

Women in Japanese Local Politics: From Voters to Activists to Politicians

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“I think that we need to elect female representatives to national assemblies to address women’s issues and into local assemblies to help solve community problems surrounding children and the family.” [1] Ichikawa Fusae

“Increasing the number of female representatives alone will neither change politics nor increase the autonomy of the local community. Women who belong to existing parties and organizations that pursue vested interests have been unable to change the political system. It is broadly citizen-based independent female representatives who are given a free hand ... who can make a difference.”

[2] Teramichi Midori

The 1979 United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women highlights the importance of

women’s equal participation in public life. Since the early 1960s, women in Japan have voted in elections at a significantly higher rate than men. However, Japanese women’s equal participation in policy formulation and decision-making processes lags far behind the participation of women in other major democracies. The principles of gender equality are endorsed by the Japanese constitution, yet their incorporation into social practice is yet to be fully realized. While there are no legal constraints on the rights of Japanese women to nominate for public office, they are proportionally under-represented in local and national elected assemblies. In 1999 a landmark law substantially contributed to gender equality when the Japanese government, for the first time, legally prescribed men and women to be equal partners and denounced discrimination against women on the basis of stereotypical gender norms and roles. This was followed by the introduction of an unprecedented number of policy changes and legislative and organizational reforms at the national level. In the same year, women’s groups operating at a grassroots level surpassed the rate

of policy, organizational, and legal changes by successfully conducting a major nationwide campaign for *More Women to Assemblies*. This led to an unprecedented increase in the number of women elected as representatives at a local level.

The purpose of this article is to assess women's expanding political role in Japan, and to explore the potential of female representatives to provide alternative viewpoints and frameworks for solving the problems of wider political disengagement in this male-dominated representative democracy. In making their voices heard, women are highlighting the need for egalitarian institutions, in tandem with creating new associations and promoting public discussion in civil society. In my discussion, I will highlight the watershed events of 1999 which helped pave the way towards a gender-equal society in Japan, with special emphasis placed on the importance of grassroots missions in eliminating barriers to the participation of Japanese women in political institutions and processes.

Representative democracy in post-WWII Japan is at a crossroads: Japan's voter turnout has been alarmingly low and the number of voters who abstain from voting, is continuing to rise. Voter turnout in lower house elections averaged more than 70% until the late 1980s. In the voter turnouts dropped to their lowest levels (44.5% in the 1995 upper house election, 59.7% in the 1996 lower house election, and about 55% in the 1995

unified local elections) in post-WWII Japan. (Koizumi's popularity did not significantly reverse the trend; the turnout was 59.9% in the 2003 lower house election and 56.6% in the 2004 upper house election.) While this could be a sign of widespread political apathy, it is more likely a reaction to the old politics of pork barreling that has long favored special interest groups. In this respect, it is political alienation rather than apathy that may appropriately explain the degree and nature of political disengagement in Japan. Currently, there is an exceptionally high demand for an alternative politics, which is unparalleled in Japan's recent history. This has provided an opportunity for reformists and new political groups to work towards democracy-building. Already, forward-looking women's groups in Japan are proposing alternative forms of political renewal.



Artwork by elementary school children in a poster contest in Takefu City, Fukui Prefecture in 2000. poster depicts sharing work at home.

In December 1945 the Japanese government, guided by the occupation authorities, revised an election law for the House of Representatives granting Japanese women, 20 or over, the right to suffrage and those 25 or over, the right to candidacy, provisions identical with those for men. Articles 14, 24, and 44 of the 1947 constitution declared equality for men and women.

Women's rights first became an issue for the UN following the World Conference of the International Year of the Woman in 1975. By the mid-1990s, the UN increasingly strengthened its mechanisms on the protection of women's rights, which were then ratified by member states including Japan. The Beijing Women's Conference of 1995 also helped stimulate a political climate that stimulated gender reform through increased activism by women's groups and female political leaders, and pressure for Japan to conform to international norms on gender equality.

The national government enacted the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999. This was the first time that Japanese authorities advanced a paradigm of a gender-equal society. This law required the state to create institutional mechanisms promoting equal gender participation and gender equality. Changes followed at the level of law and policies as well as political changes at the grassroots level. However, many leaders of women's

organizations believed that genuine gender reform could be only achieved through raising the awareness of Japanese women. By the late 1990s, key women's organizations were increasingly participatory and action-oriented towards the actualization of equal rewards for women. They were responding in part to UN calls for increasing the number of female assembly representatives to at least one-third of seats, so that women would expand their influence in the wider society. As a result of their efforts, there were a record number of women challenging assembly seats in the 1999 unified local elections. The number of female candidates in these elections increased from 2,144 in the 1995 unified local elections to 3,065 in the 1999 unified local elections, an increase of 43 percent. However, women's share of seats in local assemblies in 1999 was just 6.2 percent, a very low figure in a cross-national perspective. [3] For example, in the UK, women currently make up 27 % of local councilors. More impressive, in some African countries such as Tanzania, Botswana, and Namibia, more than 30% are female representatives in local councils.

I turn next to grassroots organizations at the forefront of campaigns to promote power sharing and increase the number of women representatives in politics and decision-making processes. In 1999, two watershed events took place. First, was the Basic Law for a Gender-Equality Society. Second was the unprecedented

success of grassroots campaigns to increase women's share of seats in local elections. My examination of these campaigns centers on independent female candidates. These candidates, who are not affiliated with any political party, are supported by groups that seek to attract independent voters irrespective of gender.

Women as Independent Candidates in Local Elections

My research clearly indicates that Japanese women are becoming more engaged in politics, including overcoming gender-specific barriers to stand for election. I illustrate this increased participation by focusing on independent female candidates in local elections while pointing out that the increase in numbers of female representatives is not necessarily a direct reflection of the inclusion of their voices in political processes.

In the initial stages of agenda-setting, the majority of female representatives tend to work together on a non-partisan basis to support women's issues such as day-care, maternity leave, and curbing sexual harassment. Although the increase in the number of female representatives has made it easier to retain women's issues on the political agenda, and to occasionally introduce gender-related policies beyond the scope of partisan politics, it is largely citizen-based female independents who have

spearheaded gender reform at the local level.

