'Gender' Problems in Japanese Politics: A Dispute over a Socio-Cultural Change towards Increasing Equality

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Abstract

'Gender (jenda)' is a troublesome loanword in Japan. While this term has been prevalent in feminist and scholarly circles, it has evoked confusion in the government and stimulated a backlash from the ultra-conservatives against gender equality. Japanese reactionaries have attacked the concept of gender because of their anxiety about cultural destruction – I thus call them the 'old guard'. Focusing on a dispute over the term 'gender' between feminists and the old guard, this paper examines the changes in the term's usage and meanings in the Japanese political context. I first shed light on Japan's reaction to the newly arrived term 'gender', outlining different attitudes towards gender between the feminist/scholarly circles and the government. Secondly, I discuss the old guard's condemnation of the concept of gender, in which they distort its significance in order to diminish its positive impact on society. I then scrutinize the old guard's reasons behind their attack on the concept of gender. My findings reveal that the old guard, whose political cause is to protect traditional Japanese culture, asserts that gender equality damages this culture. Moreover, I refute their emphasis on Japan's uniqueness, demonstrating that Japanese women's traditional virtues under the patriarchal family system are not peculiar to Japan. To gauge how the concept of gender has been interpreted politically, I highlight legislative debates about the term 'gender'. In doing so, I elucidate the extent to which the concept of gender has infiltrated Japanese society through the dispute.

1. Introduction

The current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced the term 'womenomics' ('*uime-nomikusu*' in Japanese) into the vocabulary of Japanese politics in 2013. He has been

employing this term to encourage Japanese women to participate in the labour market and to promote the more able working women to higher positions, thereby allowing them to contribute to the country's economic growth.[1] 'Womenomics' is the latest term in a line of lexical items that have shaped the socio-cultural and political perspectives of the concept of gender in Japan since the 1980s, when the term 'gender' came to Japan.

The most influential Japanese language dictionary, *kojien*, recorded 'gender (*jenda*)' as a Japanese loanword in its fourth edition in 1991. Western words that have been adopted by the Japanese language are defined as loanwords, which are transcribed into katakana.[2] Since the 1950s, the number of English-origin loanwords has increased remarkably (Okamoto, 2004: 54). In the 1990s, the government, concerned about the overflow of loanwords, proposed a policy of paraphrasing loanwords into understandable Japanese words. Despite this policy, the Japanese public has favoured loanwords over their paraphrased Japanese equivalents (Okamoto, 2004: 55). 'Gender (*jenda*)' is one of such loanwords of English origin, and among the large number of loanwords, no word has been as controversial as 'gender' because it holds the potential for socio-cultural change. The term was first welcomed by feminists and other egalitarians who wish to transform Japan into a more equal and diverse society, which has threatened the *raison d'être* of those who want to retain the Japanese socio-cultural status quo, or, even worse, to revert women's status back to that of pre-war Japan. This term has become a target of the backlash from Japanese reactionaries.

Japanese feminists, inspired by Susan Faludi's (1991) book on the backlash against American women, have named the newly emerged Japanese attack on the term 'gender' as a 'backlash' or '*bakkurasshu*' in Japanese (Mitsui and Asakura, 2012). The backlash in Japan began in the early 2000s when the concept of gender, which was becoming increasingly prevalent in society, spread into government policies. During the following decade, Japanese reactionaries persistently attempted to impede government's use of the term 'gender' and prevent feminists from calling for gender equality. They reacted to the term 'gender' out of fear that the concept of gender would spur women onto the route of surpassing the progress of men (Gelb, 2008). Notwithstanding such emotional motives, they insisted that their reaction was caused by their anxiety about cultural destruction. The Japanese reactionaries are comprised of ultra-conservative people who consider traditional Japanese culture to be superior to any other, and whose mission is to protect it from other cultures' influence, specifically that of the West.[3] The group is unwilling to accept Western-style democratic progress in society; for this reason, I hereafter refer to them as the 'old guard'.

Three English articles have dealt with this kind of issue. Joyce Gelb (2008), Tomomi Yamaguchi (2014), and Akiko Shimizu (2007) each discuss the backlash against women's movements, feminism, and sexual minorities, respectively, in the 2000s in Japan. Among

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[1] Womenomics has set a goal to increase the proportion of working women from the ages of 25 to 44 to 73% and that of women in leadership posts to approximately 30% by 2020.

[2] Chinese origin words are not defined as loanwords (Okamoto, 2004: 51).

[3] Most of them belong to a nationalist association called *Nippon Kaigi* (Japan Conference) that was organized in 1997 (available at: www.nipponkaigi.org/about).

these three authors, Yamaguchi narrates 'a brief history of post-1990s feminism in Japan' by examining the phrase 'gender free' (*sic*) in terms of the debates between feminists and 'antifeminist conservatives' (Yamaguchi, 2014: 542). In this paper, I will likewise focus on a dispute over the term 'gender' between feminists and the old guard. Unlike Yamaguchi, whose aim is to illuminate the difficulties of contemporary Japanese feminism, my research is based on my interest in the dispute *per se*, rather than in Japanese feminism or the backlash. In other words, my purpose is to explore the interaction between the dispute and socio-cultural changes.

A dispute, as Quentin Skinner (1988) suggests, is not merely a linguistic matter; rather, it has the potential to cause substantive social change. Skinner (1988: 128) calls such dynamism of verbal disputes 'speech–act potential'. William Connolly (1993: 6) also notes that 'conceptual contests are central to politics' and that 'they provide the space for political interaction'. In this way, politics is a process of contestation involving instability and change. Whenever we witness a change in politics, we recognize that a concept surrounding this change has also been altered. Political change mostly means conceptual change, and vice versa (Farr, 1989: 24–5). This paper will investigate how the term 'gender' has been accepted and rejected in Japan by examining the changes in its usage and meanings in a Japanese political context. In doing so, I will elucidate the extent to which the concept of gender has infiltrated Japanese society through this dispute. In conclusion, I attempt to argue that Japanese society has taken a small step towards gender equality.

