

# BACKLASH, FIGHT BACK, AND BACK-PEDALING: RESPONSES TO STATE FEMINISM IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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*From the mid-1990s, the Japanese government has promoted the creation of a “gender-equal society,” but since about 2000 this example of “state feminism” has faced a severe backlash. This article addresses the following questions about the phenomenon of Japanese state feminism, its history and its consequence: (1) How did the government policy for a “gender equal society” come into existence, and what explains its remarkably progressive nature? (2) What was the impact of the involvement of feminist scholars on policy-making? (3) What was the initial response to the policy? (4) What was the background of the backlash, who were the people and organizations involved, and what were the main arguments? (5) What has been the response to the backlash? (6) What are the connections and differences between the present controversy and the collaboration between feminism and the state in previous moments in Japanese history?*

**Keywords:** gender; gender policy; 男女共同参画基本法; Queer Studies; gender free; feminism; backlash

## INTRODUCTION

From the mid-1990s, the creation of a “gender-equal society” has been formally promoted by the Japanese government, at the same time as the ideal of a “gender-free” society has been advocated in a less formal way by educators and academics. Since about 2000, these elements of what might be described as “state feminism” have faced a severe backlash. Because the Japanese government’s promotion of gender equality has been intimately linked to its effort to increase the birthrate, and because the backlash reveals significant disagreement about the goals and methods of these policies, understanding this dynamic is both a pressing concern and a challenge with long-term implications. What gets lost in the war of words now fought in Japan is the extraordinary range of opinion, held both currently and historically, about what would constitute equality between the genders as well as freedom from gender norms. Excavating this rich history is crucial for

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understanding the current controversy. At the same time, analyzing the current debates raises important intellectual questions for reevaluating the history of the problematic relationship between feminism and the state in modern Japan.

This article seeks to answer some initial questions that arise out of an attempt to understand the phenomenon of Japanese state feminism, its history and its consequences. These questions include the following: (1) How did the government policy for a “gender-equal society” come into existence, and what explains its remarkably progressive nature? (2) What was the impact of the involvement of feminist scholars on policy-making? (3) What was the initial response to the policy? (4) What was the background of the backlash, who were the people and organizations involved, and what were their main arguments? (5) What has been the response from feminist activists and scholars to the backlash? (6) What are the connections and differences between the present controversy and the collaboration between feminism and the state in previous moments in Japanese history? The following are some of my preliminary findings, necessarily condensed for this paper.

## THE EMERGENCE OF STATE FEMINISM

The years from 1995 to 2005 may go down in history as a decade when “gender” became one of the most visible and hotly contested terms in Japanese political discourse. This in itself was rather surprising. What began the mid-1990s was a set of remarkably broad initiatives by the Japanese government to promote gender equality, with what seemed like an unprecedented level of feminist involvement in policy-making, culminating in the 1999 passing of the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society (*danjo kyōdō sankaku kihon hō* 男女共同参画基本法).<sup>1</sup> What followed was a similarly unprecedented level of backlash, different in intensity, quality, and orchestration from the previous types of generic everyday chauvinism. This culminated in 2005 when the questioning of government policy for gender equality reached the highest level of national discussion in the Diet, spearheaded by Abe Shinzō 安倍晋三 who would shortly thereafter be named prime minister.<sup>2</sup> But soon feminists started to fight back, and by 2006 half a dozen publications had appeared, pulling together academics and activists, again in what appears to be an unprecedented level of networking and alliance building.

All this was rather different from the dynamics of the debates a decade earlier: the debates in the 1980s that led to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (*koyō kikai kintō hō* 雇用機会均等法). Many feminist activists saw the EEOL as a kind of demoralizing defeat, in which measures serving as “protection” for women were eliminated without guarantees of “equality.”<sup>3</sup> And perhaps because of its gradualist nature, the EEOL had not aroused a backlash.<sup>4</sup> In all senses of the phrase, then, business had continued as usual in the 1980s.

1 The Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society (Law No. 78 of 1999). English translation available at [http://www.gender.go.jp/english\\_contents/basic\\_law/index.html](http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/basic_law/index.html) (accessed 11 March 2010).

2 Ogiue 2006.

3 Higuchi 2003, pp. 73–76. For background on the “protection versus equality” debate in the Japanese women’s labor movement, see Molony 1993.

4 See Gelb 1991; Knapp 1999. But see also Gelb 2000 for an updated view of the EEOL.

But something happened in the following decades. The 1990s were considered a “lost decade” for the Japanese economy, but for women it could be said to have been a booming decade.<sup>5</sup> The 1992 Childcare Leave Law (*ikuji kaigo kyūgyō hō* 育児介護休業法) guaranteed up to a year of partially paid childcare leave for either the mother or the father; the 1997 Nursing Care Insurance Law (*kaigo hoken hō* 介護保険法) socialized the cost of caring for the elderly, and thus reduced the symbolic and practical burden of daughters and daughters-in-law; the 1998 Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities (*tokutei hieiri kat-sudō sokushin hō* 特定非営利活動促進法), also known as the NPO Law, made it easier for women’s groups to gain legal status for their organizations; the 1999 Law for Punishing Acts Related to Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and for Protecting Children (*jidō baishun, jidō poruno ni kakawaru kōi tō no shobatsu oyobi jidō no hogo tō ni kansuru hōritsu* 児童買春 児童ポルノに係る行為等の処罰及び児童の保護等に関する法律) sought to curb sexual abuse of children including child prostitution and pornography; the 2000 Anti-Stalking Law (*sutōkā kōi tō no kisei tō ni kansuru hōritsu* ストーカー行為等の規制等に関する法律) and the 2001 Law for the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims (*haigūsha kara no bōryoku no bōshi oyobi higaisha no hogo ni kansuru hōritsu* 配偶者からの暴力の防止及び被害者の保護に関する法律), also known as the DV Law, criminalized behavior that was previously dismissed as personal, i.e., domestic violence.

