

Bashing Gender Equality: Establishing a System that Skews the Population on All Sides

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Demeaning counter-movements that “bashes” gender equality are spreading quietly but rapidly in Japan. Certain media publish demagogues which undermine gender equality movements. Legislators in both national and municipal assemblies employ such demagogues as leverage to attack gender equality movements. Some municipalities have even appointed known anti-gender-equality speakers to give talks at local “gender equality” teach-ins. Boards of education here and there, typically the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education, squeeze out sex education from the sphere of public education. To top it off, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) suggests that a “review” be opened on Article 24 of the Japanese Constitution, the clause that upholds gender equality within households [by stating that marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife]. All of these bashing movements are aiming towards a set of new standards of national integration which will divert public anxieties arising as a result of [the destructive impact of neo-liberal] globalization. I would call this “a new system that skews the population on all sides to adapt to globalization”. This article will report the reality of ongoing attacks on gender equality in Japan, and investigate the underlying aims of the system.

Rising “Bashing” against Gender Equality Movements

In response to the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Japanese government embarked upon various legal structural reforms in the late 1990s to help integrate gender equality into policies of all sorts. In 1996, the Diet received bills to amend Civil Law, including a scheme to authorize an option for a married couple to officially have separate surnames [in effect making it possible for women to keep their original surnames upon marriage]. In 1997, the Anti-Domestic Violence (DV) Law was enforced, and The Equal Employment Opportunity Law was reformed. The reform was implemented in exchange for abandoning legal restrictions on the hours of women’s overtime work. It was, nevertheless, a big step forward as it “prohibited” sexual discrimination at all levels of recruitment, hiring, placement, promotion and training in the workplace whilst the preceding version only mandated employers to “make efforts” not to discriminate. This reform also called for the implementation of preventive guidelines against sexual harassment in the workplace. In 1999, the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society was enacted,

aspiring to a “society where constituents can fully demonstrate their abilities regardless of gender.” At around the same time, a lively movement arose to legally mandate equal treatment (such as in wages and benefits) for both full-time and part-time employees. [This target was?a big issue for the feminist movement of the time as the part-time workforce was exclusively made up of women then].

In the context of these reforms, the first symptom of hostile bashing against gender equality appeared. It was intensive opposition from conservative organizations to the optional “separate surnames for married couples”. These conservative groups claimed that the reform would undermine the “unity of family”. Consequently, the amendment bill to allow the option was abandoned and has not been realized to this day.

Some of the bashing started targeting the women who brought the “comfort women” issue to light. [“Comfort women” is a euphemism for women who were confiscated by the Japan Imperial Military during World War II to be used by soldiers for sexual satisfaction.] Eventually, this was exaggerated to the extent that the late journalist MATSUI Yayori, an advocate of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery, 2000, and an economist OOSAWA Mari, the leading planning member of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society, received death threats when they were scheduled to give public talks.

From the year 2000, attacks against gender equality education intensified. Here, the demagogue was spread that “gender equality” denies biological sexual difference and that it moulds young minds into an androgynous model. The mechanism for slander works as follows. First, a segment of conservative periodicals publish essays by right-wing intellectuals. Examples of such essays would read, “To promote gender equality, some schools force boys and girls to change their clothes in the same room for gym classes” or “It is said that boys and girls share the restrooms as part of their gender-equality education.” Next, assembly members, both at local and congressional levels, quote these essays during their questioning sessions and put pressure on mayors (administrators) and education boards not to follow the path. Then, major conservative newspapers write about these assembly sessions, relaying the self-made scandal.

Local administrations are giving in to the attack from the legislature and are voluntarily diminishing education in gender equality in response. Since the mid 1990s, there has been a movement to unify the hitherto two separate gender-based listings of students in classes into a mix-gendered one in alphabetical order. The conventional format, which listed male students first, was considered to prioritize male over female students rather than accentuating individual qualities. However, the unification attempt invited attacks from the media, as well as from the legislators, which claimed that unified lists would “make students androgynous”. Some local administrations reverted to the separate gender listings. Another reactionary incident came from the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education, admonishing numbers of teachers for exceeding the sexual norm as they were teaching the mechanism of sexual intercourse using dolls [at a special ed. school]. [They were teaching material especially arranged by the targeted teachers for their students with special educational needs.]

The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society established in 1999 requires municipalities to implement ordinances to put gender equality in practice, but the spirit of the law is now grotesquely twisted. Upon drafting the community ordinances, some municipalities even appointed plural right-wing opponents of gender equality to be the very members of the working committees. Others invited them to speak for public seminars on the promotion of gender equality.