2. The newly arrived term of 'gender' and Japanese society

Although the English word 'gender' is paraphrased in Japanese as '*shakaiteki seisa*' (social differences between the sexes), the original English word, pronounced as '*jenda*', is more commonly used among the Japanese. The scholarly usage of the original English word spread across Japanese scholarly circles and was then circulated throughout the wider society via the media. The first appearance of the term 'gender' in Japan was in a book translated from English into Japanese, including a discussion about gender equality/inequality in 1980.[4] In the early 1980s, Ivan Illich's (1982) work on gender was introduced in a Japanese scholarly circle (Yamamoto, 1983; Tamanoi, 1984). His concept of gender, however, is different from that of feminists because of his praise for differentiated gendered roles between the sexes. It was soon replaced by Western feminists' conceptualization of the term. In the feminist usage, for example, 'gender', differentiated from 'sex', is defined as socio-culturally constructed status and roles of both sexes and it pursues the goal of realizing that women and men possess not only equal rights but they also share power and responsibility equally in public and private spheres.

In 1984, four original Japanese articles that introduced the term 'gender' according to Western feminist perspectives were published.[5] By the end of the 1980s, 45 articles

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[4] The book was written by James Grant with the original title of *The State of the World's Children* and translated by the Japan Committee for UNICEF, titled *Sekai Kodomo Hakusho* (The White Paper on Children Worldwide).

[5] Sourced from Japan's Scholarly and Academic Information Navigator (CiNii). See CiNii's books search, available at: //ci.nii.ac.jp/books/search.

relating to gender had been published. In 1989, six sociologists published the first original Japanese book on gender (Ehara *et al.*, 1989). Among Japanese scholarly societies, the Japan Sociological Society (JSS) was the most active in tackling gender issues. For three years, beginning in 1986, the JSS took up gender as the main topic of its annual meetings (Meguro, 1990: 13). In the mid-1990s, gender studies were disseminated into other academic fields such as history, literature, economics, international relations, psychology, and health sciences.[6]

The use of the term 'gender' spread throughout Japanese higher education. Many women's study courses established in colleges in the 1980s changed their titles to 'gender studies' in the mid-1990s (Ida, 2006: 207). In 1996, Ochanomizu University, a leading state women's college, changed the name of its research institute from the Centre for Women's Cultural Studies to the Centre for Gender Studies in order to extend its research perspectives from limited women's issues to broader issues of relationships between the sexes. However, the university board hesitated before using the word 'gender' in the name of an academic facility because it was not Japanese, nor was it authorized as a concept despite the fact that, as mentioned, it was already established as a Japanese loanword (Ritani, 1998: 3–4). The term also appeared in the news about the United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women.

The UN Fourth World Conference on Women held on 4–15 September 1995 in Beijing accelerated media attention with regard to gender. According to the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper archives,[7] the first article on gender appeared on 4 October 1984. The article described the 'gender gap' in the US presidential election. Although the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper carried only 49 articles referring to gender before 1994, its gender-related articles increased to 479 between 1995 and 1999. Of the 479 articles, 143 were related to the Beijing conference, including reports on women's action groups that were preparing to participate in the conference. These articles contributed to increasing circulation of the word 'gender' to more feminist circles: for examples, they described that while some feminist action groups held a meeting to discuss the Beijing conference, others invited feminist scholars to study the concept of gender.

To most of the Japanese individuals outside feminist and scholarly circles, 'gender' remained an unfamiliar loanword. National polls on public recognition of the word showed that a large gap existed between feminist/scholarly enthusiasm and public hesitation in the adoption of the word. A nationwide survey conducted by the Cabinet Office in July 1995 showed that only 2.2% of respondents had heard or seen the word 'gender (*jenda*)'.[8]

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[6] Ibid.

[7] The news archive can be accessed by the fee-charging online database called *kikuzo* II. Available at https://vpn.hosei.ac.jp/+CSCO+00756767633A2F2F716E676E6F6F66722E6E666E6E75762E70627A++/library2/main/-CSCO-3o–top.php.

[8] The questionnaires were distributed to 5,000 people, aged 20 and over and randomly selected nationwide; 3,459 (69.2%) responded to the questionnaires, available at //www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h07/H7-07-07-05.html.

The Japanese government was itself confused about the treatment of 'gender'. At the Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi on 15–26 July 1985, gender appeared as a key concept to improving the status of women. The conference action plan, entitled 'Forward-Looking Strategies', recommended that member states revise previous policies for women in order to eliminate discrimination, bias, and stereotypes based on gender. As a means of following the Nairobi strategy proposals, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government of Japan drafted the 'New National Action Plan Toward 2000' in May 1987, (Japan Cabinet Office, 2009: 2) but made no mention of the word 'gender (*jenda*)' in this plan. Moreover, the LDP avoided using the Japanese word for 'equality (*byodo*)', and instead employed the phrase 'co-participation (*kyodo sanka*)'. The phrase 'co-participation' was changed to 'cooperative decision-making (*kyodo sankaku*)' in May 1993 to emphasize that women were not merely passive participants but active players engaged in decision-making in all levels of the public sphere. Since then, the government has expressed gender equality (*jenda byodo*) by the phrase 'cooperative decision-making between the sexes (*danjo kyodo sankaku*)' (Eto, 2012: 27–8).

The Japanese government employs loanwords in laws and regulations when it judges that these words are established in the Japanese language as everyday words.[9] This explains why the LDP's refusal to adopt the term 'gender' in its official documents is unsurprising. Unlike 'gender', the term 'equality' has long been familiar to Japanese society, as its Japanese translation, '*byodo*', is prevalent in society. The most important usage of this word is found in Article 14 of the Constitution, proclaimed in November 1946, which prescribes that all Japanese 'are equal under the law'. Nonetheless, the LDP refused to use language that explicitly referred to women's equality with men in the titles of public documents and agency names. This is exemplified by the LDP government's drafting of a bill to redress the unequal treatment of women in the labour market according to Japan's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In this bill, the LDP eschewed the phrase 'equal opportunities (*kikai byodo*)', instead naming it the 'Law for Proportional Opportunities between the Sexes in Employment (*danjo koyo kikai kinto ho*)' (Eto, 2012: 28).

Why was the LDP government reluctant to use the term 'equality (*byodo*)'? The LDP has been the most powerful conservative party in Japan. It was founded by the merger between two conservative parties – the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party – in 1955, aiming to fight against socialism, communism, and fascism, as well as to establish an autonomous nation that respects traditional Japanese culture.[10] Although its anti-socialist aspect has faded since the end of the Cold War, the LDP continues to maintain that socialist-oriented public policies damage public self-reliance. According to the LDP's interpretation, equality is associated with socialism rather than democracy. The party is composed of various ideological factions, roughly divided into right, centre, and liberal. Members of the right-leaning faction – or 'ultra-conservatives' as I call them

[9] Sourced from *Sangiin Hoseikyoku* (Upper House Legislation Bureau), available at: //houseiky-oku.sangiin.go.jp/column/column004.htm.
[10] See the LDP's Platform renewed on 24 January 2010, available at: //www.jimin.jp/aboutus/declaration/.

