



Honoring the Legacy of Disaster Prevention Month in Japan Through the Lens of Women, Peace and Security

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Introduction

The Great Kanto Earthquake devastated Tokyo, Yokohama, and the surrounding areas on September 1, 1923. The earthquake, which registered a 7.9 on the Richter scale, caused immense damage. This was one of the worst natural disasters to afflict Japan, with approximately 1.5 million people affected and at least 140,000 either dead or missing.¹ In 1960, the government of Japan declared September 1 Disaster Prevention Day and the month of September Disaster Prevention

¹ "Japan's Great Kanto Earthquake kills over 140,000," HISTORY Channel, August 28, 2023, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/great-kanto-earthquake-1923-japan>.

Month in remembrance of this catastrophe. Numerous municipal governments, community centers, and civil society organizations focus on emergency drills and disaster-related activities throughout the month of September. However, these activities and engagements may fail to highlight the important role of women and a gender perspective in disaster prevention and response.

This article will discuss how gender-responsive policies should be prioritized to support the safety, participation, and meaningful leadership of women and girls in Japan's responses to conflict, crises, and disasters, ensuring the safe, equitable access to humanitarian assistance that has led to the country's increasing resilience in disaster risk reduction (DRR). Acknowledging September as an important month for DRR and the gap in women's engagement is a regional leadership opportunity for Japan to develop and integrate further gender-responsive mechanisms for DRR. As there is a lack of understanding regarding the disproportionate impact of disasters on women, children and other vulnerable populations, a gendered perspective is essential in both the contexts of DRR and humanitarian assistance efforts. The drive for disaster preparedness must be a continuous, institutionalized effort that calls for a periodic, whole-of-government approach rather than sporadic and siloed engagements.

During the 2023 Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation (SEED) trip to Tokyo, Japan, a comprehensive review of Japan's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) programs both domestically and internationally was presented through numerous engagements with Japanese politicians, government officials, academia, and civil society organizations at all levels. Experts shared their insights on how to strengthen the U.S.-Japan Alliance through our shared commitments on the successful implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, the landmark resolution outlining the tenets of Women, Peace and Security.² The SEED initiative created a unique opportunity to devote time to studying current WPS implementation in Japan.

² "Security Council Resolution 1325 Annotated and Explained," United Nations Development Fund for Women, Accessed October 2023, https://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/BasicWPSDocs/annotated_1325.pdf.

Japan's Disaster Risk Reduction and Response Efforts

Due to efforts to improve community safety over the past two decades and champion the 2015-2030 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, Japan is acknowledged as the global leader in disaster prevention. This framework is regarded as the model for creating a safer world by efficiently managing disaster risk and response and was adopted at the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015.

Japan's National Defense Program (NDPG) mentions efforts to continue to strengthen organization for disaster response and civil protection working with local governments through a whole-of-government approach.³ The NDPG states that Japan will build a posture to evacuate Japanese nationals overseas during emergencies and to ensure their safety. The Japanese government has organized the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) operations with a clear appreciation of its importance to Japan's national security because of the rising frequency and severity of natural disasters.

The JSDF has the authority to respond to sudden onset disasters. According to Article 83 of the 1954 Self-Defense Forces Law, JSDF units are required to respond to requests from prefectural governors for assistance in flood control by bolstering embankments and levees, search and rescue operations, and fire suppression.⁴ The JSDF have averaged more than 200 annual deployments for domestic HA/DR missions.⁵

In 2020, the island of Kyushu faced torrential downpours and flooding. The official response involved more than 40,000 JSDF personnel, Coast Guard members, and firefighters deployed for search and rescue operations. The JSDF deployed in early July 2021 to the coastal resort of Atami, Japan, where landslides destroyed dozens of homes and left at least 15 people dead. The rescue and recovery efforts also included police officers, firefighters, and Coast Guard members.⁶

³ "National Defense Program Guidelines and the Mid-Term Defense Program," Japan Ministry of Defense, December 18, 2018, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/d_policy/national.html.

⁴ "Japan Defense Agency (Boeiicho) Japan Self-Defense Force," Federation of American Scientists, October 12, 2000, <https://irp.fas.org/world/japan/jda.htm>.

⁵ Felix Kim, "Japan's defense forces master disaster relief skills with heavy workload," Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, August 29, 2021, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2021/08/japans-defense-forces-master-disaster-relief-skills-with-heavy-workload/>.

⁶ Japan's defense forces master disaster relief skills with heavy workload.

