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DEBATES IN JAPANESE FEMINISM

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The space of debates

Japan presents a paradox: How can a nation that is so highly developed be so gender-unequal that it ranks 114th out of 144 nations (in 2017) on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index? Could it be that lack of consensus about gender equality—how to define it, how to achieve it, whether it is desirable—has something to do with this paradox? This chapter examines debates in Japanese feminism. I begin with the role of debate in Japanese publishing culture in general and the sphere of feminist debate in particular, then describe a series of debates about abortion, motherhood, housework, and paid employment.

Debates might be a common feature of intellectual history in general, but the particular prominence of debate in modern Japan can be attributed to a few factors. At least since the late nineteenth century, an intellectual class and educated readership has supported the wide circulation of newspapers and journals, starting with the Meiroku zasshi (Meiji six journal 1874–75). This journal, for example, featured an early debate on the definition of equality between women and men (Yamaguchi 1989). Highly informed and motivated editors often stage-managed published conversations and contentions. In the 1920s and 1930s, as leftist intellectuals were forced out of academia along with the rise in militarism, they were recruited by the expanding journalistic world, and general interest magazines such as Chūō kōron (Central public debate 1899–) and Bungei shunjū (Literary seasons 1923–) became their chief venues of expressions. As these journals competed with one another, their editorial strategies evolved to include staged debates, along with interviews, dialogues (taidan), and round-table discussions (zadankai) that remain features of Japanese publishing to the present day (Ōsawa 2015).

From its inception, women were part of this world as editors, contributors, and readers. Activists like Kishida Toshiko and Fukuda Hideko aspired to political roles, and public speech making (enzyetsu) became a new outlet for women’s expression in the early Meiji period (Anderson 2010; Patessio 2011). Such roles would eventually become restricted as the government clamped down on women’s political activities, yet women continued to publicize their views through writing and circulating petitions. The first journal to be edited by a woman was Fujin no tomo (Ladies’ companion 1906–), founded by educator Hani Motoko, which sought to promote ideals of feminine education and cultivation. We see the clear emergence of a feminist discursive space in the early twentieth century, with the founding of the journal Seitō
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(Blue-stocking 1911–1916). This was the first journal to defy existing social expectations about women, and although the publication lasted for only seven years, it launched the writing careers of such women as Hiratsuka Raichō and Itō Noe, who engaged in spirited debates about reproduction, motherhood, and sexuality. Prominent literary figures like the poet Yosano Akiko were also drawn into Seito’s ambit. The journal has thus received well-deserved attention and has benefited from sustained scholarly scrutiny (Bardsley 2007; Lowy 2007).

This was followed by another magazine with a long-lived presence in Japanese feminist debates. Fujin kōron (Ladies’ public debate 1916–) touted the goal of enlightening women through high-quality materials and included a section titled “Public Debate” (kōron) in each issue (Frederick 2006). It became the dominant venue for writers on women’s issues and helped establish the subject position of “women voicing their opinions in public.” Although the publication became more commercialized in the late 1920s, it was intermittently the most important venue for feminist debate in Japan as one of the sites for the “motherhood protection debates,” as well as the first wave of “housewife debates,” discussed subsequently. The magazine also created a discursive space that guided readers into becoming thinkers and writers themselves. Its column “Free Discussion” (jiyū rōdan) invited commentaries from readers, and groups of readers organized local discussion circles (Nakao 2009).

In the early twentieth century, a magazine culture focusing on women flourished due to the confluence of several factors: the high rate of literacy due to compulsory education, the rise in publishing technology, women’s migration to the cities, and access to white-collar jobs. These contributed to what might be called a female public sphere in which feminist debates could take place. The women’s suffrage movement, driven by activists like Ichikawa Fusae and Oku Munmeo, became a major locus of feminist discourse in the 1920s. Socialist and anarchist circles gave rise to intellectuals like Yamakawa Kikue and Takamura Itsue, who were also prominent participants in various debates in that era (Sievers 1983; Mackie 2003).

The expanding empire offered opportunities for some female writers and activists, and feminist support for government policies during this time has constituted an ambivalent legacy for postwar Japanese feminism (Garon 1997; Horiguchi 2012). In the postwar period, popular magazines exploded and new venues were established for discussion of social issues. The late 1960s to 1970s, known as the era of “women’s lib,” yielded a large number of small-scale mimeographed publications, called “mini-komi.” These carried on the ethos of publications like Seito, combining topical, activist, and artistic content, fostering a community of writers and readers that was crucial to the raising of women’s consciousness (Shigematsu 2012).