The height of these conservative counter movements was probably in June 2004 when the ruling LDP’s project team for Constitution reform attacked Article 24 which upholds gender equality in marriages and households. Article 24 has provided the constitutional basis for the laws involving

various women's rights such as the Anti-DV Law (enacted) and the freedom to keep separate surnames (dropped) since the late 1990s. The project team announced "Issues to be Reviewed" which stated that "Article 24 of the Constitution should be reviewed from a perspective which attaches importance to values of family and community." Their "Review" also insisted that new public (i.e. constituents') obligations, such as the "duty to care for one's family," should be imposed.

The Right Wing behind the Politics

There has always been slander against gender equality movements, but in the past, the hosts have been a handful of men's tabloid magazines and the like. This time, the right wing counter movement is different in that local and national assemblies, administrations and even national papers are taking part in the slander. Who are the agents of the obstinate bashing coordinated among legislators, administrators, and the mass media?

In her article, "Reactionary Forces against Gender Equality" (We Nov.2004, in Japanese), MITSUI Mariko, a former member of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly who specializes in policies on women's issues, names two organizations that have spearheaded the conservative agenda. One is supposedly the largest Japanese rightwing group, the Japan Congress (Nihon Kaigi), whose utmost aim is to amend the Constitution [to the right]. The other is the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (STR) (Tsukuru-kai) which is known for the claim that school text books on Japanese history are "biased." [There is a standard for text books authorized by the national curriculum.]

According to MITSUI, the Japan Congress was established in 1997 and has branches in 47 prefectures that are grouped into 9 blocs. The Congress is presided over by a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Its member organizations include the Association of Shinto Shrines, the umbrella organization of Japanese Shinto, as well as other religious groups. ISHIHARA Shintaro, the Governor of Tokyo, is another prominent member. Approximately 240 National Diet members form a round table for this organization working in liaison with right wing opinion leaders and former military clans.

The Society for Textbook Reform is also said to enjoy the participation of university lecturers, Diet members and about 160 local assembly members. This group also has a link to each prefecture via the Text Book League of Assembly Members, STR's sub-organization. Many of the politicians who attack gender equality education in local assemblies are members of the league and the like organizations.

Now that Japanese society is aging and the size of younger generations is diminishing, female participation in the labor force is claimed to be vital. Also, venereal diseases are spreading among youth and sex education seems long overdue. Even so, the politicians are joining these retrogressive movements, asserting from "Men, be men, women, be women" to "Sex education is too much." Why do many politicians respond to such gender equality bashing?

The structural reforms which Prime Minister Koizumi has been pressing for have brought two big changes to Japanese society since 2000. Firstly, the Koizumi Administration cut down public expenditure on grants and funds to local administrations. This made it difficult for local LDP politicians to siphon off money from the center, and thus to offer benefit to voters to vote for them. Secondly, due to aggressive downsizing in industry, full-time workers decreased drastically. One out of three workers (or more than a half of woman workers) became incorporated into irregular part-time labor instead.

Thus, a number of voters in local municipalities have become estranged from LDP, the proportion of voters with secure jobs who would have preferred the stable status quo has decreased and swing votes have in turn increased. For a new dependable source of votes, anxious local politicians now tend to seek support from certain religious organizations and right-wing groups.

MASUZOE Yoichi, a member of the House of Councilors, criticizes the proposed amendment of Article 24 of the Constitution, even though he is an LDP member, because “The amendment goes against the social current towards diversity in styles of household, within which so many women need to work.” Concerning the motivation behind the proposed amendment, he contends that “this kind of reactionary move is a quick and sure way to obtain votes from conservative organizations on which legislators need to depend.”

This is the political background in which the slander, that a handful of biased organizations advocate, came to affect the decisions of local assemblies. Gender-equality bashing in legislation is not necessarily the voice of the majority. Mass media which should keep these slanders in check, too, has a gender bias in the composition of its employees: only about one out of ten reporters is a woman. While there are many articles which propagate gender-equality bashing, very few critically examine such articles. So-called “liberal” media sit on the fence and choose rather not to discuss the attacks. Consequently, such attacks do not emerge as a social issue. The structure created out of all the factors above might well have accelerated the anti-equality atmosphere to be larger than life.

The Hidden Goals: War-ready Society and Cheap Female Labor

The problem would not be so serious if these bashing movements functioned just as a rightwing call for retrogressive anachronisms. However, the ongoing attacks against gender equality could actually be one piece of a big plan aiming to convert Japan into a war-ready society. It could be an aspect of preparation for joining and siding with the US dominance via forging wars and invasions, as is seen in the case of Iraq. Professor NAKAZATOMI Hiroshi, a Constitutionalist at Fukushima University analyses that the proposed amendment of Article 24 (gender equality) goes hand in hand with the suggested revisions of Article 25, which mandates the state’s duty to provide welfare, and of the famous Article 9, which makes concrete the abandonment of war.

