

Japanese Women's Legislative and Administrative Reforms in the Postwar Era

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to cast light on some little-known facts, profile and achievements of the Japanese women leaders who fought for gender equality in the postwar era under the regime of GHQ/SCAP (the General Headquarters/Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers). It is commonly believed that Japanese women effortlessly obtained political rights and enhanced social status after the defeat of Japan as generous "gifts" from General Douglas MacArthur. The fact is that Japanese women activists had been conducting assiduous grass-root drives for enfranchisement in the prewar days, and during the U.S. occupation their top leaders, allied with female members of GHQ, played an important role in the establishment of the new constitution which guarantees gender equality and the Women's and Minors' Bureau within the government which was a foothold for Japanese women to make policies concerning gender issues. This essay traces the activities and achievements of early female legislators and administrators whose contribution to the democratization of postwar Japan has been overlooked or underestimated to date.

Keywords: Japanese women, suffrage, the Women's and Minors' Bureau, Kato Shidzue

Prewar Feminism ¹

A rigorous women's suffrage movement existed in Japan long before GHQ/SCAP came to remake Japan. The Meiji-era Freedom and People's Rights Movement (*Jiyu minken undo*) was inaugurated by Itagaki Taisuke (1837-1919) who publicly demanded the prompt establishment of the National Diet and the constitution in 1874. Even in the late nineteenth century there were several feminist activists of fame in Japan, to name a few, Kusunose Kita (1836-1920), Kishida Toshiko (1863-1901) and Kageyama Hideko (1865-1927). Inspired by the men's democratic movement, female egalitarians also started a movement for gender equality and women's emancipation. However, in 1900, to silence their voices, the government enacted the Public Peace Police Law (*Chian Keisatsu Ho*) in 1900. Article 5 of this law

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prohibited women and minors from all political activity, but it did not nip the Japanese women's political movement in the bud. In 1905, female members of Heimisha(the Society of the Common People) rose against the autocratic government and demanded the amendment of the Article Five of the Peace and Police Law. Soon a new generation of suffragists emerged and formed various political groups. In 1919, Ichikawa Fusae(1893-1981), Hiratsuka Raicho (1886-1971) and others formed the New Women's Association(Shin Fujin Kyokai). In 1921, Yamakawa Kikue(1890-1980), Ito Noe(1895-1923) and other socialist women organized the Red Wave Society(Sekiran Kai). In the same year, Kato Shidzue(1897-2001) formed the Birth Control League and started the research on fertility issues and a publication, *Small Family*.² In 1922, the socialist women succeeded in amending Article five of the Peace and Police Law and regained the right of political activity. In the following year, however, Ito Noe who was an anarchist was illegally arrested and tortured to death along with other socialists by the military police during the confusion after the Great Kanto Earthquake on September 1. And in 1925, the Peace Preservation Law was enacted with the purpose of cracking down on communists and other social activists. Undaunted by these events, Japanese suffragettes managed to make the House of Representatives approve of a limited women's suffrage bill in 1931, though the House of Peers rejected it. The feminist movement in Japan had been steadily gaining power until the Manchurian Incident occurred on September 18, 1931.

The Manchurian Incident plunged Japan into the age of militarism and completely altered the course of women's movement. In wartime, women's organizations were forced either to cooperate with the militaristic government or to cease their activities. In fear of being jailed, Ichikawa Fusae abandoned her initial anti-war intentions and chose to collaborate with the militaristic government in the hope that the government would reciprocate by fully enfranchising women after the war. On the other hand, Yamakawa Kikue chose to stop her political activity and did not give active support to the military regime. Kato Shidzue opened Japan's first non-profit birth control clinic in 1934, but her work was also halted in wartime because, with the expansion of Japan's territory after the Manchurian Incident, women's reproductive role was emphasized under the slogan "bear babies and increase the population" (umeyo fuyaseyo). In 1937, the police closed her clinic and jailed her briefly for having "dangerous thoughts."³