Japan's Readiness for Gender Equality

According to *Human Development Report 2005* Japan ranks 11th (among 177 countries) with 0.943 of the Human Development Index (HDI), and 14th (among 140 countries) with 0.937 of the Gender-Related Development Index (GDI). However, Japan drops to 43rd place (among 80 countries) with just 0.534 of the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). [4]

Even more critical, according to the February 2006 data compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Japan stood in 105th place on women's shares of seats in a lower or single house (9 percent). Today, many developing countries such as Rwanda (48.8 percent), Pakistan (21.3 percent) and the Philippines (15.7 percent) far exceed Japan in terms of women's share of seats in a lower or single house. [5]



Japanese women office workers

Building a Gender Equal Society from the Ground-Up

The principle of gender equality was established

with the legislative enactment of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society and associated laws. This swift formal development was accompanied by a gradual but steady evolution of gender norms and expectations among the general public. Traditional beliefs and expectations surrounding gender roles, which are deeply-rooted in Japanese society, have been gradually changing in recent years. Government surveys indicate a significant decline in the ratio of those interviewed who ‘fully;’ or ‘partially’ supported the premise that “the man should work outside and the woman should remain at home” from 73 percent in 1979, to 58 percent in 1997, and 45 percent in 2004. [6] Changes in the attitudes of the community were also evident in 1991 when 64.3 percent of female respondents and 68.1 percent of male respondents supported the need to increase the numbers of female elected-representatives. [7] While discrimination against women in general and women as electoral candidates in Japan has clearly decreased, this seems to have had little bearing on women’s share of seats which constituted just 9.2 percent in 2005 for national assemblies and 7.9 percent in 2003 for local assemblies. [8] Such weak relationships are also found in other countries such as Australia, Britain, and the United States. [9]

The structural constraints embedded in Japan’s electoral system have a direct relationship to the low rate of women holding office. Some scholars have demonstrated that larger electoral district

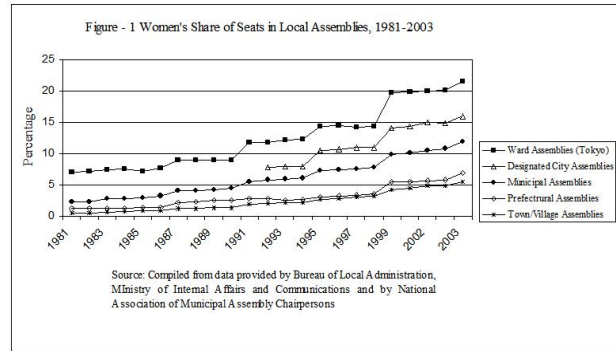
systems better accommodate the efforts of female candidates to win seats, [10] while others argue that a proportional representation system is more supportive of women in this respect than a single-member district system. [11] In the 1946 election, when Japanese women first gained the right to vote, 39 women were elected under a large constituency system [12] to the House of Representatives. In the following year, Japan introduced a new system for the lower house, made up of medium-sized multi-member districts (3 to 5 seats in each district) with single non-transferable votes; under this system, women’s seats declined immediately to 15 in the 1947 election and, by the 1986 election, had dropped further to a low of 7 seats. By 1993, the 38-year rule of the LDP ended, and Japan reformed its electoral system to small-sized single-member districts combined with a proportional representation system. In the subsequent 1996 election, women’s seats increased to 23, with 16 of these seats proportionally elected. Proportional representation seemed the most favorable environment for female candidates. [13]



Doi Takako, Japan's leading woman politician as leader of the Socialist Party (1996-2003) and President of the Diet (1993-97)

While Japan’s experience in national elections

seems to support the links and observations in the above-mentioned literature, local elections suggest a different story. Elections for local assemblies have been organized under a large constituency system with 1 to 18 seats in each district for prefectural and designated city assemblies, and a large number of seats in single districts covering the whole area for city/ward/town/village assemblies. [14] However, women’s share of seats in larger constituency-based local assemblies remained extremely low, indeed stagnant, until the 1983 unified local election. From this point there were small incremental changes at local assembly elections with women gaining 1.7 percent of seats in 1986. [15] It is interesting though that women holding public office at the local level rapidly increased during the late 1990s. [16] It is unlikely that the highly structured electoral system was a primary factor enabling the sudden rise of female representatives. Other critical factors may include women’s awareness of, and willingness to, incorporate their voices within policy formulation and decision-making processes.



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Women’s campaigns in local elections in recent years have illustrated the capacity of Japanese women to form networks, to help raise the awareness of women in general, and to successfully increase the number of female representatives. Figure 1 illustrates that 1999 was a turning-point for the representation of women at the local level. In simultaneously held local elections in April 1999, a total of 2,381 women were elected to local assemblies (in prefectures, cities, towns, and villages), with the percentage of women elected increasing to 6.2 percent, an increase of 1.3 percent from the previous election. In the 1999 unified local elections, for the first time ever, nearly 20 percent (cf. 14.3 percent in 1998) of the 972 representatives in 23 Special Ward assemblies of Tokyo were female; equally significant, the number of women elected to Prefectural assemblies soared by a stunning 70 percent from the previous 1995 elections. The 1999 unified local elections were also something of a political milestone, for women were elected to local assemblies in *all* 10 prefectures which, to

	Ward Assemblies (Tokyo)	Designated City Assemblies	Municipal Assemblies	Prefectural Assemblies	Town/Village Assemblies
1981	7		2.3	1.2	0.6
	7.1		2.3	1.2	0.6
1983	7.5		2.9	1.2	0.7
	7.6		2.9	1.2	0.8
1985	7.1		3	1.3	0.9
	7.7		3.2	1.4	0.9
1987	8.9		4	2.2	1.2
	8.9		4.1	2.3	1.2
1989	8.9		4.2	2.6	1.3
	8.9		4.5	2.6	1.4
1991	11.8		5.6	2.8	1.9
	11.8	7.9	5.8	2.8	2
1993	12.1	8	5.9	2.6	2.2
	12.3	8	6.1	2.7	2.2
1995	14.3	10.5	7.3	3.1	2.7
	14.4	10.7	7.4	3.3	2.9
1997	14.2	11	7.6	3.4	3.1
	14.3	11	7.9	3.5	3.3
1999	19.7	14.1	9.8	5.5	4.2
	19.8	14.3	10.1	5.5	4.5
2002	20	15	10.5	5.7	4.8
	20.2	14.9	10.8	5.8	4.9
2003	21.5	16	11.9	6.9	5.6

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that point in time, had been represented by men only. [17] The campaigns of female candidates and their support groups and networks gained considerable attention in the media and helped raise awareness of the need for gender equality among the general public.

