Fragile Flowers or Steel Magnolias: Women's Rights in Japan to Occupation

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Women’s rights in Japan is a largely under-explored topic. Women are often presented in the Geisha stereotype. This is especially true of media made about Japan and shown to non-Japanese audiences. This presents a misnomer of the Japanese woman as victim, and this is not so. This paper explores their struggle for equal rights in politics, reproduction, and education. Japanese women gained the most during the periods of war, as did women in the west. The struggle culminated in the SCAP constitution of 1946 that granted political rights to Japanese women.

Japanese women, like those of other nations, had ideas on what the movement should do that varied from generation to generation, and sometimes woman to woman. Those from the Meiji Era were fighting the image of “good wife and mother” this was what the men at the time wanted the world to see.¹ This argument’s presence makes sense in Japanese culture. First, it goes along with previously held ideals from the Tokugawa Period,² and blends with the trend in Westernization.³ Women in Japan try to create “women centered feminism”; this is championed by Hiratsuka Raicho. Gordon calls the wave of feminist thought at this time

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¹ Andrew Gordon, A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa times to the present (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 112.
² This is Gordon’s examination of late Tokugawa. One of the practices during this period was for the woman to stay in Edo (Tokyo) and raise their children while the men followed Alternate Attendance. This showed women as a central part of the culture and society, but in the background. Not the way they would later hope for.
³ Ibid., 22-36.
at “least as threatening to the ruling elites” as some of the other groups.4 There were also groups that were more radical and thought marriage should be ended because it was detrimental to females. These women wanted to end all patriarchal authority. Japan’s rigid class system created multiple boundaries for lower-class women, much as Margaret Sanger found in New York City’s Lower East Side.

When Sanger visited Japan, the image of the Tokogawa women was still prevalent. Despite this, men were frank in discussions about women and relationship between the sexes. Sanger spoke at a meeting of the Peer’s Club, where the questions about women flew. Some examples she recorded are why do they divorce, could they love more than one man, and did they love their children. Motherhood and its role continued to be a pivotal point in the Japanese arguments. One man asked, “Is it not true that the American woman can be all things to her husband-his companion, mother of his children, mistress, business manager, and friend?”5 She writes in response, “I agreed with them that this was the ideal, but had to confess that by no means every American wife fitted into this picture.”6 In truth, there were still many gender misconceptions during this era.

Japan faced many changes as the twentieth century wore on, especially after the American occupation. A major change was women leaving the home and entering the workforce. What would then happen to their role as “good wives and mothers”?7 Kamiya Hiroo examines this in her chapter of Feminist Geography entitled “Daycare Services Provision for Working Women in Japan.” The early feminists emphasized

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4 Ibid.
5 Sanger, 329.
6 Ibid., 329.
7 Gordon, 112.
motherhood when writing in the 1920s, and this emphasis remained while Hiroo was writing in 2005. She stated that women usually left their jobs upon becoming pregnant, versus western nations with daycare centers, and maternity leave. Japan has, in modernity, a different view of women than its western contemporaries.8 Hiroo examines the issue with graphs and charts illustrating different areas and times in the life of women. She makes note of the fact that during occupation the number of women working in rural areas was high; they would have worked in agricultural jobs. The number of women in the workforce in urban areas remained low due to the motherhood culture. Hiroo’s work demonstrates an ever-evolving role of women. In 2011, as when she wrote in 2005, laws regarding women are changing to include an even greater scope of rights and privileges. Japan and the West have instituted alternative patterns for care.9 In 1997, Japan’s Equal Opportunity Law was revised stating that women could not be discriminated against for hiring, promotion, or job training. Maternity leave and leave to care for elderly parents were added the same year. However, as Hiroo states, “It seems too early to judge the net effect of these shifting policy directions.”10

Reproductive control is another element of feminist demands. Japanese women were involved in this fight. In Feminism in Modern Japan author Vera Mackie examines women and reproductive control in Japan. She looks at a period spanning from the later nineteenth century until Occupation. Mackie’s examination is based on both secondary and primary accounts.11 Their fight is much like that of women in other

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9 Alternative care being when a woman (or man) leaves their work to care for a parent, spouse, or another relative other than a child.
10 Ibid., 289.
11 Mackie is using a chronological approach. I have chosen a topical approach to illustrate
countries. The government believed it could legislate control over women’s bodies. Women had limited options as a result.

