’s participation in decision-making and leadership in peacetime while addressing structural discrimination in society and organizations by reforming discriminatory systems and mechanisms.

In the field of international cooperation, we often hear claims such as “even if we encourage women's participation, women are not willing to participate” and “women do not want to take on leadership roles.” To the extent these arguments are true, they are primarily due to strong societal and/or organizational pressures that discourage women from becoming leaders and expressing their opinions openly. In addition, because women disproportionately shoulder the burden of domestic chores, childcare, and nursing care, many are unable to participate in decision-making or take leadership roles, even if they wish to do so.

Under these circumstances, it is essential to reduce the disproportionate burden placed on women, while also changing the attitudes, rules, and customs within societies and organizations that prevent women from participating in decision-making and exercising leadership. As an illustration, JICA project experts in Palestine collaborated with local male leaders, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of women's participation in decision-making. Through their persistent efforts, a significant and positive change in awareness and behavior towards women emerged, particularly among men. Encouraged by the recognition that they were “needed”, women began to

participate in various development processes, including decision-making. It is important to further strengthen collaboration with male leaders and advocates in this way, both in Japan and abroad. In promoting WPS, we must enhance our capacity to address unconscious gender biases and promote more innovative actions that increase women's leadership opportunities within and beyond Japan.


Strategy 3: Advancing the WPS Agenda through international cooperation to accelerate changes toward a gender-equitable society in Japan

Japan unfortunately lags behind other nations in terms of women's participation in decision-making and leadership in the political, economic, and social spheres. It is crucial to strengthen partnerships among diverse stakeholders – both women and men from Japan and abroad – through international cooperation to further enhance mutual learning. In this regard, JICA has applied lessons from the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake to its gender- and diversity-focused disaster risk reduction training programs for countries that frequently experience natural calamities, such as Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

One unique aspect of these training programs is that they bring together government officials responsible for disaster management and those in charge of gender equality, as well as representatives of civil society organizations, from the participating countries. Through this training, participants learn how to step up their disaster-response efforts through women's participation and leadership while sharing their experiences with each other and with citizens and government officials from disaster-affected areas in Japan. International cooperation of this kind will likely increase awareness and drive moves toward gender-equitable social transformation in Japan, while also contributing to the development and implementation of gender-equitable policies within Japan.

Conclusion

Promoting the WPS Agenda is a significant contribution to the international community as well as an opportunity to accelerate meaningful change in Japan. With its vision of "Leading the World with Trust," JICA aims to create societies in which women and girls can live in peace, safety, and dignity. To achieve this, it is important to enhance synergies between developing countries and Japan by working collaboratively with both international and domestic communities and by providing opportunities to share

valuable knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, promoting gender-equitable social transformation during peacetime is essential. This can be achieved through collaboration with male leaders and advocates, while recognizing women as “change agents” who can lead the advancement of the WPS Agenda. 

¹ This refers to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted by the Security Council at its 4213th meeting on 31 October 2000 (S/RES/1325).

² Intersectionality refers to the overlapping or compounding of discrimination related to gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, geographic location, disability, and so on. (Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality*. John Wiley & Sons)

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