



**WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY
UNDER A BIDEN-HARRIS
ADMINISTRATION (PART ONE:
PARTICIPATION)**

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 first in the three-part series on what the Biden-Harris administration means for the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Americans have elected their first-ever woman vice president, but will that usher in a renewed *Pax Americana*? If the histories of China's Empress Wu Zetian and England's Elizabeth I are to be believed, women leaders are no guarantee of dovish behavior. Yet there have been signals from US President Biden and Vice President Harris that women will be front and center in domestic and foreign policy—which may indicate an increase in talk of peace over aggression. In celebration of [International Women's Day](#)—the annual March 8 call to accelerate women's social, economic, cultural, and political equity—we

explore what a Biden-Harris administration would mean for women's issues in US foreign policy. In this three-part series, we will cover what the policy histories of Biden and Harris imply for their administration's international policy, examine their "[Agenda for Women](#)" and vows to "[ensure full implementation](#)" of the [Women, Peace, and Security \(WPS\) Agenda](#), and consider what a commitment to advancing gender equality will mean for the Indo-Pacific region.

Overview of WPS and the Participation Pillar

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on [Women, Peace and Security](#) was adopted in 2000 and codifies the WPS agenda. It recognizes the gendered impact of conflict and calls for the meaningful inclusion of women across the peace and security continuum. The agenda rests on four pillars—Prevention, Participation, Protection, and Relief and Recovery. *Participation* concerns women's full and equal participation in peacebuilding and decision-making. *Prevention* relates to preventing conflict and gender-based violence in fragile contexts. *Protection* advocates for protection of women and girls from gender-based violence amid conflict. Finally, *Relief and Recovery* demands that humanitarian efforts meet the unique needs of women and girls. This article is the first of a series in which we consider how the new administration will engage with the WPS pillars. Here, we consider how Biden and Harris will address the WPS *Participation* pillar.

Participation is a cardinal pillar of the WPS agenda and calls for strengthening women's meaningful involvement at all levels of decision-making: in policymaking, peacebuilding, and security decisions. Research has shown that increasing gender equality in leadership structures is associated with political stability and durable peace. On average, women are less likely to [support armed conflict](#). In policymaking, women are less likely to support [the military over community welfare](#). In peacebuilding, women's leadership improves conflict negotiation outcomes and rebuilding efforts. Studies show that women's involvement in peacebuilding increases the probability that peace will [last over 15 years by 35%](#). Women also have the potential to [improve strategic](#)

[decision-making](#) within military structures by adding to diversity of thinking.

Biden-Harris on the WPS Participation Pillar

The domestic focus of Biden and Harris' political careers makes it challenging to envisage how they will integrate WPS into their foreign policy. Nevertheless, by examining their domestic policies, we can find clues as to how they may advance women's issues globally. The election of Kamala Harris as vice president and the [record number](#) of women set to fill Biden's Cabinet are significant accomplishments for women's participation. Not only is this Cabinet on track to contain the [greatest number of women in US history](#), it would be the first to achieve gender parity. Biden has also hired an [all-woman senior communications team](#), and Harris' [senior aides are all women](#), too.

Despite these positive steps, more work is needed to increase the number of women in high-ranking security positions. Aside from the indicators previously mentioned and statements on supporting women's leadership globally, neither Biden nor Harris have specifically referred to supporting women as *peacebuilders*. Nevertheless, there is plenty to suggest that they will work to increase women's participation in national security institutions. Biden appointed Avril Haines as the [first woman director of national intelligence](#) and Kathleen H. Hicks as the [first woman deputy secretary of defense](#). Biden and Harris also signed a pledge organized by Leadership Council for Women in National Security (LCWINS), a nonpartisan organization dedicated to improving women's inclusion in the US security sector to ensure at least [50% of national security Senate positions](#) are filled by women.

The Status of the WPS Participation Pillar in the Indo-Pacific

Much remains to be done in the Indo-Pacific to improve women's participation at all levels of governance and policymaking to fulfill the WPS *Participation* pillar mandate. Countries within East Asia and the Pacific have increased the representation of women in parliament from around [16 to 20% in the](#)

[past 20 years](#). Still, this 4% increase is small compared to the 12% increase in the [Middle East and North Africa, Central Europe and the Baltics](#), and the [United States](#). The lowest levels of [women's representation](#) in national parliaments can be seen in Vanuatu (2%) and Papua New Guinea (3%), with Japan (10%), Malaysia (15%), and Thailand (16%) not much further ahead. By contrast, the highest levels of women's representation are in Australia (30%), Timor-Leste (38%), and New Zealand (41%). However, these levels are low compared to countries like Mexico (48.2%), Bolivia (53.1%), Cuba (53.2%), and Rwanda (61.3%). It is also important to note that seeing women in more-powerful upper house roles is a far better indicator of *meaningful* gender parity than what is often token women's representation in lower houses—here, too, countries in the Indo-Pacific have [a long way to go](#).

Opportunities for increasing women's inclusion in peace initiatives also exist. The Philippines has led the way by appointing Miriam Coronel-Ferrer as the [first woman in history](#) to act as chief negotiator while signing a major peace deal with an armed insurgent group. She signed the final peace accord between the Philippine government and armed rebels (the Moro Islamic Liberation Front) in 2014. Yet, in most cases, peacebuilding efforts by grassroots women's organizations in the Indo-Pacific continue to be overlooked by official actors, and women are largely [excluded from formal peace processes](#).

In Indo-Pacific, men still vastly outnumber women in national security institutions, particularly in senior roles. There have been some positive steps, but the number of women serving in militaries around the region is almost negligible—women account for 5% or less of national armed forces—and major barriers to women's entry into security institutions remain.

Next Steps on WPS Participation in the Indo-Pacific

Has Vice President Harris' election encouraged Indo-Pacific women to strive for greater presence within public institutions? Harris' election was [widely celebrated in India](#), where her mother is from. A number of [grassroots women's organizations](#) held

talks to discuss Harris' journey to office. It remains to be seen whether Harris' election, alongside the new administration's commitment to advancing gender equality, will influence women's participation in countries across the Indo-Pacific.

Beyond setting an example for women and girls worldwide, Biden and Harris will likely continue to concentrate their efforts on *domestic* women's issues given the health and economic crises triggered by the pandemic. No doubt this administration will be more progressive on WPS than even Obama was, especially given Harris' groundbreaking appointment as the first woman vice president. When combined with the Department of Defense's [Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan](#), which aligns with the [WPS Act of 2017](#) and the [US Strategy on WPS](#), and US Indo-Pacific Command's subsequent application of WPS principles to personnel composition, "[policies, plans, doctrine, training, education, operations and exercises](#)," we should be optimistic about the future of WPS in the Indo-Pacific. Among elevated maritime security concerns, ongoing extremist violence, the continued North Korea nuclear threat, increasingly aggressive moves from China, cyberthreats, and the global recession and COVID-19 recovery challenges, there are numerous opportunities for women to provide positive leadership and influence on security matters. You can read our full *Participation* policy recommendations in our forthcoming in-depth *Issues & Insights* article, and follow the rest of our analysis of how Biden and Harris may impact the other WPS pillars in the Indo-Pacific in forthcoming parts two and three.

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