

Translation

Demands and Movements of Japanese Women after World War II

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This article outlines what Japanese women have demanded and worked for after World War II. Women got mobilized during the war but they lost their job because men replaced them after coming back from war. Women acquired the right to vote and to be elected, and 39 female Representatives were elected. In addition, the Constitution of Japan was created to clearly state the discontinuation of the war. In the 1950s, an anti-nuclear movement sought peace and human rights, and a mother movement was born. During the period of high economic growth in the 1960s, there were judicial struggles for childcare and gender equality in the workplace. The International Women's Year of 1975 influenced women's policies and strengthened ties with women around the world. The number of female workers has continued to increase in the 21st century, but there are many non-regular employees who are part-time, fixed-term contract and temporary employees. The movement that allows women to accuse sexual harassers is widely supported. However, even after all this, the gender gap in Japan is still high, and additional actions will be necessary in the future.

Defeated Japanese women

On August 15, 1945, Japanese people learned of their defeat. At that time, major cities in Japan were hit by air raids and atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. People lived in fear and hardship. The defeat was an unexpected event for those who were unaware of the current status of the war both inside and outside of Japan. But peace returned and people were relieved.

After World War II, the people stationed in the battlefield returned to Japan. Retirement of female workers was promoted in order to give men back their place as central “pillar” (which was considered to be the center of the family) and allow them to return to their work place or get a job. The number of female workers was 12.27 million in 1944, but it decreased to 7.95 million by December 1945. Women mobilized during the war were easily affected by the economy and lost their jobs due to circumstances of the nation and companies being male dominated.

The Public Security Law was abolished in October 1945, and the trade union movement was revived. In August 1946, the number of unions was 13,622, with 3.93 million members, 960,000 of them being female. Women's departments were formed one after another in the unions. At the same time, the government and companies fired women as they sought to “rationalize” economic reconstruction. For example, Japan National Railways announced employee cuts. The first one was mainly for young people and women. The youth and

women's department of the trade union led the opposition movement.

While Japan was placed under occupation, the "liberation of women" and "gender equality" reforms were promoted. In October 1945, GHQ (the General Headquarters of Allied Powers) issued five major reform orders to Prime Minister Shidehara. They included the liberation of women, encouragement of trade unions, liberalization of education, and so on. In fact, just before the reform orders were issued, the Cabinet Assembly decided to revise the House of Representatives election law, which included women's suffrage. After that, through the extraordinary parliament, women's voting rights were realized. Then, in April 1946, the first general election was held after World War II, and 39 female representatives were elected. This was the highest number of female representatives until 43 female members were elected in the 2005 House of Representatives election. The Constitution of Japan was enacted in November 1946 and came into effect in May 1947. Saying that "all people are equal under the law", the Constitution of Japan prohibits discrimination, and advocates sovereignty, basic human rights, and pacifism.

Seeking peace and human rights

In March 1954, the United States conducted a hydrogen bomb test at Bikini Atoll. Crew members of the Japanese fishing boat Daigo Fukuryu Maru, which was operating nearby, were exposed to the radiation. Radioactive rains caused pollution of fish and vegetables. A signature campaign was held against the hydrogen bomb test. It is said that it started in Suginami Ward, Tokyo, and of the 260,000 signatures, which represent about 70% of the inhabitants, 200,000 were collected by women. A signature campaign against nuclear testing was rolled out all over Japan, and in August, the National Association for the Signature Campaign for the Atomic Bomb Prohibition was formed, and over 30 million signatures were collected in one year. In August 1955, the first World Conference on Atomic Bombs was held in Hiroshima. The event was attended by Misako Yamaguchi, who was called the Atomic Bomb Maiden, and Suzu Kuboyama, the wife of Aikichi Kuboyama who was a fisherman and died after being exposed to radiation on the Daigo Fukuryu Maru. Many women also participated and appealed for peace. After that, the Japan Council against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs was formed to play a central role in the antinuclear movement.

Around this time, rationalization was intensifying with the aim of improving productivity in major industries. Labor disputes also increased, and there were struggles for families and communities. In May 1954, a voluntary union was formed at the Omikenshi (Omi silk company) Osaka head office and submitted a request to the company to gain rights which should have been taken for granted. However, as the company refused the request. Factories across the country went on strike one after another. The goal of the strike was to require "compulsory opposition from Buddhism, opening of correspondence, suspension of personal property inspection, freedom of going out," etc. For that reason, it was called the "human rights strike". Young women with no trade union experience fought for 106 days and they won. Patriarchal labor management and human rights abuses against female workers shocked society. Domestic and foreign workers and public opinion supported the Omikenshi

strike.

The World Mothers Convention was held in Switzerland in July 1955. Representatives were sent from Japan as well as the first Japan Mothers Convention had been held in June of the same year. The executive committee was formed by more than 60 groups, and 2000 people participated in the competition. The executive committee was organized by the Federation of Women's Organizations, the Women's Democratic Club, the Women's Department of the Japan Teachers' Union, the Japan Children's Association, the Consumers' Co-op, and the Coal Mine Housewives Council. The conference was called the "Tears Conference" because of the passionate discussions about life, education and peace issues. The World Mother Convention was attended by 1060 people from 68 countries. The famous slogan "Life-giving mothers want to raise life and save life" is a passage of poetry presented at the conference. From Japan, 14 representatives participated with Natsu Kawasaki as the leader. After returning to Japan, the debriefing session was held 1691 times. The mother movement called for transitioning "from discussion to action" and demanded peace, such as opposition to the Japan US Treaty of Mutual Security and Cooperation and US military bases and a ban on atomic bombs. The movement conducted a wide range of activities centered on the problems of children and women, such as the demand for live polio vaccines, the establishment of nursery schools, and prices issues. The mother movement has led the postwar women's movement in Japan.

