



**SASAKAWA USA**  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

# Advancing Diversity and Inclusion During COVID-19

*Featuring Justice Minister Yoko Kamikawa*

## **Abstract**

*On Thursday, October 1, 2020, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) was pleased to host Minister Yoko Kamikawa, recently selected to serve as the Minister of Justice for the new cabinet of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, in an on-the-record, invitation-only virtual roundtable. Min. Kamikawa discussed the impact of COVID-19 on women in Japan, women's leadership in business and politics in Japan, and how Japan can increase diversity in political leadership during COVID-19. Additionally, Ambassador Melanne Verwee, Director of Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, provided commentary on the issues discussed by Min. Kamikawa.*

*This talk was presented through Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series and held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington D.C. policy community, academia, think tanks, and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in Tokyo. President of Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Dr. Atsushi Sunami introduced Min. Kamikawa, and Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President of Sasakawa USA, moderated the webinar and facilitated the Q&A.*

## Remarks by Minister Kamikawa

Min. Kamikawa began her remarks by reflecting on her first foray into politics, a political campaign she created over thirty years ago for a class as a student at the Harvard Kennedy School. From the Kennedy School to the Cabinet of PM Suga, Min. Kamikawa stated that her mission has been to promote human security in a society where “everyone can play a role and everyone can thrive without feeling alone.” As COVID-19 has greatly impacted human security, with a profound impact on people with lower-incomes, women, and minorities globally, Min. Kamikawa noted that in her discussion she would cover the impact of COVID-19, domestic violence, and what challenges still lay ahead for Japan.

Min. Kamikawa first discussed the impact of COVID-19 on women in Japan. Due to the lockdown earlier this year, many Japanese companies were forced to suspend their operations with few companies offering telework. Unfortunately, this situation left many women unemployed, as women in Japan disproportionately hold part-time positions and work in sectors that were impacted by COVID-19. Min. Kamikawa also identified that healthcare and essential workers have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. In response to these issues, Min. Kamikawa recommended three approaches. First, Japan should expand and strengthen protective measures against COVID-19 for healthcare and essential workers and should do the same for medicine supply chains. Secondly, Japan should promote telework/contactless work through digital transformation for essential workers. Lastly, Min. Kamikawa recommended that Japan secure human resources in areas such as IT and nursing care to ensure workers' needs are addressed during the COVID-19 era. She added that Japan needs to prioritize education and developing human resources so that those who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 can gain employment opportunities in new fields.

Next, Min. Kamikawa turned to address the uptick in domestic violence due to COVID-19 and her personal efforts at confronting gender inequality. Since the onset of COVID-19, Japan has seen a 20% increase in the number of consultations on domestic violence in the second quarter compared to 2019, mirroring the United Nation’s findings that there has been a global increase in domestic violence. In response to this trend, Min. Kamikawa noted that Japan launched a new “Domestic Violence Consultation” service in April, which has already received over 20,000 consultations, in part due to its ability to provide consultations in ten foreign languages. In addition, the Health and Community Members Federation, which Min. Kamikawa chairs, compiled policy recommendations on preventing and alleviating secondary health damage caused by COVID-19, such as trauma related to domestic violence. Finally, Min.

Kamikawa described her long-term dedication to gender equity as Japan's representative of the Women Political Leaders (WPL), an international network of women parliamentarians. The WPL 2019 summit, where 422 women political leaders from 87 countries met to discuss women's health, education, and the environment, resulted in the "Declaration of Outcome," which Min. Kamikawa handed to PM Shinzo Abe at the G20 Osaka Summit. For Min. Kamikawa, the WPL summits reflect the need to work with women leaders worldwide to address the negative impacts of COVID-19.