– take a stand on not only anti-socialism but also advocacy for traditional Japanese culture. In their beliefs, traditional Japanese culture includes women's virtue of serving their families with devotion. Naturally, this traditional viewpoint is at odds with the idea of gender equality. Such anti-socialist legacy and traditional culturalism might have contributed to the LDP's reluctance to readily admit equality between the sexes.

However, two factors urged the LDP to enact the law to eliminate sexual discrimination. One was international pressure. As mentioned above, the law was triggered by the ratification of CEDAW, whereby the government had to follow the international rule. Another factor was the neo-liberal stream of economics that influenced Japanese business executives and economists in the 1980s (Eto, 2012: 28). Neo-liberalism is inconsistent with the traditional gender division of labour: it encourages women to participate in a competitive labour market insofar as they assimilate into a male-defined working style; however, it hardly favours state regulations to protect women's reproductive health. While business groups supported women's participation in the labour market, they did not agree with state regulations to facilitate women's equality with men in the labour market. Business groups, as major backers of the LDP, had a strong influence on LDP policies. Their support for women's labour-market participation affected the LDP's enactment of the law, whereas their disagreement with state regulations was convenient for the party. The LDP government thus avoided the term 'equality' because of the neo-liberal influence and the party's ideological stance. It then replaced the phrase 'equality' with 'cooperative decision-making' in the New National Action Plan, transforming equality into an entirely different concept. The concept of cooperative decision-making did not seek to rectify unequal relations between women and men in the private sphere, as it forced women who desired an active life outside of the home to adopt men's lifestyles and customs (Eto, 2012: 28).

3. Conceptual change of 'gender' in the Japanese political context

In the general election of August 1993, the LDP lost power, resulting in the organization of a coalition government by the eight opposition parties. This coalition government was dissolved 11 months later, after which the LDP returned to power by forming a three-party coalition government with the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) and the New Party *Sakigake* (Party Harbinger) in June 1994. The three ruling parties nominated SDPJ leader, Tomiichi Murayama, as prime minister. Under his leadership, the conceptualization of gender in Japan progressed slightly. Prime Minister Murayama asked the advisory council to implement cooperative decision-making between the sexes to draft an all-encompassing vision of how women and men should equally share benefits and responsibilities in the twenty-first century. He nominated feminist economist, Mari Osawa, as its core member. In the discussion, Osawa proposed a new conception of 'gender-free (*jenda-furi*)' to express a way of liberating women and men from gender stereotypes. The phrase 'gender-free' became the impetus for an attack on gender equality (Osawa, 2000).

Japanese feminist ideas of 'gender-free'

The phrase 'gender-free' emerged in Japanese feminist circles in mid-1995. Inspired by Barbara Huston's (1985) article on gender and public education, psychologist Kazuko Fukaya (1995) first introduced the idea of 'gender-free', which connoted behaviours liberated from, and unrelated to, differences between the sexes. However, Fukaya misunderstood Huston's viewpoint on gender-sensitive education and confused 'gender-free' with 'gender-sensitive' (Sasaki, 2007). Huston herself, according to Yamaguchi (2012: 36), who conducted an interview with her, thought that gender sensitivity was indispensable in the realization of gender equality, but that 'gender-free' was an inappropriate approach to gender equality in education. Some feminist scholars refused to recognize this phrase as feminist terminology because of its Japanese-style English (e.g. Ueno, 2011: 302–3). Nonetheless, this phrase was established as critical in terms of calling for a gender equality policy and quickly became widespread throughout feminist circles. The following reasons explain such immediate feminist acceptance of the phrase: it expresses both gender problems and solutions simply and clearly, and it is a convenient term for communication among feminists in different fields. Moreover, the phrase spread to the wider society because the English word 'free,' pronounced as '*furee*', is a familiar loanword to most Japanese people.

Employing Osawa's proposal, the advisory council made up its final report, titled Vision for Cooperative Decision-Making between the Sexes: Creating New Values in the Twenty-First Century. The report still retained the odd phrase that the LDP had coined but it defined 'cooperative decision-making between the sexes' as 'liberation from socio-culturally constructed sexual differences (gender or *jenda*) so that people can behave spontaneously based on their primary personalities'. [11] The report was the first government document that not only included the term 'gender (*jenda*)', but also suggested the ideal of gender equality (Osawa, 2000: 2–12; Ueno *et al*, 2001: 10).

Murayama stepped down as prime minister and was replaced by the LDP President, Ryutaro Hashimoto, in January 1996. After this replacement, the LDP, the SDPJ, and the New Party *Sakigake* agreed to enact a law to develop a cooperative decision-making society between the sexes based on the council's final report as well as the platform for action resolved by the UN Fourth Conference on Women. The LDP, in response to the agreement, proposed a bill, the Basic Law for Cooperative Decision-Making in Society between the Sexes (hereafter, the Basic Law),[12] to the Diet (the national parliament in Japan). The bill was passed on 15 June 1999. The Basic Law includes neither the terms 'equality (*byodo*)' nor 'gender (*jenda*)'. However, Osawa (2000: 78–100) maintained that the law reflected the essence of the council's final report because it was framed by gender perspectives and its goal was to accomplish gender equality. Many feminist scholars shared her perception (Ida, 2006: 175). Chizuko Ueno *et al.* (2001: 20) evaluated the law

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[11] Sourced from the Cabinet Office, available at: //www.gender.go.jp/danjyo_kihon/index.html.

[12] The Basic Law for Cooperative Decision-Making in Society between the Sexes is available at http://www.gender.go.jp/about_danjo/law/kihon/9906kihonhou.html#anc_top.

positively, explaining that Japanese feminists were able to achieve substantive progress in gender equality through abandoning the need for straightforward language. In other words, for feminists, other egalitarians and social reformists, the Basic Law became a potential base for advancement in gender equality and social justice.