In 1992 a women's group, the Alliance of Feminist Representatives, was formed by independent elected representatives and those endeavoring to elect more women to local and national assemblies. Together, they launched a campaign urging an increase in the ratio of female representatives to at least 30 percent. Mitsui Mariko, a Tokyo Metropolitan assemblywoman, and other foundation members who were familiar with similar proposals at UN women's conferences, argued that a ratio of 30 percent would provide the minimal threshold for forming a critical mass whose voices could not be ignored in assemblies. [18] In 1994 the Alliance investigated the numbers of female representatives and found that women were not included as representatives in 58 percent of some 3300 local assemblies. [19] To rectify this, they launched a project known as 'Eliminate Zero-Women Representatives Assemblies!' in 1997 demanding that political groups and parties include female candidates in targeted electoral districts across the nation. Three years earlier, in 1994, the Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Foundation had established the Promotion Center for Women's Political Participation, a training program to help women stand for local elections;

it offered two courses, one providing practical knowledge for running local elections and the other providing political education for women.[20] The majority of participants were women between the ages of 40 and 55 who lacked *sanban*(the three foundations) of family support, organized support groups, and financial resources. [21] There were eight to ten, two-day sessions over the space of one year in the first course, five two-day sessions over one year in the second course. [22] In 1994, 93 women from 19 prefectures across Japan participated in the training program [23] with a further 709 women completing the program during the following nine years.[24] Training for the program was provided for the most part gratis by academics, government officials, politicians, journalists and accountants. This was fortuitous as the program was not financially supported by any government body but relied on membership fees and private charitable contributions. It neither recommended nor supported specific political ideologies and parties, nor did it endorse or recommend any specific candidate for election. It provided an independent place for networking among participants from all parts of Japan. In the 1995 unified local elections, 36 of 93 inaugural program participants ran for election and 24 of these won a seat. [25]

This concept of providing training for prospective candidates spread throughout grassroots groups across the nation, and such training programs were called *bakku-appu sukuru*

(backup schools). In 1996 the Women and Politics Information Center in Kansai initiated a Women to Assemblies backup school. By 1998 grassroots groups in 17 of 47 prefectures had organized similar backup schools and, in 2003 these same groups were active in 24 prefectures. [26] Although there was some variation in their activities, they all shared common features: no affiliation with any political party, a commitment to women's political participation, and financing through internal funds (for example, membership fees).

Local governments also developed a scheme called *josei kaigi* (women's simulation assembly), which was designed to promote activities for women to participate in local decision-making and to send more women to assemblies. Despite the value of the local government's scheme, it was women's groups that had initially requested the local administration to hold simulation assemblies on a regular basis, and it was existing assembly-women that had proposed inclusion of simulation assemblies as part of local gender-equality policy. In 1996 just 10 local governments ran simulation assemblies, a figure that rose to 48 in 1999, and 116 in 2002. As one example, the Yamanashi prefecture implemented a simulation assembly program in 1988 as part of its gender-equality policy called Yamanashi Human Plan 21. In 1999, 6 of the 22 simulation assembly participants were elected to Yamanashi's local assemblies that had never had female representatives. The participants were openly

recruited or recommended by women's organizations (such as housewives' and consumers' associations) with the number of participants mirroring the total number of seats in the real assembly. Simulation assemblies were typically held as a one-day or half-day event, although participants would be invited to attend several preparatory meetings and training sessions, which, in Toyama prefecture for example, ran for 100 days. Actual assembly halls were then made available for simulation in which participants took the floor to question chief executives from the community or government officials in charge of policy issues in line with practices at *bona fide* assembly sessions. Simulation plays allowed participating women to experience what it would be like to be an assembly-member and to learn how to transform their involvement at a community level into political strategies and solutions. [27]

The local government-sponsored *josei kaigi* received much publicity, notably in photographs of women chairpersons at simulation assemblies, which helped to increase public awareness in conservative rural communities. As a result, the usually empty public seats were packed with women and their spouses and the relatives of women participating in simulation assemblies. [28] These facilitated assemblies also assisted participants by offering family support such as childcare, which had been one of the key barriers (*sanban*) to their participation in political processes. [29]

Networks were also organized to support backup schools and simulation assemblies. In 1996, for example, Higuchi Keiko, Domoto Akiko and others (Diet women, local assembly-women, scholars, journalists, activists, and housewives), acknowledged that information available in the existing mass media was limited in the field of women's issues and launched a nationwide, information exchange network known as JJ Net. [30] In addition to issuing a regular newsletter called *JJ-Net News* the network provided and shared information through fax and email. By 1998 JJ-Net had grown into an ICT-based instantaneous information provider, which members utilized for electoral campaigns and policy-making processes. [31] As of 2005, JJ-Net had over 1000 registered members.

In 1999 former Education Minister Akamatsu Yoshiko, journalist Shimomura Mitsuko and four other female leaders established the organization WIN Win as a membership network of support and fund-raising to increase women's presence in political processes. This network was modeled after Emily's List, which works to further the number of female representatives in the Democratic Party in the US. As of 2000, WIN WIN had 861 members. [32] Each member designated a specific candidate of her own choice from the WIN WIN's recommendation list, and then supported the chosen candidate with a donation of ¥10,000 or more. The female candidates that the WIN WIN committee unanimously recommended were included in the

recommendation lists at major local and national elections. [33] The first recommended candidate, Ota Fusae, won a seat in the 2000 Osaka gubernatorial election and became Japan's first woman governor. It is important to note here that these networks operated on a non-partisan basis with a strong sense of mission to promote gender equality policy.