The passage of these laws seemed to signal that the Japanese state itself was embracing feminist ideals, or conversely that feminist ideas had made inroads into the highest levels of government. Whether all this was a result of international pressure, or a response to the domestic demographic crisis, a by-product of a fleeting progressive coalition, or the fruits of grassroots feminist activism, or a combination of all these and more, the fact remained that a form of “state feminism” emerged in Japan in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The ensuing backlash forced a revisiting of fundamental questions about the goals and methods of Japanese state feminism. Meanwhile, some feminists initiated, or reiterated, a more critical examination of the government’s current gender policies.

## “GENDER-EQUAL SOCIETY”

Since about 1995, the Japanese government promoted initiatives that led to the 1999 Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society and the subsequent Basic Plan for a Gender Equal Society (*danjo kyōdō sankaku kihon keikaku* 男女共同参画基本計画). The specific terminology in these documents is worth scrutinizing in some detail, as it provides significant insight into the intentions and compromises among those who were involved in drawing up these initiatives.

Although “gender equal” is the official English translation given for 男女共同参画 *danjo kyōdō sankaku*, the Japanese phrase actually means “male female joint participation.” It is an intentionally vague phrase that avoids the Japanese word 平等 *byōdō*, meaning ‘equality’. The strategic choice of this phrase has been explained by Ōsawa Mari 大澤真理, a feminist

5 Higuchi 2003.

6 See Stetson and Mazur 1995 for the concept of state feminism. Interestingly, though Stetson and Mazur chose to examine state feminism in “advanced industrial societies with stable democratic political systems” (p. 13) Japan is not included in their comparative volume.

economist who has served in the government's Council for Gender Equality 男女共同参画審議会, the main body responsible for formulating the Basic Law. Ōsawa points out that conservative politicians have long been wary of the term 男女平等 *danjo byōdō*, because they associate it with equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity, and hence with practices such as affirmative action and quotas – “the paraphernalia of ‘Western-style’ feminism.”<sup>7</sup> So the term *byōdō* had to be avoided from the start.

On the other hand, some scholars have also pointed out that the phrase *danjo byōdō* has been associated with a subtle form of discrimination through differentiation: the Ministry of Education has long used the phrase to signify that men and women have different qualities and capabilities and should be treated accordingly along different lines – albeit with equal respect.<sup>8</sup> This “theory of different qualities of men and women” (*danjo tokusei ron* 男女特性論) would lead to justifying different curricula for boys and girls based on their “natural” qualities, talents, and destinies: requiring home economics for girls, technical arts for boys.<sup>9</sup> These alternate interpretations are enough to tell us that *byōdō* is a contentious and contested term in Japanese discourse.

It may also be worth noting that *sankaku* 参画 is a rather unusual word and is hardly ever used in daily conversation.<sup>10</sup> The more common term *sanka* 参加 also denotes participation, but the difference between the two terms is telling: the *kaku* 画 of *sankaku* denotes ‘planning’, while the *ka* 加 of the more familiar *sanka* denotes ‘adding’. Some have pointed out that *sanka* could just mean inviting women to events planned and hosted by men, in an “add women and stir” approach to gender equality. *Sankaku*, by contrast, is a term that connotes participation in planning, and arguably calls for a much greater role for women in society.<sup>11</sup>

So although some feminists have insisted that the more familiar and straightforward *danjo byōdō* should be used instead of the less familiar and more officious *danjo kyōdō sankaku*, and thus have celebrated any occasion when the phrase *danjo byōdō* was adopted in an official context,<sup>12</sup> it turns out that this could actually be a more multivalent and potentially contested term than *danjo kyōdō sankaku*, which at least has a legally defined meaning, delineated through the Basic Law.<sup>13</sup> Although the most accurate translation for *danjo kyōdō sankaku* might be “male female joint planning and participation,” we will abbreviate it in

7 Ōsawa 2000.

8 Itō 2002, pp. 42–44.

9 See Asai 2003, Kimura 2005. For an overview of gendered education in postwar Japan up to the late 1980s, see Buckley 1993, pp. 359–65.

10 Initially, the government toyed with another unusual term *danjo kyōsei* 男女共生 (male–female co-living) but this term was eventually rejected. Itō 2002: pp. 42–43.

11 Ōsawa 2001, p. 17. Ōsawa also notes that “*sanka*” conjures up the image of women being mobilized by the state into participating, an image that “*sankaku*” sought to dispel, though in more recent years, “*sankaku*” has come to carry some of the same connotations due to the ways in which the initiative has appeared to come from the top down.

12 See Satō 2001, pp. 89–90, for a discussion of Tokyo's Basic Ordinance for Male–Female Equal Participation 男女平等参画基本条例 (*Danjo byōdō sankaku kihon jōrei*). Satō considers the inclusion of *byōdō* in the title a positive achievement.

13 A “gender-equal society” is defined in the Basic Law as a “society in which both men and women, as equal members, have the opportunity to participate in all kinds of social activities at will, equally enjoy political, economic, and cultural benefits, and share responsibilities.”

this article as DKS. We will not follow the Japanese government's rather duplicitous practice of using the English phrase "gender-equal society" to refer to DKS unless it is to make a specific point. It may not be too far a stretch to say that what lies at the heart of the recent debates is precisely the difference between "gender" and *danjo* ('male–female') as well as the difference between "equality" and *kyōdō sankaku* ('joint planning and participation').