Japan's Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Japan is recognized for its implementation of WPS in international fora and overall support for gender equality in Japan. Japan's domestic application of the implementation and institutionalization of WPS principles at all levels is also progressing, albeit at a somewhat slower pace. The JSDF and Japanese Ministry of Defense (JMOD) were particularly useful in observing how JMOD is actively working to incorporate a gender perspective and inject the WPS agenda within JMOD and JSDF organizations. JMOD is stepping into a leadership position on WPS domestically, with our SEED cohort's meeting with the two agencies being the first meeting focused on WPS at JSDF headquarters. During the meeting they also highlighted Japan's participation in the inaugural 2022 WPS Symposium hosted at Camp Zama by U.S. Army Japan. Nonetheless, there is more work to be done. The U.S. Army Japan WPS Symposium brought together WPS stakeholders from the United States and Japan to elevate bilateral and regional efforts to collaborate on WPS. While it is admirable that these efforts are being applied by an implementing ministry, the challenge lies in the whole-of-government integration of the WPS agenda.

Understanding of gaps in WPS implementation was aided by our meeting with members of the Cabinet Office's Gender Equality Bureau to discuss their initiatives to advance women's empowerment in the central government and to advance gender mainstreaming in the context of disaster relief operations. They highlighted the significance of the gender perspective throughout the process, including thorough checklists and a gendered perspective in planning, execution, and post relief efforts, while also noting that the JSDF did not take part in any central government disaster relief drills.

The Critical Connection Between WPS and DRR

Globally, women face disproportionate undue and additional hardships during disasters. In their communities, women are already leaders who respond to conflicts, natural catastrophes, and humanitarian crises of all kinds. Disaster preparedness in communities is improved by women's volunteer work and leadership in disaster prevention. For example, during an evacuation drill, women disaster prevention volunteers reached out to their network of female leaders within

schools, parent-teacher organizations, and local government when it became necessary to persuade high school students to take part in the drills to make the exercise a success.⁷ Leadership positions in community disaster prevention, traditionally held by men, were also made stronger by the addition of a gender perspective. The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality of the Japanese government seeks to increase the percentage of women in leadership positions to 30% by the early 2020s. It establishes a goal for prefectural disaster management councils and municipal disaster management councils to have 30% women's participation by 2025 and should assist with this momentum towards women's involvement in DRR.⁸

The importance of women in all phases of disaster preparedness, response, and recovery cannot be overstated. Opening remarks by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the 2022 World Assembly for Women (WAW) covered a wide range of issues to accelerate gender mainstreaming. Gender in disaster management policy was discussed at the WAW conference, with session 10 covering the role of women in DRR using a gender perspective to strengthen the resilience of disaster-affected areas.

Gender inequities that persist in everyday life often exacerbate the disproportionate impact of disasters on women. In all facets of humanitarian response, women and girls, together with the organizations they represent, play an essential role. Their leadership is crucial in addressing gender-based violence, creating efficient policies and systems, and executing relief and recovery activities. Due to traditional preferences in some societies for educating men over women, women often experience lower literacy rates leading to a lack of access to information regarding evacuation preparations. In many developing countries, women are also prohibited from entering shelters due to religious restrictions.⁹ When permitted to enter shelters, women can often struggle to maintain their privacy while nursing infants or changing clothes. Additional concerns in accessing materials such as feminine products, underwear, and breastfeeding equipment can negatively affect health and well-being.

⁷ Miwako Kitamura, "How women leaders emerged from the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami," ReliefWeb, November 4, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/japan/how-women-leaders-emerged-great-east-japan-earthquake-and-tsunami>.

⁸ "The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality 'Toward a Reiwa Society Where All Women and Girls Can Thrive and Achieve Their Full Potential,'" Japan Labor Issues 5, no. 33 (August-September 2021), <https://www.jil.go.jp/english/jli/documents/2021/033-02.pdf>.

⁹ "Women and Girls in Disasters," Center for Disaster Philanthropy, n.d., <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/resources/women-and-girls-in-disasters/>.

Promoting the inclusion of women in disaster response and DRR policy-making processes is crucial to support the rapid recovery of communities, as inclusion creates an opportunity for a whole-of-society approach to response and relief efforts. When women are involved in decision-making, more members of the communities will know life-saving evacuation procedures. National support systems, such as those in charge of health and security or the judicial system, as well as local support networks, can fail during times of crisis. Gender-based violence, which includes intimate partner violence; child, early, and forced marriage; sexual assault; and sexual exploitation and abuse, has a disproportionately negative impact on women and girls and can be exacerbated during times of crisis. Too frequently, emergency response, relief, and recovery activities do not include the needs of women and girls, neglecting the security and well-being of over half the population.

