

The Strong Point of Japanese Diplomacy Required Today: Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the WPS Resolution

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In October 2000, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (WPS) to encourage women to participate equally alongside men at all levels of decision-making in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peace-building, and peacekeeping. A quarter of a century has passed since then. During these 25 years, the WPS resolution was widely ratified across the international community; the UN Security Council adopted nine other resolutions related to WPS; WPS principles were endorsed by many international organizations, academic institutions, NGOs, and civic organizations; and efforts were ramped up to further implement the WPS agenda.

In September 2015, Japan's then prime minister, Shinzo Abe, delivered an address at the UN General Assembly, outlining Japan's action plan for WPS. Japan launched a second WPS action plan in 2019 and a third in 2023. Guided by these action plans, Japan mounted pioneering initiatives for incorporating the WPS agenda into a range of areas. These initiatives included processes for addressing conflict-related scenarios and the threat of natural disasters and climate change. Moreover, they included measures for developing talent to disseminate the WPS agenda. In 2023, Yoko Kamikawa became the first woman in two decades to serve as Japan's minister for foreign affairs. Having devoted herself to promoting WPS since before taking office, Kamikawa famously advocated for WPS in Japan and abroad.

The WPS resolution is one of the most well-known resolutions in the history of UN Security Council resolutions primarily because the resolution did more than simply affirm the longstanding principle that women require protection. It emphasized the need for women to participate as active agents at all levels of decision making. It established an international principle that became a crucial landmark in world history. In the 19th century and earlier, global-reaching national security frameworks were grounded in patriarchy, a system in which men have authority. Worldwide, men monopolized the bulk of the policymaking process at all levels of decision-making. At the time, the international community was an arena of power politics, where one power competed with another. This arena demanded masculine values such as swagger, military clout, and political clout. Gender roles were divided, with men cast as active protagonists and women as passive and subservient. In male-dominated areas, particularly in diplomacy and security, women encountered social barriers to power; for men, these areas served as a compelling source of male-dominated system.

Under these circumstances, conflicts exacerbated gender discrimination. During conflicts, women faced an increased threat of discrimination and mortal danger, simply because they were women. Today, gender-based violence remains a reality in conflicts worldwide. A case in point is the conflict in Ukraine, which began in February 2022. There has been a slew of reported incidents of women experiencing sexual violence at the hands of Russian troops, and reports suggest that at least 50 thousand women are engaged in military service in Ukraine proper. Moreover, the Russian invasion has left many schools understaffed, with many male teachers on the front line. Amid this vacuum, Russia is enforcing Russification-education on the Ukrainian children.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the international community never attempted to address the situation. In the field of peace studies, efforts began in the 1960s to explore an approach to peace and security that emphasized feminine values and women's gender perspectives. Similarly, the field of international relations began to incorporate feminist perspectives, having excluded them for centuries. Consequently, an attempt was made to redefine security according to gender perspectives. The inclusion of women's perspectives prompted a paradigm shift from state-centric security to human (anthropocentric) security. This paradigm shift, coupled with the cumulative history of feminist efforts to reinterpret authority and power, culminated in the WPS resolution. Initially, the UN had adopted the WPS resolution in the context of enshrining human rights norms. However, in what was a natural development, gradually, the resolution became part of the international zeitgeist of gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention, peacekeeping operations, peace-building, and other areas of crisis management, along with a range of other areas, including management of disasters and climate change and measures against influence maneuvering, such as fake information.

However, what warrants our attention today is something that the WPS resolution is not: it is not some universal concept that applies immutably across the past, present, and future. Gender is a product of the complex interactions between various actors, local histories and cultures, and social conditions. Considering this, the WPS agenda will fail to create a genuine impact if it adheres to one-size-fits-all rules and policies, disregarding local histories, cultures, and practices. This is all the more true in today's increasingly complex landscape, in which we must consider sexual minorities in the LGBTQIA+ community who are inbetweeners—people who do not identify exclusively as any one gender.

