



KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE INAUGURAL WORKSHOP ON
**WOMEN, PEACE & (MARITIME) SECURITY
IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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WORKSHOP ON WOMEN, PEACE, AND (MARITIME) SECURITY IN THE PHILIPPINES

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is the first country in Asia to adopt a National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security. The plan rests on three main pillars: 1) protection of women’s human rights and prevention of any violation of these rights during and after armed conflicts; 2) women’s empowerment and participation in security-related policymaking; and 3) promotion and mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the security sector. While laudable, the action plan remains aspirational, and support is needed for its success. There is also an overwhelming focus on counterinsurgency, particularly involving conflict zones in Mindanao and the Communist revolutionaries. In issues related to the South China Sea and maritime security, women’s roles remain constrained.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

The Philippines’ several national legislations and policy frameworks mandate its national and local government institutions and armed services to institutionalize programs aimed at achieving gender “equality and equity” and ensuring that women can participate fully in nation-building. Both the Philippine Navy (PN) and the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) have Gender and Development (GAD) programs, but the two services fall short of full compliance and effectively “cascading” national mandates into their operations. The maritime work environment is traditionally led and dominated by men, where “work” takes place offshore and away from home communities. The Philippines’ naval and coast guard operations, especially those related to the South China Sea dispute, are primarily state-centric rather than human security-oriented. As such, applying the WPS agenda within the maritime sector has been more challenging than in other domains. WPS approaches to PCG operations notionally should underscore men, women, boys, and girls’ unique needs and experiences contributing to sustainable peace, but such WPS principles tend to be applied to only continental and land-based conflict areas. To begin to more effectively implement WPS perspectives in the maritime security context, the PN and PCG should address women’s participation and support for their professionalization as maritime security practitioners. They should also provide better resource training inclusive of gendered perspectives. The workshop emphasized these findings, among other takeaways.

METHODOLOGY

Sponsored by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Office of Women, Peace, and Security and organized in partnership with a local non-governmental organization, Sulong Peace, the workshop aimed to advance the WPS agenda by engaging with the PN and the PCG by gathering 20 of their officers for a thematic three-day program that focused on developing a basic understanding and appreciation of WPS concepts as they apply to maritime security.

Research collected for this project will be published in the fall of 2023 to highlight key statistics related to the roles and contributions of women in the Philippines’ maritime security sector, underscore gaps in the implementation of the WPS National Action Plan, and offer sound, pragmatic, and actionable recommendations.



KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Philippines has several national legislative and policy frameworks that advance women's empowerment by institutionalizing gender mainstreaming in all aspects of governance, including in the security sector. From the "Women in Development and Nation Building Act" of 1992 (Republic Act 7192) and the "Magna Carta of Women Act" of 2009 to the most recent National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS 2017-2022, the Philippines mandates its national and local government institutions and its armed services to institutionalize programs aimed at achieving gender "equality and equity" and ensuring that women can participate fully in nation-building.

The Philippine Navy (PN) and the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) value women's contributions to their organizations and the country's pursuit of a safe, secure, and rules-based maritime order. Women perform active and meaningful roles in protecting the Philippines' sovereign rights and interests in its vast exclusive economic zone, maintaining port security, and promoting other law enforcement and commercial interests. There are no regulatory limitations to their participation in operations. The inclusion of women is driven by the PN's and PCG's desire to achieve equity, equality, and empowerment.

Nevertheless, long-standing institutional challenges to women's full and meaningful participation in the maritime security sector remain, largely stemming from the embeddedness of traditional gender roles throughout society. While both the PN and the PCG have Gender and Development (GAD) programs, the two services are still a long way from full compliance with and effectively "cascading" national mandates into their operations. Long-term career goals often conflict with family obligations or expectations, narrowing the pool of women eligible for leadership positions. Moreover, the lack of gender balance in the workforce can create unsafe conditions for women, especially when the prosecution of sexual abuse cases is not efficiently pursued.

Furthermore, the maritime work environment—traditionally led and dominated by men, where "work" takes place offshore and away from home communities—can be inhospitable to women. Base facilities, offshore assets, and equipment lacking gender-inclusive design can discourage women in the service and deter them from joining the PN and PCG. Base facilities and vessels that fail to accommodate women personnel can hinder women from actively pursuing field or sea duty assignments. For instance, there persist inadequate billeting facilities that separate men and women personnel and a lack of policies responsive to individuals with family obligations.

Current GAD mainstreaming efforts and funding are limited to conducting seminars and training workshops. Channeling funds toward practical measures that provide women with a safe and productive work environment could reassure current women servicemembers and signal widespread organizational changes to future women recruits.

Given these findings, effectively implementing WPS principles in the maritime security context most certainly must include addressing women's participation and supporting their professionalization as maritime security practitioners.

A greater challenge to mainstreaming WPS principles in maritime security operations in the South China Sea (SCS) is that priority missions such as maritime domain awareness (MDA) activities; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations; and sovereignty patrols are predominantly framed as state-centric issues, rather than being human security-oriented. The Philippines' dispute with China over the South China Sea is understood to be an issue of sovereignty and sovereign rights over disputed and largely uninhabited offshore territories and maritime zones, with implications for the rules and norms governing activities in those waters. Applying a gender lens is a critical step in any holistic security assessment, but practitioners have not applied such a lens to the factors driving South China Sea/West Philippine Sea disputes. A limited reading of WPS logic has resulted in little to no application of a gender perspective in this state-centric domain, consequently limiting its effectiveness. This may stem from a

combination of insufficient WPS education and the challenge of incorporating a gender perspective into state-based issues. While a gender perspective would open new avenues for resolving threats to national security, individuals with such skills are rarely consulted when tensions like this flare. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the PN has been slower in integrating women and gender-inclusive policies than its counterparts in the Philippine Air Force and Army, who, in recent years, deployed personnel to community-facing frontlines, such as the 2017 Marawi Siege.