The 1980s was a golden era of feminist debates. The decade saw a flourishing print culture enabled by the economic boom, a critical mass of women entering higher education, and the emergence of female and feminist voices in academia. Movements for gender equality policy gained momentum, and women’s studies courses, conferences, and organizations began to lead to the publication of journals and books. The feminizumu (feminism, written in the katakana syllabary) boom in the 1980s was at once commercial, political, and academic in nature. The generation of scholars who came into prominence in this era led the feminist debates into the twenty-first century. Sociologist Ehara Yumiko orchestrated a series of five edited volumes of feminist debates on topic such as “commodification of sexuality,” “reproductive technology,” “nationalism,” and “liberalism”. She thus became one of the most important coordinators of feminist debate in 1980s and 1990s Japan (Ehara 1990, 1992, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2001). Ueno Chizuko became one of the most prolific and prominent feminist scholars and enlivened the discursive arena through her policy of never backing down from an intellectual fight (see foreword to Ueno 2009, xi–xx). The 1990s were not a “lost decade” for Japanese women, as the economic narrative would suggest. It was an era of significant advances for Japanese women.
Debates in Japanese feminism

But the backlash that followed these advances revealed significant divergence of public opinion about women’s roles in society (Kano 2011).

By 2011, many important print journals had ceased publication, and much of the discussion had moved online. The landscape of digital feminist debate is still a little difficult to discern, but informal feminist and gender discussions have continued to take place online on electronic bulletin boards like Hatsugen komachi (http://komachi.yomiuri.co.jp).

Debates on abortion

Japan has been characterized as a nation where debates on reproductive choice have been low key and where a tacit consensus has prevailed about abortion as a necessary evil. But, in reality, a lively debate has existed for many decades, and feminists have not been unanimous on the issue. A number of factors make Japanese discussions about abortion unusual, if not unique, in the world (Morioka 2001). First, Japan was one of the earliest nations to decriminalize abortion (1948), and this happened as part of a program that explicitly touted eugenic goals. It was not achieved without controversy, but the circumstances under which decriminalization happened have meant that much less public debate surrounded this momentous change. Second, two decades later, just as the world’s advanced industrialized democracies were turning toward liberalizing abortion in the 1960s and 1970s, Japanese public discussion shifted in favour of greater restriction. Although no drastic legal changes resulted, the debate was visible and emotionally charged. Third, while abortion remained accessible and was described as the most popular form of birth control in postwar Japan, access to the contraceptive pill was delayed by several decades and remained controversial for a long time (Norgren 2001). Fourth, Japanese feminist activists, rather than simply arguing for access to abortion as a woman’s right, developed a more nuanced argument. This was partly due to the intervention from advocates of the rights of individuals living with congenital disabilities. In other words, the feminist argument about abortion has become deeply intertwined with arguments about eugenics, bioethics, and disability rights in post-1970s Japan.

The beginning of a feminist debate on abortion came in 1915, with the publication of Harada Satsuki’s “From a Woman in Prison to a Man” in the pages of the journal Seito. The text takes the form of a letter written by a woman charged with abortion, which was illegal at the time. Harada voices a strong statement in favour of the right to terminate, using the analogy of menstruation and amputation to argue that a woman should not be punished for deciding to get rid of parts of her own body. Also prominent was the depiction of dire poverty that would lead a woman to “bear total responsibility” for the potential life of the fetus by choosing to terminate it since “I do not have the right to force this kind of life on a child” (Harada 1915; for English translation, Bardsley 2007, 70–76). This text provoked the ire of censors but also sparked a lively debate involving prominent intellectuals, including members of the nascent feminist rondan (sphere of debate). Most interesting was the response of Itō Noe, who would eventually take over as editor of Seito. This firebrand feminist was vehemently opposed to abortion, but her argument also reveals a deep anxiety about her economic situation. She explains that she was also impoverished when she was pregnant, but thought that “a child would not be born if it were not strong enough to survive this kind of life,” and if it could not survive, then it would naturally die (Itō 1915). It is ambiguous whether this statement reflects the high infant mortality rate or persistent practices of child abandonment as alternative to economically motivated infanticide (Sawayama 1998; Drixler 2013). What is striking here is the model of minimalist definition of parental responsibility. Few would agree with Itō’s drastic reliance on “nature” to take care of offspring—in the decades that followed, economic destitution would be one of the
dominant reasons for arguing in favour of making abortion available. Later it became one of the primary justifications allowing abortion in the postwar period; the “economic reasons” clause has been used in 99 percent of abortion cases to the present day (Katō 2009).