Long after the Tokogawa system had failed, the image of the “good wife and mother” remained. It was something even feminists wanted to preserve. By the 1930s Japan was embroiled in what would become World War II. Many women were without their husbands and in need of assistance for their children, and Mackie states the need became more pronounced when women and their children began to commit suicide together. The Social Democratic League reported as July 1932 there had been 492 of these incidents that had claimed the lives of 821 children. This led to the formation of Bosei Hogo Ho Seitei Shokushin Fujin Renmei – the Alliance for the Promotion of a Mother and Child Protection Act – in September 1934. The other part of this group favored abortion and contraception stating that a woman should not have to give birth to an unwanted child.

Women wanted power over their own future, and part of that was having control of their bodies. Hiratsuka Raicho presents a scenario in an edition of Seito; she pointed out that she had used contraception before. The story is about a woman in prison for having an abortion. Mackie says there is debate as to whom the woman in the article is speaking to – some say it is her partner, and other commentators believe various elements of the feminist need. Therefore, in this section on reproductive control the pages of Mackie’s work will be varied in placement in her book. In addition, the section will cover about 80 years in one place versus the chronological approach.

13 Gordon, 111, 120.
14 Mackie, 105.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 This was a women’s rights journal in Japan.
18 Ibid., 51.
it to a judge. Ellen Key\textsuperscript{19} states that children are often born due to the fact women feel they have no option. They are birthed into poverty and heartache. She said she decided not to have the child because she could not provide for it. Her thoughts were considered so deviant that the issue of \textit{Seito} was banned by the national government. She stated that it must be an important decision to contemplate abortion.\textsuperscript{20} Then she pursues the thought to looking at abortion sociologically. Hiratsuka felt that if abortion remained illegal some care must be provided for the children by the state to make sure their needs were met.\textsuperscript{21} Others did not see the issue so simply. Another writer at the time, Yamada Waka, felt that abortion was against the laws of nature; and though she felt for Ellen, she would not condone her choice.\textsuperscript{22} Others believed the solution to be the total autonomy of women in matters of their bodies.

Socialism appeared to have fueled the liberation of women from the bonds that held them. Their fight to be equal in legislation also went to the workplace and; as in western movements, this group of working women pushed to end the inadequacies they faced. Their demands included the end of night work for women and paid, adequate maternity leave as well as leave during their menstrual cycle each month. Margaret Sanger was a guest and lecturer in Japan during this formative period. While touring factories Sanger found that, like similar institutions in the United States, the conditions were deplorable. She described one room where the windows were closed and locked giving the whole room a hot, moist, damp feeling.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19} Mackie shows that Raicho identifies her as a fictional character based on the real Ellen Key a feminist from the Netherlands.
\textsuperscript{20} Mackie, 50.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Margaret Sanger, \textit{The Autobiography of Margaret Sanger} (Minneola, NY: Dover Publications, 1934), 330. The Dover edition used for the paper is 1971. It was published in 1934 under the
The Japanese women also wanted to be enfranchised. Women had been fighting for the right to vote for over twenty years prior to it being granted. According to an article by Sharon H. Nolte, the pre-war fight began in 1919 and continued until 1931 when the state became consumed with the Manchurian Campaign. This particular effort culminated in the 1931 Hamaguchi Suffrage Bill that came from a cabinet minister. Nolte points this out because with the structure of the government, it carried more weight. In 1925, universal suffrage had been granted to men in all elections, and as a result, women’s suffrage bills had been produced. All had failed to pass.

The 1931 Hamaguchi Women’s Suffrage Bill would have been the first to grant suffrage of any kind to Japanese women. The idea was to allow women to vote in local and village elections. Revolutionary to this bill was the provision that a woman could hold public office with the consent of her husband. Civil Code of 1897 stated she would need her husband’s permission, as inheritance rights still went to the male head of household; thus, “officially” the woman would need his “permission” to access the money needed to follow customs. These customs included entertaining dignitaries in their homes. It passed the House of Commons, or lower house, but it did not pass the House of Peers, according to Nolte, and this was a result of the remaining patriarchal view. Suffragists in Japan also opposed limited voting rights. It did not seem like a victory,

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25 Nolte, 690.
26 Gordon, 300.
27 Nolte, 691.
28 Ibid., 692.
29 Ibid.
more a placation buried in the Tokugawa views of women. Adachi Kenzo, the Home Minister under Hamaguchi, condoned the activism of women, and he could understand their desires. Kenzo was quoted as saying the bill responded to “women’s demands over the past several years.”

