

# SEEKING THE “NEXT NORMAL”

## CREATING A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD WHERE WOMEN (AND MEN) CAN THRIVE

What has the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic been on women? What has the pandemic revealed about our societies, politics, workplaces, and lifestyles? What should the “next normal” be for women in the United States, Japan, and the world? And how can women’s voices be amplified in policymaking and in US-Japan cooperation? These were some of the issues on the table when the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) gathered more than 40 American and Japanese women leaders—including 11 national legislators as well as leaders from government, business, media, philanthropy, academia, and think tanks—for a series of three virtual meetings in March–April 2021.

The 2021 US-Japan Women Leaders Dialogue, co-chaired by Rep. Diana DeGette and Rep. Seiko Noda, revealed a tremendous convergence among the experiences and concerns of the participants during the global pandemic. In both countries, women have borne a substantially heavier economic burden due to the sectors in which women tend to be employed and the propensity for women—particularly in Japan—to be contract-based or part-time employees. Both countries have also seen the pandemic take a heavy toll on mental health, affecting women and children in particular.

The pandemic has also exposed underlying inequities in both societies, including in areas like access to technology and broadband, and access to caregiving support. Both American and Japanese participants called for improved access to affordable childcare and care for elderly or disabled family members, which are critical if women are to thrive in the workforce. There was also agreement on the need to rethink the dominance of the traditional male role and its ability to define women’s roles, including the unequal division of caregiving and housekeeping roles that persists in both countries.

Aside from the impact of the pandemic, another area of convergence was the lack of gender parity among those holding elected office in the United States and Japan. At all levels of government, men are significantly more likely to run for office than women. Participants identified a variety of reasons, including the traditional imbalance in childcare and household roles and other psychological and normative factors, and they noted that women are less likely to view politics as a career choice, particularly in Japan, where there have been fewer notable role models in the past. Women are also more likely to run if encouraged or recruited by others and if they view politics as a means to affect change on policy issues they care about. The current image of national politics as being a place of backroom dealing, public posturing, and excessive inaction makes it a less attractive option for many women, and there was a call to rethink the way in which politics is conducted.

And finally, as the meetings were held around the time of the first meeting between Prime Minister Suga and President Biden, participants noted with dismay that the agenda laid out by the two leaders failed to mention women at all, and they called for greater involvement of women in dialogues and initiatives on international security and for cooperation in areas such as the promotion of women in STEM and femtech.

The following recommendations summarize some of the ideas that were generated to address the issues raised during the three discussions, but are solely the responsibility of JCIE.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Creating the “next normal”

- Assess and adopt best practices from during the pandemic—e.g., telework, telemedicine, and improved access to broadband and technology
- Offer affordable, high-quality childcare and eldercare for all and ensure that caregivers are paid a wage that reflects their valuable role
- Make paid family leave available to all men and women and promote use of paternity leave
- Shift away from the current reliance on nonregular/contracted employment practices that undermine women’s financial security
- Retrain women, particularly in IT and other areas that provide greater income and job stability.
- Encourage greater job flexibility and mobility in Japan
- Bring men into the discussion of how to change workstyles to promote work-life balance for all

## 2. Promoting women’s political participation and policy impact

- Promote and expand initiatives to inspire young women to learn about and engage in politics
- Expand programs that support and recruit women candidates for public office
- Reevaluate how politics is conducted in order to attract more diverse and capable voices
- Recruit more cabinet members in Japan from outside of government

## 3. US-Japan collaboration for the post-pandemic world

- Support US-Japan collaboration to shore up the rules-based international order
- Engage women not just in soft power conversations, but also in bilateral discussions on national and international security issues
- Put women on the agenda of the next US-Japan Summit
- Facilitate US-Japan collaboration to promote and invest in women in STEM and femtech
- Provide opportunities for ongoing dialogues among women leaders

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