WPS has received attention as a key phrase for exploring Japanese diplomacy. Readers may be familiar with how Japan, after ratifying the WPS resolution, developed three successive action plans and actively adopted measures to implement the resolution. Notably, human security (a concept that emerged in the mid-1990s emphasizing security at the human-individual level rather than the national

level) became mainstream in Japan in 1998, partly because then prime minister Keizo Obuchi actively incorporated the concept. In the human security agenda, Japan has actively engaged with the international community in various ways, including establishing the Human Security Fund in 1999, establishing the Commission on Human Security, and amending the Official Development Assistance (ODA) framework. This agenda was forward-thinking inasmuch as it involved distinctively Japanese methods that served to enhance Japan's brand image in the international community.

The World Bank estimates that the economic loss owing to gender inequality is 160 trillion dollars, twice the value of GDP globally. In Asian countries that have shrinking and aging populations, it has become more important than ever to reassess policies from a gender perspective, not least because the active participation of women will make these countries more resilient. However, Japan is behind other countries with respect to gender mainstreaming. This is evidenced by the fact that married couples are required to have the same surname and that Japan ranked 118th on the Global Gender Gap Index 2024. Such examples, considered in isolation, would undermine any claim that Japan has no gender gap. However, as aforementioned, Japan has actively embraced the WPS agenda, making it a key plank of its diplomatic policy. Japan has much to gain in future, by addressing how to close this gender gap as part of an active commitment to disseminating an all-inclusive WPS agenda, nationally and internationally.

Human security aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which the international community has committed to. Considering Japan's history and track record, Japan has an opportunity to consider international relations from a gender perspective and use active diplomacy to build a peaceful future. To that end, leaders in Japan must undertake the torch of gender equality from those who have gone before and present the world with new diplomatic principles for WPS, one that draws on Japan's strengths and considers global trends.

Clearly, the WPS resolution, by emphasizing the long-ignored perspectives of women, has broadened the discourse in the field of security, thereby contributing to peace and security worldwide. This year is particularly opportune. In addition to marking the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the WPS resolution, it is a year in which Japan will co-chair a meeting of the WPS Focal Points Network with Norway. Meetings of the WPS Focal Points Network are political events that attract attention from the international community; they are attended by representatives of the member-states' governments and also by regional organizations such as NATO, OSCE, AU, and ASEAN. As co-chair in this memorial year, Japan has a historic mission to present a future vision for the WPS.

An unbelievable number of wars and conflicts are occurring in countries and regions worldwide.

These wars and conflicts, in addition to all the violence and bloodshed they entail, beget sexual violence, refugee crises, food shortages, poverty, and many other problems that deprive people of a peaceful life. In African states and other places where conflicts frequently occur, women and children often fall victim to abuse, cruelty, and violence. In the Ukraine conflict, now in its fourth year, there has been a slew of reported incidents of women experiencing sexual violence at the hands of Russian troops. Despite 25 years having elapsed since the international community committed to the WPS resolution, women and children continue to be victimized in these ways. What are we to make of this?

Foundational to the WPS agenda is gender equality. The first step in ensuring gender equality is to form a framework for coordination and partnership between a diverse range of stakeholders. National governments must collaborate in an international process of policymaking, involving non-governmental actors such as international, regional, and academic organizations, and NGOs. Regarding diplomacy, Japan's most salient strength lies in its track record of applying soft diplomatic skills to avoid damaging relations with countries and regions. To further disseminate the WPS agenda, we must now consider what Japan and the Japanese people must do, to fulfill this historic mission, and then take the initiative and act. Now is the time.

(This is the English translation of an article written by TAKAHATA Yohei, Executive Director / Distinguished Research Fellow of JFIR / Governor and Executive Secretary of GFJ, which originally appeared on the e-Forum "Giron-Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on April 1, 2025.)