The History and Future of Women’s Participation in Politics in Japan

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Introduction
Following the 2003 House of Representatives (HR) election, the percentage of all congresswomen in Japan totaled 7.33%, ranking Japan 92nd among 141 nations around the world. The ratio of women in local governments was also as low as 7.6%, following the nationwide 2003 local elections. The ratio in the HR alone became 7.1% and in the world ranking of women in national parliaments; Japan has fallen 13 places to 134th since the last survey. Incidentally, the average ratio of female HR members in the world is 15.3%. That is, the ratio of women in congress in Japan is less than half the average. Why are the figures in Japan this low?

Hiroshi Watanabe, a political scientist, mentioned in the preface of the “Japanese Political Science Association Annual Report 2003,”

If this situation occurred between two ethnic groups in a country, there would certainly be an outburst of riots or independence movements. This unbelievable situation continues, for the most part, unnoticed. How is this possible?

In the political science field in Japan, I believe that people’s actions and movements supersede their theories. Since 1975, as women’s movements grew throughout the world, women have come to realize an extreme gender-imbalance in the policy-making process. In everyday life, women have recognized the huge impact policies have had on them, policies made in a male dominant structure. As a natural consequence, women started to fight for not only voting rights but also the comprehensive suffrage of women. Thus, women began to take political actions, which would allow them to enter Parliament directly.

In the 1990s, in both national and local governments, the number of women candidates increased constantly, resulting in an increase of dietwomen. However, in the national government, the number of women decreased slightly in the 2001 House of Councilors election and the 2003 House of Representatives election. On the other hand, the number of women hit a record-setting level in the nationwide 1999 and 2003 local government elections.

In this article, I will explore the method by which women have been empowered and encouraged to participate in the political field.

1. Current Situation of Woman in Parliament
(1) Women’s participation in National government
The number of congresswomen in the House of Representatives (HR) after the 2003
HR election has fallen from 38 to 34. The number of candidates has decreased in the last 4 years, and the number of congresswomen has also decreased in the past 17 years.

There are 38 congresswomen in the House of Councilors, placing 29th in the world. Half of the Councilors were reelected in the 2001 House of Councilors election, and the number has decreased in the past 6 years from 21 to 18. What is the biggest obstacle for women in getting elected at the national government level? Yumiko Mikanagi pointed out that there are three factors behind this extremely low number of women as political representatives in Japan; 1. there is a sense of discrimination against female candidates among voters, 2. there are few women running in the elections, and 3. there are obstacles within the election system as well as in politics, and the greater society (Yumiko Mikanagi, “Women and Politics (Josai to Sajii)” Shinhyoron 1999). I do not believe that the second factor applies because there are more and more women running the elections. In Japan, the third factor, systematic obstacles, has been of great influence.

It was in the 22nd House of Representatives election in 1947 that women exercised their first votes. At this election, 83 women ran with their new eligibility and 39 of them were elected (elected rate: 45%). However, since then, after more than half a century, this number has never been topped. There are five reasons for this. The 1st and biggest reason lies in the then large-constituency/multiple ballot electoral system. In this system, voters can write down two or three names on a ballot, and presumably many gave at least one vote to a female candidate. The 2nd reason is the lack of male candidates as the prewar male politicians were exiled in a “purge of the public sector” in 1946. Expectations of women in postwar pacifism would be the 3rd reason. The 4th reason is on account of General MacArthur’s support for women.

The 5th and last reason is that the shortage of campaign money due to postwar poverty brought about the implementation of an inexpensive election (Tokuko Ogai, The Stars of Democracy: The First Thirty-Nine Female Members of the Japanese Diet, U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal 1996). Since then, the number of female politicians has been hovering around 10. However, ever since the proportional-representation constituency combined with the single-seat constituency system, introduced in 1994, the number of female politicians has gradually increased. It proved that proportional-representation constituency works favorably for women, while the single-seat constituency works against women (as this system creates a large number of wasted votes). In the case of the House of Councilors, a nonbinding list system was introduced to a proportional-representation constituency of the House of Councilors electoral system in 2001. It is apparent that the biggest obstacles exist within this structure. Political parties tend to approve of “bankable candidates” as the official candidates from the party. The expensive nomination deposit is also a disadvantage for women in running in the election. However, unfortunately in Japan, there are almost no nationwide movements demanding systemic reforms like in South Korea where women organizations demanded the introduction of a “quota system” in the government and political parties.