The nationalism that had come into vogue around 1900 began affecting women during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). During this war, they praised the first Japanese Red Cross nurses as well as a foundling political group for women the Patriotic Women’s Society. Women widowed by the war received some pension and worked in marginal jobs. Their plight and courage won the support of both sides politically. In addition, industrialization had created an emerging middle class, and they began to send their daughters to high school. Women who graduated could make a good salary for a few years before marriage. Even the poorest began to send girls to primary school. Attendance came up from seventy-one percent in 1900 to ninety-seven by 1910. Attendance usually averaged out of these numbers at approximately eighty-nine percent. Twenty-six percent, on average, went on through the middle school grades.

World War II would continue in Japan until 1945. On August 15, 1945, Emperor Hirohito did something he had never before done. He addressed the nation of Japan live over radio. Generally, his words were transcribed and released. Aihara Yu, a 28-year-old wife, remembers being called to the one radio in the village and hearing the emperor’s words. Her story reintegrates the position of women during the war period.

Aihara received a public education and remembers something they

30 Ibid., 693.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 696.
33 John W. Dower, Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II (New York: Norton and Company, 1999), 34.
learned about fighting for the state: the thought being the individual was of no importance. Hiroo points this out as well. Hirohito’s speech was not what the people had expected, at least according to Aihara Yu. She believed he would ask that people offer themselves to the state. Instead, he said that the Japanese army would be disarmed and able to return home. In other words, the war was over. She remembers thinking that her husband would come home to her if only he did not commit suicide when he heard the news. Sadly, he was already dead. According to Dower, he died in a battle only a few days prior to the end of the war. By the time of Hirohito’s “agonized” speech of 1945, Japan lay in ruins. Three million people were dead countless others wounded, and ill – all this for a war waged in the emperor’s name.

There would now be a new force in the Pacific, Douglas MacArthur. He was appointed Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). MacArthur was imperious, strong-willed, and a bit of megalomaniac. He and nine other Allied representatives oversaw the signing of the official surrender of the Japanese on the USS Missouri. MacArthur spoke on the Missouri saying, “A better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past” – a place for “freedom, tolerance, and justice.” MacArthur appeared to have felt this way on the surface and put policy in place that would reflect that.

The Allied Occupation brought many changes to the people of Japan. MacArthur and his colleagues believed they could transform and “educate” and train” a race inferior to them. Koikari says that if

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 41.
38 Ibid. This is a quote from MacArthur’s speech on Japan’s surrender.
they found the entire race to be inferior and uneducated who needed them more than women did, those thought to be perpetually kept in the dark by oppression.\textsuperscript{40} To SCAP they were prime candidates for growth, change, and emancipation.\textsuperscript{41} The Allies, especially Americans, had an understanding of Japanese women as victims and innocent bystanders. Koikari’s argument is that Japanese women were not victims or bystanders but part of a dynamic that the western mind did not comprehend.\textsuperscript{42} They had always been part of this complicated world of gender relations.

Imperialism helped shape the world that the Allied forces found post-World War II. She theorizes that much of what happened began with the Westernization of Japan.\textsuperscript{43} Women’s movements started during the turn of the twentieth century and cemented during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), and they had gained momentum prior to the Manchurian incident which as previously stated hampered all civil rights regardless of gender. Complicated gender roles were just part of the “Junpu Bizoku”\textsuperscript{44} that the Allies had come upon in Japan. There had been some state participation from women during mobilization efforts for World War II. The Dainihon Kobubo Fujinki\textsuperscript{45} was an example of state led work by women. Modern feminism as it emerged in Japan had roots in nationalism, colonialism, and westernization. An interesting point that Koikari makes is that MacArthur and the other Allied leaders perceive the women as victims because they compare them to the state of women in their own nations.\textsuperscript{46} They do not consider the ramifications of an Eastern cultural dynamic.\textsuperscript{47} This is often

