



**WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY
UNDER A BIDEN-HARRIS
ADMINISTRATION (PART TWO:
PREVENTION AND PROTECTION)**

BY MARYRUTH BELSEY PRIEBE AND
JENNIFER HOWE

Maryruth Belsey Priebe (maryruth@pacforum.org) is a WPS Research Advisor at the Pacific Forum. She is also a Harvard Extension School MA in International Relations student specializing in the nexus of WPS and climate security and has a manuscript under review entitled, "The News Media: A Catalyst for Women, Peace and Security in Qatar."

*Jennifer Howe (jennifer@pacforum.org) is a resident Women, Peace and Security fellow at the Pacific Forum. She graduated from Durham University, UK with an MA in Politics and international Relations. Her publications include "["Conflict and Coronavirus: How COVID-19 is Impacting Southeast Asia's Conflicts,"](#)" in *Issues & Insights* and "["The Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Hawaii and the Asia-Pacific"](#)" in *COVID-19 Research & Perspectives*.*

The following is the second in the three-part series on what the Biden-Harris administration means for the Women, Peace and Security agenda. For part one, click [here](#).

In their "["Agenda for Women,"](#)" US President Biden and Vice President Harris promise to improve women's financial security, protect their reproductive rights, and address gender-based violence (GBV)—all important elements of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, as codified in [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325](#) (UNSCR 1325). UNSCR 1325 rests on four pillars: *Participation, Prevention, Protection, and Relief and Recovery*. Having explored the [Participation pillar in PacNet #13](#), in this article, we examine *Prevention and*

Protection. The *Prevention* pillar addresses the root causes of conflict and how to prevent it holistically with an emphasis on women as peacebuilders, while the *Protection* pillar focuses on shielding women from the harms inflicted during conflict, including sexual violence. The following analysis covers the potential impact that the Biden-Harris approach to foreign relations may have on the implementation of these core WPS objectives throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Biden-Harris on the WPS Protection and Prevention Pillars

The domestic legislative histories of President Biden and Vice President Harris reveal a sensitivity and understanding of WPS issues and help to sketch out what kind of example they will set in the Indo-Pacific on women's protection and prevention issues. In particular, the president has taken steps to advance the implementation of policies that align with the WPS Protection and Prevention pillars. In the early 1990s, he was disturbed by the fact that [marital rape was virtually impossible to prosecute](#) in most states, despite some 15% of American women experiencing marital rape annually. Consequently, he introduced a Senate Violence Against Women bill in 1990, supported by women's rights groups and his Republican colleagues. Though it took several years, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was signed into law by President Clinton in September 1994, and has been characterized by Biden as his "[proudest legislative accomplishment](#)." According to the US Department of Justice, the VAWA has been responsible for a [72% drop in intimate partner violence](#) (IPV) rates from 1993 to 2011, and has been renewed and expanded several times since its enactment.

During Vice President Harris' time as attorney general for California, she pursued "[tough on crime](#)" policies, some of which [disproportionately affected](#) low-income women. Commentators [argue](#) that as a black female prosecutor facing intersectional racial and gender prejudices, she had to prove her commitment to tackling crime. After obtaining greater national power in her role as Senator, Harris [championed](#) criminal justice reform and [fought for women's issues](#) within and outside the justice system. In 2019, Harris

co-sponsored the [EMPOWER Act](#) to protect workers on Capitol Hill from harassment. Harris also frequently [positions violence against women as an economic issue](#), supporting the view that women's economic empowerment is critical to preventing women from becoming trapped in abusive relationships.

The VAWA [expired in February 2019](#). Though the House of Representatives passed a 2019 VAWA Reauthorization Act supported by all Senate Democrats, Senate Leader Mitch McConnell refused to bring the bill to a vote. Going forward, Biden and Harris have made VAWA reauthorization [one of the top first-100-day priorities](#), and will expand it with clauses that provide greater justice and support for survivors of gender-based violence. Clauses added to the Act will aim to provide greater protection for young people experiencing sexual violence; curtail online harassment, abuse, and stalking; and put an end to the [rape kit backlog](#).

WPS Protection and Prevention Pillars in the Indo-Pacific

On matters related to the WPS Protection and Prevention pillars in the Indo-Pacific, there are numerous opportunities for the Biden-Harris administration to push for greater implementation. [Rates of violence against women](#) vary widely among Indo-Pacific countries, but continue to be high in all: 37% of women encounter some form of violence in their lifetimes in South Asia, 40% in Southeast Asia, and 68% in the Pacific. While the percentage of women who have experienced some kind of [physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes](#) is lowest in Bhutan at 15%, [46% of women living in Timor-Leste](#) experience gender-based violence (GBV), with the highest rates (68%) in Kiribati and Papua New Guinea. Asia also reported [20,000 intentional deaths of women and girls in 2017](#), more than any other region of the world. Importantly, data on violence against women is extremely difficult to collect, and most [experts suggest the actual numbers are higher](#), especially in regions where GBV is culturally acceptable. Data collection challenges and the spike in [GBV as a result of the ongoing COVID-19](#)

[pandemic](#) make the implementation of the Protection and Prevention pillars all the more urgent.

Women's inclusion as peacebuilders in formal conflict negotiations is also an important element of the WPS Prevention pillar. As mentioned in our previous installment, studies have shown that women's involvement in formal peace processes increases [by 35%](#) the probability that a [peace agreement will last over 15 years](#). However, global figures reveal that women represented only 13% of negotiators, 6% of mediators, and 6% of signatories in major peace processes [between 1992 and 2019](#). [Women's contributions as peacebuilders](#) in the Indo-Pacific continue to be outside formal efforts to achieve peace. Notable [grassroots women's movements](#) in Myanmar, the Pacific Island countries and territories, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste have amplified women's voices in conflict mitigation.

The Next Four Years for WPS in the Indo-Pacific

“End violence against women” and “Protect and empower women around the world” are the last of five planks of the Biden-Harris [Agenda for Women](#) (the first three planks covered women's economic security, health care access and inequities, and work-family responsibilities), and includes support for confronting GBV and pursuing ratification of the UN [Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (CEDAW). (The only other countries to have failed to ratify CEDAW are Iran, Somalia, and Sudan.) These are important steps, yet aside from the indicators previously mentioned, and statements on supporting women's leadership globally, it is highly recommended that the Biden-Harris administration go further to empower women as *peacebuilders*, a key approach to achieving and sustaining peace agreements. To effectively address this aspect of the WPS agenda, this new administration could outline specifics of their approach for the *Prevention* pillar and emphasize the need to keep women engaged in high-level talks and negotiations. The new administration could also encourage countries in the Indo-Pacific to take up the principles in the *Protection* pillar to shield women from the worst impacts of conflict. Read our full policy recommendations in our in-depth [Issues & Insights article](#), in which we delve

more deeply into the purpose of the *Prevention* and *Protection* pillars, the state of Indo-Pacific women's rights, and how the Biden-Harris administration, US Indo-Pacific Command, and the State Department can act to continue their development in the Indo-Pacific. In the last part of this series, we will dive deeper into the *Relief and Recovery* pillar and the implications of Biden-Harris' foreign policy on the status of women as the world moves into a period of pandemic recovery.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.