



Seeds & Solidarity: Lessons and Insights from the 2023 Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation on Women, Peace and Security

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This publication was part of Dr. Smith's participation in Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA's Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation (SEED) program, where eight U.S. Women, Peace and Security (WPS) experts traveled to Japan from July 22 to 30, 2023. The 2023 SEED delegates engaged with Japanese policymakers and experts to understand the challenges and opportunities Japan faces with implementing WPS and to explore avenues for future U.S.-Japan collaboration on WPS.

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

-African Proverb

A couple of days into the Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation (SEED) program to Japan, I found myself seated next to fellow delegate Sahana Dharmapuri as our minibus wound its way across Tokyo en route to our next engagement. The spaces between meetings, with the entire

delegation squeezed into the van, were some of the most fruitful. They created moments of pause in an otherwise demanding schedule where we could reflect – a space to trace the connections between our own experiences advancing Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in the United States and the challenges faced by our Japanese counterparts.

During this particular ride, Sahana, a longtime WPS advocate and Director of Our Secure Future, recounted the origin story of the U.S. WPS Act, the world’s first-ever law on Women, Peace and Security.¹ Although I was familiar with the timeline of events, Sahana offered something more: the story of the people behind the movement. Too often, we forget that great achievements sometimes begin with a small group of people who refuse to accept the status quo and believe in the promise of a brighter future; who are committed to sustained action, to bringing others along, to building solidarity; who have the courage and grit to push forward, even in the face of overwhelming challenges. And from these humble and earnest beginnings, transformative change can, against all odds, spring forth.

Sahana’s story took us back to 2010. It was the tenth anniversary of the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.² UNSCR 1325 is the foundation of what has become the WPS Agenda. It marked the first time the UN Security Council formally recognized that armed conflict disproportionately affects women and girls in ways that are distinct from men and boys, and was the beginning of an international policy framework that aims to mainstream a gender perspective into peace and security efforts. The adoption of UNSCR 1325 by the UN Security Council, much like the WPS Act in the United States, was the outcome of years of civil society organizing and advocacy. Today, the WPS Agenda includes ten UN Security Council resolutions and has catalyzed a global community dedicated to advancing its mandate – to account for the differing and disproportionate impacts of conflict on women and girls; to prevent and protect women from conflict-related sexual violence; and to ensure women play a central and meaningful role in all aspects of conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and relief and recovery

¹ “Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017,” United States Congress, October 6, 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ68/PLAW-115publ68.pdf>.

² “Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325),” Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Accessed September 2023, <https://www.peacewomen.org/SCR-1325>.

efforts.³ Since Resolution 1325 was adopted in 2000, 107 countries including Japan have created WPS National Action Plans (NAPs), which serve as localized frameworks to implement UNSCR 1325.⁴

In the United States, a decade passed after the adoption of UNSCR 1325 before the political leadership needed to support the development of a U.S. WPS NAP emerged. Despite persistent pressure from civil society to do so, it was not until U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others in the U.S. government – including Melanne Verbeke, the first U.S. Ambassador for Global Women’s issues – signed on to the cause that things began to move at the political level. In October 2010, Secretary Clinton announced the U.S. government’s commitment to develop a WPS NAP and one year later, President Barack Obama issued an Executive Order making the NAP official U.S. policy. While this was a critical next step toward the integration of a WPS lens into U.S. foreign policy, what Sahana and others recognized was that it would not be enough to create lasting change without legally mandating implementation and ensuring accountability through mechanisms to monitor and evaluate progress.

As we sat together on the minibus, the sights and sounds of a bustling Tokyo streaming by outside, Sahana told me how a small group of civil society actors began working together on the long journey to create the U.S. WPS Act.⁵ It would take seven years to bring it to fruition, but in 2017, a law was finally passed with bipartisan support requiring coordinated efforts by the Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and the United States Agency of International Development to mainstream a WPS perspective into U.S. foreign policy. This October will mark the sixth anniversary of the WPS Act, which has become the lynchpin of U.S. WPS implementation efforts. To fulfill the obligations of the Act, each of the four U.S. agencies had to create an implementation strategy, which by necessity, required dedicated personnel who would carry out the mandate and government allocation of resources. The Act also required implementing agencies to provide training for relevant staff to equip them with the skills necessary

³ “The Resolutions,” Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Accessed September 2023, <https://www.peacewomen.org/why-wps/solutions/resolutions>.