How the JSDF Supports WPS Integration in its DRR Efforts

Since 1969, the Cabinet Office has tracked public perceptions of the JSDF every three years. Polls dating back to the 1980s have tracked the rise in public support for the JSDF. Even while most respondents (63.5%) were aware that maintaining national security was the JSDF's principal goal, a much higher percentage (77%) believed that disaster assistance was the force's most valuable task.¹⁰ As a result, the JSDF continued to invest a significant amount of its time and money in humanitarian aid and other community initiatives. Public perception has improved because of the JSDF's disaster relief efforts. During the most recent poll in 2022, the Japanese public responded with an even higher percentage (88.3%) believing that disaster assistance was their most important task. Respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 had the highest percentage of positive impressions (93.5%) of the JSDF's disaster response efforts due to favorable impressions during the Great East Japan Earthquake.¹¹ The data indicates that the JSDF's time, talent, and financial contributions to DRR activities continue to be a worthwhile investment.

The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty constitutes a cornerstone of the U.S.-Japan Alliance. The NDPG encourages bilateral actions such as HA/DR to be conducted to increase U.S.-Japan presence in

¹⁰ Japan Defense Agency

¹¹ Kosuke Takahashi, "Poll: Japanese Support for Self-Defense Forces Rises to Record High," *The Diplomat*, March 7, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/poll-japanese-support-for-self-defense-forces-rises-to-record-high/>.

the Indo-Pacific region and to strengthen and broaden cooperation in a variety of areas. This is particularly important in the periodic involvement of the JSDF to participate in all aspects and contingencies to include disasters, drills, and multinational exercises, as this will strengthen Japan's ability to ultimately deter and counter threats. Drills and exercises encourage information sharing and familiarity of organizations to ensure a smooth bilateral coordination and execution of tasks related to Japan's peace and security.

The JSDF cannot realize its full potential in disaster management without regular interaction with many stakeholders, including local governments, international partners, NGOs, and disaster relief organizations. The JSDF is deployed at the request of civilian authorities. The time to become familiar with civilian disaster management procedures should not be during an actual event, but through drills, multinational exercises, and engagements before disasters occur. If civilian authorities and organizations are not familiar with the JSDF by including them in planning processes and exercises, the effectiveness of the JSDF response will be reduced. The annual Okinawa and Shizuoka Prefecture Disaster Drills are prime examples of the gold standard, but such drills are not mainstreamed throughout all prefectures.

The annual Okinawa and Shizuoka Prefecture Disaster Drills with the U.S. Marine Corps showcase how the planning and preparation for the exercise improved community, military, and government readiness for humanitarian crises. These drills are an excellent effort by both prefectures to periodically improve their disaster response capabilities. The U.S. Marines have historically responded to sudden onset disasters in Japan. Due to the Marines' expeditionary nature, they can provide relief supplies and immediate aid as they do not require a functional port or airfield to operate. As the institutional and public attention to disaster preparedness wanes after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, annual disaster preparedness drills are an institutional reminder of the importance of disaster preparedness and help build resilience. More than 86 organizations participated in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises.

Looking Ahead to the Future of WPS in Japan and the U.S.

It is evident the Japanese government wants to pursue a strategy that prioritizes women's leadership and ensures that all emergency responses include measures to protect women and girls. To ensure

that humanitarian aid meets the needs of people impacted, it is essential that Japan's strategy include women's roles and participation at all levels. The U.S. government is also dedicated to advancing gender equality and the safety and participation of women and girls in all their diversity during times of conflict and crisis. To guarantee that humanitarian aid meets the needs of those affected and is carried out with their participation, an inclusive and intersectional approach is necessary.

The forthcoming 2023 U.S. Strategy and National Action Plan on WPS will expand our lines of effort to include relief, response, and recovery, which closely aligns the U.S. with the global WPS agenda and serves to improve the U.S. government's efforts to be more inclusive in responding to sudden onset disasters. In doing so we are mainstreaming WPS principles across DRR policies and creating more opportunities to collaborate with Japan on strategies to advance gender equality processes and institutions. To enable the proper relief and recovery of the afflicted area during these drills, the application of WPS principles at all stages of DRR should be utilized.

While the JSDF's purpose has gradually changed to incorporate disaster relief tasks, the NDPG substantiates the importance of disaster response in national security matters. When considering the lessons learned from disaster response initiatives since the 1960s, it is repeatedly demonstrated that the inclusion of women, a gender perspective, and broad stakeholder engagement must be stressed and practiced throughout all stages of disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

CDR Andre Agraviador wrote in his personal capacity. The views and interpretations expressed by the author are solely his own.



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