## WHAT IS "GENDER FREE"?

"Gender free" as a term, on the other hand, had its own genealogy within Japanese discourse, and since the backlash initially started as an attack against the ideas and practices associated with "gender free," it is worth looking at these a little further as well. The term has been traced back to Barbara Houston's article "Should Public Education Be Gender Free?,"<sup>14</sup> although the Japanese appropriation of the term seems to have been based on a misreading of this article.<sup>15</sup> Houston was actually critical of the idea of "gender free" educational practices because they could lead to ignoring existing gender discrimination. Houston instead advocated "gender sensitive" educational practices. In 1995 the term "*jendā furī*" ジェンダー・フリー began to be used by a major women's organization funded by the Tokyo metropolitan government, the Tokyo Women's Foundation (*Tokyo josei zaidan* 東京女性財団), and by 2001 it had become a widely used term in government, education, and mass media, though its definition was also wide-ranging.<sup>16</sup>

Part of the confusion arose from the fact that "gender free" began to be used widely around the time when the term "barrier free" (*baria furī* バリア・フリー) became the buzzword in Japan to refer to accessibility for the disabled. Since "barrier free" means *eliminating* barriers for the disabled, "gender free" can come to mean "eliminating gender." This was not the intention of most of those who used the term "gender free" – most used it to mean "free from gender bias." But as we will see later, the backlash would target exactly this blurriness between "eliminating gender" and "free from gender bias"; by deliberately confusing these distinct definitions, the backlash would raise the specter of a society of unisex school locker rooms and co-ed sleepovers as part of its campaign.

## FORTUITOUS OR INEVITABLE?

How did the government policy for a "gender equal society" (i.e. for DKS) come into existence, and what explains its remarkably progressive nature? There are answers that point to fortuitous circumstances, the right things happening at the right time. These include the fact that the generally conservative Liberal Democratic Party was forced into coalition with two more progressive parties, both led by women, in the years 1996–1998.<sup>17</sup> On

14 Houston 1994.

15 Houston 2006; Yamaguchi 2006, pp. 244–54.

16 For another early example, see the feminist journal *Agora* 204 (February 1995), where the journalist Fukao Tokiko uses "gender free" to refer to language that is free of gender bias, such as the term "parenthood" instead of "motherhood."

17 The New Party Sakigake (*Shintō Sakigake* 新党さきがけ) led by Dōmoto Akiko 堂本暁子, and the Social Democratic Party (*Shakai Minshu tō* 社会民主党) led by Doi Takako 土井たか子. See Ōsawa et al. 2003, pp. 143–44.

the other hand there are answers that point to the larger historical forces and global trends. These include the rise of international feminism as well as the rise of domestic grassroots feminism. The more weight is given to the “fortuitous” elements, the more understandable seems the outbreak of backlash, and more grim the prospects for continued advancement for feminists. Conversely, the more weight that is given to the “inevitable” elements, the more tempting it becomes to dismiss the backlash as a temporary setback.<sup>18</sup>

The significant impact of internationalism in Japanese gender policy has been well documented.<sup>19</sup> As in many other countries, the United Nations International Decade for Women 1975–1985 was the catalyst for the creation of a national machinery in Japan to address women’s issues. The series of World Conferences on Women punctuating the decade (Mexico City 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985) further promoted the development of both international and domestic feminism. The International Women’s Year Liaison Group (*Kokusai fujinnen renrakukai* 国際婦人年連絡会) founded in 1975 in Japan through the initiative of Diet members Ichikawa Fusae 市川房枝 and others, operated as an umbrella organization for domestic women’s groups.<sup>20</sup> The IWY Liaison Group became one of the most powerful national women’s organizations, gaining what amounts to a representational monopoly on women’s interests through its large membership base and political connections. The government established regular channels of communication with this umbrella group, thus maintaining an efficient and manageable way to incorporate women’s voices into policymaking.<sup>21</sup> The impact of international feminism on Japanese women’s issues thus has by now a decades-long history.<sup>22</sup>

In a more direct way, one may count the “Beijing effect” and the “souvenir effect” as among the factors that led to the Basic Law.<sup>23</sup> The “Beijing effect” refers to the way in which the 1995 Fourth World Women’s Conference in Beijing, with its Declaration and Platform for Action, galvanized both domestic women’s groups and international pressure for improving the status of women; the “souvenir effect” refers to the way in which the Basic Law’s passage was enabled by the Japanese government’s desire to tout it as an achievement at the so-called “Beijing + Five” follow-up conference in New York in 2000. The Beijing Joint Accountability Committee (known as “北京 JAC”) was a new Japanese group that emerged from this process; it was less hierarchical in structure than the older IWY Liaison Group, and sought to contact and lobby policymakers more directly.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth noting that this international pressure would eventually leave state feminism vulnerable to backlash based on nationalist sentiment. If one chooses to tell the story of DKS as arising through internationalism and top-down directives rather than through a domestic groundswell, then that opens up the way to claim that DKS is foreign to Japanese

18 See Gelb 2004, 2006.

19 Gelb 2003, Chan-Tiberghien 2004.

20 Yamaguchi 1992.

21 Murase 2006, p. 109. Murase also points out that this access by the IWY Liaison Group came at the expense of grassroots groups, which were excluded from the policy-making process.

22 See Gelb 2002 for the effect of CEDAW on EEOL.

23 Higuchi 2003, pp. 81–83.

24 Kanai 1998.

tradition and has little social support. Conversely, if both the state feminist policies and the backlash can claim to have support from the grassroots, then this suggests the existence of a profound division within Japanese society.

A narrative about how internationalism has enabled the rise of state feminist policy should, however, be complemented by a narrative about domestic trends, without which the international pressure would not have found traction. These domestic trends are epitomized by the phase “age of women” (*onna no jidai* 女の時代), which became a slogan for activists as well as advertisers in the mid- to late 1980s. As the percentage of women employed in wage-earning work outside the home exceeded 50 per cent in the 1980s, a trend that the passing of the EEOL both fueled and reflected, women became increasingly important as wage earners and consumers. Women also became more active in the political arena, as female candidates swept through elections supported by activist housewives, memorably described by political scientist Robin LeBlanc as “bicycle citizens.”<sup>25</sup> Feminism as intellectual discourse bloomed in this climate as well, and books with “*feminizumu*” フェミニズム in the title sprang up and multiplied on bookstore shelves.<sup>26</sup> Many scholars involved in this boom of feminist discourse were also actively involved in governmental and non-governmental women’s groups. In a trend that has continued to the present day, national and local governments have mobilized women scholars as experts in its various advisory councils addressing issues of concern to women.<sup>27</sup> These domestic trends in the late 1980s and 1990s have worked together with international trends described above.<sup>28</sup> As domestic women’s groups increasingly engaged in electoral politics and policy-making at various levels, international pressures also led the government to create a national machinery to address women’s issues. The fact that Japanese women, including both government officials and NGO members, comprised one of the largest delegations at the 1995 Beijing Conference as well as at the 2000 Beijing + Five Conference provides one index of this conjunction of domestic and international feminism.