In the 1999 unified local elections, the support groups and networks outlined above developed an impressive electoral campaign known as the Women and Politics Campaign 1999. This was the brain child of the Eliminate Zero-Women Representatives Assembly campaign, which was initiated by the Alliance of Feminist Representatives. In September 1998 the Alliance designated a person (in principle, an independent representative) to take charge of the campaign in each of the 47 prefectures. Campaign participants then took simultaneous actions throughout the nation by holding press conferences calling for 'more women to assemblies' and participating in public demonstrations in front of each prefectural office for this purpose. [34] This nationwide campaign highlighted the public profile of female politicians, attracted the interests of the mass media, and raised public awareness of the necessity to increase the number of female representatives, while urging accomplished women to run for election. [35] Some scholars argue that in the 1999 elections, campaigners kept the focus of the media on the single issue of

‘more women to assemblies’ and, in the process, effectively sustained the visibility of this nationwide campaign throughout the entire campaign period.[36] As a result of these 1999 elections, women were elected to prefectural assemblies in all of the 10 prefectures (Akita, Ehime, Iwate, Nagasaki, Niigata, Oita, Shimane, Tokushima, Tottori, and Toyama) in which women had never been represented prior to this time.

Even more impressive, in the 1999 unified local elections, 45 female candidates within the Tokyo Citizens’ Network were elected in 32 cities/wards of Tokyo; and a member of the Tokyo Citizens’ Network, Uehara Kimiko, won the mayoral election in Kunitachi City, Tokyo to become Tokyo’s first female mayor. In the 2001 election for the Tokyo Metropolitan assembly, six female candidates from the same Network were elected. In the 2003 unified local elections, 52 female candidates of the Network ran for office and 47 were elected in cities/wards of Tokyo. The Citizens’ Network spurred the growth of local groups throughout Japan, which formed the basis of 109 local networks across the nation (Hokkaido, Iwate, Tochigi, Saitama, Chiba, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Nagano, and Fukuoka). In the 2003 unified elections, 164 female Citizens’ Network candidates stood for local assemblies of Tokyo and 107 of those candidates won seats (accounting for 45 percent of the successfully elected female Citizens’ Network candidates across the nation), Kanagawa (28 percent), Chiba

(15 percent), and three other prefectures. [37]

The Tokyo Citizens’ Network and alternative political participation

In town/village assemblies, as illustrated in Figure 1, female representatives accounted for less than one percent of all seats until 1986. Female representatives in those assemblies increased from 2.7 percent in the 1995 simultaneous local elections to 4.2 percent in the 1999 elections. Nearly 60 percent of 1702 town/village assembly-women were conservative independents who were elected primarily by both blood-tie relations and a shared territorial bond of neighborhood organizations, and about 40 percent of the assembly-women were affiliated with a political party other than the LDP.[38] Less than one percent were Citizens’ Network activists or progressive independents elected by citizens’ networks and coalitions of support whose goal was to incorporate citizens’ voices into policy formulation and decision-making processes. [39] Eighty-five percent of Citizens’ Network assembly-women concentrated on municipal assemblies in urban areas as opposed to towns and villages. [40]

It is interesting to consider what stimulated the emergence and subsequent success of the Citizens’ Network in urban areas. The origin of the Tokyo Citizens’ Network dates back to the creation of the consumers’ cooperative

organization, the Life Club Cooperative Society, which began operation in Setagaya Ward, Tokyo in 1968. [41] Originally, this organization sought to ensure the safety and quality of consumer goods and services at reasonable prices while protecting consumer interests by directly connecting consumers with producers. By 1989 it had grown into the Federation of the Life Club Cooperative Society, based in 13 prefectures across the nation.

Throughout the 1970s, producer-oriented government policies were responsible for a wide and growing range of social problems arising from industrial pollution and food safety issues. Those citizens participating in co-op activities found it difficult to accept the established order of political priorities geared toward corporate interests. Realizing the necessity of advocacy, [42] one of the Society founders, Iwane Kunio, proposed the “Representative Authorization Campaign” by proclaiming that, “the Life Club is not only an organization for purchasing goods, but also a place where we further the independence and participation of citizens in a democratic community.” [43] This proposal in March 1977, led to the establishment of a political organization called the Group Citizens, the predecessor of the Citizens’ Network. It was not long before this service provider of mutual support based on self-help was promoting the political involvement of women. By July 1977 women participating in the Life Club

Cooperative Society were, for the first time, recruiting their own female candidates to challenge incumbents in the Nerima district for a Tokyo Metropolitan assembly election. While this challenge was unsuccessful, it paved the way for the “Representative Authorization Campaign” that recruited women to serve in assemblies. In 1979, for the first time, the Group Citizens—renamed as the Tokyo Citizens’ Network in 1988—successfully sent a female representative to the Nerima Ward Assembly. [44]

The rotation system

The larger goal of the movement, over and above the election of women representatives, is to create citizens for political change. Citizens’ Network members served as representatives in local assemblies on a rotating basis. The Network also established limited terms for assembly-women specifying a maximum number of three terms or 12 years in office. In the 2003 unified local elections, Tokyo Citizens’ Network members came to share the view that a limit of three terms or 12 years was acceptable, but that a limit of two terms or eight years would be more desirable. [45] This rotation system, which was set up in 1990, was implemented to avoid the professionalization of representatives (that lends itself to the creation of vested individual interests and corruption over time), and to facilitate the election of as many members as possible into local assemblies. [46] As described in more detail

below, the Citizens' Network helped inexperienced and less qualified citizens to become representatives. According to the Citizens' Network, the ultimate objective of the rotation system is to empower individual citizens through their representative experience. [47] In their view, this system provides an alternative pathway into political engagement while helping to eliminate the distance between citizens and policy-making processes. [48]

The salient feature of Japanese politics at the local level is personal networks based upon voters as clients and elected representatives as patrons. Virtually all incumbent Diet members build campaigns around personal support organizations, known as *koenkai*. These organizations are such valuable assets for electoral success that upon their retirement or death they often pass to their relatives or staffers. Along with incumbents' strength (the mean incumbent reelection rate: slightly over 80% in national elections), this hereditary system adds another barrier to keep nonmembers, especially Japanese women, out.