Postwar Feminism

The end of the Japan-U.S. war on August 14, 1945 revived Japanese women's energetic movement for gender equality. Only ten days after Japan's surrender, Ichikawa Fusae organized the Women's Committee on Postwar Policy (Sengo Taisaku Fujin Inukai).⁴

Kato Shidzue viewed GHQ as emancipator of women and served them as translator and advisor on gender-related issues. One of the female GHQ staff members Kato assisted was Ethel B. Weed(1906-1975) who was appointed Women's Affairs Information Office.⁵ Other than Kato, Weed met several prominent

Japanese feminist figures in various fields and gave them a hearing. By visiting the rural parts of Japan (except Shimane and Tottori) and talking with ordinary women, Weed tried to understand Japanese women and explained the spirit of the New Constitution and gender equality. Her earnest efforts to communicate with Japanese women evoked admiration from her Japanese assistants. By the national media she encouraged Japanese women to vote with a slogan, "By your vote, you can create or destroy a legislator."⁶ Perhaps her lectures had a good influence on the audiences. Of eligible voters, 72.8% vote at the 22nd election for the House of Representatives on April 10, 1946. And 39 women out of 79 female candidates won seats.⁷ Ethel B. Weed was a nameless officer, but indisputably her efforts and achievement deserve more recognition of historians.

The First 39 female Diet members⁸

Competition in the first postwar general election was unprecedentedly keen. 2691 male candidates and 79 female candidates ran for 466 seats in the Diet. 79% of men and 67% of women went to the polls.⁹ Half of the female candidates won the election. The high success rate of female candidates is clear proof of the enormous popularity of female candidates among the voters at the time. Below is a profile of all the female members.

Name

Ando Hatsu, Imai Hatsu, Ooishi Yoshie, Oohasi Kimi, Kato Shidzue, Karasawa Toshie, Kimura Chiyo, Koro Mitsu, Koshihara Haru, Saito Tei, Sakakibara Chiyo, Sawada Hisa, Sugawara En, Sugita Kaoruko, Tsuchi Utako, Takeuchi Shigeyo, Takeda Kiyoko, Tanaka Tatsu, Togano Satoko, Tomita Fusa, Nakayama Tama, Niidzuma Ito, Nomura Misu, Honda Hanako, Matsuo Toshiko, Matsutani Tenkoko, Miki Kiyoko, Murajima Kiyoko, Mogami Hideko, Moriyama Yone, Yamaguchi Shidzue, Fujiwara Michiko, Yamashita Tsuko, Yamashita Harue, Yoshida Sei, Yoneyama Hisa, Yoneyama Fumiko, Wazaki Haru¹⁰

Age

Their average age was 46.7 years. The eldest member was Takeuchi Shigeyo(66). The youngest ones were Matsutani Tenkoko and Miki Kiyoko (both 28).¹¹

Party Affiliations

Nihon Shakai To (8), Nihon Shinpo To (6), Nihon Jiyu To (5), Nihon Kyousu To (1)
Minor parties (10), Independent(9)¹²

Occupation

Medical doctor (including dentist) (4), No occupation (10), Teacher, headmistress (8), Writer (2), Manager of business (4), Executive member of organization (5), Clerical worker (1), Midwife (1), Farmer (1), Unknown (3)¹³

Education

Primary school (2), Girls' high school (11), Teachers' College (including Koto Shihan) (5), Other college (4), Nihon Women's College (3), Tsuda-juku College (1), Waseda University (1), Technical school (3), Medical school (4), Foreign school (3), Unknown (2)¹⁴

Ogai Tokuko lists six reasons for the political victory of women in the 22nd election.¹⁵ The first reason is that the election was conducted in the multi-vote plurality system with large districts (*dai senkyoku sei*). Plural members being elected from a single constituency, fewer ballots need be cast for each one. Female candidates are often weak because they have fewer political resources than their male opponents. Therefore, the election system used in the 22nd election was favorable for female candidates to win. In the next 23rd election in 1947, the electoral system was changed to the single-vote system with medium districts (*chu senkyoku sei*). This electoral reform adversely affected women. The number of female winners dropped to only 15; in 1949 it further dropped to 12. The flood of women into politics rapidly receded. Thus Ogai regards the political victory of women in 1946 as a transitional phenomenon rather than a more lasting social trend.