## FEMINIST SCHOLARS AS FEMOCRATS

What was the impact of the presence of feminist scholars on policy-making? It seems to have been considerable. Ōsawa Mari, an economics professor at Tokyo University, reveals in her interview with feminist Ueno Chizuko 上野千鶴子, conducted in November of 1998 and initially published in May 1999, that the presence of feminist experts like her on the Council for Gender Equality that drew up the Basic Law and Basic Plan was significant, even decisive.

Perhaps most surprisingly, according to Ōsawa’s account, the feminist voices on the Council were able to use the vagueness of the term “*danjo kyōdō sankaku*” to their strategic advantage, interpreting the ultimate goals of DKS as going beyond “women’s rights” and reaching the dissolution of gender itself. Thus an explicit connection was made between

25 LeBlanc 1999.

26 Kano 2002, 2005.

27 Kanda et al. 1992, pp. 71–96.

28 For an overview, see Mackie 2003.

“gender equal” and “gender free” and this connection was incorporated into the Council’s early report “DKS Vision” ビジョン submitted in 1996.<sup>29</sup>

In her interview, Ōsawa Mari reveals several ways in which the presence of feminists on the Council for Gender Equality was crucial. First, she notes that this Council was unusual in that logic prevailed, that members were able to voice their opinions and to produce drafts of reports based on their opinions. This was possible because the bureaucrats (*jimukyoku* 事務局) had no background in women’s studies. In contrast, the feminist experts on the Council had done their homework and it was their logical argument that carried the day.<sup>30</sup>

Second, Ōsawa notes that she took a strategic, two-tiered approach to discussions about gender in the Council meetings: the first was to note the existence of socio-culturally constructed gender differences as opposed to biological sex differences, and to seek the elimination of the former. The second, more advanced tier, was based on a poststructuralist understanding of sexual difference itself as socio-culturally constructed through the gender binary, and sought the elimination of the gender binary. When Ueno voices her disbelief that the second, poststructuralist level of argument was really understood by members of the Council, Ōsawa affirms that in fact they seem to have done so.<sup>31</sup> She notes that three separate versions were proposed to the Council, and the most radical one was chosen: Version A, aiming for “gender-free,” i.e. dissolution of gender, was chosen over Version B that affirmed biological and social differences, as well as over Version C that avoided using the term “gender” altogether.<sup>32</sup> This shows that the poststructuralist deconstruction of the gender binary was understood and chosen by the Council as the ultimate goal of DKS.

Finally, Ōsawa points to the difference between the earlier, more traditional versions of national gender equality plans and the 1996 “Vision” proposed by the Council: while the earlier versions focused on supporting women’s special capabilities (*tokusei* 特性) to bear and raise children, the 1996 Vision argued the need to overcome the sexual division of labor, and even went as far as aiming for the dissolution of binary gender.<sup>33</sup>

Thus the government’s policies for DKS became linked with “gender free” in an important way through the efforts of feminist experts who also served as “femocrats.”<sup>34</sup> This is also why the backlash would eventually go beyond simply attacking the use and ideas of “gender free” and would strike at DKS as well, and why ordinances pushed by the backlash movement make explicit reference to “not denying the qualities of manliness and womanliness,” retreating to the kind of “theory of different qualities of men and women” that DKS explicitly rejected.<sup>35</sup>

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29 Ōsawa 1996.

30 Ōsawa 2001, pp. 27–28.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–25.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29. It has to be noted, however, that the 1996 Vision was more progressive than what eventually became the Basic Law, which through its preamble put gender equality in the context of solving Japan’s demographic challenges, rather than in the context of human rights. See Nakajima 2000.

34 On the concept of “femocrats” see Eisenstein 1995, Makihara 2008.

35 Especially striking in this discursive context was the January 2009 airing of a three-part NHK special titled “Onna to otoko: Saishin kagaku ga yomitoku sei” 女と男: 最新科学が読み解く性 (‘Woman and man: sex decoded through cutting-edge science’), with the second segment focusing on research into sex and gender



## RESULTS AND INITIAL REACTIONS

There have been two significant positive results of the passage of the Basic Law. The first is a new administrative structure that strengthened the agencies in charge of gender policy. The move was intended to “mainstream” gender policy, and is considered to have created a “national machinery” for advancing women’s rights in Japan.<sup>36</sup> Ōsawa Mari has noted that gender policy under DKS was no longer marginalized in a particular ministry within the bureaucratic structure, but was centrally located in the Gender Equality Bureau (*danjo kyōdō sankaku kyoku* 男女共同参画局) within the Cabinet Office (*naikakufu* 内閣府). The ability to intervene in the work of other ministries and agencies made the Gender Equality Bureau especially powerful.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, each ministry and agency was required to create an administrative division charged with DKS initiatives – even within the Defense Agency. Prefectural and local governments also established their own administrative offices and advisory councils for achieving the goals of DKS.<sup>38</sup>

A second outcome of the Basic Law are the various ordinances for DKS passed by prefectures, cities, and further down the municipal hierarchy. Ordinances (*jōrei* 条例) are the highest kind of legislation that can be passed at these municipal levels, and by calling for these ordinances, and the drawing up of concrete local plans for promoting DKS, the Basic Law fulfilled the function of being a blueprint for change.