Women's problems during the high economic growth period

The number of female workers increased during the period of high economic growth, and there was an increasing demand to continue working regardless of whether they were married or had children. They also needed a nursery school where they could safely leave their children. At this time, the number of nursery schools was still small, and even if there were any, only children over the ages of three years old could be kept and the hours of operation were short. Since 1960, private nursery schools were founded. During the mother's movement, the phrase "keep as many nurseries as there are posts" became a slogan, and the nursery school movement was enhanced.

In 1964, the Women's Countermeasures of Department General Council of Trade Union of Japan and the Tokyo Regional Council of Trade Union for Women's Council held a national conference. The scope had expanded from a nursery school as a measure against poverty to a nursery school for the growth of children. Parents demanded the construction and enhancement of public daycares. At the same time, they searched for a place for a nursery school, secured nursery teachers, and worked hard to raise funds. In addition, parents demanded, in turn: childcare centers after maternity leave, extension of childcare hours, complete school meals, and childcare for persons with disabilities.

The increase in the number of female workers had stimulated the women's club activities of trade unions and heightened their awareness of their rights. Females also acquired the conditions to continue working, such as extension of maternity leave and securing personnel to substitute workers on maternity leave. Some women tried changing the customs of marriage, childbirth and youth retirements, which were the custom in companies.

The “Sumitomo Cement Trial”, which was decided by the Tokyo District Court in 1966, was a pioneer decision in which it was judged to be discriminatory that the marriage retirement system was only for women. “The Mitsui Shipbuilding Trial” against childbirth retirement was another trial that women won. In the “Tokyu Organization Industrial Trial”, a woman appealed a discriminatory youth retirement system. The young retirement age, 55 years old for men and 30 years old for women, was extremely disadvantageous to the woman, and it was decided that it was invalid. After this, women continued to gradually challenge discrimination in the workplace and achieved gender equality. The women’s court cases were often supported by the unions to which they belonged, but in some cases, they could not get support from their unions. In those cases, supporters formed a “protection group” to support the women’s cases.

Impact of International Women’s Year

The International Women’s Year of 1975 was a major milestone worldwide for the status of women. The Japanese government established the Women’s Affairs Planning Promotion Headquarters in the Prime Minister’s Office in September of the same year. In 1977, the National Action Plan was formulated. A signing ceremony for the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was scheduled at the UN World Conference on Women’s Decade (1976–1985). Although the Japanese government was reluctant, the women’s movement got active and Japan signed it. Domestic law was revised to ratify the treaty. Around that time, in Japan, the patriarchal nationality law was amended, home economics became coeducational, and gender equality in employment was established as a law. It also ratified the 1985 Treaty on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

In the 1990s, stimulated by a serial article, some women confessed that they were comfort women, the issue of comfort women was taken up in Korea. They made a claim and filed a suit against the Japanese government requesting apology and compensation. The official apology of the Japanese prime minister was also announced regarding past Japanese wars of invasion and colonial rule. A special report on violence against women was submitted to the 1996 United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Comfort women were defined as sexual slaves and were a sin of humanity. Military comfort women are a matter of Japan’s responsibility and disdain for women. We should continue to work with people from South Korea and the world to tackle this problem.

21st Century Women’s Movement

The number of regular employees in Japan in 2019 was 34.94 million, among them 11.6 million were women. There were 21.65 million non-regular employees, among them 14.75 million were female, and the majority of the jobs were taken by females. The Worker Dispatch Act, established in 1985, was subsequently revised. The number of temporary workers has increased during this period, reaching 1.42 million in 2019. With the revision in 2020, full-time employees and temporary employees have the same wages for the same work.

However, as the Lehman shock has increased the dispatch of workers, we are worried about the effects of the new corona crisis.

In the 21st century, the # Me Too movement to expose sexual harassment was very wide spread. In 2017, a civil lawsuit was filed in Japan, and in 2018 a suspicion of sexual harassment was protested within the National Assembly. It has been taken seriously as a human rights issue for women, and such actions are supported by public opinion.

According to the “Global Gender Gap Report 2020” surveyed and announced by the World Economic Forum (WEF), Japan has a large gender gap, especially in the political field, and is 121st among 153 countries in the world. A diverse approach to gender equality in all areas must continue to be pursued.

The Global Gender Gap Index Ranking, 2020

Rank	Country	Score
1	Iceland	0.877
2	Norway	0.842
3	Finland	0.832
4	Sweden	0.820
5	Nicaragua	0.804
6	New Zealand	0.799
7	Ireland	0.798
8	Spain	0.795
9	Rwanda	0.791
10	Germany	0.787
15	France	0.781
19	Canada	0.772
21	UK	0.767
53	USA	0.724
76	Italy	0.707
81	Russia	0.706
106	China	0.676
108	Korea	0.672
121	Japan	0.652

*0 is not completely equal 1 is completely equal

Explanatory note

This article is an English translation of the manuscript “Women’s Demands and Movements to Survive Postwar Society” published in “Gakushu no Tomo (Learning Company)” No. 804 (August 2020). This is one of the six articles in the special issue “Living as a Sovereign: The Fight of Japanese Society and the People”. This manuscript is a compact version of the post-war Japanese women’s movement and I wanted it to be known to people in other countries. The magazine has given permission.

Append a Note

I translated this article into English and cooperated with Marin Kuroki, an instructor at the Shinyurigaoka brunch of the AEON English School.