While the economic argument would be used mostly by the side justifying abortion, with Itō a striking exception, a eugenic argument was used first by the proponents and then by the opponents of abortion. Hiratsuka Raichō was one of the earliest and most vocal proponents of eugenics, believing that some individuals were more qualified than others to reproduce. In a 1917 article, she deplored the fact that that people suffering from alcoholism, tuberculosis, leprosy, syphilis, and mental illnesses were bearing children. She called for restrictive qualifications for marriage in order to control the quality of reproduction (Hiratsuka 1917). It is important to remember that eugenics was understood in the early twentieth century to be a rational and even progressive response to social problems, in line with sanitation and hygiene (Otsubo and Bartholomew 1998). Contention existed between those who wanted eugenics to benefit the individual, the family, or the state, but access to reproductive control for women would come at the price of supporting eugenic arguments in the pre-1945 period, and most feminists were in favour.

In the 1960s, the fear of overpopulation that had driven the liberalization of abortion in the postwar period gave way to the era of high economic growth and the need for “high quality” workers. A campaign to prevent the birth of “unhappy children” provided low-cost prenatal testing, including amniocentesis, a recently developed testing technique. This was coupled with the wide accessibility of abortion, unlike elsewhere in the developed nations of the Western bloc. This is precisely why disability rights groups in Japan perceived it with great alarm and why this juncture of prenatal testing and selective abortion became a very contested issue in Japan, more so than in other countries (Kato 2009).

In response to criticism from disability rights advocates, who pointed to selective abortion as a form of eugenics, Japanese feminists had to develop a more nuanced argument to defend the right to abortion. Unlike the binary of “fetal right to live” versus “woman’s right to choose” that has driven the debates in the United States, for example, in Japan, there has been a feminist call for a “society in which women want to give birth.” Yet the low birthrate since the 1980s points to a society in which many women do not feel they can or want to give birth.

The aversion to eugenics has also led to a difficult position for women wishing to assert more control over reproduction. Prenatal testing and access to reproductive technologies continue to be restricted for various reasons, including the ideology of leaving things to nature, which we saw with Itō Noe in the 1910s (Kano 2016, 64–103).

Debates on motherhood and beyond

Debates on motherhood and employment have erupted at various intervals in modern Japanese history. The various strands can be distilled to a few basic questions: Is motherhood the most important role in women’s lives, or is it just one of many? If motherhood is understood to be significant, how should the state or society support it? If it is only one of many roles, what is the role of paid employment in women’s lives? How far should women pursue equality with men in paid employment, and what should be the balance between pursuit of career and family? Lack of consensus on these issues may be part of the reason Japan continues to rank low in global measures of “gender equality.”

One of the earliest feminist debates is known as the “motherhood protection debate,” which began in the 1910s, but the questions it raised persist today. At that point, women were excluded from formal political activity, as the 1890 Law on Associations and Meetings barred women
from attending political meetings or joining political organizations (Nolte and Hastings 1991). The official state ideology was to educate women to become “good wives, wise mothers,” yet young single women were recruited en masse into factory labour, especially in textile mills. “Motherhood protection” became a concept used by labour activists as well as by feminists associated with Seiitō (Molony 1993).

The most fundamental concept raised at this historical juncture was whether the state should help mothers if they needed financial support. The poet Yosano Akiko argued that “women’s professional independence must be the rule” and that only financially independent women with enough savings had the right to become mothers (Yosano 1918). As a prolific poet, financial supporter of her family, and mother of a large number of children, Yosano was unusual among women in her generation in having achieved a high degree of financial independence and in being able to claim that she had done so through her own labour rather than through inheritance (Rodd 1991; Horiguchi 2012). Yosano’s position bears a striking resemblance to the libertarian position in contemporary society, which insists on seeing reproduction as a private matter that should be shielded from state interference, even if that means rejecting state assistance.

In contrast, founder of Seiitō Hiratsuka Raichō insisted on state protection of motherhood, since “mothers are the wellspring of life” and emphasized the social significance of motherhood (1918). But in doing so, she ended up calling for the state’s eugenic control of quality of reproduction, as we saw previously. Disentangling arguments for the social significance of motherhood from arguments for state control of motherhood proved difficult. Thus, Yosano argued against state intervention and posited reproduction as a personal matter, but she had little to say about women for whom financial independence was impossible. Hiratsuka, on the other hand, wanted to emphasize the importance of motherhood, but ended up arguing for its control and regulation by the state. The tension between the wish not to equate women with mothers on the one hand and the wish to argue for support for women as mothers on the other hand is one of the enduring dilemmas for feminist arguments (Kano 2016, 111–112).