Initial reactions to these policies were muted and cautious. It is in fact difficult to find strong early responses, either positive or negative. Some have noted that DKS was not taken seriously by the male establishment.<sup>39</sup> Ueno Chizuo likened the DKS to a painting of rice cakes (*e ni kaita mochi* 絵に描いた餅), a well-known metaphor for something that is theoretical and without substance, and at another point as “candy” (*amedama* 飴玉) – something to toss to children, or in this case women, to stop their complaints, but nothing that will truly satisfy their hunger.<sup>40</sup>

One way to gauge the responses to DKS is to track the appearance of journal articles. The National Diet Library’s NDL-OPAC database allows us to see, for example, that the term “*danjo kyōdō sankaku*” begins appearing in titles in 1991, with one article listed for that year, and that the number of articles rises steadily but rather slowly during the decade, until it more than doubles from 59 articles in 1998 to 155 articles in 1999, the year the Basic Law passed. The number peaks around 2002, but remains in the triple digits to the

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differences in medical, educational, and business settings. The program concluded that there were undeniable biological differences between women and men, suggested that these developed via early human adaptation to environmental challenges (men went hunting so became better at spatial recognition; women had to remember and communicate good foraging sites so became better at linguistic communication etc.). While the program stressed that these differences in ability do not mean that women and men cannot strive for the same goals, just that they might best use different strategies to achieve the same goals, in the context of the controversy over sexual difference in relation to state gender policy, it is striking that NHK should produce and air this program at just this time. <http://www.nhk.or.jp/special/onair/090112.html> (accessed 11 March 2010).

36 Gelb 2004, p. 5.

37 Ōsawa 2001, pp. 50–51.

38 Murase 2006, p. 108.

39 Satō 2001 pp. 87–88.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

present. On the other hand, articles with “gender free” in the title begin to appear in 1996 with three articles listed for that year. In the first four years, all references seem to be positive, but in 2000 the first negative article appears, peaking in 2003 with 22 out of 48 articles taking a negative position against the term. Data such as this support the claim that DKS and “gender free” were not initially received with much academic or journalistic fanfare.

Another way to consider the initial responses is to turn to feminist publications, which are logical places to look for early reactions to these state feminist initiatives. An exemplary case is *Agora* あごら, one of the longest-enduring journals of the Japanese women’s movement.<sup>41</sup> It published the Council’s initial discussion points on DKS and relayed the government’s request for “public comment,” publicizing the various meetings to be held for citizens to express their opinions.<sup>42</sup> But this journal itself declined to take an editorial stance either for or against DKS. This was in marked contrast to the stance it had taken a decade earlier on the EEOL, which it had memorably derided as a “inexplicable law to ban equality” 奇怪禁等法, a pun on “*kikai kintō hō* 機会均等法” the short version of the Japanese term for “equal opportunity law.”

Various explanations have been given for the initial feminist coolness, even indifference towards DKS, including the fact that the policy seemed to target married couples with children, which struck many feminists as irrelevant to their own struggles to assert women’s identities independent of wifeness and motherhood.<sup>43</sup> Early feminist critiques also noted those dimensions of the policy that amounted to a compromise between the interests of feminists (who wanted to challenge the gendered division of labor), conservative government officials (who wanted to boost the birthrate), and business leaders (who wanted more women to remain in the workforce).<sup>44</sup> What is also suggestive is that the emergence of “state feminism” – sometimes also disparagingly called “state policy feminism” (*kokusaku feminizumu* 国策フェミニズム), “institutional feminism” (*taiseinai feminizumu* 体制内フェミニズム), “administrative feminism” (*gyōsei feminizumu* 行政フェミニズム) or “bureaucratic feminism” (*kanryō feminizumu* 官僚フェミニズム) – was regarded by many women with suspicion, and hence the state promotion of seemingly feminist goals was met with skepticism.<sup>45</sup> There was an emerging split in the 1990s between those who would commit to state feminism and those who would maintain a distance from it. The background of this is related to the history of Japanese women’s mobilization by the state, discussed below.

## THE BACKLASH

What was the background of the backlash, who were the people and organizations involved, and what were the main arguments? There is no doubt that the resurgence of

41 Buckley 1997, pp. 245–71 for a profile of Saitō Chiyo, founding editor of *Agora*.

42 *Agora* 241 (July 1998).

43 Asano 2006.

44 Hotta 2002, pp. 106–10.

45 Nakajima 2000.

nationalism has been one of the engines behind the phenomenon. For example, the popular base for the backlash had much in common with that which supported the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (*atarashii rekishi kyōkasho o tsukuru kai* 新しい歴史教科書をつくる会). The group sought to create a new set of overtly nationalist textbooks, in order to correct what it described as the self-flagellating (*jigyaku teki* 自虐的) tendency of the Japanese educational curriculum vis-à-vis Japanese colonial and wartime actions. The inclusion of the so-called ‘military comfort women’ (*jūgun ianfu* 従軍慰安婦) issue in the state-approved middle-school history textbooks was an especially contentious point.<sup>46</sup> Once the controversy began to die down, the nationalists’ attention turned to gender as the next target.<sup>47</sup>

The turn to gender issues was likely prompted by another controversy, namely over surnames of married couples.<sup>48</sup> In 1996, the government’s advisory council on legal systems proposed that the civil code be revised to introduce the option of married couples keeping their respective surnames (*fūfu bessei* 夫婦別姓). For the growing cohort of women sustaining professional careers after marriage, it had become a major inconvenience to have to change one’s surname mid-career. Despite the fact that this revision was proposed during a time of feminist upswing, it faced severe political opposition. Conservatives argued that separate surnames would lead to the collapse of the family, tapping into a wider anxiety about social change under demographic as well as neo-liberal pressures.<sup>49</sup> The forces against the proposal formed an association called the Japan Conference (*Nippon Kaigi* 日本会議) in 1997, which soon grew into the largest coalition of conservative groups in Japan.<sup>50</sup> Scholars have pointed out that the eventual backlash against gender policy brought together several disparate sets of advocates, including the advocates for nationalist textbooks and advocates against separate surnames.<sup>51</sup>