The Basic Law prescribes that national and local governments must make action plans to realize what the law prescribes as practical policy programmes. Following the national action plan issued in December 2000, local governments formed their own action plans to implement the law in their regions. In their planning, local governments set up advisory councils to discuss their drafts, which were modelled after the Advisory Council for Cooperative Decision-Making between the Sexes that was established in the national government, and often invited feminist researchers and activists to these councils (Yamashita *et al.*, 2001). These feminists adopted 'gender-free' as a key concept in local plans (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2004). Some local plans in urban areas were more radically oriented in seeking changes in social customs than the national plan.

The old guard's reaction against 'gender-free'

The rapid diffusion of the concept of 'gender-free' and the possibility that it even brought social reform to small towns and villages stimulated the old guard to react against gender equality. When the Basic Law was enacted, the old guard might have underestimated its impact on society, as they expected it to be merely nominal without any substantive effect (Ueno *et al.*, 2001: 20). In fact, the law was passed in the Diet with one assent. The old guard had obviously paid no attention to the enactment of the Basic Law (Yamaguchi, 2012: 55). Despite the old guard's expectations, more than 3,200 local governments[13] were engaged in making their action plans and many were active in adopting the idea of 'gender-free'.

Progressive local plans became the targets of the old guard's attack. In order to be authorized as active plans that would take effect, the Basic Law requires that local government plans be passed through relevant local assemblies. When drafts were discussed in the assemblies, the old guard assembly members opposed the inclusion of the phrase 'gender-free', condemning it for being, in their view, a 'dangerous' feature in the local plans (Hayano, 2002: 12). These assembly members insisted on deleting the phrase 'gender-free' and its relevant provisions. They specifically problematized provisions that were aimed at a gender-equal society in which women themselves could decide their reproductive rights and life courses, and all people could have the space to exercise their abilities regardless of gender differences. If governors or mayors denied their requirements, the old guard assembly members would propose alternative plans to eliminate the words 'gender-free' and their unfavourable provisions. They explained that the reason behind their opposition to 'gender-free', an idea put forward by local government administrations, was its inconsistency with individual freedoms due to its intervention with the private sphere (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2003). The reaction of the local

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[13] The Japanese local governments consist of 47 prefectures and a large number of municipalities. The number of municipalities has decreased to 1,727 since 2005 due to a merger policy.

politicians of the old guard against local plans became widespread in the many regions in which local governments had drafted plans that included the concept and words of 'gender-free'. These local governments were attacked not only by their old guard assembly members but also by grass-roots activists outside the assembly. The old guard activists put pressure on local governments to eliminate the phrase by means of letters, telephone calls, and direct visits to local government offices (Yamaguchi, 2012: 55).

The old guard combined their attack on 'gender-free' with their hostility towards publicly funded sex education. In 1992, the Ministry of Education released guidelines for sex education to be a part of mandatory programmes, and distributed a booklet on these guidelines to primary schools, proposing that teachers use the booklet as a sub-textbook in health and science classes. Schoolteachers and education experts welcomed the Ministry of Education's new policy, believing that it was essential for primary school pupils to learn accurate information about sex to develop their sexual self-determination. The old guard, in contrast, perceived sex education as risky based on their prejudiced understanding that it would teach children how to engage in sexual intercourse and use condoms. They alerted society to the risks of sex education, which, they maintained, encouraged innocent children to have immoral sex (Asai, 2006: 3–4).

The old guard's identification of sex education with 'gender-free' is derived from their belief that the traditional Japanese family system, which was historically and culturally constructed, is the anchor of Japanese culture (Watanabe *et al.*, 2000; Nishio and Yagi, 2005; Yamatani, 2010). In their opinion, family members bond through strong kinship, patriarchal hierarchy, and a traditional gender division of labour: a senior male member holds the power that rules the family, while female members devote themselves to caring for other members as wives, mothers and daughters or daughters-in-law (Nishio and Yagi, 2005). Above all, they praise motherhood as the highest virtue of Japanese women (Hayashi, 1998; Yamatani, 2010). They insist that both the idea of 'gender-free' and sex education deny the traditional family system and motherhood by liberating women socially and sexually (Watanabe *et al.*, 2000; Nishio and Yagi, 2005; Yamatani, 2010). According to the old guard, women who enjoy sexual activities and determine their own reproductive rights go against normative roles, thereby becoming factors in the ultimate destruction of traditional Japanese culture (Nishio and Yagi, 2005: 62).

It is no wonder then that both sex education and the idea of 'gender-free' threatened the sensibilities of the old guard. The old guard feared that schoolteachers would teach their pupils the concept of gender. Since compulsory education was the basis for creating 'Japaneseness' or the essence of being Japanese, in their view gender education would fragment and weaken Japanese culture. As with sex education, the old guard distorted the meaning of 'gender-free', choosing to interpret it as a dangerous idea that sought to arbitrarily abolish the biological differences between women and men (Nishio and Yagi, 2005: 62). For example, they characterized 'gender-free' as an idea that denied the social norms of masculinity and femininity, and damaged the common Japanese virtue of male toughness and female modesty. They exaggerated the efficacy of the local plans that included the phrase 'gender-free' in order to portray it negatively, arguing that if

such plans were implemented, girls would be forced to share the same dressing room with male teachers and boys (Tobari and Fujita, 2007: 265–7).

The old guard members are divided into three groups: politicians, activists, and scholars/journalists. These groups have played different roles in their movement against gender equality. Politicians have attempted to block the phrase and the idea of 'gender-free' in policymaking. In March 2005, for example, the LDP's old guard formed a project team to investigate the actual conditions of what they considered to be excessive sex education and 'gender-free' teaching.[14] The project team members conducted their own survey on the consequences of both 'excessive' sex and 'gender-free' education in schooling between 10 May and 6 June 2005. Employing the results of this survey, the project team put forth a proposal to eliminate not only the phrase 'gender-free', but also the word 'gender' from the upcoming second national plan.

