What has Changed with the Emergence of Female Politicians?

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“Let’s increase the number of congresswomen” – this slogan has been raised in recent years as one of the main tasks of the women’s movement. However, as “the increase in the number of congresswomen” has become a social agreement, even conservative political parties, which we do not necessarily consider as being eager in pursuing gender-equality policies, started creating female cabinet members and heads of parties. At the same time, congresswomen, who led in the bashing of different surnames within married couples or gender-sensitive education, started to stand out. In the middle of it all, a question started arising in women’s hearts: what has changed with the arrival of female members of congress? While the public cheers, “let’s increase the number of congresswomen,” there exists the reality that “there are various kinds of female congress members.” Standing between these two, I will attempt to re-examine the meaning of having female members of congress.

A Sense of Urgency in Clogged Politics

The late 90’s were the era in which the slogan “let’s increase the number of congresswomen” was perceived with a certain kind of urgency among women. This is because a series of events occurred in which the male-composed assemblies and administration stood firm every time policy issues regarding women appeared. As a result, the realization that “politics are clogged” became known.

For better or worse, economics after World War II developed based on the gender division of labor. Society sorted men into wage labor and women into free labor. The cost of social welfare was kept low by the unpaid labor of wives. The funds saved on the public were instead distributed mainly into the industrial sector. A portion of the profit made by industry was given to men as salary, with which they then ensured stable lives for their wives. At the same time, this mechanism kept women in line so that they did not quit their unpaid labor.

However, severe international competition reached Japan after the end of the cold war at the beginning of the 1990’s. Then, the system, in which industry guaranteed household wages to all husbands to support their wives, had reached its limit. One of the reasons behind this phenomenon is that business lost its capacity to guarantee household wages and life-long employment to its employees. Another reason is that there was a rapid increase in the number of women who realized they could live their lives easier by acquiring financial stability on their own instead of living under the old system of controlled stability.

From this background, there occurred a lowering of the birth rate, a succession of lawsuits against the wage gap between men and women, and the recognition of sexual harassment and domestic violence as problems. For establishing a new framework to respond to such rapid changes in the social and
economic structures, women demanded various laws and the reformation of systems. In response to this movement, the 1990’s saw a need for and high expectations of female members of congress.

The Two Sides of Female Members of Congress

In the air of excitement of the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing of 1995, female members of congress received the demands of women and were engaged in nonpartisan cooperation. A series of events occurred, such as the movement to rename and reform the Eugenic Protection Act and civil laws from a woman’s point of view, the revision of the Equal Employment Act of 1997, value of unpaid work by the Economic Planning Agency and the creation of the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society. In addition, congresswomen attempted to spread this kind of movement and information by fax both within and outside of the National Diet. These moves were connected to the demand for equal treatment of part-time workers and the recent revision of the Domestic Violence Prevention Law.

However, in the swell of backlash after these moves, conservative female politicians started appearing as stiff opponents in allowing different surnames for married couples. The reason for the opposition was the familiar defense of, “the family will be destroyed”.

I have had the privilege of exchanging opinions with these politicians. From these opportunities, what I learned was that these politicians were barely informed of the above-mentioned facts, such as the upheaval of political and economic infrastructure at the
international level.

There existed a sense of crisis among the administrative officials, that people needed to be adjusted to such an upheaval. It was exactly the reason why the attempt to create a new style of family such as allowing different surnames among married couples became the focus within the administration. However, nobody provided the assembly members with accurate knowledge on the change of the economic infrastructure. As a result, the backward causal relationship “because feminists made noise in creating new family structures, the stable infrastructure of the post-war era was destroyed” was the interpretation made by the conservative congress members.

**Are Male Members of Congress Fine as Long as Their Political Measures are OK?**

Following these examples, it may start to appear that what’s important is not to increase the number of “female members of congress,” but to increase the number of “congress members who have a deep understanding of political measures for women’s issues.” Such members are certainly important, yet, “female members of congress” are still important.

Basically, humans are self-centered creatures, and so they are mostly interested in themselves. Therefore, even being hard-line opponents of political measures for women, most of the congresswomen or those women who intend to be involved in politics have a strong interest regarding women’s issues.

I had a chance to discuss political measures for women’s issues and the corresponding backlash in a study session with some female Democratic Party members of a local government and their supporters. At the beginning, the energetic middle-aged women who locally participate in support said, “we are not convinced of gender-sensitive policies because that would eliminate femininity and manliness.” Then, I explained to them that it is an unavoidable restructuring of the relationship of women and men for adjusting to the rapid change in the economic infrastructure. By the end of the meeting, they said “We see it. Let’s work on it together.”

Sometimes strong opposition emerges because people have an interest, but are misinformed. If we provide them accurate data and information and a source of confidence, “a woman can be elected even if she does not follow men’s opinions,” there exists the potential for a large surge of energy.

What’s important is to increase opportunities even more where one gender can decide on issues concerning their own gender.

Even though “various congresswomen” become lost, fall into conflict with one another, and argue fiercely, they find a direction for their gender. This process itself reduces the feeling of isolation among women and increases their sense of participation. In addition, I believe this is an important part of a new relationship between women and men that would be suitable for the rapidly changing social infrastructure.

**Illustrating a New Axis**

Female figures argue over political measures related to themselves at scenes such as the National Diet regardless of whether they are for or against political measures for women. Their visible performance would be one of the changes made by the emergence of congresswomen that we would raise as an example. Another would be the creation of “congresswomen who go beyond individual parties.” Through this process, a horizontal axis of a different dimension called “gender” has been introduced to the world of political parties where things are ordered vertically and it was said, “man or woman, it does not
matter”.

If we add accurate and abundant information that reflects changes in the role of gender in society and the position of women, and if this information can be shared, “female members of congress” will become an even stronger power in the promotion of political measures.

What is being asked is not “what has changed with the emergence of female members of congress” Some women have started engaging in actions such as establishing a system for providing information regarding women’s issues, raising and digging out “candidates who have a good understanding of women’s political measures,” and supporting female members of congress by lobbying in political parties or government. The question is how we ourselves will “have the female members of congress change things” by making these actions more complete.

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