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“Me? A Feminist?”: Gender Activism and Collective Identity in Japan

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This paper investigates how gender activists in Japan came to form a collective voice of women despite possessing many characteristics that, according to our knowledge of their Western counterparts, would work against their achieving unity as a social movement.

The Japanese gender justice movement differs from its more publicized counterparts in the West in many respects¹. One such difference is that gender activists in Japan refuse to articulate their activism using a single collective label such as “feminist.” However, my respondents subscribe to no other label. Second, gender justice movements in Japan have never experienced a large-scale protest comparable to their counterparts in the West. The largest example numbered around 2,000 women, and was organized by the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s (Shigematsu 2003). Third, the movement’s financial resources are very limited. Projects by gender activist organizations are largely self-funded by membership fees. Fourth, there is no division of labor between service-oriented and policy-oriented organizations; instead Japanese gender activist organizations and groups both provide services, such as phone counseling, and mobilize around national policy through petitioning and lobbying.

While these characteristics make the movement seem resource-poor and less organized, the Japanese gender justice movement shows noteworthy longevity as well as the ingenuity necessary to launch nation-wide campaigns. Moreover, the activists’ rhetorical strategies in

¹ I do not wish to imply that the Western nations are the standard by which to measure all other nations. In fact, I believe that all analyses of non-Western cases need to be conscious of the political and scientific implications of always using Western nations as the starting point. However, it is an undeniable fact that the audience is most familiar with Western nations and thus, the discussion is also meant to clarify any assumptions that the audience may have.

advocating gender equality show a remarkably uniform understanding in which gender functions as a set of “constraints” that impose ascribed gender roles on them and violate women’s human rights.

How did gender activists in Japan come to maintain a common understanding of gender relations and hierarchy, and share discursive strategies, despite the lack of a collective label? Without a collective label, as one may see in the West, what unites the activists and what contributes to fostering their collectively shared identity as gender activists? My research found that personal history, activist culture, movement history, and Japan’s particular approach to nation-state building all contributed to the shared views and thus discursive strategies of gender relations among gender activists in Japan. This paper focuses on one of these factors: personal history. The activists’ stories showed that their identities as activists developed as they questioned the gender status quo that stressed women’s contribution to society as docile mothers and wives.

Significance of Research

This study builds on burgeoning transnational feminist theory and practice, and their relationship to gender and political participation (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Naples and Desai 2002; Walby 2005). Inspired by scholars such as Mohanty (2003), Narayan (1997), and Yuval-Davis (1997), my study contributes to the emergent efforts by feminist scholars to build a framework that sees women as products of larger processes, such as history and nation building, rather than as a universal monolithic category vis-à-vis men. It joins the call for “transnational feminist sociology” that pays attention to both material and cultural practices and the politics of inclusion and exclusion (Kim-Puri 2005).

Methods

This paper develops out of my doctoral research for which I conducted 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Japan from December 2006 to March 2007. Using snowball sampling, I conducted in-depth interviews in Japanese with thirty-six gender activists in two policy areas, education and labor/employment, with a regional focus on two metropolitan areas I call Yamazaki and Kawanishi². Interviews ranged from one hour to three hours and asked about personal histories, as well as past projects and campaigns, and for an assessment of the current status of the movement and a projection for the future. I observed and participated in public events, workshops, and the behind-the-scenes work of gender activist groups and organizations. I have transcribed all of the interviews and coded the interview and observation data myself.

Activists' Personal Histories and Meaning-Making

How did gender activists in Japan come to share the view that gender produces structural constraints on individuals and that women's rights are human rights? Undeniably, the recent availability of western feminist writing in Japanese gave activists conceptual and linguistic tools to articulate their analysis of society and their demands. Activists' participation in United Nations NGO forums also contributed to the framing of their demands in accordance with the language of the UN conventions. As my case also shows, feminist efforts to mainstream gender perspectives in international and domestic policy around the world have produced powerful slogans that transformed the way we see and interpret our realities (True 2003:374).

Sociologists who study social movements have long argued that for any powerful slogan to gain enough popularity, it must have cultural significance for the target audience, namely potential constituents (Ferree and Miller 1985; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). Expanding on this insight, I contend that the international discursive strategies such as "women's

² I use pseudonyms for locations and interview subjects to protect their anonymity.

human rights” must have cultural significance to the social movement actors themselves as well as potential supporters. Gender activists in Japan use ideas from the international discursive strategies because these ideas resonate with their lived experiences. The following analysis demonstrates that activists’ gender consciousness developed out of the particular construction of gender relations and can only be fully understood in the context of the gendered processes of economic development and nation-state building in Japan.

The gendered nation-state building and activist socialization both shaped my respondents’ strong sense of justice and optimism for social change. Many had participated in the New Left/student movement in the 1960s and the 1970s. They grew up believing that women should be treated equally. However, they came to find out a gap between beliefs and reality: although women’s attainment of education and labor force participation increased, gender segregation in both academic fields and the labor market endured. The state has consistently supported the gender segregation by pursuing the middle-class ideology of women’s domesticity and men’s work-based masculinity, which gave rise to a corporate-centered welfare state that casts the nuclear family as a unit with a single breadwinner and a full-time homemaker as its beneficiary (Osawa 1993; Peng 2000; 2002).