Activists have also been involved with the goal of forcing local governments to withdraw plans that would develop gender equality: they staged aggressive demonstrations against feminists who were speaking out about the 'gender-free' concept or fighting for gender equality. They tried to disturb public lectures by feminists and compelled public libraries to remove feminist publications on gender. Owing to the activists' strong pressure on lecture organizers and librarians, feminists were driven to cancel lectures, and their publications were removed from public libraries (Ueno, 2011). The most serious case was the attack on Mariko Mitsui, a feminist activist, who was dismissed as director of the Women's Centre at Toyonaka City in Osaka Prefecture. Since starting her job in 2000, Mitsui had dedicated herself to disseminating the notion of gender equality to Toyonaka residents. Despite her dedication, her reappointment was rejected by the Toyonaka City government in March 2004 due to the pressure of the old guard's activists. When Mitsui refused the city government's demand for her resignation, her public activities were disturbed by the activists' demonstrations near her building that called for her resignation; as a result, she was eventually compelled to leave her post. She sued the city government for unjust dismissal in December 2004. Mitsui's suit became a symbol of feminist resistance against the old guard. Mitsui finally won her suit at the Supreme Court of Japan in January 2011 (Mitsui and Asakura, 2012).

Logic of the old guard's attack on the concept of gender

The old guard scholars and journalists helped to spread distorted interpretations of gender in the wider society through publications and media appearances. They concentrated specifically on theorizing the old guard's arguments against feminism and gender equality, in which feminism is identified with communism, and, as a result, gender equality is regarded as a communist idea. The scholars insisted that the Basic Law was formed based on a Marxist ideology, which is incompatible with traditional

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[14] The team was named *kagekina seikyoiku /jenda furi kyoiku jittai chosa* (an actual condition survey on excessive sexual/gender-free education), available at: //www.ne.jp/asahi/m/net/GenderEqualityAT_jiminBashing.html.

Japanese values and culture (Nishio and Yagi, 2005: 62). However, these remarks on feminism were made without a correct understanding of the ideal. The scholars' main purpose of combining feminism with Marxism was to label both as being rooted in the same dangerous ideology, thereby denying Japan's post-war democratic regime. They disagreed with the judgments in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, in which 28 Japanese military and political leaders were convicted of major war crimes – a conspiracy to undertake and wage war – and several thousand soldiers were charged with conventional war crimes. They condemned the tribunal as a 'winner's justice' demanding that the verdicts be invalidated and retried (Fujioka, 1997). The old guard also objected to the current Japanese Constitution because they maintained that the Constitution was enacted by the General Headquarters of Allied Forces, not by the Japanese people (Nishio and Hasegawa, 2000: 99–158), and that its ideals were not only derived from a 'social contract' model, which is incompatible with traditional 'Japaneseness', but also sought a socio-cultural revolution (Yagi, 2013). Meanwhile, as they understood that Japan owed its successful economic growth to its alliance with the United States and Western Europe, they did not express their enmity explicitly and instead directed it exclusively towards Marxism and Communism.

Why does the old guard regard Marxism as the enemy? There are two possible reasons. First, in their thinking, Marxism erodes the Japanese ethos of mutual aid, in which one cares about others as one cares for oneself and is often willing to sacrifice oneself for others and society (Watanabe *et al.*, 2000). To them, the human liberation that Marxists envision is a selfish idea, as one seeks to put one's own interests above those of others or society. They fear that a Marxist influence would dissolve strong bonds among the family, community, and society. Second, the old guard uses Marxism to impress their objectives in a positive way on the general public. The old guard believes that many Japanese hate or fear Communism. Thus, by inflaming the threat of Communism, they induce more people to support their cause. More importantly, the old guard opposes not only Marxism but also Western socio-political ideals, such as liberty, equality, human rights, and democracy, as they believe that these ideals are inconsistent with traditional Japanese ethos. The old guard's true enemy is Western values, which they believe will demolish traditional Japanese culture. In short, the old guard displays their xenophobia or exclusionism through hostility towards Marxism.

As noted above, the most serious threat that feminism poses to the old guard is the destruction of the Japanese family structure. The old guard scholars state that feminism legitimizes women's selfishness in which wives and mothers abandon their husbands, children, and other relatives in order to liberate themselves (Watanabe *et al.*, 2000). In their theory, the traditional Japanese family system is centred on Japanese culture. Therefore, it is unacceptable that women prefer the development of their careers or self-realization over caring for their family and relatives. However, it is in fact questionable whether the family system is an actual part of the long-standing Japanese culture.

The traditional family system of Japan, or '*ie-seido*', was established by the Meiji Civil Code in 1898. Japan opened the country to the world as a result of the Meiji

Restoration in 1868. Through the adoption of a Western socio-political system, the Meiji government spurred Japan's modernization. Through this process, the government invited Western scholars to provide instruction and advice in relevant fields. One of these scholars was a French jurist, Gustave Boissonade, who assisted the Meiji government in drafting the Meiji Civil Code which is composed of two parts – property and family law, and the infusion of progressive Western modern themes of civil liberty and equality (Yano, 1997: 309–59). However, Japanese jurists criticized Boissonade's draft for being too progressive, and, as a result, the Meiji Civil Code was modified based on the Prussian legal system, which was perceived as more suitable to Meiji imperial nation-building than Boissonade's liberal ideals (Miyakawa, 1965). In parallel with the Prussian influence, family law in the Meiji Civil Code was modelled on women's status in the samurai or warrior class in the Edo period, which was the Japanese feudal age between 1603 and 1868, before the Meiji modernization (Yamanaka, 1988). In the Edo period, people were divided into four classes – samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants – and the samurai class ruled the other three classes. Meiji government officials had previously belonged to the samurai class and thus it was natural for the officials to adopt the model that was most familiar to them.

Family law, which prescribed the rules of matrimonial relations, as well as parent–child relations, conceptualized the traditional family system of Japan through two principles. The first was that the senior male family member ruled the other members of the family and that his ruling power passed to his first legitimate son. The second was female subjection to male power in the following ways: wives had no legal competence; only a wife's adultery (i.e. not the husband's) was criminalized; child custody was predominantly attached to fathers; and women charged with parricide were more severely punished than their male counterparts. Contrary to the old guard's understanding, such patriarchal traditions were not unique to Japan and were common in the West, as demonstrated by the first-wave Western feminist movements that struggled for women's rights in marriage. In England, for example, the Coverture had prescribed the legal status of married women by which wives did not enjoy legal rights for several centuries until the mid-nineteenth century – until then, husband and wife were regarded legally as one person. There, a wife was dependent on her husband, and he represented her legal status. In Japan, the first principle – the rule of the senior male member and male succession to a house established in the mid-twelfth century – had pervaded from the upper classes to the lower classes in the Edo period. However, the second principle – women's subordination to men – had not always been the case before Meiji Japan.