⁴ “National Action Plans: At a Glance,” Women, Peace and Security Programme of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Accessed September 2023, <https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/>.

⁵ Sahana Dharmapuri, Jolynn Shoemaker, and Sarah Williamson, “What You Should Know About the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017.” Our Secure Future, Spring 2018, https://oursecurefuture.org/sites/default/files/Policy%20Brief-WPS-101_digital.pdf.

to integrate a gender analysis into U.S. foreign policy and promote the role of women in peace and security efforts. Importantly, the WPS Act also mandates these agencies to regularly report to the U.S. Congress on the progress of implementation efforts.

It was inspiring to hear Sahana talk about the early days of that effort when it was just a small coalition of people who committed themselves – outside of their organizational positions and responsibilities – to volunteer and begin drafting ideas that would shape the legal framework for implementing WPS in the United States. This handful of civil society actors worked behind the scenes, without formal titles or outside resources, in partnership with Congressional members and staffers to galvanize bipartisan support for the Act. Their efforts, alongside the political leadership of WPS champions like Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Verveer, were instrumental in moving WPS forward in the United States.

While the WPS Act has been critical to the United States’ “whole-of-government” approach to WPS implementation, none of our success would have been possible without a dedicated WPS community.⁶ The strength of our movement is driven by stakeholders from civil society, academia, and government coming together around a common goal – this cooperative approach creates a trifecta of impact aptly represented in the composition of this year’s SEED delegation. Like spokes on a wheel, each of these sectors is critical to maintaining the stability of the movement and sustaining forward momentum. Throughout the week, my appreciation for the WPS community, of which I am a part, would deepen and grow, as would my conviction that Japan too must build a WPS community of its own within the country and with WPS experts, leaders, and champions abroad.

Looking around the minibus at our colleagues, a delegation of experts from the implementing agencies sitting alongside experts from civil society and academia, each bringing lessons and insights to exchange with Japanese counterparts, it was extraordinary to think that our positions and portfolios were in some ways an outcome of Secretary Clinton’s and Ambassador Verveer’s leadership in 2010 and Sahana’s and her civil society counterparts’ conviction that a WPS Act was

⁶ “FACT SHEET: U.S. Government Women Peace and Security Report to Congress,” The White House, July 18, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/18/fact-sheet-us-government-women-peace-and-securityreport-to-congress/>.

both necessary and achievable. I don't know if they could have anticipated the ripple effects of those early actions. Of course, this is just one piece of the story. It would take the dedication and contribution of countless others both within and outside of government, including male allies like Ambassador Donald Steinberg, to ultimately achieve success, but it was humbling and inspiring to see that real change can start with just a handful of champions. Although Japan is still in the early stages of moving the WPS Agenda forward, Sahana's story made me feel hopeful that they, too, can achieve their aspirations to advance WPS.

Across our interactions during the SEED trip, it became clear that there are already sparks of a WPS movement in Japan, catalyzed in large part by The Honorable Yoko Kamikawa's leadership in the Diet and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation's (SPF) commitment to strengthening the WPS framework in Japan. In October 2022, Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Verveer visited Japan at the invitation of SPF to lend their support and encouragement to ongoing efforts to advance WPS.⁷ During a series of high-level meetings organized by SPF, members of the Diet announced their commitment to creating a WPS caucus, and champions from other sectors expressed their desire to collaborate with the U.S. to move WPS efforts forward in Japan and the region. Minister Kamikawa's steadfast resolve and ability to inspire others to action are working alongside geopolitical forces that are putting pressure on Japan to strengthen its national security strategy. It was clear from our meetings that there is a window of opportunity for Japan to take a leadership role in moving the WPS Agenda forward. But the WPS movement in Japan cannot rest on Minister Kamikawa's shoulders alone. We know from the U.S. context that networks of solidarity and an integrated multi-sectoral approach are critical to long-term success.

Our delegation was privileged to exchange lessons with many Japanese stakeholders from government, civil society, and academia who are engaged in work directly relevant to the goals of the WPS Agenda, but they have yet to come together to form a community of practice. It was surprising to learn that so many of the people we met were unaware of each other's work. The SEED trip was an important step toward engaging diverse actors across sectors on WPS issues, but more is needed to build and sustain those connections.

⁷ Melanne Verveer, "Women, Peace, and Security in Japan: Collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation," Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, November 3, 2022, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/women-peace-and-security-in-japan-collaboration-with-the-sasakawa-peace-foundation/%ef%bf%bc/>.