Such fears are not without basis. The LDP’s project team toward Constitution reform proposes putting “duty to care for family” and “duty of national defense” into it as part of the “public obligations”. The team also wants to add a new clause to Article 25 (social security and welfare clause) that obligates constituents’ “responsibility to support social welfare.” In other words, the LDP’s “Issues to be Reviewed” imply that the state should not be the sole provider of welfare but that the obligation also lies in the constituents; i.e. families should be responsible for looking after their own members. If “gender equality within the household” provision (Article 24) is repealed on top of this, women will be obliged to shoulder the unpaid care work at home. National expenditure on welfare may be reduced as well. While regression in gender equality and social security binds women with mandatory unpaid labor, the regression in Article 9 (the abandonment of war clause) will round up men for national defense.

Now we know that gender equality bashing aims to help the state shed welfare costs by mobilizing female unpaid labor to the full extent. If women can still find time between caring for the sick, the old and the young, they can go out to work, part-time for a minimum wage. From an economic perspective, this is a postwar tried and tested system for suppressing wages, which is now being reinforced in order to cut costs to face competition in this time of globalization.

Gender-based division of labor is nothing new to Japanese society. Japan’s postwar decades were

maintained by such a system, underpinned by rapid economic growth. This was a system in which men with life-long job security were guaranteed enough salary to support their whole families as heads of nuclear households, while their spouses engaged in unpaid reproductive labor. However, globalization and the structural reforms by Prime Minister Koizumi leading to downsizing in industry are undermining this. The fact that more women now proceed into higher education is also causing it to lose its popularity.

This is the background to the conservatives' attempt to reinforce the gender-based social division of labor centered around the family unit. The regressive movements toward constitutional amendments have to be understood in this context, and the slander against gender equality is the prologue to an entire mechanism of societal restructuring.

Let me sum up the stakes each interest group has in this restructuring scheme. (1) The right wing wants to impose normative roles on family, particularly on women, in an attempt to quell the anxiety about eroding the old order as though in the postwar period. (2) Politicians aim to obtain votes by joining (1), as well as to convert the society to be war-ready by getting rid of constitutional confinements. (3) The economic world aims to maintain a reserve army (part-time workers with a minimum wage and minimum benefits) and to reduce the cost of welfare. (4) Male circles of business and large media who are fearful of the changing circumstances and nostalgic about the lost status quo, support and spread the rightist trend.

The division of labor and exploitation of men's dedication to work and women's to home were the foundation of the rapid industrial economic growth in Japan. However, this paradigm has long since reached its limit. The four groups try hard to keep procuring the human resources and concentrate their energy into the making of a new 'system that skews the population on all sides' glimpsed behind the gender-equality bashing.

Resistance from Women

This system of societal restructuring did not go unnoticed. Women in Japan are responding quickly.

A housewife (age 47) learned about the "Review" (of the Constitution) by the LDP in June 2004 through the Internet. She realized the urgent nature of the scheme, and contacted women's organizations she knew and started a study group about the LDP's proposal to amend Article 24. She knew first hand about the loss of identity and self-esteem which resulted from her quitting a job in order to join her then long distant partner and marry him, twenty years ago. When she married, she changed her family name, and lost her work that used to support her identity as well as her practical sufficiency. She did not know anyone around the new home and suffered a lonely task of child-rearing. Eventually, she regained her self by choosing to reclaim her family name. "Having experienced sacrificing all of me for my family, then suffering it to a great extent, I was shocked to see that LDP's "Review" demanding the duty to care for family and prioritized family over individuals' she explains.

Her study group grew and eventually launched a campaign to prevent the revision of Article 24. Their initial convention on Nov. 5, 2004 in Tokyo attracted so many participants that the hall they prepared was not big enough to seat everyone. The speakers included a mother of a disabled child as well as researchers in women's studies. They warned in turn that "The amendment aims to externalize the costs of welfare to the unpaid labor of women. Caring and child-rearing will be left without societal support, and households will be in disarray." Japanese households bear progressively fewer children [with the current birthrate of around 1.3 children per woman]. With a diminishing young working population, national revenue can not be maintained by keeping women

as cheap, irregular or unpaid labor. From the state's perspective, it is necessary that they become workers who can pay tax and duty to social security. To enable women to do so in an aging society with a low birthrate like Japan, public expenditure would have to be rerouted to provide public daycare for the young and the old. This was the direction into which the legalization of women's rights in the late 1990s was aiming to shift.