In the Edo period, most women, except those in the samurai class, enjoyed freedom in their marriage (Takagi, 1999). Edo women were able to obtain a divorce much easier than women living under the Meiji Civil Code: Edo couples often obtained divorces by mutual agreement, and child custody was often determined by their agreement as being shared by the couple. If the divorce was the husband's fault, his wife's dowry had to be returned. The divorce ratio in the Edo period was 4.8 (per 1,000 people) (Nawata, 2006:
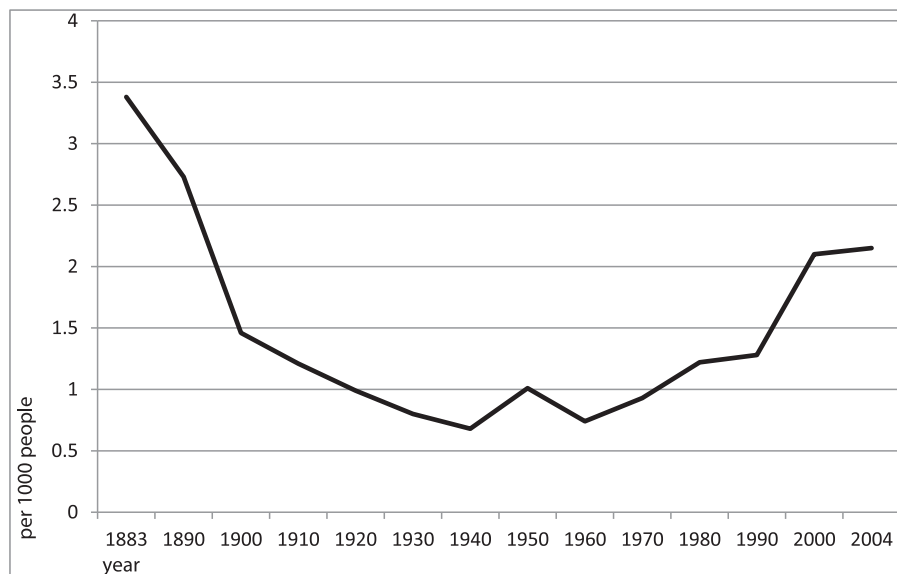
Figure 1. Changes in divorce ratio, Japan: The early Meiji period to 2004
Source: Nawata (2006): 94.

94). However, divorce rates declined remarkably (see Figure 1) compared with rates before the introduction of the Meiji Civil Code in 1898. Figure 1 shows the dramatic effect of family law on women's circumstances.

Most Edo women in lower social classes – farmers, artisans, and merchants – were actively engaged in their family businesses in cooperation with their husbands, and some women were successful as substitutes for their husbands in business (Koyama, 1995: 167–90). These lower classes comprised more than 95% of the Edo population. In the ruling samurai class, the population, which consisted of less than 5% of the total Edo population, the custom was for women to be confined to their homes as assistants to men. Most Edo women, however, were not always subordinate to men (Takagi, 1999). In addition, the customs in samurai households were very similar to Western feudal patriarchy rather than the most popular customs of Japanese households at that time. To catch up with Western socio-economic developments, the Meiji government had planned to build a hierarchical nation-state with the Emperor at the peak in order to push industrialization and reinforce the military forces in one body of the diverse classes. The Code, specifically the family law, forced most Japanese to obey a new and unfamiliar family order. However, it was necessary for Japan to create a new social norm that was not at odds with modernization and to bridge the gap between the two different worlds (Nishikawa, 1995). The family law helped to modernize Japan with new Westernized norms. The traditional family system of Japan was a new creation of the Meiji government with a seemingly old cover.

The traditional family system of Japan appeared only 100 years ago, despite the old guard's belief that it had been socially and culturally constructed since the time of ancient Japan approximately 2,000 years ago. More importantly, rather than pre-war values, the Japanese people supported Western democratic values, such as human rights, equality, and self-determination during the post-war period. Above all, the Japanese people significantly changed their gender consciousness. This is exemplified by the opinion polls conducted by the Japanese government on the notion of the gender division of labour, which proposed that men should go out to work and women should stay at home to look after their family. The proportion of female respondents who disagreed with this notion was 10% in 1972, 39% in 1992, 51% in 2002, 53.7% in 2004, 56.9% in 2007, and 58.6% in 2009, while that of male respondents was 10% in 1972, 29% in 1992, 41% in 2002, 49.7% in 2004, 50.7% in 2007, and 45.6% in 2009.[15] Excluding the 2009 results from the male respondents, the Japanese public's gender consciousness increased with each new poll. Compared with that of Western countries, the pace of change is modest. But women's changes have been significant, surpassing those of men at a rapid pace. In spite of the old guard's expectations, the notion of gender equality has begun to disseminate across Japanese society.

3. Legislative debates on the idea of 'gender-free'

The attack on 'gender-free' intensified in local governments as basic plans approached completion. Many local governments subsequently withdrew their more progressive plans and replaced them with moderate ones. The old guard, gaining momentums by local governments' disposal of progressive plans, intervened in the second national basic planning session. The Basic Law requires renewal of the plan in accordance with socio-economic changes every five years. The first national basic plan needed to be renewed in 2005. The old guard's Diet members intended to prevent the second national plan from using not only the phrase 'gender-free' but also the word 'gender'. The dispute over the concept of gender moved into national politics, where Diet members acting for gender equality confronted the old guard.

The percentage of women in the Diet, which is composed of two houses, the Lower House or the House of Representatives and the Upper House or the House of Councillors, is extremely low, lagging behind those of many developing countries, as well as those of other advanced countries (Eto, 2010). In the heyday of the backlash against the concept of gender, the proportion of female Lower House members was 4.6% in 1996, 7.3% in 2000, 7.1% in 2003, and 9% in 2005. The percentage of women in the Upper House, on the other hand, was slightly higher with 16.7% in 1996, 15.9% in 2000, 14.9% in 2003 and 12.4% in 2005[16]. As a consequence, of such modest proportions,

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[15] Sourced from the Cabinet Office White Paper 2004 and 2012, available at: //www.gender.go.jp/about_danjo/whitepaper/h16/gaiyou and //www.gender.go.jp/about_danjo/whitepaper/h24/sentai/html/suhyo/suhyo001-04-08.html.