Successful implementation of the WPS Agenda hinges on an ability to draw on the strengths of diverse actors to advance an integrated approach: civil society, government, and academia each have an essential role to play. As our delegation attended meeting after meeting, each of us contributing our own piece of the puzzle to conversations with Japanese colleagues, the value of a multi-sectoral approach became even more clear and took on new meaning as it became animated in our interactions. Many of the same ingredients that led to success in the United States are present in Japan – we met with leaders in each of these sectors, who together could build the critical mass needed to move WPS forward in Japan. The U.S. Embassy and SPF are well positioned to support this vital work by continuing to foster relationships between key stakeholders, both within Japan and abroad, creating opportunities for briefings and knowledge exchange, and building the capacity of civil society and government actors to advance WPS integration.

In so many countries around the world, including the United States, a robust civil society has been essential to the success of the WPS Agenda, playing a key role in advocacy efforts, building capacity and networks, and holding governments accountable. We heard from several stakeholders that while civil society organizations in Japan are active, the government does not always see them as critical partners. We were also informed that civil society in Japan often lacks the resources and capacity to collect the data needed to underpin advocacy efforts, as well as the necessary training and experience to lobby the government to act. These are two areas where additional investments would positively impact WPS efforts. Better equipping civil society to advance WPS is an important step toward increasing their impact and repositioning them as crucial WPS actors and government partners.

At the government level, it is encouraging to see how quickly parliamentary support for a WPS Caucus has grown within the Diet in the last year under the leadership of Minister Kamikawa. They seem well positioned to push for a WPS Act of their own, which would significantly strengthen WPS implementation, as it did in the United States. In the meantime, sustained efforts and resources, including expanded cooperation between the U.S. and Japan and ongoing support from partners like SPF, are needed to maintain momentum and build government capacity to advance WPS.

This year, Japan adopted its third WPS NAP, and encouraging reports from the NAP Evaluation Committee – composed of representatives from academia, NGOs, and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) – suggest implementation is improving. It was impressive to hear about Japan’s efforts to integrate a WPS lens into disaster risk reduction measures following the earthquake in 2011. These lessons could inform initiatives to mainstream WPS in other areas of government, including early but promising efforts within the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. Capacity-building at the government level is a strategic avenue for ongoing U.S.-Japan engagement and would be mutually enriching. While the U.S. is further along in terms of a “whole-of-government” approach to WPS, we continue to struggle with some of the same challenges as Japan. Opportunities to share knowledge and lessons learned, alongside a sustained commitment to integrating WPS into national and regional security strategies, would benefit both nations.

Academia also has an essential role in advancing the WPS Agenda. At the [Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security](#) (GIWPS), we have seen this firsthand. Our Institute was founded by Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Verveer after they were repeatedly met with demands from policymakers to provide evidence that WPS would lead to better national security outcomes. In 2013, they founded the Institute to build the evidence-based case for why women matter in issues of peace and security. For the last ten years, GIWPS has been dedicated to research that demonstrates WPS is not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do.

Both government and civil society efforts would be strengthened through greater partnerships with Japanese scholars and researchers. During our visit, we met many brilliant academics and researchers – including those leading on WPS at SPF – who could help build an evidence-based case for WPS in Japan and better equip decision-makers with the WPS knowledge they need for more effective policy and practice. These efforts would be further supported by creating a WPS hub or center in Japan or a partner nation, that could serve as a go-to source for WPS expertise and help coordinate wider efforts in the region. Japanese academics and researchers could also play a role in educating the next generation of policy professionals to equip them with the theoretical and practical skills to advance WPS. GIWPS has had some early success with this approach at Georgetown University, where we have launched a graduate certificate program in Gender, Peace and Security. A similar model could be replicated at universities in Japan to build a pipeline of

future leaders on gender equality and WPS issues who can spearhead both domestic and international efforts.

Thus far, Japan's focus on WPS has primarily been within its foreign policy. While this is not unusual and is also the case in the United States, Japan's leadership position on WPS in the region and on the global stage would be significantly strengthened by addressing the status of women at home. Evidence from GIWPS' WPS Index shows that the wellbeing of women and the wellbeing of nations goes hand-in-hand: where women are doing better, countries are more peaceful, prosperous, and better equipped to adapt to climate change.⁸ The WPS Index, which draws on 11 different indicators across dimensions of inclusion, justice, and security, measures women's status in 170 countries around the world. In 2021, Japan ranked 35th overall with strong performance on indicators related to women's education, employment, and financial inclusion. However, Japan's performance dropped significantly when women's parliamentary representation and legal discrimination were factored in.