Min. Kamikawa then shifted to address the challenges that lay ahead concerning leadership. She identified that one challenge will be to ensure that leadership prioritizes human security, as it is essential to incorporate the perspectives of vulnerable people into decision making and develop inclusive frameworks at all levels. Regarding this issue, Min. Kamikawa highlighted her work in the Japanese prison system. As prison facilities have become hotspots for COVID-19, Min. Kamikawa stated that the Ministry of Justice has worked to develop concrete guidance to prevent outbreaks in the facilities to ensure human rights, health, and the wellbeing of those who were detained at the early stages of the pandemic. Looking forward, Min. Kamikawa stated that the Ministry has also created a contingency plan to enhance organizational and operational response in the case of a second wave in the fall or winter of this year. On her final point concerning challenges leaders face today, Min. Kamikawa stated that COVID-19 has brought an onslaught of issues, and measures need to be taken that reflect on diversity and inclusivity, which is not only a challenge for the U.S. and Japan but also a global challenge. She highlighted both the UN Crime Congress and the Youth Forum in Kyoto as initiatives that are working to address these challenges on a global scale. Concluding her remarks, Min. Kamikawa expressed her commitment to investing in the youth of the world, noting the amazing young students she met at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Youth Forum in Kyoto.

## Commentary by Ambassador Melanne Vermeer

Following the in-depth discussion provided by Min. Kamikawa, Amb. Vermeer responded to the minister's presentation. First, she expressed her appreciation to Min. Kamikawa for being a long-term leader in advancing Japanese diversity and inclusion as only one of two women in the Suga Cabinet. She then turned to make four key comments relating to Japanese diversity and inclusion during the era of COVID-19.

First, Amb. Vermeer's agreed with Min. Kamikawa that women have been disproportionately impacted by the ongoing pandemic. COVID-19 has exposed the deep inequalities present in both Japanese and American societies, and Amb. Vermeer stated that the response to these inequalities needs to be inclusive to account for women. She added that most health care workers are women, so the provision of personal protecting equipment (PPE) and testing is critical to control the spread of COVID-19 for women on the frontlines alongside other essential workers. Amb. Vermeer also added that unfortunately, for all Americans, the United States government has failed to adopt a successful national strategy to contain COVID-19.

The U.S. and Japan's shared struggles in women's employment brought Amb. Vermeer to her second topic: Womenomics. While Amb. Vermeer noted that Womenomics, a suite of policies implemented by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration, has succeeded in increasing women's workforce participation and job rebound, women still disproportionately work in part-time or contract jobs that afford few benefits and bring uncertainty during economic downturns. One million women in Japan have already lost their part-time jobs due to the economic crisis. To overcome this, Amb. Vermeer stated that women need to be prioritized in the Japanese economy through a focus on career-enhancing regular jobs, availability of childcare, and promotion of women's entrepreneurship.

Next, Amb. Vermeer returned to Min. Kamikawa's discussion regarding domestic violence to illustrate her third key point: the importance of consultation services and burden-sharing in Japan. Since the start of the pandemic, rates of domestic violence, depression, suicide, and other health issues have trended upward globally. Amb. Vermeer remarked that those at the greatest risk of experiencing these issues are households with job loss, people under lockdown, and parents experiencing mounting childcare burdens. For Japanese women especially, these issues, in addition to the difficulties Japanese women face due to societal norms, have only been exacerbated by COVID-19. The unaddressed inequality in burden-sharing has been exposed by COVID-19, with Japanese women spending four times as much time performing unpaid labor, including childcare and household chores, than men.

In her final remarks on Min. Kamikawa's discussion, Amb. Vermeer discussed gender equality in Japan. In 2020, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report ranked Japan 121 out of 153 countries in terms of gender parity. Combined with Japan's lagging efforts to increase women's share of private and public leadership positions to 30% by 2030, a key tenet of PM Abe's Womenomics plan, this report showcases Japan's inability to address gender inequality.

Despite this harrowing gender gap, Amb. Verveer stated that COVID-19 offers seeds of opportunity for Japan. Concluding her comments she noted that it will require committed leaders like Min. Kamikawa to create greater diversity and inclusion in Japan.