According to a written document, only three requests have been made in Japan. In 1974, 16 female organizations, including The League of Women Voters of Japan, voiced objections to the single-seat constituency to the prime minister. The other two requests
were made by the “Liaison Group for the Implementation of Resolutions for the International Women’s Year Conference of Japan” (International Women’s Year Liaison Group) founded in 1975, which was International Women’s Year. They suggested a proposal in 1990 to ask each party to encourage women to run in the House of Representatives election, and another proposal in 1992 to reform the electoral system.

(2) Current Situation of the Participation of Women in Local Assemblies

Compared to the difficulties women face in participating in national government even today, women's participation in local assemblies has been increasing since the 1990's. Many women have made local assemblies their sphere of political expression. Women's movements, in order to send women to local assemblies or support female politicians, have rapidly grown in many parts of the country. After the nationwide 2003 local election, the number of local assemblywomen as of June 2004 total up to 4,804, the largest-ever. The ratio, 7.6% (out of a total 60,200 seats), is not necessarily satisfactory, but it has increased sharply in only a decade, from that of 1.4% in 1983. Women were almost excluded in local assemblies where the ratio of female politicians was only 0.77% in 1983. However, in 1987, the ratio increased to 1.3% and it has since grown in 4-year bursts, respective to election years.

Consequently, although only 34.2% of local assemblies had at least one assemblywoman 1991, it had almost doubled to 62.5% by 2003. This showed that women’s continuous grassroots activities successfully sent their representative to assembly in addition to the many women that proactively run in elections. Indeed, the increase of assemblywomen in the 1990s is a product of the increase in female candidates, even though there was no significant change in elected rates. This continuous, increasing number of female candidates shows that the gender role (“Politics is men’s business”) that has prevented women’s participation in the political sector is changing.

(3) Historical and Social Background of Women’s Participation in Local Assemblies

Since the war there have been several big waves in the advancement of women in politics in terms of autonomy.

The first wave occurred during the first and second postwar general elections. The number of assemblywomen in the 1947 general election was 793. Since then, it has decreased continuously and reached 21 in 1975. The postwar political activities of women's groups were born out of the need for suffrage. This was due largely to women's awareness and their efforts in the community right after the war. Besides, we had a policy of democratization in local society and home, which was led under the democratic reforms by the general headquarters of the US military. Regarding the number of assemblywomen at the 1947 nationwide local elections, Nagano prefecture had the most, followed by Saitama and Gunma where sericulture was popular and the women's workforce were highly valued.

At the 3rd election after the war in 1955, the number of female politicians decreased nationwide. This was due to a reduction in the number of seats due to consolidation of smaller municipalities. It was also connected to a change in the social structure in Japan. Rapid economic growth began 10 years after the end of WWII. The Economic White Paper described Japan's new era as “No Longer Postwar.” The rapid economic growth brought with it the urbanization and consumalization of life, and more farmers had
to pursue side job to survive. While women in agricultural communities also started working at factories, the gender division of labor was strengthened and women’s movements striving to improve the quality of life shrunk. Thus, women disappeared from the assemblies because the progress of the male-dominant social system at every segment divided women’s networks.

The second wave started with the women’s liberation movement in 1970. Under the slogan of “a reform in everyday life is women’s political action,” women’s movements were spreading. The upsurge of the women’s movement and “International Women’s Year” in 1975 followed by “UN Decade of Women” were major challenges for women’s political initiative in Japan.

Women in Japan understood that women’s votes were not utilized to improve women’s situation, but rather were merely supporting men’s power. They started the movement with Teruko Yoshitake as their representative to run in the 1978 House of Councilors election in the national constituency. Although she lost the election, the non-partisan, grassroots women’s network for the election took a pioneering role in a movement to send women to politics.