The beginnings of the backlash can be traced back even further, however, to certain developments since the late 1980s. It was at that time, for example, that Yamashita Etsuko 山下悦子, a scholar who had previously published insightful studies of Japanese feminism,<sup>52</sup> began taking contemporary Japanese feminists to task for misrepresenting the true needs of women. Yamashita’s main claim was that contemporary Japanese feminism had fallen into an uncritical celebration of capitalism and consumerism, ignoring the needs of married women burdened with childcare and eldercare.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, Hayashi Michiyoshi 林道義, a Jungian psychologist, had begun publishing a number of books in which he advocated the return to the traditional family, with a strong father as authority figure.<sup>54</sup> He later buttressed it with a book calling for the return of the

46 See Ueno 1998/2004.

47 Kanai 2005.

48 Asano 2006.

49 On the changes in the modern family, see Ueno 1994/2009.

50 See [www.nipponkaigi.org](http://www.nipponkaigi.org), accessed 29 June 2010.

51 Hosoya 2005.

52 See, for example, Yamashita 1988a.

53 Yamashita 1988b, Yamashita 1991. See Kano 2005 for a critique of Yamashita.

54 Hayashi 1996.

housewife as the exemplary female figure, as well as a book directly attacking feminism.<sup>55</sup> These books, too, resonated in a discursive space in which certain successes of the women's movement, such as the raising of awareness about the problems inhering in the sexual division of labor, were blamed for concrete problems in contemporary society, such as the rise in youth crime and higher divorce rates. These earlier intellectual rumblings suggest that the backlash connected with a larger conservative discourse that had emerged by the mid-1990s as a shadow accompanying the splendid spectacles of the "women's age."

There were thus several elements that came together in the backlash, including "old conservatives" who had been prominent for several decades,<sup>56</sup> "new conservatives" who had become vocal within the last decade,<sup>57</sup> conservative politicians,<sup>58</sup> religious organizations,<sup>59</sup> and grassroots activists.<sup>60</sup> There is also evidence that the backlash was orchestrated at a higher level, and the "relay play" within the conservative Sankei 産経 media network played a significant role. First, certain journals such as *Seiron* 正論 would feature articles by so-called "experts" that would include unsubstantiated episodes about the egregious results of "gender free education"; second, these same articles would be picked up by newspapers owned by the same media conglomerate as the journals, i.e. the *Sankei shinbun* 産経新聞; third, these articles would then be cited by local and national diet members in their questioning of policy; fourth, this questioning would be reported as news by the same journal and newspapers.<sup>61</sup> By the end of the media relay, the initial musings of a few pundits have been transformed into newsworthy facts. This tactic illustrates how a small group of conservative voices can come to play a crucial role in forming public opinion. Government bodies sensitive to the critiques from politicians and mass media would begin to institute self-censorship, and eventually the self-censoring moves would begin to replicate themselves throughout society in a vicious cycle.<sup>62</sup>

Politically, the backlash gained traction within conservative and neo-nationalist circles. Yamatani Eriko, a former journalist and editor for the Sankei media network, won a seat for the Lower House in 2000 and went to on head the Liberal Democratic Party's "Project Team for Investigating the Status of Radical Sex Education and Gender Free Education" 過激な性教育 ジェンダーフリー教育に関する 実態調査プロジェクトチーム. The Project Team's "evidence" for rampant radical sex education was eventually discredited by scholars who pointed out that the explicit nature of some of the practices (such as using anatomically correct dolls) were due to the fact that they took place in the context of educating children with special needs. Other instances cited by the Project Team were anecdotal and not

55 Hayashi 1998, Hayashi 1999. See also Yoda 2000 for a critical analysis of this kind of discourse of paternalism.

56 Such as novelist and Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎, novelist Sono Ayako 曾野綾子, critics Watanabe Shōichi 渡辺昇一 and Hasegawa Michiko 長谷川三千子.

57 Such as Hayashi Michiyoshi, Yagi Hidetsugu 八木秀次, Takahashi Shirō 高橋史朗.

58 For example Yamatani Eriko 山谷えり子 and Abe Shinzō 安倍晋三 further discussed below.

59 Such as the Association of Shinto Shrines (*Jinja honchō* 神社本庁), Seichō no ie 生長の家, the Unification Church (*Tōitsu kyōkai* 統一教会) and the related International Federation for Victory over Communism (*Kokusai shōkyō rengō* 国際勝共連合).

60 See Hosoya 2005, Asano 2006.

61 Takenobu 2005, pp. 22–23.

62 Satō 2006, p. 213.

supported by verifiable information. Yet the damage had been done. The bashing of sex education, and the retreat to a moralistic education stressing sexual purity over sexual health, were combined with an attack against “gender free” educational reforms that had sought to correct decades of subtle sexual discrimination, such as putting the class roster of boys before the roster of girls.<sup>63</sup> By the end of 2005, “gender free” was singled out in the government’s Second Basic Plan for Gender Equality as a term to be avoided because it would lead to confusion.<sup>64</sup> The backlash had thus reached the highest levels of government.<sup>65</sup>

While the nationalist undertones of the backlash undoubtedly point to the continued power of conservatives in Japan, there are also other dynamics concurrently at work as well. The backlash seems to have tapped into a surprisingly widespread sense of anxiety and resentment, especially among young men alienated in the neo-liberal transformation of Japanese society.<sup>66</sup> Internet websites, bulletin boards and blogs have been important loci for the spread of this discourse. Other factors that have fueled the backlash include the continued bleak picture of the economy and an increasing fear that the future looks even bleaker, the specter of Japan’s decline in international status as China becomes more dominant, compounded with the sense of social decline as the population ages and the birthrate fails to rise. The conservative turn is exacerbated by the continued “exiting” of women from the workplace and potential spheres of influence,<sup>67</sup> as well as the continued dominance of older men in politics. The backlash found traction precisely because Japan had been mired in these conditions for at least a decade by 2005.