## Minister Kamikawa's Response to Ambassador Verveer's Commentary

In response to Amb. Verveer's commentary, Min. Kamikawa provided the audience with insight into the success of Womenomics. First, she agreed that the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report rankings for Japan are disappointing; however, since the beginning of Womenomics in 2012, women's active participation in the workforce has changed dramatically. The results of Womenomics in the economy can be seen in PM Abe's proclamation of support for women in 2013 with economic organizations and the passing of legislation, including the promotion of women's participation in work-life in 2016 and the promotion of gender equality in 2018. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has also created a women's school to support women who aim to become politicians. Highlighting these successes of Womenomics, Min. Kamikawa noted that Japan still faces many challenges regarding gender equality. However, as one of two women in the cabinet of PM Suga, she stated that she hopes she can be a role model for women and also encourage young women to become leaders of the next generation.

## Moderated Q&A with Attendees

The first question of the Q&A was from Dr. Susan Pharr, Professor of Japanese Politics at Harvard University, and former professor and mentor of Min. Kamikawa. Regarding the discussion on Womenomics, Dr. Pharr asked Min. Kamikawa to speak more about what can be done to incentivize organizations to promote women to management. Min. Kamikawa responded by stating this is a very difficult question for Japan. Due to societal norms and pressures, it is very difficult for Japanese women to pursue professional work and also support their families. To overcome this issue, Min. Kamikawa stated that education is of the highest priority. Education can empower women to both run for office and take high-level leadership positions, while setting an example for future women leaders. She noted that during her career, she has always done her best to empower younger generations of women, highlighting her responsibility to do so as one of two women in PM Suga's cabinet.

Next, Ms. Suzanne Basalla, President and CEO of the U.S.-Japan Council, asked two questions. First, what are the characteristics of women that enable them to better respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? Second, how is the Japanese non-profit sector addressing gender inequality? Min. Kamikawa responded to the first question by highlighting the Japanese government's response to the 2011 natural disasters. In particular, inequities in disaster relief for women at that time underscored the importance for Japan to include women's perspectives in leadership. As for the second question, Min. Kamikawa highlighted the importance of bridging the work of government, private sector, and civil society. She added that it is a high priority to include diverse and inclusive perspectives and policies, both in Japan and internationally.

Next, Ambassador Kurt Tong, Partner at the Asia Group LLC, asked Min. Kamikawa to discuss further how the promotion of women's participation can be sustained across all borders and cultures. In response, Min. Kamikawa highlighted her work as Japan's representative of the WPL. The WPL's worldwide network connects women from across all different countries, cultures, and languages. As Japan's representative at the 2019 WPL summit, Min. Kamikawa set the agenda for discussions on social welfare, environment, and education. She recommended that the platform of WPL be continued domestically and internationally to further talk about both short-term and long-term issues that women face globally.

The last set of questions came from Ms. Wendy Cutler, Vice President at the Asia Society Policy Institute, and Ms. Shihoko Goto, Deputy Director for Geoeconomics and Senior Associate for Northeast Asia, Asia Program at the Wilson Center. As moderator, Dr. Akimoto, combined their two questions into one, asking Min. Kamikawa to speak more about the intersections of women and technology in Japan. Min. Kamikawa responded by discussing the priority of digitalization under PM Suga and his cabinet. For example, Min. Kamikawa has already taken steps to further digitalize procedures and promote telework among her staff in the Ministry of Justice. Furthermore, she organized a project team to explore the use of A.I. in her ministry. Ultimately, she views digitalization as an opportunity to improve women's quality of life in Japan.

## Closing Remarks by Minister Kamikawa

Concluding the Q&A, Dr. Satohiro turned to Min. Kamikawa to give the final remarks of the event. She began by emphasizing the importance of young generations in creating a diverse and inclusive society.

She stressed that younger generations must be prepared to tackle the challenges posed by COVID-19. To do that, international cooperation is indispensable, and programs such as the Kyoto Youth Forum offer an opportunity for younger generations with differing backgrounds to gather and exchange views. Min. Kamikawa concluded by stating that, as a politician and the Minister of Justice, she will dedicate herself to achieve a society in which no one is left behind and is inclusive under the rule of law.

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*Sasakawa USA is grateful to Min. Kamikawa, Amb. Verveer, Dr. Sunami, Q&A participants, and attendees for the thoughtful discussion on advancing diversity and inclusion during COVID-19 throughout the webinar.*

*The views summarized herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.*

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