In short, voters trade electoral support for personal favors—an engagement that diminishes citizen's participation in decision-making processes. The value of the rotation system is that it incorporates a large number of citizens in policy formulation and decision-making processes. It was through this system, for example, that twenty-one Tokyo Citizens'

Network assembly-women retired, an action that enabled 30 new assembly-women to be elected as part of the local elections of April 2003. [49]

Network members also acknowledged the need to assume responsibility for ensuring the quality and continuity of the representatives' work. To this end, former-assembly women set up a Citizen Thinktank-People Town Institute in 1998. [50] The primary members of the Institute are former assembly-women who have been undertaking investigations and conducting research to help solve community problems and to help incumbents draft alternative policy proposals. The Institute has organized: training workshops for increasing assembly-member-initiated policies and ordinances, a wide range of surveys on the implementation of a new social welfare system for the elderly, and has acted as a third party evaluator, authorized by the Tokyo Metropolitan government, holding welfare providers accountable to users. [51]

The rotation system has done much to foster the inclusion of citizens in political processes, yet Citizens Network assembly-women recognize a number of serious barriers to the further development of the system. Under the compulsory government-operated pension membership of local assemblies, assembly-members who stay in office for just two terms or under are required to surrender the full benefits of their assembly-member pension. In fact, some Citizens' Network assembly-women, such as

Fukushi Keiko, withdrew their membership from Tokyo Citizens' Network after serving the maximum term and continued to run for office beyond the three-term limit. This made them eligible for full pension benefits. Another difficulty is that career women serving on the rotation system as assembly-women find it difficult to return to their place of employment at the end of their term as their jobs are not held open for them. Some critics argue that the majority of Citizens' Network members are housewives and therefore have no need for remuneration as assembly representatives. [52] The Citizens' Network has been successful in raising the awareness of women and their participation in political processes, but in order to increase the numbers of assembly-women, the Network needs to revise its strategies for continued success. [53]

Intermediary roles in participatory policy-making

Citizens' Network assembly-women play a role in coordinating policy consultation between citizens and the metropolitan administration. The voting group of Citizens' Network assembly-women has organized and coordinated a series of conferences to help facilitate negotiations between the Tokyo Metropolitan administration and citizens. As part of this process, the assembly-women have provided citizens a standing forum to present to the administration their choice of policies through utilizing assembly members' right of investigation and

policy proposal. Then, at the conclusion of the conference, Citizens' Network representatives take action to initiate citizen's preferences and wishes.

The first Citizens-Administration Conference was held in October 1994, and has since continued on a yearly or twice-yearly basis. A citizens' working party was formed to prepare documents and strategies for each conference, while Citizens' Network assembly-women contacted the relevant metropolitan departments and provided their expertise and knowledge to interested citizens. The assembly-women have admitted that it has not been easy for a wide range of social groups to make a concerted effort toward a policy proposal, yet argue that the process is worthwhile given its contribution to agenda-setting and to the articulation of community interests in political processes. The general public has also recognized these efforts as useful in building a livable community, particularly given the number of achievements arising from the conferences. The 2001 conference, for example, led to the establishment of two Tokyo Metropolitan Government guidelines: the 2003 Chemical Material Guidelines Applied to Children (Indoor Air Quality) and the 2004 Chemical Material Guidelines Applied to Children (Food Safety). Although relevant guidelines existed for adults, this was the first time that the needs of children had been considered. Furthermore, when the

issue of domestic violence was placed on the agenda of the 2004 Conference, the Tokyo Citizens' Network successfully persuaded six relevant metropolitan departments and three political parties to participate. As a result, combating domestic violence has been incorporated as a large program within the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's welfare section and there is now a consulting hotline for victims, financial support for the provision of shelters for victims, and education for abusive men. [54]

Intermediary roles in local governments' cooperation with community groups

The Tokyo Citizens' Network has also helped to establish, and to facilitate, collaboration between non-profit organizations (NPOs) and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government at the 2002 Conference where government officials, for the first time, directly exchanged information with citizens participating in NPO activities. [55] Two intermediary organizations, the Community Fund-Town Future and the Tokyo Community Power Bank (Tokyo CPB), were established by the Citizens' Network in 2003, to improve social equity in the community and to help revitalize the local economy. [56] The mission of the Community Fund-Town Future is to provide citizens with the appropriate knowledge and expertise—such as fund-raising, marketing, management skills, and partnership with the public sector—to open a community enterprise.

The Tokyo CPB has provided loans raised from the investments of individuals and organizations whose goal is to support citizen enterprises that make a contribution to local communities. One of the successful NPOs supported by the Network is Ecomesse which has been promoting a recycling system that helps to preserve the environment. It channels the proceeds from membership fees and donations, and from the nine second-hand shops it runs in Tokyo, to such schemes as tree-planting movements and the provision of solar panels and batteries in public facilities. [57]

Grassroots election campaigns

The election campaigns that the Tokyo Citizens' Network proposes are funded exclusively by the donations of individual citizens and/or the work of volunteers. In contrast to many mainstream political parties, the Tokyo Citizens' Network has shown a commitment to a high standard of transparency and accountability by regularly publicizing its revenue and expenditure flows.[58] In their view, assembly-members are ordinary citizens who donate to the Network according to their income and their participation in political activities.[59] To this end, the Network has negotiated an agreement known as the "Representative Authorization Contract" with assembly-members to donate a contracted portion of their income to the Network. These donations, together with membership fees and voluntary donations from the community,

support the activities of the Network.