The argument of the backlash advocates can be summarized as a kind of biological essentialism: their main claim is that there are natural biological differences between men and women, and that this would dictate different social roles for men and women.<sup>68</sup> The claim is that the state feminist policy (DKS) of promoting the continued employment of women during the childbearing years destroys the “traditional Japanese family” consisting of the male breadwinner and the full-time housewife. Ironically, such a “traditional family” had become the norm in Japan only for about a decade, in the 1970s, during the period of high economic growth.<sup>69</sup> Yet the conservative discourse found receptive ears in the segment of the Japanese population that identified with the fading vision of such a family. In essence, the state feminist policy upset both men, who felt accused of not doing enough to help with housework and childcare, as well as women, who felt rebuked for not holding on to their jobs while raising children. What proved problematic was precisely the potential of DKS to challenge the traditional sexual division of labor.

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63 Kimura 2005.

64 The Second Basic Plan can be downloaded from <http://www.gender.go.jp/kihon-keikaku/2nd/honbun.html>, accessed 19 August 2010.

65 Ogiue 2006.

66 Miyadai 2006.

67 Schoppa 2006.

68 See Koyama and Ogiue 2006 for more detail.

69 Ōsawa 2002, p. 57.

## FEMINIST FIGHT BACK AND BACK-PEDALING

What has been the response from the feminist activists and scholars to the backlash? The most visible response to the backlash has come from academic feminists: there has been an unprecedented level of networking and alliance building among scholars. Even those who were initially cautious about the term “gender free” have come to realize that the backlash targets more than this term: it is a crisis with the potential to threaten the entire range of ideas and practices associated with feminism, women’s rights, and gender equality. Even the concept of “gender” itself – signifying socially and culturally constructed differences to be distinguished from biological sexual difference – has come to be questioned. The Science Council of Japan (Nihon Gakujutsu Kaigi 日本学術会議) created a “Scholarship and Gender” committee to respond to the crisis, pulling together prominent feminist scholars such as Ōsawa Mari, Ueno Chizuko, and Ehara Yumiko 江原由美子.<sup>70</sup> The Women’s Studies Association of Japan (Nihon Josei Gakkai 日本女性学会) published a book with detailed information refuting the arguments of the backlash.<sup>71</sup> A number of other edited volumes have appeared, constituting a feminist “fight back” フェイトバック.<sup>72</sup> It should be noted, however, that certain differences in position and emphasis have emerged among those fighting back: some see the defense of government policy for gender equality as primary, while others would continue to maintain some critical distance from it; some see the emphasis on “gender free” as misplaced, preferring to emphasize equal treatment of men and women instead, while others would continue to insist on the importance of dismantling gender norms at a more fundamental level.

The backlash directly targeted the term and ideas associated with “gender free.” The allegation has been that gender free education and the more radical aspects of DKS would lead to an elimination of all sex and gender difference: unisex bathrooms and locker-rooms, girls and boys sleeping together in the same room on overnight school trips, and so forth. Much of this is unfounded, and also familiar to those who remember the backlash against the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States that called forth similar specters of a sexless society to induce panic and confusion.

Some scholars have argued that the term “gender free” is not only based on a *misreading* of the original use, but is also *misleading* in many ways and should thus be abandoned as a feminist term. Yamaguchi Tomomi 山口智美 and Saitō Masami 齊藤正美 are among those who advocate a return to the more straightforward term of *danjo byōdō*, i.e. equality between men and women. The same scholars also object to those aspects of both the government-led and independently organized aspects of the “gender free” initiatives that focus on consciousness-raising and education, arguing that the emphasis should be placed on eliminating discriminatory *practices* rather than on changing *consciousness*.<sup>73</sup>

70 English language summary of the report available from <http://www.scj.go.jp/ja/info/iinkai/gender/index.html> (accessed 11 March 2010).

71 Nihon Josei Gakkai 2006.

72 See Asai 2003, Kimura 2005, Ueno et al. 2006, Wakakuwa et al. 2006, Yuibutsuron kenkyū kyōkai 2006.

73 See their web articles on <http://webfemi.net> (accessed 6 December 2010).

The state seems eager to drop “gender free” altogether. The Second Plan for DKS in 2005 stated that the term “gender free” is confusing, and in 2006, the Gender Equality Bureau issued a recommendation that local governments avoid using the term.<sup>74</sup> The government back-pedaling on “gender free” can be seen as a tactical move to rescue the core ideas of DKS: equal treatment of women and men. The feminist critique of “gender free” is also motivated by the desire to push this core idea forward. But there is an aspect to this trend that could be worrisome.

The concept of “gender free” in its most inclusive moments gestured not only beyond binary definitions of femininity and masculinity, but also pointed to the fundamental instability of categories such as sex, gender, and sexuality. In doing so, gender free had the potential to reach out to transgender and transsexual individuals as well as to gays and lesbians. In other words, it is my view that “gender free” in Japan overlapped with the concept that is known in Anglo-American contexts as “queer.” The introduction and spread of the concept and practices associated with the term “gender free” coincided with the growing discursive visibility of sexual minorities. It is worth remembering that individuals such as Kakefuda Yuko 掛札悠子 and Fushimi Noriaki 伏見憲明 had begun coming out in publications since the early 1990s, and there was a spate of books on lesbian and gay studies in the late 1990s. Meanwhile, authors such as Tsutamori Tatsuru 蔦森樹 (MtF) and Torai Masae 虎井まさ衛 (FtM) published books about their experience as transgender and/or transsexual individuals. In 1998 the Japanese medical establishment came to recognize Gender Identity Disorder as a medical condition, with sexual reassignment surgery becoming legally available in 2003. Meanwhile, in 1999 the journal *Queer Japan* クイア ジャパン began publishing, and 2008 saw the founding of the Japan Association for Queer Studies クイア学会.