The second reason was a broad purge of undesirables from government office. 82% of the incumbent members of the Diet (all men) became ineligible for office. This made ample room for female candidates to secure seats. Due to the scarcity of male candidates the political parties established a women's section and recruited female candidates for the 22nd election. Both the Liberal Party and the Socialist Party asked Ichikawa Fusae to recommend some appropriate female candidates. Ironically Ichikawa Fusae could not run for any election until 1950, for she was purged by SCAP because of her wartime support of the militarist government through the media.

Some of the recruited women were the wives of purged male politicians. They ran as substitutes for their husbands, but they were often more successful than their husbands in election. For instance, Koro Mitsu, Mogami Hideko, and Fujiwara Michiko became the Diet members in place of their husbands.¹⁶ Koro Mitsu lost her seat in the 23rd election but won a seat in the House of Councilors and served for three terms. Her husband, Koro Akira, attempted to reenter politics in 1952 but lost the election completely. Mogami Hideko won the election in 1946 and 1947 but lost in 1949. Her husband, Mogami Masazo, ran for the lower house in 1952 but met with the voters' disapproval like Koro Akira. The next year, his wife ran again for the upper house and won a seat.¹⁷ Another interesting case is Fujiwara Michiko. She married a Diet member, Yamazaki Kenji, and ran for a seat in the Diet in his place. Yamazaki had not returned to Japan from military service in Southeast Asia. But when he returned home a week before the election, he was with a Bornean wife and the children she had borne him. After winning the election, Fujiwara immediately divorced him. In the 1947 election, both Fujiwara and Yamazaki ran and fought with each other. Fujiwara beat her ex-husband. Despondent Yamazaki went to Brazil with his Bornean family.¹⁸ These cases show the dramatic change of man-woman relations in the postwar Japan. In the new

democratic Japan, independent women who can excel their husbands are much more popular than men with old outdated ideas.

The third reason was the Japanese voters' strong desire for peace. Both male and female voters thought female candidates to be pacifist or at least less harmful. Moreover, the food shortage was the nation's most immediate problem after the war. Female candidates were somehow expected to show superior practical ability in supplying enough food.

The fourth reason Ogai postulates is General MacArthur's support of women. He was a great feminist (at first). On October 11, in a meeting with Prime Minister Shidehara Kijuro, he instructed that the five pillars of postwar reform would be: the granting of full political rights to women; the granting of full political rights to workers including the right to form unions; the democratization of education; the abolition of conglomerate companies. The liberation of women through enfranchisement was at the top of his list of Five Great Reforms. He not only granted Japanese women suffrage but also advised politically minded women such as Kato Shidzue to run for the 22nd election. Each of the 39 women elected to the House received a message of congratulations from General.¹⁹

However, there is one fact that Ogai has omitted. Newly discovered evidence has revealed a surprising fact that the women's rights bill was not initiated by the Occupation forces but was drafted on the independent initiative of the Shidehara Kijuro Cabinet. The testimony of Horikiri Zenjiro, a minister of the Shidehara Cabinet, and the diary of Suita Daisaburo, Chief Cabinet Secretary of the Shidehara Cabinet, prove it.²⁰ The reason why they had passed the proposition for female suffrage at the cabinet council before the meeting with General MacArthur is unclear. However, citing this fact, Iwao Sumiko contends that the bill represents the fulfillment of the struggle carried on by the Japanese women's movement for decades and that Japanese women's suffrage was not given by the Americans but won by a small group of women's movement leaders.²¹