Moreover, the headline-grabbing nature of conventional maritime conflicts often obscures the human security facets of maritime security and ocean governance. For instance, an intentional, dangerous maneuver by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel against a smaller PCG boat would almost immediately generate broad media attention and compel the government in Manila to re-evaluate existing policy tools. Meanwhile, non-traditional maritime security challenges linked to human security do not always garner the same attention. Women and children represent half of irregular migrant populations who travel by sea; women are victims of organized and transnational maritime crime such as human trafficking and slavery; women and children in the fishing sector are vulnerable to forced or unpaid labor, sexual abuse, and exploitation; and women play active roles as agents in piracy and terrorism operations.

The PN and PCG have integrated WPS principles in their operations by implementing a GAD Focal Point System to mainstream gender perspectives in their policies, programs, projects, and activities; created safe spaces for women personnel; and the PCG has established the Women's Desk to handle cases of violence against women and children among its ranks. The PCG also demonstrates the integration of WPS principles in operations at sea by providing medical personnel with gender-sensitivity training, largely recruiting women as PCG medical personnel, and utilizing the "Enhanced Gender Mainstream Evaluation Framework" to measure the extent of the PCG's gender mainstreaming efforts. As more regions within Filipino waters are impacted by natural disasters and climate-related events, it will become even more important to address the gendered nature of human security threats in the maritime space.

Despite the good intention of underscoring women's invaluable contributions to maritime security, some initiatives can reinforce gender stereotypes and become counterproductive. A frequently cited example of operationalizing women's roles in maritime security is the PCG's *Angels of the Sea* program, in which women service members are asked to issue radio challenges to foreign vessels found violating the Philippines' sovereign rights or to respond to one, often coming from intruding vessels of China Coast Guard. This is a relatively new program that began in late 2022. While its impact is not yet established, the rationale behind the program (described as a psychological tactic) is that projecting women's voices evokes the mothers, wives, sisters, and communities on land and helps to de-escalate tensions/confrontations between military/paramilitary ships. Some workshop participants argued that such tactical use of essentialized conceptions of gender in maritime operations could be counter-productive to gender narratives and undermine women's roles as legitimate security practitioners. Measuring the effectiveness of the *Angels of the Sea* program will be an important next step to determining its relevance to the WPS agenda.

Workshop participants provided evidence that women's Protection, Prevention, and Relief, and Recovery in conflict situations is being actively considered in policy and operational contexts. Beyond the well-being of women PN and PCG service members, the Philippine maritime security sector has done some work to implement gender-sensitive policies for responses to threats that impact human security at the community level, though a more thoroughgoing application of such policies is needed. On a more macro level, the state-centric nature of maritime conflict, where the front lines are offshore and removed from extended families and communities, means that the WPS agenda has struggled to demonstrate relevance to traditional maritime security policy and its operationalization. A more creative application of the WPS framework is required to address state-based maritime security challenges.

Recommendations

- The Philippine Government should consider funding geared toward retaining women in the PCG and the PN throughout their careers, including those that respond to family obligations/expectations. For instance, funding can be channeled toward developing various support systems and facilities—for servicemembers with children, for spouses, and for couples who are both in the Navy or Coast Guard. The Philippines can also consider greater funding for women’s healthcare services.
- The PN and the PCG should draft and implement policies that mitigate conditions where women’s personal safety is at risk in the workforce. Sexual abuse cases must be swiftly prosecuted.
- The PN and PCG’s anti-sexual harassment policies should be reviewed, in consultation with women civil society organizations, to ensure that punishment for sexual abuse can deter future perpetrators. For instance, units should immediately assume responsibility for filing a case (violation of Articles of War) against the perpetrator if the victim desists because of fear of discrimination or retribution. Related policies should also hold Unit Commanders accountable if a case is not investigated or processed properly within a reasonable period of time.
- The PN and the PCG should institutionalize regular training on Gender and Development policies and sexual harassment by making them a requirement for all personnel.
- A Guidebook on GAD/WPS policies and procedures should be drafted, peer-reviewed, published, and distributed to all PN and PCG personnel. Such a guidebook should specifically address gendered human security concerns within the maritime security domain, and be periodically updated as needed.
- Future PN and PCG hardware acquisitions should ensure gender-inclusive designs and facilities. The Philippine Government can include such requirements when requesting procurement bid proposals.
- Security assistance partners of the Philippines, such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, should consider gender-inclusive designs when transferring vessels or equipment to the PN and the PCG.
- Expanding the roles and presence of women at sea is essential to fully cascade WPS principles at the operational level of maritime activities. The Philippines and its partner countries should prioritize women’s full and equal participation and see it as a first step in advancing our understanding of how a gender perspective can bring about sustainable peace.
- Given the success of other Philippine services (such as the Army) in operationalizing WPS, the Philippine government could consider developing a defense-wide WPS framework to encourage more information-sharing, cross-collaboration, shared metrics, and lessons learned.

Note: A more comprehensive report on Women, Peace, and (Maritime) Security in the Philippines is forthcoming in late 2023 and will be published on Pacific Forum’s website.