The 2007 Unified Local Elections

Since 1995 the national government has revised the Special Law on Municipal Mergers several times to promote merger of municipalities. The government's legal obligation to provide the newly merged municipalities with fiscal rewards has led to the process of large-scale mergers, the process known as the "Great Heisei Merger." The merger process reached its peak between 2003 and 2005. The unified local elections in 2007 were held in this new and unfamiliar environment in which the total number of municipalities in Japan dramatically decreased to 1,892 in 2007 from 3,257 in 2003 (when the previous unified local election were held). As a result, the total number of municipal assembly elections dropped to 831 in the 2007 unified local elections from 1,633 in the 2003 unified local elections. [60] The total number of municipal assembly seats declined from 57,137 seats in 2003 to 41,342 seats in 2006. In particular, seats for villages and towns decreased sharply from 37,703 seats in 2003 to 16,358 seats in 2006. [61]

There are serious implications of this structural reform for women who wish to stand for local elections. About a quarter of women candidates rely on more personalized neighborhood/kinship-based support groups for electoral success, and most of these candidates stand for local elections in rural districts where

mergers heavily influenced the nature of electoral competition. [62] Overall, the redrawing of municipal boundaries creates larger electoral districts while the total number of assembly seats in the newly merged municipalities decrease significantly. In many cases, the female candidates are required to receive their votes beyond the basis of neighborhood/kinship-based support groups in order to win. One such case is the merger of Tateyama city, Kamogawa city, and nine towns and villages in Chiba prefecture. The total number of seats for the assemblies of these cities, towns and villages is 183, but once merged, the maximum number of seats for the newly merged municipality will be only 34. In one of those villages, Miyoshi, a minimum of around 100 votes is required to win a seat in the old district, but that in the merged municipality is estimated at 1,500 votes. In other words, the changes make it extremely difficult for female candidates to win these elections. Some candidates experienced the necessity of political party-organized support for the larger electoral district in the 2007 unified local elections. [63] Unfortunately, the compiled data for the 2007 election results of the newly merged municipalities are not available yet at the time of writing. Now, party-affiliated or broadly citizen-based women's candidates for prefectural or municipal assemblies in major urban areas, in which the Great Heisei Merger has hardly influenced the electoral districts, tell a different story in the 2007 unified local elections. The

number of female representatives in urban areas increased. Forty-four prefectures and fifteen designated cities held assembly elections in 2007. [64] A total of 190 women (the largest number ever recorded) were elected to the prefectural assemblies, with the percentage of women elected increasing to 7.5 percent, an increase of 1.3 percent from the previous 2003 election. Women's share of seats exceeded 10 percent in nine prefectural assemblies: Nagano (19.0 percent), Shiga (17.0 percent), Nara (13.6 percent), Tottori (13.2 percent), Hyogo (12.0), Yamanashi (10.5 percent), Iwate (10.4 percent), Kanagawa (10.3 percent), and Fukushima (10.3 percent). Even more successful, 176 female candidates were elected in the municipal assemblies of the fifteen designated cities, and women's share of seats reached above 20 percent in seven designated cities: Sapporo (23.5 percent), Kawasaki (22.2 percent), Saitama (21.9 percent), Sakai (21.2 percent), Chiba (20.4 percent), Kyoto (20.3 percent), and Nagoya (20.0 percent).

The Tokyo Citizens' Network continues to promote public participation in agenda setting and policy proposals through its effort to organize investigation activities and public forums. It has developed 34 local networks within the Tokyo metropolitan area. As of November 2006 (before the 2007 unified local elections), 328 female Citizens' Network candidates across the nation won seats for local assemblies, and 128 female Tokyo Citizens'

Network candidates did likewise. In the 2007 unified local elections, 49 female candidates (the largest number ever recorded) within the Tokyo Citizens' Network were elected in 16 cities/11wards of Tokyo, and only three female candidates from the network lost elections in 2 cities / 1 ward. [65] To increase the number of Tokyo Citizens' Network assembly women further, the key task is to attract non-party-affiliated voters, especially those politically disengaged eligible voters. [66]

Conclusion

In post-WWII Japan, key resources, including legal authority, political legitimacy, fiscal resources, organizations, information and expertise, have concentrated at the national level. The local community was linked to these state resources through local power brokers. These influential politicians used access to state benefits as a means to assist their personal supporters and, in return, gain the financial support and votes of supporters for their re-election. In this system, special or sectional interests prevailed with little incentive to make decisions for the common good.

Since 1975, the Japanese government has increasingly resorted to deficit financing as stagnant tax revenues combined with political pressure to increase the scope and quality of public services. Concentration of resources at the national level was no longer an effective strategy

for meeting the political demands of the electorate or for solving social problems. Japanese women's groups challenged the male-dominated allocation of resources and worked towards a more equitable allocation of resources. They welcomed state intervention on gender issues for creating a gender-equal society, while understanding that the real solution of gender issues was beyond the top-down reach of the state. In the early 1990s, Japanese women's networks and coalitions became more active in sending greater numbers of women to assemblies and the Diet. By the late 1990s, they began to form nationwide partnerships and to mobilize resources at all levels of society.

There have been significant changes in the inclusion of women as representatives at the local level, especially in urban areas. Female representatives have increasingly held chief executives and city departments accountable for their performance, and have facilitated direct exchanges between the administration and individual citizens in agenda-setting, policy formation, implementation, and evaluation processes. Furthermore, women's networks have developed an alternative form of equitable political participation for stakeholders that contrasts with traditional vertical patron-client relationships. Women's organizations, such as the Citizens' Network, are spreading a socially-centered form of governance that draws upon, and coordinates, government and voluntary

sector participation, effectively providing an alternative to the traditional system of local government. This has enabled a better delivery of services through the exchange of resources—including information, expertise and funding—among government and societal stakeholders. The full impact of women's horizontal partnership initiatives on Japanese politics at the nationwide systemic level has yet to be assessed; however, the visible successes of these partnerships in urban areas remain encouraging.

Economic rationalism or neo-liberalism in recent years has generated and sustained structural economic inequality, in which gender difference plays a significant role. [67] Underpinning the task of building a gender-equal society is the need to reconnect political equality with economic equality, which entails significant political reforms. Equally important, it is necessary to promote the inclusion and influence of women in political and decision-making processes over and above an increase in the numbers of women in political institutions. [68] Building a gender-equal society demands that equal participation of women in public life remains on the political agenda and in public debate. The Japanese case reveals the importance of women's mobilization 'from the ground-up' as the impetus toward a gender-equal society, and to sustain public debate on this issue.

