

Men's Involvement in Gender Equality Movements in Japan

By Hiroko Hashimoto

Lowest among the developed countries, Japan was ranked 41st by the United Nations Development Programme in terms of the Gender Empowerment Measure in the year 2000. There are three main factors behind such an unfavourable evaluation.

One, Japanese women have little participation in political activities. The ratio of females in Parliament is only 7.5 percent (104th in the world, according to a survey conducted by the Inter Parliamentary Union).

Two, female managers are few. The ratio of female managers in Japan is less than 10 percent, the lowest among the developed countries and lower than in many developing countries including the Philippines.

And three, women earn much less than men. On the average, their income is only around 52 percent of the income of Japanese men.

In 1999, the Japanese government promulgated a Basic Law for Gender Equal Society. Declaring it a policy to promote equal participation of women and men in family matters as well as in society, the law directs the government at all levels to take positive actions for the promotion of gender equality.

Some local governments have already enacted their own legislation. In fact, even before the Prime Minister announced his plan to formulate the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society at the Parliament, Saitama prefecture had

already organised a research group to draw up such an ordinance. The result is a more detailed ordinance that includes law enforcement and provides for the establishment of a grievance committee to assist victims of violence and other violations of women's human rights. In Tokyo, on the other hand, the local government can request private companies to report on the status of their implementation of gender equality.

Furthermore, an alliance of women parliamentarians from various parties plans to submit a draft law to the current Parliament for the prevention of domestic violence.

Gender equality in Japan is still far behind the situation in other Asian countries. One aspect is that most Japanese men have not been involved in this issue, and this is what the present paper focuses on.

Men's Involvement in Gender Equality as Public Work

In January 2001, the national machinery for the advancement of women was upgraded to the status of Bureau, under the Cabinet Office, from being an Office under the Prime Minister. Officers of the Gender Equality Bureau consist of 22 women and 17 men. Among the managers, four are women and five are men. Although the top manager (the Director General) is a woman and 56 percent of all staff members are women, most of the managers are men. Even this ratio is special, since the percentage of female government officials at managerial level in Japan in 2000 is only 1.1 percent.

I conducted a study on the status of gender focal points and gender mainstreaming in all 47 prefectures and the 12 specially designated cities in Japan in 1997.

According to the results of the study, there were 55 female officers and 45 male officers at the gender focal points/women's office of the 47 prefectures. At managerial level, more women were found (58 versus 42 male managers). Since the percentage of women among all local government managers is only 3.4 percent as of 2000, this figure shows that mostly female officers are working to promote gender equality. On the other hand, quite a number of male officers are also employed in this job, although many women NGOs frequently complain that these men hardly show their passion for promoting gender equality.

Public servants in Japan usually transfer from one job to another every two or three years. For both female and male civil servants, gender focal points/women's offices are only one of these assignments. They acquire their expertise on gender issues through their work, regardless of their sex.

Many elective officials—mayors, governors and city councillors—have supported gender equality, partly to demonstrate their concern for female voters.

Attitudes Towards Feminism and/or Gender Equality

There has been a gradual decrease in the stereotyped idea that “men work outside and women stay at home.” According to a national opinion poll conducted in 1997 on attitudes towards gender equality, 65 percent of the male respondents and 52 percent of the females agreed with this idea. The attitude is more prevalent in rural rather than urban areas.

A similar opinion poll conducted in 2000 focused on male attitudes towards gender equality. More women (83 percent) and men (77 percent) agreed that men should take a leave from their jobs to take care of family members who are sick. But child-care leaves for men were supported by only 70 percent of the women and 67 percent of the men. All generations of both men and women agreed to men's taking leave in case of illness in the family. The older people, however, were less receptive to child-care leave for men than the younger women. Regarding domestic chores, 83 percent of female and 71 percent of male respondents believed that men should share in the housework. The older they were, the less women supported that idea, while among the men no such age pattern is distinct.

It may be concluded that most Japanese, whether women or men, accept stereotyped sex roles. However, younger women are the least likely to agree.

Sharing Domestic Chores

Article 6 of the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society states that men and women should equally share domestic chores including child rearing and caring for sick family members.

