

To Our Readers

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The government of Japan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985. Getting to this point was no simple task.

The government never prioritized the ratification because the constitution of Japan stated that all people are equal and there shall be no discrimination because of sex. However, women in Japan insisted that the constitution was not enough and lobbied to revise and create laws in order to ratify the CEDAW. As soon as the government realized that with the ratification they would be required to revise and create new laws, they decided not to ratify it. When women found out, they began a nation-wide campaign, and along with a network with various women in power they made the government ratify the CEDAW. In order to ratify the CEDAW, the government of Japan was required to improve three things in the national machinery; discrimination against women in education, employment, and Nationality Law.

According to Nationality Law at that time, a child born in Japan was only eligible for Japanese nationality if their father held Japanese nationality; a child with a Japanese mother (and a father of another nationality) was not eligible for Japanese nationality. The government justified this discriminatory practice as a traditional patrilineal system. The patriarchy justifies a view that children are the property of their father and ie (“family”). The mother’s body was often considered a borrowed womb and a child was only passing through it. These beliefs were still strong in the Nationality Law even in the postwar constitution.

It is obvious that these beliefs are connected with the Emperor System, which was supported by a false legend from the Meiji constitution that the imperial dynasty was “unbroken for ages eternal.” Fortunately, we could revise the Nationality Law so that a child of a Japanese mother can obtain Japanese nationality. However, we still use the same family registry system that had reinforced patriarchy in prewar Japan. This custom still exists in East Asian countries where women are struggling with the system.

In this issue, we will examine the discriminatory customs and systems in Japan and explore how women have been challenging patriarchal culture.

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