These findings mirror drivers affecting Japan's ranking on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report, which placed Japan 125th out of 146 countries in 2023.⁹ With regard to women's political participation, Japan has some of the lowest rates globally. This is surprising, considering the Japanese constitution recognizes the equal rights of men and women. However, we heard from Japanese colleagues that persistent discriminatory gender norms remain a significant barrier to women's progress, and legal reforms are needed to further promote gender equality, including greater labor protections, more access to childcare, and reforming tax laws that penalize families where both parents work full-time.¹⁰ Given the link between the status of women and the status of nations, efforts to move the WPS Agenda forward in Japan must take place alongside efforts to advance gender equality.

If Japan were to domestically apply WPS commitments to promote Japanese women's participation and their meaningful role in decision-making, it could translate to better national

⁸ "Women Peace and Security Index," Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, Accessed September 2023, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index/>.

⁹ "Global Gender Gap Report 2023," World Economic Forum, June 20, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023>.

¹⁰ Emily Potosky, "How the Tax Code can Harm Women: A Japanese Case Study," The Tax Foundation, June 30, 2016, <https://taxfoundation.org/blog/how-tax-code-can-harm-women-japanese-case-study/>.

security outcomes and a stronger economy. Additionally, integrating a women’s human rights perspective, inherent in the WPS Agenda, into broader gender equality efforts in Japan could bolster progress on both fronts. As Secretary Clinton famously said in Beijing in 1995, “Human rights are women’s rights, and women’s rights are human rights, once and for all.”¹¹

The 2023 Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation on WPS was a fruitful exchange that planted seeds from which to continue to grow U.S.-Japan relations. Our engagement with Japanese colleagues generated many insights about how we can work together to advance WPS. Speaking on behalf of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, we are eager to continue collaborating with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and our Japanese and American partners to move WPS forward in Japan and abroad.

On a more personal note, the trip reminded me how lucky I am to be part of a global WPS community. In this field, the highs are high, and the lows are low. We need each other – to celebrate the wins and weather the losses and to exchange ideas and expertise that help us move our collective work forward. My greatest wish is that our Japanese colleagues feel welcomed into and continue to grow this community. I also hope they find strength and a sense of solidarity in knowing they are part of a global movement. While the road is long, we can go far as long as we go together.

Dr. Jessica M. Smith wrote in her personal capacity. The views and interpretations expressed by the author are solely her own.

¹¹ “‘Women’s rights are human rights, once and for all’: The First Lady’s International Rallying Cry from Beijing,” Clinton Digital Library, Accessed September 2023, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/exhibits/show/womens-rights/wr-hr-introduction#:~:text=The%20First%20Lady%20delivers%20the.%2C%20once%20and%20for%20all.%E2%80%9D>.



Jessica Smith is the Director of Research at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS). The Institute was founded in 2013 by Secretary Hillary Clinton and Ambassador Melanne Verveer to strengthen the evidence-based case for why women matter in issues of peace and security. Today, GIWPS is a leading light on innovative approaches to advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, providing essential analysis, expertise, and leadership to support more impactful policy and practice.

As the Director of Research, Dr. Smith works closely with Ambassador Verveer to develop and execute cutting-edge research projects that are responsive to contemporary policy challenges. The Institute's research aims to document and amplify the difference women make when they are meaningfully included in decision-making roles across peace and security efforts, including how women's leadership from the grassroots to the political level leads to more sustainable, prosperous futures for all.

Dr. Smith completed her Ph.D. at the Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. She has over a decade of experience working on gender-related issues with women in diverse contexts, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Indonesia, Jordan, and the United States. Her doctoral research focused on women's experiences of vulnerability and agency in conflict-affected contexts, specifically how the principles of the WPS Agenda translate and become meaningful to local actors.

In addition to serving as the Director of Research, Dr. Smith is an Associate Professor at Georgetown University and also teaches graduate courses at George Washington University.

Outside of academia, she has worked in various capacities for the International Rescue Committee, Catholic Charities, the United Nations, USAID, and the US Institute of Peace.