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 40.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 41.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{44} This is a beautiful custom and culture.
\item \textsuperscript{45} All Japan Women’s Defense Association
\item \textsuperscript{46} Koikari, 47.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 47.
\end{itemize}
MacArthur was determined to democratize Japan, that is to say, his understanding of democracy and relationships. He had a vision for his version of Japan. Women had long considered suffrage a priority and it being granted after the surrender would strengthen the “peace constitution” as it became known. Ichikawa Fusae, a vocal advocate for suffrage prior to the war, started again immediately after the surrender. She believed that suffrage must be granted by the mobilization of women; and not because the occupied powers felt, they should have it. In the end, it was up to the Allies one way or the other – as with few exceptions, they wrote the constitution. By August 25, 1945, she had organized seventy women into a group called Sengo Taisaku Fujin Iinkai. Fusae did get her wish in a way the newly formed Shidehara Cabinet which met on October 9, 1945 and agreed to women’s suffrage. Some of the ministers had been in favor of it prior to the war, and all agreed that after their contribution to the war effort, they should vote. However, before they could act on the matter, MacArthur gave Minister Shidehara the five-item reform demand. Even though MacArthur signed the constitution, the documents indicate that suffrage would have been granted by the Shidehara Cabinet. SCAP just presented their top five reforms before they could act on their convictions. The reforms came from his office but Hiratsuka Raicho, Yamada Waka, and Ichikawa Fusae, along with countless other suffragists, won the victory. They convinced the cabinet to agree to suffrage before MacArthur brought the document, and they deserve that credit. Their courage did bring about their means, perhaps just not in the way they

48 Ibid., 46.
49 Women’s Committee to Cope with Postwar Conditions- their idea was they could deal with reconstruction and the postwar situation of women.
hoped.\textsuperscript{50}

Suffrage was one thing; however, complete gender equality was the goal of the Allied constitution. MacArthur would later say that Japanese women were the perfect “poster child” for American democracy.\textsuperscript{51} Images of them casting their first vote and walking from feudalism to freedom are iconic and make America look like the democratic leader of the world.\textsuperscript{52}

The Cold War affected how long the occupation forces would take to draft the constitution. It was drafted from February 4, 1946 to February 12, 1946, barely over a week. SCAP felt that for democratization to be complete there had to be total gender and racial equality.\textsuperscript{53} Since tensions were rising in the East because of a new fear of Communism, there was no longer a common enemy (i.e. Hitler), and the spread of that ideology was feared. MacArthur and others believed they had to get Japan under their control and democratized so they would have an ally in the East.\textsuperscript{54}

Two committees would deal with women’s rights in the constitutional convention, the Steering Committee and the Civil Rights Committee. There was a woman involved in the writing process Beate Sirota Gordon (at the time she was Beate Sirota). Sirota had experience that was instrumental in drafting the portions dealing with women. To strengthen her positions, she presented historical documents with similar beliefs: Weimar Republic Constitution, Meiji period government documents, and some from the Russians.\textsuperscript{55} This helped the process move quicker. Some of Sirota’s ideas seemed revolutionary. She was impressed

\textsuperscript{50} Koikari, 50.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 53-54.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 57.
by Article 19 of the Weimar Constitution because it gave women equal place in marriage.\textsuperscript{56} She drafted Articles 18-20, 23-26, and 29. Of them Article 23 was considered the most revolutionary.\textsuperscript{57} All of the articles were very detailed and spelled out everything from marriage equality to the wife’s participation in the decision to adopt. There was fear that her articles would end Junpu Bizoku, or the beautiful culture and traditions of Japan. Additional concerns also addressed head of household and succession. The draft went before the Imperial Diet that for the first time included women (39). Her work is pared down, calmed down, and included with other parts of the draft. For example, her Article 23 became Article 22 in the passed constitution.\textsuperscript{58} Sirota achieved much success in her writing, and much of what she wanted is included.\textsuperscript{59}

Victims, “fragile flowers,” and “caged birds” were all terms that people applied to the Japanese women. It turns out that they are none of these things except in the misguided perception of some. They are and had always been strong, just in a quiet even sedate kind of way. Like their sisters in Great Britain and the United States, they wanted to be enfranchised, have birth control, marriage rights, the right to obtain work, and to get an education. Over the period from the end of Tokugawa in 1868 until the Constitution of 1946, women fought valiantly for their rights and won them a bit at a time. The important issues were to shed light on the life and liberation struggle of the Japanese women and to demonstrate that despite the difference in culture women are all the same: strong, ethereally beautiful and courageous.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 70-71.