The fifth reason was economical. Usually rich candidates get an advantage over poor ones in election because they can spend more money on the election campaigns. In 1946, however, all the candidates were almost equally poor. On February 17, 1946, an official SCAP order froze funds in the banks in order to convert the old currency to the new Japanese yen bill. This economic condition was favorable to female candidates who had less political financing than their male counterparts. Almost no candidate afforded to "buy" votes in the 22nd election.²²

The sixth reason Ogai found out was the voters' misunderstanding of the new voting system. Gender equality in politics was so emphasized that many first-time voters got wrong ideas that men must vote for men and women must vote for women or that they have to write down a male name and a female name on a single ballot. Such misunderstandings worked favorably for female candidates in the 22nd election.²³

Ichikawa Fusae ²⁴

Although Ichikawa Fusae was not among the first 39 female Diet members, she directed newly elected Diet women, most of whom were amateur politicians, from the outside of the House. Ichikawa united the Diet women from different walks of life by organizing a nonpartisan women's club for them (Fujin Giin Kurabu).²⁵ The most pressing practical problem which the club members had to tackle was milk and food shortages. When all the women legislators met with General MacArthur on June 20, 1946, the first day of the new Diet's session, Kato Shidzue asked him to import "more wheat and soya beans for our people and milk for the babies," frankly telling him, "we are all hungry in Japan now."²⁶ No male Diet member could have made such a shameful request to the Americans on behalf of the Japanese people. Another female legislator, Saito Tei, also did a thing which no male Diet member would have dared to do: at the meeting with General MacArthur, she carried hydrocyanic acid in her pocket with the intention of swallowing it in front of him if he declined her request for food aid in order to save the lives of millions of starving Japanese. ²⁷ On July 25, 1946, chief members of the club submitted a bill to the House and succeeded in freezing the price of milk.

Another barrier the women in the Diet had to overcome was the lack of a women's powder room in the Diet building. Their demand for a women's powder room was also met successfully. Ichikawa viewed it as revolutionary. Regrettably this powerful nonpartisan club of the female Diet members dissolved itself in just four months due to irreconcilable differences of the party policies.

After the purge was rescinded in 1950, Ichikawa won a seat in the House of Councilors in 1953 where she would serve for most of the next three decades until she died in 1981. Her postwar political career is characterized by the advocacy of women's issues (especially prostitution), the promotion of women's participation in politics at all levels and the advocacy of clean politics.

Kato Shidzue ²⁸

Young Kato Shidzue accepted the marriage proposal from a mining engineer and moved to a smoky town near the Miike coal mines on the island of Kyushu. There she was shocked to see half-naked miners' wives working in coal pits with babies on their backs and sometimes even giving birth underground. She also saw some of the babies coughing up dust and dying. She felt that Japanese women should have more control over their bodies. Thus when she met Margaret Sanger, an American birth control activist, in New York in 1920, she was inspired to start birth control in Japan. During the early days of her birth control campaign, many Japanese were deeply opposed to birth control. Her earnest advocacy of contraception was only scoffed at by some Japanese men who said that using contraception was "like leaving a restaurant without paying the bill." ²⁹ In wartime she was forced to stop her work for birth control. After the war, during the days of the U.S. occupation she was elected to the House of Representatives in 1946 and 1947

consecutively. As a female lawmaker, she tried to legalize abortion and contraception and succeeded in passing the Eugenic Protection Law in 1948 which was amended the following year to permit abortions for "economic reasons" along with the manufacture and sale of contraceptives. From 1950 to 1974, Kato energetically campaigned for birth control as a member of the House of Councilors. As a result, by 1957, condoms were so widespread that Japan's birth rate was half what it was in 1947. The number of abortions also dropped from one million a year in the postwar era to 500,000 a year in 1985. Mark Weston, Kato Shidzue's biographer, comments on her achievement as follows:

Because of her role in helping to lower Japan's birth rate, Kato Shidzue, who turned 102 in 1999, has contributed as much to Japan's prosperity as the founders of Sony and Toyota. Between 1950 and 1985 the world's population doubled, but in Japan it rose just 45 percent. One hundred twenty-five million Japanese live in a country smaller than California. If the birth rate had been only slightly higher, tens of millions more would have competed for land and resources.³⁰

Today the population explosion has become a serious problem. An estimated one hundred million children are homeless and living in the streets.³¹ Birth control activists with the political acumen to propose effective policies and strategies like Kato Shidzue are much wanted in the over populated nations now.