Today, Japanese women have gained significant

socio-economic status. But improved access to education and jobs do not readily translate into the ability to overcome Japanese women’s low share of seats in representative assemblies. This article illustrates how Japanese women’s groups are overcoming gender-specific barriers to standing for elections. The research suggests that women representatives at the local level are working toward social renewal by reconnecting citizens with local government in a directly democratic way.

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Posted at JapanFocus on January 29, 2008.

Notes

1. A passage from Ichikawa Fusae’s note, “The Flower of Radish,” cited in Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Foundation (IFMF), ed., *Ichikawa Fusae Seiji Sanga Senta de Manabu 47-nin no*

Chosen (47 Challengers Who Studied at the Promotion Center for Women’s Political Participation) (Tokyo: Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Foundation, 2002), p. 98.

2. Teramachi Midori, “Shiminha Seiji to Josei Giin” (Citizen-based Politics and Women Representatives), *Toshi Mondai* Vol. 97, No. 1 (January 2006), p. 17.

3. Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association (IFMA), ed., *Local Assemblies, Handbook of Data on Japanese Women in Political Life, 2003* (Tokyo: The Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association, 2003), pp. 123-25.

4. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), ed., *Human Development Report 2005* (New York: UNDP, 2005). The UNDP developed these indices: the HDI measures the degree of human capabilities with the three basic criteria of ‘healthy lifestyle allowing longevity,’ ‘knowledge’ and ‘average living standard.’ It also indicates the degree of human capabilities while deducting for disparities between men and women as a penalty; and the GEM evaluates the degree of women’s capabilities to participate in economic and political activities, with specific measurements including the ratio of income earned by women, the ratio of women specialists and managers, and the ratio of women parliamentarians.

5. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Women in National Parliaments* (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>) (2006); site last accessed March 2006.
6. Adopted from surveys conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan in May 1979 (8,239 respondents), September 1997 (3,574 respondents), and November 2004 (3,502 respondents).
7. Japan, Prime Minister's Office, Public Relations (PR), *Josei ni kansuru Yoron Chosa* (Opinion Survey on Women), September 1991.
8. Japan, Cabinet Office, Gender Equality Bureau (GEB), *Josei no Seisaku Hoshin Kettei Sankaku Jokyō Shirabe* (<http://www.gender.go.jp/>) (Report on the State of Gender Equality Policies and Measures to Promote the Formation of a Gender Equal Society) (2006); site last accessed October 2006.
9. Robert Darcy and Sarah S. Schramm "When Women Run against Men," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 1977), pp. 1-12; Elizabeth Vallance, *Women in the House: A Study of Women Members of Parliament* (London: Athlone Press, 1979); Jonathan Kelley and Ian McAllister "The Electoral Consequences of Gender in Australia," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (July 1983), pp. 365-77.
10. See, for example, Robert Darcy, Susan Welch, and Janet Clark, *Women, Election, and Representation* (New York: Longman, 1987).
11. See, for example, Pippa Norris, "Women's Legislative Participation in Western Europe," in *Women and Politics in Western Europe*, ed. Sylvia Bashevkin (London: Frank Cass, 1985), pp. 95-99; Joyce Gelb, *Feminism and Politics: A Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). A single-member district tends to produce the phenomenon of "incumbency advantage," facilitate a standard candidate, that is, a middle-aged man from a middle income family, and cause a direct confrontation among candidates for winning a single seat. See Susan Welch and Donley Studlar, "Multi-Member Districts and the Representation of Women: Evidence from Britain and the United States," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (May 1990), pp. 391-412; Elizabeth Vallance, "Women Candidates in the 1983 General Election," *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol. 37, No. 3 (1984), pp. 301-9.
12. Comprising 2-14 seats in each district.
13. Ray Christensen, "The Impact of Electoral Rules in Japan," in *Democracy and the Status of Women in East Asia*, eds., Rose J. Lee and Cal Clark (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), pp. 25-46.
14. It is characteristic of local assembly

members in post WWII Japan that independents accounted for 30 to 40 percent in local assemblies. It is thus unrealistic to introduce a party-based proportional representation system at the local level.

15. It is important to note that the single non-transferable vote is used in the large-sized multi-member districts at Japan's local elections and thus findings in Britain and the United States cannot be directly applied to those in Japan.

16. The figures in this section are provided by Local Administration Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and Secretariat, House of Representatives.

17. The figures in this section are provided by, Japan, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIAC), Local Administration Bureau.

18. Mitsui Mariko and et al., "Josei no Seiji Sanga to Dairinin Undo" (Women's Political Participation and Representative Authorization Campaign), *Shakai Undo* No. 233 (1999), pp. 2-26.

19. Mitsui and et al., "Josei no Seiji Sanga to Dairinin Undo," p. 7.

20. The Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Foundation was established in 1962 to "provide political

education for women, propagate ideal and fine elections, and build the foundation of Japan's democracy."

21. Kubo Kimiko, Interview by the author on April 20, 2006; Yamaguchi Mitsuko, Interview by the author on April 21, 2006.

22. Kubo Kimiko, Interview by the author on April 20, 2006.

23. IFMF, ed., *Ichikawa Fusae Seiji Sanga Senta de Manabu 47-nin no Chosei*, p. 11.

24. IFMF, ed., *Ichikawa Fusae Seiji Sanga Senta de Manabu 47-nin no Chosei*, p. 6.

25. IFMF, ed., *Ichikawa Fusae Seiji Sanga Senta de Manabu 47-nin no Chosei*, p. 11. In 1993 then Japan New Party Diet Woman En Yoriko launched a series of lectures called 'Politics School for Women' given by non-partisan well-known politicians.

26. *Fujin Tenbo* "Josei no Gikai Shinshitsu Shien Kusanone Gurupu" (Grassroots Groups for Promoting Women to Assemblies), (March 1998), pp. 4-6; Kubo Kimiko, Interview with the author on April 20, 2006; Yamaguchi Mitsuko, Interview with the author on April 21, 2006.