[16] The Upper House election is conducted by a combined-independent system of majoritarian and proportional representation (PR). Until 1999, the PR list was based on a closed type, in which political

there were only a few feminists in the Diet. Nonetheless, these Diet feminists made significant efforts to rebut the old guard's distorted interpretation of 'gender-free', and they played a key role in discussing this issue in the Diet.

In a meeting held by the Lower House of the Education and Science Committee on 26 February 2003, Keiko Yamauchi of the Social Democratic Party (SDP)[17] raised a question about the interpretation of 'gender-free' and suggested that this phrase be defined as 'liberation from consciousness of stereotyped gender roles'. Seven other women inquired about how the old guard's remark on 'gender-free' was twisted in different Diet sessions.[18] Like Yamauchi, Hiroko Mizushima of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) rephrased 'gender-free' as 'liberation from gender stereotypes' in the Lower House Budget Committee meeting held on 27 February 2003. Through her question about a substitute word for 'gender-free' in the Upper House Cabinet Committee meeting held on 26 March 2003, Yoko Tajima, an independent, elicited the important view that 'gender-free' corresponded to 'gender equality' in English from Mariko Bando, the head of the bureau in charge of the Basic Law. Moreover, Chinami Nishimura of the DPJ stated that she perceived 'gender-free' as not inferring the elimination of sexual differences but of socio-cultural differences between the sexes. Nishimura then asked the minster in charge whether her perception was appropriate for government policy in the Lower House Budget Committee meeting held on 2 March 2004. A substitute for the minister, Haniwa Natori, affirmed Nishimura's viewpoint.

In other Upper House sessions, Sachiko Kawahashi and Yoriko Madoka of the DPJ and Mizuho Fukushima of the SDP were likewise involved in debates on 'gender-free'. Kawahashi raised the issue four times, on 16 July, 8 August and 26 November 2002, and on 16 April 2003, while Madoka and Fukushima spoke out on 19 and 30 November 2003, respectively. Yoko Komiyama, a DPJ Lower House member, spoke out in favour of 'gender-free' as a valuable equivalent of 'gender equality' on 12 October 2005. The feminists were not restricted to women. There was a male Upper House member who acted on behalf of women: Takahiro Kuroiwa, an independent, spoke up in the Upper House Cabinet meetings held on 10 and 17 July 2003. He criticized the old guard's

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parties fixed candidates' ranking orders and voters could not choose a candidate. According to Yoriko Madoka of the DPJ, who had served as an Upper House member for three terms from 1993, the closed-list PR system was relatively advantageous to women candidates because her party put women on higher ranking in the list to emphasize its respect for them. In 2000, however, the party-list system was changed to the open-list system in which voters could choose one among candidates on the party list. Madoka notes that the open-list system urges parties to nominate those who sustain material resources to succeed in nationwide campaigns with their well-known names and that, as a result, women candidates came to lose their benefit (sourced from my own interview with Madoka on 20 February 2014). This rule change might affect decreases in the proportion of female Upper House members, although it is only a part of the reason.

17   The SDP is the former Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ). The SDPJ changed its name to the SDP in 1996.

18   Diet discussions are quoted from the Diet Records provided by Japan's National Diet Library, available at: //kokkai.ndl.go.jp/.

misunderstanding of the phrase 'gender-free', pointing out that the idea of 'gender-free' was not inconsistent with biological differences between the sexes.

These Diet feminists succeeded in demonstrating that the phrase shared the same idea as gender equality. Their legislative deliberation was crucial, not only as political discourse that influenced policymaking, but also as a symbolic representation that affected public attitudes. Thus, this action might have spurred the old guard's desperate interruption of the second national basic plan. The old guard began to make an issue of 'gender' *per se*, in addition to 'gender-free'. Similar to the fact that feminists are not always female, the opponents of gender equality are not always male. In the Upper House Budget Committee meeting held on 4 May 2005, Eriko Yamatani, a female member of the LDP, asked the government to remove the word 'gender' from the second national basic plan. In the first plan, the word 'gender' was defined as 'socio-culturally constructed sexual differences' and used 13 times. The plan specified that the government should review social institutions, customs, and consciousness from gender perspectives based on gender research. Yamatani maintained that the word 'gender' was not only incomprehensible to ordinary people like her but also harmful in school education because it burdened children with the idea of abolishing sexual differences between women and men. Yamatani's logic in condemning 'gender' was the very same logic used against 'gender-free' (Eto, 2012: 33).

As the government held the responsibility for planning, the dispute over gender in the second basic plan was handed over to the ruling LDP. Above all, it was left to two Diet women, Kuniko Inoguchi and Yamatani. Inoguchi, a newly elected LDP Lower House member in the general election of 11 September 2005, was further appointed as Minister of Cooperative Decision-Making Between the Sexes[19] during Junichiro Koizumi's third administration on 31October 2005. Since Inoguchi had contributed to developing women-friendly policies as a member of the Advisory Council for Cooperative Decision-Making between the Sexes from 2001 to 2002, her appointment as Minister in charge of planning was good news to supporters for gender equality. However, the same supporters were wary of the appointment of Yamatani as the parliamentary secretary who assisted Minister Inoguchi. One may wonder why two women with such ideologically opposed views cooperated in taking the initiative in the second national basic planning session. These incompatible appointments were a reflection of the LDP's ambiguous position on gender equality. As discussed earlier, the LDP supported women's participation in the labour market in terms of economic neo-liberalism. The party, meanwhile, included old guard politicians whose actions were influential in inner-party politics. Prime Minister Koizumi, who was a leading advocate of the neo-liberal economy, approved women's active participation in the labour market; thus, he did not always disagree with gender equality, despite having to listen to the views of the old guards in order to maintain his relationship with them.

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[19] The Japanese government expresses the English translation of 'cooperative decision-making between the sexes (*danjo kyodo sankaku*)' as 'gender equality'.

Nominating Inoguchi and Yamatani to the two top posts was an act of compromise on his part, which sought to keep balance between the two different LDP positions.