Her second achievement was the participation in the Diet session's discussion of a new constitution as one of the first 39 Diet women in 1946. By virtue of Beate Sirota(1921-), two articles which guarantee gender equality(Article 14 and Article 24) were inserted in a new constitution drafted by SCAP. 72 members of the subcommittee responsible for reviewing the draft constitution were carefully selected by SCAP and they included six female members: Kato Shidzue, Takeda Kiyo, Moriyama Yone, Ohasi Kimi, Koshihara Haru, and Oishi Yoshie. No doubt Kato was chosen by SCAP for her good command of English and Americanized mindset. Focusing on Article 24, Kato appealed to the subcommittee to abolish the patriarchal system established as part of the Japanese Civil Code so that gender equality could truly exist.³²

Women's and Minors' Bureau

In creating a women's bureau in the Japanese government, Kato also played a critical role, for her ability to speak English enabled her to have close contact with influential female GHQ members such as Ethel Weed and Helen Mears(1900-1989). On August 5,1946, three female Diet members(Mogami Eiko, Takeda Kiyo, and Yoneyama Hisa) declared that they would introduce a special bill to create the Women's Bureau within either the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Welfare. Their plan, however, met with the disapproval of the mainstream GHQ male staff. Even General MacArthur, who gave top priority to women's suffrage in his "Five Great Reforms", contradicted himself by warning female Diet members

against forming a women's bloc and influencing policymaking. Why did they change their attitude to Japanese women? Perhaps they noticed that the majority of female Diet members were left. They were either socialist or communist. In 1946 and 1947, labor movements were becoming stronger day by day in and around Japan. In China communist revolution occurred in 1949 and the Korean War started in 1950. In 1946, Japan was swaying between capitalism and socialism. This situation probably made the attitude of the GHQ male staff conservative. On March 21, 1947, SCAP allowed the Japanese government to change the electoral system to a single vote one and decreased the number of female legislators to keep women down. However, succor was given to Japanese women. Helen Mears, the single female member of the GHQ/SCAP Labor Advisory Committee, was very positive on the need of creating a women's bureau in the Japanese government. In June, 1946, Mears submitted a personal report on Japanese women to GHQ, in which she wrote:

In view of new women Diet members' inexperience, a small minority can have little authority in policy-making. The desirability of setting up some administrative center in the government where women could have considerable authority in molding policies in relation to programs considered of special interest to women probably needs little urging.³³

Mear's and Japanese female Diet members' earnest demand pressured both American and Japanese men into setting up the women's bureau. On September 1, 1947, the Women's and Minors' Bureau was established within the newly created Ministry of Labor, though Japanese women disliked the name of the bureau which seemed to regard women and children (onna-kodomo) together as weak. This bureau consisted of the Women Workers' Section, the Minor Workers' Section and the Women's Section. Although several women were nominated as the first director of the bureau, Yamakawa Kikue became the first director. It was because Kato Shidzue wrote letters to Ethel Weed and recommended Yamakawa to her. Yamakawa retained this position until 1963. The bureau was charged with the tasks of carrying out surveys on the working conditions of women and children, ensuring their protection, enforcing the prohibition of child labour, and considering the conditions of domestic labour. In all prefectures, the bureau set up local branch offices staffed by women only. GHQ female members stationed in the rural areas enthusiastically served as advisor to inexperienced female staff at the local offices.³⁴ Bureau staff members in both central and local offices devoted themselves to supporting women and minor workers enough to get the public support. When the bureau faced the danger of abolishment due to a budget cut in early 1949, a large number of protesters (15,000!) turned up in Hibiya Park to protect the bureau. Through the enthusiastic support of people, the Women's and Minors' Bureau survived the crisis.

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