The conservatives have been resisting and repeatedly trying to amend Article 24 as a threat to their dominance since the Constitution was enacted. This time, the "Review" caused an immediate surge of protests from women, not only because there is apprehension about increase oppression of women, but because there also is a mixture of shock and fear that the review as such will be too regressive and counterproductive to deal with the drastically diminishing young population.

Probably owing to women's protests, the LDP did not include the proposal for the Article 24 Amendment when it published a draft for revisions of the Constitution in November 2004. The draft is toned down compared to its predecessor "Issues to be Reviewed", only stating that households are the smallest building blocs of the society. This statement too, however, is attracting criticism as the idea still prioritizes households over women and paves the way to loading women with more responsibilities than their share.

Alliances of the "Skewed"

The gender-based division of labor where women worked unpaid served to reduce public expenditures on welfare when the Japanese national birthrate was high and there was surplus labor. But the division of labor is not suitable in this time of a decreasing working population. In order to utilize this anachronistic structure again, neo-liberals in Japan seem to be counting on foreign workers in the last resort.

The Japanese government is drafting free-trade agreements with other Asian countries through which it will incorporate foreign labor into the areas of medicine and care. Instead of re-routing public expenditure to establish ways to allow women to leave the house and work outside, the government seems to be scheming to introduce under-paid foreigners as paid care providers for children, the sick and the old. In this case, however, it is likely that the foreign workers' human rights will be depreciated; there is a real possibility that the Japanese government will attempt to keep their rights out of Japanese labor rights in order to suppress their wages.

Already in Japan, legislating equal treatment for part-time workers has been put off, and they are ostracized from the standard labor rights, such as child-care leave and the principle of equal pay for equal work, which full-time workers have achieved. The tiered structure has already drawn our attention in some workplaces in Japan in which foreign workers are situated at the bottom. If they show their will to protest, however, the Japanese immigration control have them deported.

Finally, such unjust treatment may well increase social anxiety. Hence, the rulers play a trump to deal with it: making scapegoats.

As seen above, the contradiction between the LDP's plot to reconstruct women's role as unpaid workers at home and the needs of the labor market to deal with the reality of decreasing labor force will widen. By labeling women as responsible for welfare of their family, women will be to blame when the welfare system stalls. Gender equality bashing opens the way to make women scapegoats.

Similarly, if the utilization of foreign labor fails, it is easy to shift the blame onto foreigners themselves, covering the policy's inconsistency with human rights. Through their newly-launched

governmental website, the Japanese government is already fabricating the atmosphere that foreigners are not to be trusted. The website has the function gain tip-offs about foreigners who might, or might not, be “illegal immigrants” and asks constituents to comply with it.

Since neo-liberal policies became mainstream, men and women have both been increasingly feeling anxious and insecure. Men have lost job security. Without the shelter of secure employment for men, households have stopped being safe havens for housewives. Both men and women are thus susceptible to make use of the scapegoats.

In other words, this unpragmatic social restructuring scheme, or the new system of skewing the population on all sides, is coupled with the introduction of new built-in scapegoats to Japanese society. Even if the new system fails, not much attention will go to discussing the fundamental root causes. Then, the trouble worsens as the falsely accused victims increase.

Similar scapegoating has been introduced already here and there. One symbolic case is the admonishment of the special ed teachers who provided sex education as mentioned above. Another grave example is a series of administrative punishments imposed on school teachers who refused to sing the National Anthem (Kimigayo) and/or to raise the National Flag (the Rising Sun) during graduation ceremonies [Kimigayo and the Rising Sun were the very symbols of Japan’s imperialism and military invasion from the run-up to the end of World War II. Many educationalists as well as others have been against the use of the same symbols and against the nationalism that have increasingly been forcing the use recently]. The Japanese school system already contains serious problems due to budget deficiencies and insufficient educational facilities, but these punishments spotlight the “incompliant bad teachers” and divert the constituents’ dissatisfaction toward these scapegoats.

When Article 24 was threatened, many people from the field of education joined forces to protest against it. Various groups of people collaborated in organizing civic actions. This is the kind of alliance that is most needed now. The many scapegoats and scapegoats-to-be in isolation need to link themselves to each other. Through widespread networks made up of each link, they need to prevent themselves from being alienated, and to share information and understanding with anyone who could be designated as the next scapegoat. People on all sides of this debacle need to recognize the how the ‘skewing’ mechanism works and stand up together against it, now.

P.S.

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