However, husbands spend an average time of 20 minutes per day on housework, whether their wives are employed outside the home or not. Husbands in their 40s work the least, while husbands in their 20s perform chores a bit longer. It may be concluded that Japanese men are not undertaking domestic chores like their counterparts in other countries.

Therefore, many Japanese women have to quit their jobs when they marry or give birth to their first child. Japan is one of the very few countries where the labour activity rate of



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Japanese men spend an average of 20 minutes a day on housework and childcare. Gender advocates believe they could and should do more than that.

women drops sharply in their late 30s to early 40s. Another developed country where this phenomenon has been observed is the Republic of Korea.

Persistence of Patriarchy in the Rural Areas

Niigata prefecture (whose main product is expensive rice) is richer than other prefectures whose economies are also mostly agricultural. Yet 35 percent of women in Niigata's farming families have no bank account in their own names, nor do they possess their own properties.

The Japanese government has promoted the "family management agreement" scheme, to increase the economic independence of rural women. Once families make the agreement, its women members could obtain a minimum salary for their farming work. However, only 480 out of a total 123,160 farming families in Niigata prefecture have entered into such an agreement.

The truth is, many conservative politicians of the ruling party of Japan do not appreciate the "family management agreement" scheme. They strongly opposed its inclusion in the Basic Plan for Gender Equality which was discussed and approved by the Cabinet at a meeting in December 2000. Because of their opposition, the Ministry of Agriculture had to drop the agreement from the Basic Plan. The conservative politicians fear that such a scheme could destroy the traditional family system in Japan.

However, rural families today already find it extremely difficult to pass their occupation and properties on to the next generation, as their sons can hardly find Japanese women willing to marry them. It is no longer acceptable for most women to work long hours on the farm, without any economic independence and having to obey and take care of their parents-in-law.

I myself grew up in a rural area in Japan. My late father became a farmer as he had to leave the Imperial Navy after World War II. My mother repeatedly told me that I should get a good education so that I would not need to marry a farmer. At the age of 16, I left my family to study at a prestigious high school in the city. Since then, I have returned to the village only for short visits.

Inevitably, some of those rural men who remain unmarried until their 40s and 50s obtain brides in their 20s from other Asian countries such as China and the Philippines by paying 3-4 million yen (US\$25,000-33,000) to the women's families.

Re-emergence of Right-wing Fundamentalism

Parliamentarians belonging to the ruling party of Japan supported the passage of the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society, convinced by the party leaders' argument that the law would ensure the necessary supply of qualified personnel in the labour force. It is estimated that Japan will face a serious labour shortage in the 21st century due to the long decline in the country's fertility rate, which has been decreasing in the last 50 years. (As of September 2000, the rate had gone down to 1.33.) In order to meet this problem, Japanese society must build support systems for working women, and men have to share domestic chores. These issues are provided for in the Basic Law for Gender Equality Society. Therefore, Parliament passed this law not to expand the enjoyment of women's human rights but to utilise the labour of women towards the revitalisation of the Japanese economy.

Meanwhile, several right-wing magazines and journals have attacked the Basic Law by warning that it could destroy the country's family system. They also oppose feminism which

they say is similar to Marxism, an ideology which was not able to survive. Those right-wing "experts" include many men and some women of various ages.

Towards a Gender Equal Society

We can foresee a slightly bright future among the younger generation. Most young women and some young men are gender sensitive. (A Men's Liberation Group has already been organised.) Non-traditional men who want to live freely also find it difficult to survive in Japanese society. The total number of suicide victims in recent years has exceeded the total number of victims of traffic accidents in Japan. In particular, the suicide of men in their 40s has increased drastically. Some kill themselves in order to utilise the money from their life insurance for the family they left behind, and/or the company they owned. These tragic incidents are directly related to the oppressiveness of traditional sex roles in Japan.

It is important for Japanese women to change our society in close collaboration with gender sensitive men such as those in the Men's Liberation Group. We could also start to change our society from local areas. More and more women are entering the political arena in the various localities since the late 1980s, and this is a good sign. ☺

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