The third wave came with the birth of a local political party, which used the consumers’ cooperative union as a main body. From this new wave, more women participated in relatively large local assemblies such as Tokyo and K anagawa.

The forth wave was formed with the establishment of a women’s multidimensional support network, which supported a massive advance of women to assembly in the 1990s. In the 1980’s, women in Japan learned from the women’s liberation movement and the global grassroots women’s network that it is important to participate in politics. Targeting the nationwide 1999 local elections, there were various campaigns developed under the slogan of “More Women in Politics” and “Eliminate Zero-Women Representatives Assemblies.” There were also establishments of nationwide political schools and backup schools for women who were willing to stand for the election. Also, the women’s network was expanding and a foundation was established for providing information and financial support in order to increase the number of assemblywomen. It is also important to recognize that local governments started establishing local women’s centers and promoting women-related policies as indirect factors to send women into politics.

2. Meaning of the Birth of Assemblywomen

In rural areas, such as Nagano prefecture, women have been challenging local traditional electoral customs. There is a saying that one needs dana (a strongly-tied and well-organized constituency), kanban (prestigious social status), and kaban (a briefcase full of money) as essential electoral tools. Local women’s groups urged to stop the nomination of local men in power and to operate “clean elections” which would not use private money but only publicly-donated money. They also challenged several vicious local electoral customs such as forcing local people to support local candidates and put sanctions on those who would not do so. Their handmade “ideal election” in the 1980s considered the housewives’ experiences to be “resources” which had previously been seen as “debts.” It showed potential as the transformation of a traditionally money-driven election system. The advancement of women into assembly, too, effects gender relationships in the family and traditional views of gender.

According to the interview I conducted with family members of female candidates in
2003, half of the husbands opposed their wives’ decisions to run in elections. For the rest of the husbands, half opposed it in the beginning, but later became cooperative, and the other half actively supported their wives’ decisions. The reason that husbands or family members opposed women’s decisions was that they thought that once their wives or mothers became assemblywomen their “family” would have to change. Indeed, the husbands of real assemblywomen realized that if they continue to rely on their wives for traditional gender roles like cooking or cleaning, they could not survive. They unconsciously have to alter their points of views and their lifestyles. Not many assemblywomen I met in Nagano were aware of the change of gender role. However, while those women utilize their experiences in a society as political resources, they are breaking free from the gender division of labor and gender roles. Thanks to the women’s network and increasing role of women in politics, local governments’ policies are changing from the traditional, infrastructure-oriented to the people, life-oriented. Moreover, local newspapers and media broadcasts provide information on such movements and encourage women to create further movements.

3. Summary and Future Tasks
I have been exploring the meaning behind the birth of assemblywomen. It is difficult to achieve benefits for women in politics because female politicians are so few. In Chiba prefecture, they could not pass the bill for the Gender Equal Participation Ordinance. It is obvious that we need more feminist assemblywomen.

We can learn from the women’s movement in Korea, where they have gained a lot concerning women-related policies since the 1990s.

In South Korea, women started a movement in 1994 to demand a quota system in every sphere. As a result, they revised the electoral system. Although there were pros and cons about the quota system in South Korea, female leaders basically agreed with each other that the quota system is useful as a temporary measure to correct discrimination; Korean women were focusing more on the improvement of the male-dominated mechanism in order to increase women’s participation in the policy-making process. Some people pointed out that there is a gap between reality and people’s conscious due to rapid changes in the system. In addition, there is criticism that the women’s movement in Korea is institutionalized and has become conservative because the leaders of the movement combined systems and now is a so-called “nationalistic feminism.” However, the number of female politicians has been increasing drastically and that not only empowers and encourages women to take action, but also to create women-related policies.

Without having institutional systems such as a quota system, women in Japan have been establishing political independence based on their individual lives and sending women into local assemblies. On the other hand, we are facing institutional obstacles and difficulties at the national government level. It is important for us to change institutional factors, including the electoral system, as well as in nominating candidates whom we can share the feeling that we can change politics by ourselves.

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