Whereas Yamatani acted for those who intended to prevent gender equality from moving forward, Inoguchi represented those who wished to develop gender equality. In June 2005, several months before Inoguchi's installation, the government invited the general public to send their comments and opinions on the second national plan to the Cabinet Office by post, facsimile, and the Internet; the government office received 5,941 messages. Although some messages were opposed to 'gender' or 'gender-free,' most were in favour of gender equality or felt that the use of this word in the plan was acceptable.[20] Following the public comments, Inoguchi undertook campaigns to rally public support for her cause. For instance, once she took office, she held public meetings in Osaka, Fukuoka, Akita, Okayama, and Tokyo to inform people of the significance of gender equality and to engage in dialogue with women from diverse backgrounds (Hiratsuka, 2005). A total of 1,477 participants attended the meetings. The public interest in this planning must not be underestimated; such public support encouraged Minister Inoguchi to retain the idea of 'gender'.

The disputes between Inoguchi and Yamatani became fierce as the deadline approached. In a press conference on 13 December 2005, Inoguchi announced that she planned to keep the word 'gender'. Yamatani, meanwhile, told news reporters that she did not plan to retain the word (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2005). However, Inoguchi was supported in her fight for gender equality not only by those in feminist circles but also by her LDP colleagues. Ten newly elected Lower House members of the LDP, including several men, passed a statement to Inoguchi in which they requested that the ideal of gender equality be established, based on a correct definition and understanding of 'gender' (Higashioka, 2005).

On 27 December 2005, the Cabinet Council approved the second plan. The word 'gender' remained, although this came with a concession to the old guard. Whereas 'gender' had been defined as 'socio-cultural differences between the sexes' in the first plan, the definition in the second plan was changed to 'social differences between the sexes', omitting the word 'cultural.' The second plan attempted to correct the old guard's distorted phrase, stating that cooperative decision-making in society between the sexes is inconsistent with the rejection of the differences between the sexes or the sexual neutralisation of human beings. To avoid frequent usage of the term 'gender', the phrase 'cooperative decision-making between the sexes' came to be used as a substitute (Tanaka, 2011: 326).

The second plan includes the phrase 'gender perspectives', defined as the awareness of socially constructed differences between the sexes that cause social discrimination or stereotyped division of labour between the sexes; this phrase did not appear in the

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[20] See Cabinet Office, *Danjo kyodo sankaku shakai shisaku ni kansuru iken boshu no kekka* (public comments on policy-making for cooperative decision-making between the sexes) (June 2005), available at: //www.gender.go.jp/kaigi/senmon/keikaku/siryo/pdf/11-1.pdf.

first plan. Despite its relatively modest definition, this concept is a crucial point in the second plan. In the Lower House Cabinet Committee meeting held on 24 February 2006, when Komiyama of the DPJ asked how gender is conceptualized in the second plan, Minister Inoguchi offered a more precise explanation: in the second plan, 'gender' is conceptualized in such a way as to promote gender equality that redresses sexual discrimination, stereotyped gender norms and bias in the gender division of labour, and removes social obstacles impeding women and men from exercising their capacities (Eto, 2012: 33).

Conclusion

Through the dispute over the term 'gender (*jenda*)', this paper investigated how this term and its concept had been treated in the Japanese political context between the 1980s and the early 2000s. The old guard's attack caused Japanese feminists a great deal of pain and discouraged them from acting for gender equality (see Yamaguchi, 2014). Notwithstanding this negative effect, the old guard was not successful in their attack; rather, they contributed to the gradual dissemination of the concept of gender among the general Japanese public. Their dispute with feminists played a role in informing the wider public of the significance of the term 'gender'. In the 2000s, the frequency of the use of this term in newspaper articles increased. Between 2000 and 2009, the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper carried 1,593 articles that included this term.[21] Among these, 1,180 articles were published in the first half of the 2000s, when the old guard's attack on 'gender' became fierce. These articles spread the term beyond feminist and scholarly circles to the ordinary Japanese people. According to opinion polls on public recognition of the term conducted by the Cabinet Office, the respondents who answered that they had heard or seen the word 'gender (*jenda*)' were 11.1% in 2000, 22.3% in 2004, 28.1% in 2007, and 31.9% in 2009.[22] The proportion of Japanese who knew this word had increased three times in nine years.

The LDP's coinage of 'cooperative decision-making between the sexes (*danjo kyodo sankaku*)' is more familiar to the Japanese public than 'gender equality (*jenda byodo*)'. These two phrases are different in their significances: the former hardly aims to achieve women's equality with men in the private sphere nor does it seek to change the male-dominated socio-cultural order. The concept of LDP's phrase has been taken over by Womenomics, which emphasizes equality between women and men in the public sphere but includes no reference to equality in the private sphere. Women's

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[21] Sourced from *kikuzo* II.

[22] Sourced from the Cabinet Office, *danjo kyodō sankaku shakai nikansuru yoron chosa* (opinion polls on cooperative decision-making between the sexes): *heisei* 12 *nendo* (2000), *heisei* 16 *nendo* (2004), *heisei* 19 *nendo* (2007), *heisei* 21 *nendo* (2009). The questionnaires were distributed to 5,000 men and women, aged 20 and over and randomly selected nationwide; the surveys were conducted by interviews, and the average proportion of all survey responses was 64%, available at: //survey.gov-online.go.jp/h11/danjyo/index.html; //survey.gov-online.go.jp/h16/h16-danjo/index.html; //survey.gov-online.go.jp/h19/h19-danjyo/images/s25.gif;   //survey.gov-online.go.jp/h21/h21-danjo/index.html.

active labour market participation will impose excessive burdens on women unless gender inequality at home and in society is improved. However, the Japanese public, particularly younger generations, often identify 'the cooperative decision-making between the sexes' with 'gender equality'. In a letter to the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, for example, a 17-year-old high school girl, Memori Nakahara, writes of her understanding of 'the cooperative decision-making between the sexes' as follows:

> The Basic Law took effect eight years ago, but Japanese society has not changed that much. The proportion of men who have taken parental leave is extremely low, only 1.56 per cent, not just because this policy is not well known but also because men themselves as well as their companies do not recognize the importance of childcare ... The cooperative decision-making between the sexes means that there are no stereotypes of masculinity/femininity or prejudice to control their attitudes.... Women are active in participating in the labour market, so men should be encouraged to stay at home with their families right now. (Nakahara, 2008: 17)

Anne Phillips (2010: 22), who disenchants the myth of multiculturalism, asserts that culture is neither monolithic nor immune from changes but is 'always in the process of interpretation and re-interpretation'. This passage appears to be true of Japan. The idea of gender equality has begun to permeate into Japanese society. Although it regresses at times and progresses at other times, it is undeniably indeed moving forwards at a slow and steady pace.

Author's Profile

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