27. This section is based on Ogai, "Josei Mogi Kaigi to Iu Josei Seisaku," pp. 116-18.

28. Yamaguchi Mitsuko, Interview with the author on April 21, 2006.
29. Yamaguchi Mitsuko, Interview by the author on April 21, 2006.
30. *JJ-Net News* August 10, 1996.
31. Domoto Akiko, "JJ Junen no Ayumi" (Developments in the Decade of JJ) in the Introduction of the compiled issue of *JJ-Net News* Vol. 301 (January 12, 2001)-Vol. 404 (June 29, 2004).
32. *JJ-Net News* March 2, 2001.
33. *JJ-Net News* March 2, 2001.
34. Mitsui, M. and et al., "Josei no Seiji Sanga to Dairinin Undo," p. 7: Women and Politics Campaign Office (WPCO), *Women and Politics Campaign 1999 Report* Tokyo Women and Politics Campaign Office, 1999.
35. WPCO, *Women and Politics Campaign 1999 Report* on April 26, 2006.
36. Iwamoto Misako, "1999-nen Chiho Senkyo ni okeru Josei no Yakushin" (Women's Advances in the 1999 Local Elections), *Seisaku Kagaku* Vol. 8, No. 3 (February 2001), pp. 21-38.
37. IFMA, *Local Assemblies, Handbook of Data on Japanese Women in Political Life, 2003* Tokyo Citizens' Network (TCN), *Tosei o Kaeru* (Citizens' Networking for Changing the Metropolitan Governance) (Tokyo: Tokyo Citizens' Network, 2004).
38. Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association (IFMA), *Local Assemblies, Handbook of Data on Japanese Women in Political Life, 1999* Tokyo: The Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association, 1999).
39. IFMA, *Local Assemblies, Handbook of Data on Japanese Women in Political Life, 1999*
40. IFMA, *Local Assemblies, Handbook of Data on Japanese Women in Political Life, 1999*
41. Robin M. LeBlanc, *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 127-30.
42. Nakamura Eiko, Interview with the author on April 26, 2006.
43. Tokyo Citizens' Network (TCN), *Roteshon Giin ga Machi o Tsukuru* (Rotation Representatives Build the Town) (Tokyo: TCN, 2003), p. 5.
44. This section is largely based on author's interview with Tokyo Citizens' Network Secretary-General, Nakamura Eiko, April 26, 2006.

45. Tokyo Citizens' Network (TCN), *Tosei o Kaeru Seikatsusha Netowaku no Shigoto* (Citizens' Networking for Changing the Metropolitan Governance) (Tokyo: TCN, 2004), p. 53.
46. TCN, *Roteshon Giin ga Machi o Tsukur*, p. 1; TCN, *Tosei o Kaeru Seikatsusha Netowaku no Shigoto* p. 46.
47. TCN, *Roteshon Giin ga Machi o Tsukur*, p. 1.
48. Nakamura Eiko, Interview with the author on April 26, 2006.
49. TCN, *Tosei o Kaeru Seikatsusha Netowaku no Shigoto*, p. 45.
50. Nakamura Eiko, Interview by the author on April 26, 2006.
51. TCN, *Tosei o Kaeru Seikatsusha Netowaku no Shigoto* p. 44. In 2003 only 139 ordinance bills were proposed by assembly-members at all the 47 prefectural assemblies; by contrast, 3,235 ordinance bills were initiated by prefectural governors. In March 2004, after attending the training workshops, TCN assembly-women along with residents were able to draft and pass an Underground Water Preservation Ordinance at the Koganei City Assembly.
52. Iwamoto, "1999-nen Chiho Senkyo ni okeru Josei no Yakushin," p. 27.
53. This section draws on author's interview with Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association Secretary-General, Kubo Kimiko, April 20, 2006 and with Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association Executive Director, Yamaguchi Mitsuko, April 21, 2006.
54. This section is based on TCN, *Tosei o Kaeru Seikatsusha Netowaku no Shigoto* pp. 12-13; Nakamura Eiko, Interview by the author on April 26, 2006.
55. TCN, *Tosei o Kaeru Seikatsusha Netowaku no Shigoto* p. 13; Tokyo Citizens' Network (TCN), *Tokyo Seikatsusha Netowaku no Yobikake: Kihon Seisaku* (Appeal by Tokyo Citizens' Network: Basic Policies) (Tokyo: TCN, 2003), p. 19.
56. Community Fund, "Machi ga Genki ni Naru Shikumi" (<http://www.h7.dion.ne.jp/~fund/>) (Mechanisms for Revitalizing the Town) (2003), ; site last accessed April 2006.
57. Ecomesse, "Kankyo Machizukuri Ekomesse (<http://www.npo-ecomesse.org/>)" (Environmental Town-Making, the Ecomesse) (2006) ; site last accessed April 2006.
58. Nakamura Eiko, Interview by the author on April 26, 2006.
59. TCN, *Tosei o Kaeru Seikatsusha Netowaku no Shigoto*, p. 53.
60. Japan, Ministry of Internal Affairs and

Communications, Soumusho no Seisaku (http://www.soumu.go.jp/menu_02/index.html#seisaku) (Policies by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication ; site last accessed January 2008.

61. The figures are provided by Japan, Ministry of International Affairs and Communications. However, note that about 98.8 percent of major cities have set the actual number of their municipal assemblies seats lower than the nationally defined maximum number. See *Zenkoku Shigikai Junpo* April 25, 2003 (No. 1506).

62. Yamaguchi Mitsuko, Interview with the author on December 14, 2007.

63. *Fujin Tenbo* "Toitsu Chiho Senkyo o

Kaerimite" (Review of the Unified Local Elections), (August 2007), p. 6.

64. *Fujin Tenbo* "Dai Jyurokkai Toitsu Chiho Senkyo Tokoshu" (Special Report on the Sixteenth Unified Local Election), (May 2007), pp. 5-7.

65. The figures are provided by the Tokyo Citizens' Network.

66. Nakamura Eiko, Interview with the author on December 14, 2007.

67. Anne Phillips, *Which Equality Matter?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999).

68. Joni Lovenduski, *Feminizing Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).