The personal history of Sasaki-san, a labor activist, is an example of how gendered nation-state building, activist socialization in the larger labor movement, and the historical context shaped her path as a gender activist. She was a student activist in college, worked as a nursery school teacher at a government-run daycare center, and was active in the labor union. The hiring practices of Japanese corporations and the government make it difficult for a worker, especially a woman, to be re-hired full-time. When Sasaki-san’s second child became ill, she left her job as a teacher to take care of the child while her husband worked and stayed a labor activist.

I worked full-time as a public servant. I really wanted to continue working, so I worked hard for the labor union [to make changes for working women] as well. Then my first child became ill, well, he passed away. Back then people had even less of an understanding for working mothers. I was blamed for my child's death because I worked. I couldn't concentrate on taking care of my second child when he became ill because I kept on wondering why he became sick. [...] I couldn't continue working full-time just by my sheer will. So I decided to take time off from work to take care of my child. I had a teaching license and wanted to go back to work as a nursery school teacher again but there were no opportunities to do that full-time. Japanese women's work is characterized by a so-called M-shaped curve³, as you know. I resisted that pattern for myself but had no choice but to fall into it.

Her story reflects a narrative that I heard repeatedly while in the field: women are made to choose between family and work. A woman's identity is viewed to ultimately lie in the private sphere; no matter how good a worker is, she is never valued and respected in the workplace⁴. Sasaki-san had been very aware of the complexity of the balancing act that women faced and grappled with. Later in the same interview, she noted that even though she and her husband shared a passion for activism, he had ultimately expected her to stay home and assume all of the childcare/parenting responsibility. These personal experiences fuel her conviction to represent part-time working women.

While a majority of the labor activists have been active in labor unions, a majority of the education activists are teachers who are both active and inactive in teachers' unions. Most of these teachers gained gender consciousness through their profession. Aoki-san is a high school teacher. Her gender consciousness was formed over the years through daily interaction with her female students. She explained:

³The M-shaped curve refers to Japanese women's labor force participation pattern where the number of women in the labor force dips in their late twenties to early thirties, indicating that many drop out of the labor force to marry and have children. The pattern also contains employment status segregation according to marital status: young single women work full-time in large corporations, while married older women work part-time in small enterprises with little to no benefits.

⁴ Viewing women as ultimately belonging in the private sphere also applies to young unmarried women who are "prospective mothers." Until recently, the concept of maternal protection in Japan applied to all women, regardless of their marital/familial status and girls were (and still are) considered future mothers for whom protection such as "menstruation leave" was considered an appropriate measure to protect their reproductive health.

My students worked really hard and excelled through middle school. But usually by the sophomore year in high school, they would start saying, “I’m only a female. Junior college would be good enough.” Those who had been doing really well academically would start losing interest in the subjects altogether. I would ask them, “Why do you think junior college is good enough for you?” And they would say, “I will be getting married anyway.” That was in the ‘80s. When you compared university graduates and junior college graduates, there were a lot more jobs for junior college graduates. [...] And I grappled with how to challenge them when they would just give up, saying, “Junior college is good enough because I’ll be getting married.” That became my goal as a teacher.

While labor activists sought to change structural disadvantages for working women, education activists concentrated on awareness-raising. They devised programs to develop critical thinking in children, colleagues, and parents about gender expectations that were taken for granted. They lobbied school administrations and education boards to reexamine school policy/organization. Education activists’ commitment to gender equality in education stemmed from their daily interactions with children, in which gender expectations powerfully inhibited girls from pursuing their own interests.

The idea that gender is a set of structural constraints also applies to men in the activists’ view. When asked during interview to fill in the blank “In my mind, a man is [],” most respondents answered that the man was the one with power and authority. However, many qualified the statement by adding that with the power and authority come less freedom to think outside the box. One education activist explained:

Others think that men have it easy, but men suffer from long hours of work, death by exhaustion, and suicides⁵. There are men out there who want to spend more time with their families and children. But they can’t. That’s because society has taken that away from men. We need to liberate men. We need to protect the right to live like humans for both men and women.

The economic crisis mode and the expanding gap between the rich and the poor since the recession of the 1990s make lifetime employment feel more like a myth than a reality to many.

⁵ “Death by exhaustion,” including sudden deaths and suicides, has been recognized as a social problem in the last couple of decades in Japan and has been approved for workers’ compensation benefits by the government.

Global economic competition and increasing job insecurity are reported daily in the media and threaten middle-class men's identity as breadwinners. According to the gender activists I studied, men hold onto their masculine identities by engaging in self-destructive acts. They believe that the structure of gender as it is maintained by the state, society, and economy ignores men's fundamental needs, desires, and thus rights as humans. Therefore, while the activists recognize male domination to be oppressive to women, they also see individual men embodied in the structure of domination to be victims of human rights violations.

Conclusion

Despite the characteristics that point to disorganization rather than unity, the Japanese gender justice movement showed remarkably unified views of gender relations in Japan. The presumed women's tie to the private sphere as mothers and wives and men's to the public sphere as breadwinners encourage men and women to stay within their respective spheres and restrict their actions when attempting to transgress the bifurcation. Gender activists believe in the concepts of women's human rights and gender as a set of structural constraints not only because, from the perspective of international politics, these concepts render their discursive strategies effective, but also because of their lived experiences of the gender injustices that have persisted throughout Japan's history of nation-state building. Even though this paper's focus on personal history only shows us one piece of the puzzle, understanding personal history situated in the larger historical context is a productive way to understanding how the women became activists and how they make sense of their activism. It is an attempt to show that women are products of larger processes and that we can more fully understand global processes including the transnational feminist efforts by focusing on local struggles.

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