It seems quite possible that “gender free” had the potential to connect these existing and emerging populations *and* the presumably much larger population that has felt, to various degrees, constrained by the rigid gender norms operating in Japanese society. Why can a person (of any sex or gender or sexual persuasion) not wear a skirt one day and trousers the next? Why can a person not have long hair one season and a buzz the next? Why *not* be gender free?<sup>75</sup> The back-pedaling on the part of the government as well as on the part of some within the feminist community cuts off this potential connection and retreats to a heteronormative position. While DKS comes out of a feminist tradition of critiquing the male breadwinner and female housewife model,<sup>76</sup> it has not fundamentally critiqued the normative heterosexual family model. That precisely was the unusual potential opened up by “gender free” as an idea and initiative. And in retreating to a position that proclaims “we don’t want to be gender free; we just want equal treatment of women and men,” the

74 Nihon Josei Gakkai 2006. Some local municipalities and centers have overcompensated in the direction of avoiding the term “gender” altogether – a move criticized by feminists but in keeping with the backlash claim that biological sexual difference is fundamentally unchanging and unchangeable. This essentialist argument would make the concept of “gender” as differentiated from “sex” unnecessary.

75 Some scholars have argued that the use of the term “gender” in certain academic feminist contexts had precisely this expansive definition in mind, rather than the narrower definition of “social and cultural differences between men and women.” See Kano 2003.

76 Ōsawa 2002.

heterosexist dimension of DKS would be maintained, and the queer potential would be disavowed.<sup>77</sup>

## A HISTORY OF STATE MOBILIZATION OF WOMEN

What are the connections and differences between the present controversy and the collaboration between feminism and the state in previous moments in Japanese history? A historical perspective proves highly instructive. The close collaboration of prominent feminists with the colonial and militarist efforts of the state has been well documented.<sup>78</sup> Women's groups cooperated with the state in prewar as well as in postwar Japan. The government saw this a kind of social management, using women's groups for its own agenda, while women's groups had their own reasons for this cooperation. In the prewar period, women's lack of formal political powers meant that many groups found it useful to ally themselves with state bureaucrats in order to accomplish their goals.<sup>79</sup> Autonomous women's groups were of course likely to be persecuted and resistance to the state was punished.<sup>80</sup> Although some feminists tried to resist mobilization into the war effort, they were few, and most were silenced. Most feminists saw the war as an opportunity.<sup>81</sup>

In the postwar period, this cooperation continued for various reasons. Some scholars have pointed out that women have tended to look to the state to achieve their goals because autonomous citizen's groups have been masculinist and unwelcoming to women's efforts.<sup>82</sup> Miriam Murase shows in her important study of the postwar women's movement that the government has constrained the autonomy of the women's movement through official women's groups and women's centers.<sup>83</sup> This has created a division between mainstream women's groups close to the state, and radical feminist groups opposed to the state. The emergence of state feminism in the 1990s did little to alter this basic picture. Though more scholars identifying themselves as feminist have been drawn into the various state-sponsored projects for gender equal society, many remain fundamentally skeptical of the goals and methods of government policies.

Some of the trends we have observed in state feminism in contemporary Japan are found in other advanced industrialized nations as well, but some important divergences are also visible. In countries with the most effective forms of state feminism, such as Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway, the offices in charge of feminist issues were set up under social democratic governments that prioritized gender equity. Scholars and activists with backgrounds in women's studies were often called to leadership

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77 Note however, the "Queering the Backlash" symposium organized by the Women's Studies Association of Japan (Nihon Josei Gakkai) 22 December 2007.

78 Ueno 1998, translated by Beverly Yamamoto as *Nationalism and Gender* (Melbourne: TransPacific Press, 2004) gives an overview of the debate surrounding the scholarly discourse on women as collaborator versus women as victim of the militarist regime.

79 Garon 1997. See also Molony 1993.

80 Hane 1988.

81 Sasaki 2001.

82 Kaizuma 2004, pp. 156–57.

83 Murase 2006.



positions at crucial stages in this process, and the term femocrat, coined in Australia in the 1970s, has come to be used generally as a term denoting feminist experts working within government institutions. In each of these “high state feminism” countries, it is also notable that a combination of mainstream and more radical feminist groups have exerted strong pressure on the state, within political climates emphasizing the role of the state in redressing social inequality.<sup>84</sup>

In the case of Japan, the DKS machinery was put in place under a relatively progressive coalition government with the involvement of party leaders, bureaucrats, and feminist scholars who strongly pushed for gender equity. With the collapse of the coalition and the return to a more conservative regime in 1998, the backlash was able to gain traction and eventually reach the highest levels of government. The more liberal Democratic Party of Japan took over in the summer of 2009, but a sense of political paralysis at the top has prevailed. There are few remaining signs of the confluence of domestic and international feminism that had pushed the state towards feminist policy-making in the 1990s. The academic feminist community has fought back vigorously against the backlash, and government advisory councils remain potential arenas for feminist scholars to influence policy, but the long-term impact of these efforts still remains to be seen.

## CONCLUSION

The backlash suggests that there are deep divisions in early twenty-first century Japanese society about state feminism, about what are perceived as appropriate roles for women and men, and about the state’s involvement in encouraging or discouraging particular roles. But it must also be said that while the proponents of the backlash paint the government model of DKS as being equivalent to feminism, there are deep divisions within feminism on these questions as well.

Feminists themselves raised some of the following questions about DKS. Is the government promoting a particular way of living, heterosexual, married, with kids, both parents employed etc., at the cost of other ways of living? Is the government promoting freedom from sexual/gender difference or not, and is that a good thing or not? And in arguing back that the policy is about eliminating sexual discrimination, not eliminating sexual difference, are feminists guilty of homophobia? In other words, are they focusing on gender at the cost of ignoring attacks on sexuality (especially sexual minorities, the transgendered, the queer etc.)? In promoting the participation of women in wage labor, are feminists colluding with the government in capitulating to capital? Are feminists successful in performing the acrobatic balancing act?

And these, in the end, raise some of the largest and most fundamental questions about the ways in which we organize our society. What really is a fair and just way to support reproduction? Who should be in charge of reproductive labor such as housework and childcare? How should it be distributed? What is the role of the state in supporting this labor and in managing its distribution? Should the state mandate one model of distribution of labor over another? Should feminists argue for the protection of the family or for the

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84 Stetson and Mazur 1995, pp. 287–91.

deconstruction of the family, for the equal treatment of women and men, or for the dissolution of any kind of difference between women and men?

Thus the debate continues.

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