

PACIFIC FORUM



Key Findings

Beyond Women's Suffrage: Views from the Indo-Pacific

Public Webinar

Thursday, August 26, 2021 (US) | Friday, August 27, 2021 (Asia/Australia)

In commemoration of Women's Equality Day in the United States on August 26, 2021, the Pacific Forum and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command co-hosted a 90-minute public webinar on women's suffrage in the Indo-Pacific. The webinar, which was attended by more than forty individuals, explored the suffrage movement from past to present. The discussion also examined the interplay between women's suffrage and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which calls for women's full and equal participation in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Representatives from Bangladesh, Japan, and New Zealand reflected on women's political participation and WPS within their countries, revealing common areas of progress and remaining challenges to women's political and social empowerment.

Key findings from this event are described below.

I. Women's Suffrage: Past to Present

The historical development of the suffrage movement was a central theme of the discussion. While democracy started expanding globally at the beginning of the 19th century, it was not until the end of the 1800s that women first gained voting rights. Most democracies had enfranchised women by the 1970s. However, the path to universal suffrage varied greatly from nation to nation - it occurred rapidly in some countries and was a piecemeal process in others. Panelists from the Indo-Pacific reflected on women's suffrage within their countries, illustrating that the fight was far from uniform.

New Zealand: New Zealand was the first country to enfranchise all women citizens. The government extended the vote to women in 1893 following "pervasive" petitions organized by women's groups. Women were allowed to serve in New Zealand's parliament from 1911, and the first female minister was elected in 1933. Despite these early victories, the number of women politicians remained low until New Zealand introduced mixed member proportional voting in

1993. The new electoral system led to a rise in women's political representation -- by 1996, women constituted 30% of New Zealand's parliament, up from 9% in 1981. As of 2020, women comprise almost half (48%) of New Zealand's parliament. The past three decades have also seen an increase in women leaders, with the first woman prime minister elected in 1997. As of 2021, New Zealand's prime minister, governor-general, and foreign secretary are all women.

Bangladesh: Bangladesh has a long tradition of women leaders. Women in Bangladesh were granted the right to vote shortly after the country gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. Women in Bangladesh have enjoyed high levels of political participation since securing the vote - they have occupied positions of political leadership since 1991 and there has been an uptick in women voters since 2008. Today, Bangladesh is among the top ten countries globally for women's political participation according to the [2021 Global Gender Gap Report](#). Despite major progress, women continue to account for just 20% of Bangladesh's parliament and are often excluded from local government.

Japan: The first wave of the women's liberation movement in Japan spanned 1920-1945. During this period, Japanese women began looking to other countries that had granted women the vote like the US. However, it was not until 1946 - during the post-war US occupation - that women were first included in Japan's electorate. Suffrage was secured following consistent pressure from feminist labor unions. In the same year that women won the vote, 33 women were elected to Japan's national legislature. Unfortunately, Japanese women "never reached the same level of political influence again" despite the country experiencing a second wave of the women's liberation movement between 1960-1999. Today, Japan performs poorly in terms of gender equality - it ranked 120 out of 152 countries in the 2021 global gender gap index.

II. Women's Suffrage and Women, Peace and Security (WPS)

The webinar underscored the importance of the suffrage movement to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which provides a policy framework for achieving equitable peace and advancing women's rights. The agenda rests on four interlinked pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. Participation calls for enhancing women's participation across the entire spectrum of peace, security, and politics; protection and prevention call for protecting women and girls from gender-based violence (GBV) and preventing its occurrence, as well as conflict prevention; and relief and recovery calls for applying a gendered lens to the design and execution of humanitarian assistance.

Stability and Peace: There is evidence to suggest that women voters contribute to the creation of policies that enhance peace and stability. Research shows that an increase in women voters is associated with greater public spending on education and health, both of which improve stability. Moreover, women are far less likely than men to favor the use of force in resolving national and sub-national disputes, which reduces the likelihood of conflict. This correlation is corroborated

by the fact that democracies without women voters are 30% more likely to start an international dispute and 130% more likely to start a war. As one speaker aptly stated: “who votes matters.”

Progress and Challenges in WPS Implementation: Representatives from the Indo-Pacific reflected on WPS implementation within their countries. Bangladesh, Japan, and New Zealand have all formulated WPS National Action Plans (NAPs) (legal documents that provide a set of domestic and/or foreign policies to advance the implementation of WPS at the national level). Both New Zealand and Japan adopted NAPs in 2015, while Bangladesh adopted a NAP in 2019.

All three nations have made some progress in implementing the four WPS pillars -- New Zealand has narrowed gender gaps in security institutions, while Japan and Bangladesh have integrated gender into national policy. In New Zealand, women now account for 14% of the army, 20% of the air force, and 24% of the navy, with their numbers rapidly expanding in the latter two branches. Women also comprise 20% of New Zealand’s police, up from 13% in 1995. In addition, New Zealand has applied a gender lens to its overseas development and aid efforts. Similarly, Japan has adopted gender mainstreaming in national policy. The second iteration of Japan’s WPS NAP (drafted in 2020) focuses a great deal on gender mainstreaming in participation, prevention, and disaster response and recovery. Bangladesh has also made a concerted effort to adopt a gender lens in post-disaster relief and recovery efforts, as well as in the design and execution of countering violent extremism programs.

However, there continue to be numerous barriers to the full realization of WPS objectives in all three countries. New Zealand is yet to renew its 2015-2019 NAP, while Japan’s 2015 NAP had limited monitoring and evaluation due to budget constraints. Speakers from New Zealand and Bangladesh also discussed the challenges of advancing the WPS prevention and protection pillars. Although Bangladesh has a “zero tolerance policy” towards violence against women and has enacted strict legislation to prevent its occurrence, GBV remains endemic in the country and has increased since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Women in New Zealand also continue to be subjected to high levels of GBV -- the country leads OECD member-states for having the highest incidence of violence against women.

IV. Conclusions

The webinar allowed for the examination of women’s suffrage globally and within the Indo-Pacific. The discussion provided an in-depth analysis of women’s political participation both as voters and decision makers, the importance of women’s political inclusion to stability and peace, and progress and challenges in implementing the WPS agenda. While there are numerous challenges to achieving gender equality and solidifying women’s rights within the Indo-Pacific, all panelists agreed that there have been extraordinary accomplishments for women’s rights over the past two centuries.