Hiratsuka would go on to found the New Women’s Society (Shin Fujin Kyōkai) in 1919 and would advocate not only motherhood protection, but also job training and better working conditions for women, as well as women’s right to participate in politics (Sievers 1983). Yosano would assist in the founding of the private Bunka Gakuin school in 1921 and promoted the egalitarian education of female and male students. Education and teaching as a profession would remain a viable path toward financial independence for many women, and teachers were among the first to obtain paid maternity leave and childcare leave. Thus, for neither of these interlocutors did the idea of motherhood protection remain a merely intellectual topic.

In the following decades, the motherhood protection debate was extended into a debate about the political future. Socialist feminist Yamakawa Kikue proposed in 1918 that, “for a fundamental solution, we must seek change in the economic relations that created and exacerbated women’s problems in the first place.” Yamakawa criticized both Yosano’s call for independence within the existing capitalist structure and Hiratsuka’s call for state protection. For Yamakawa, only socialism could release women from economic dependence on men. Takamure Itsue entered the debate a few years later, advocating an alternative to both capitalism and socialism in the form of radical agrarian anarchism (1926). That women like Takamure and Yamakawa would debate the shape of a post-capitalism is remarkable, and, as described previously, the interwar rondan of the 1920s and early 1930s made such imagined futures seem palpable to these women.

Transnational references in the debates are also significant. Takamure identified Yosano’s advocacy of women’s independence with Anglo-American liberal feminist traditions, Hiratsuka’s
advocacy of motherhood protection with German and Scandinavian maternalist feminism, Yamakawa’s position with Russian socialist feminism, and her own position as the new direction for Japanese feminism, within the global map of feminist ideologies.

The housewife debates which began in the 1950s and developed in several waves in the ensuing decades further extended motifs of the motherhood protection debates (Ueno 1982; Myōki 2009; Bardsley 2014). Isono Toshiko and others proposed an alternative to women’s economic independence via employment by advocating payment for housework and reproductive labour. Those who opposed her argued from a traditional Marxist viewpoint, dismissing housework as not creating value because it does not produce commodities and thus was not deserving of pay. This debate exposed the disagreement between those who affirmed the existing capitalist system by demanding pay for housework and those who saw such demands as giving into the capitalist status quo. Japan in the 1950s and 1960s was a high-pressure laboratory of capitalist development, and these debates were at the forefront of global trends (Ueno 1999). What Isono had discovered, that is, women’s “unpaid labor” in the home, later became part of the common terminology of international feminism as a concept that explains the continued economic gap between women and men.

Women continued to make further advances into the workforce, and arguments for women’s economic independence and equality in the workplace began to be more forceful. In the 1970s, however, Takeda Kyōko suggested a radical transformation of values, claiming that, “the housewife alone is the figure of a liberated human being.” Takeda lauded housewives as having chosen to place themselves in positions of weakness and rejecting economic independence via employment, “in order to coexist with and help out children, the elderly, and the disabled” who are even less capable of economic independence (Ueno 1982, 2, 134–149). The critique of capitalism was part of the countercultural atmosphere and the women’s lib movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but ironically this was also the era in which the full-time housewife was the most hegemonic, due to postwar social policy. The postwar industrial and welfare policy in Japan had been designed to support a particular model of life, paying “family wage” to married male workers and providing low-cost company housing and other benefits in exchange for long hours of work and loyalty to the corporation. Married women were expected to support this system by shouldering all aspects of home life (Ōsawa 2011).

In the 1980s, the debate about the value of paid employment and workplace equality culminated in the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1985, but it also saw Kanō Mikiyō call for a “total withdrawal” from the workplace as a form of radical feminist protest (1985). The celebration and vilification of the full-time housewife would continue intermittently in the 1990s and 2000s, even as social reality changed so that the majority of married women would be working at least part-time (Myōki 2009). Even after the material basis for the full-time housewife evaporated, the ideology of the liberated housewife continued to persist.

Recent debates focus on how to address the declining birthrate (Takeda 2005) and work-life-balance, whether the state should support individuals or families with children, and how to evaluate paid and unpaid work (Kano 2016). The passing of the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society in 1999 resulted in a harsh backlash from conservatives and revealed the lack of social consensus about gender roles (Kano 2011). While most feminists were critical of the sexual division of labour that equated womanhood with housewife-hood and motherhood, they were divided in how much the government should support women who wished to focus on those roles rather than paid employment. And while most feminists valued economic independence for women, not all saw gender equality within a capitalist system as the ultimate goal (Kano 2018). In the meantime, the position of full-time housewife continues to be protected through
insurance and pension provisions, and employment for women and men is far from truly equal (Miura 2016). Thus, the debates continue.

Further reading


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13 Changing Folk Cultures of Pregnancy and Childbirth
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16 Gender and the Workplace
20 Demanding Publics: Women and Activism

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