

## JAPANESE WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

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Japanese history provides striking examples of changes in the status of women. The vast social changes sweeping Japan during its modernization from the 1860s to the 1940s affected women's lives with regard to their rights in all aspects. Profound changes in the economic, social and political status of Japanese women were set in motion during the Allied occupation after world war-II. Constitutional guarantees and other reforms introduced during that period gave women a full legal basis for equality.

The constitution of 1947 introduced during the occupation specially forbade "discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin". The new constitution also made provision in article 24 that marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes" and on the "equal rights of husband and wife" and that with regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the stand point of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes"<sup>1</sup>. These provisions make the constitution of 1947 one of the most progressive constitutions in the world regarding guarantees for women's rights and equality in society. It also established the basis for women's equal educational opportunities and opened the way for a public school system that has become largely co-educational. The Labour Standards Law enacted in April 1947 set the basis for fair treatment of women workers. Most of these measures were same as women's labour laws then in force in United States.<sup>2</sup> New provision introduced into the civil code further implemented the constitutional guarantee of women's equality in family life. In the post war reform of the civil code, husbands and wives were placed on legal parity in the marriage relationship, women can now negotiate contracts without their spouses consents. Marriage itself can be entered into on the consent of both

parties without parental permission when both have reached legal age i.e. 18 for males and 16 for females. In the old code a woman was registered under the name of her own family head or that of her husband, to day she can apply for registration in her own name.

The socio-economic changes in present day Japan have greatly altered the lives of women. In comparison to men on the whole, women still spend more time and energy doing the traditional female activities of house keeping and taking care of children. At the same time, it is true that the days when getting married, having children, doing house work and bringing up children were considered the natural calling for women, have slipped into the past.

“The twentieth century has seen a world wide revolution in the extension of political rights to women”<sup>3</sup>. The degree to which women’s right to participate in politics at all levels varies widely. Japanese women’s views of their place in political life has undergone profound changes over the past four and a half decades. Women gained full political rights, in a legal sense, in 1945 as the by product of Japan’s defeat in World War-II and subsequent occupation by American forces. Before that, their participation in politics had been extremely limited.

A women suffrage movement took shape in Japan in the early decades of the twentieth century but its base of support was far too limited for it to have a consciousness raising effects that such movements had in a number of western countries<sup>4</sup>.

When Japan began its rush to modernize in 1868, the country was emerging from almost seven centuries of feudalism presided over by a class of male warrior elite, the Samurai. “By the Tokugawa period central government policy had required that male elites with national political roles should leave their families behind in the provisions when they come

to the capital to deal with political affairs. Many women of the elite class were thus even physically peripheral to Japanese political life".<sup>5</sup>

Plagued by economic problem and pressured by the west, Japan's crumbling feudal structure had given way to a new leadership pledging its determination to modernize the country. "News of feminist movements under way in other countries found its way to Japan, and western ideas and ideologies gained popularity. As a result some voices were raised on behalf of women's rights. Women suffrage became an issue as early as 1876 in one of Japan's newly founded prefectural assemblies".<sup>6</sup> Japan's first suffragist, Kishida Toskiko (1863 - 1901) campaigned throughout Japan on behalf of this movement and combined her appeals for democratic rights with appeals on behalf of women".<sup>7</sup> Various women's groups, led by the Women's Suffrage Alliance pressed for suffrage in the following years. Ichikawa Fusae, who had spent the period from 1920 to 1924 in America in contact with such American suffragists as Carrie Chapman Catt, founder of the league of women voters, and Alice Paul, organiser of National Women's Party, became the key figure of this period".<sup>8</sup>

From the late 1930s, when Japan's expansionist activities in Asia accelerated, until 1945, when the war ended, women, including those who had been active in the feminist causes of earlier decades, were buffeted to a great extent by the national mobilization policy of the government, the economic hardships imposed on the nation before and during the war, and the patriarchal attitudes of Japan's wartime leadership".<sup>9</sup>

The suffrage movement itself literally disappeared when women's groups of all kinds were subsummed in 1942 under a state directed greater Japanese Women's Association (Dai Nihon Fujin Kai) organised in support of the war effort.

In 1945 Japan's defeat brought an era to an end and in that same year enfranchisement came and women gained full political rights. The Election law was revised in December 1945 to permit women to vote and run for political office. "In the first election of the post war period, held on 10th April 1946, over 20 million women went to the polls for first time".<sup>10</sup> Since 1946 the gap between the voting rates of women and men has continued to lessen and since the election of July 1968 the voting rate for women has exceeded that for men. Japan is today one of the few countries in the world where women out vote men.

In the national government, women were appointed to positions mainly in those bureaus and commissions directly concerned with women's affair e.g. "in 1975 about 39% of all mediation commissioners of the family courts and 35% of all public and child welfare commissioners were women".<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, all of the major political parties have women's sections attached to them, and Japan has women's groups that parallel many of the organizations working in the United States such as the League of Women voters, the Association of University Women, and the parent - teacher Association. About 2.7 million women belong to the National Council of women's Organization of Agricultural Cooperatives. There are approximately 25,000 regional women's organizations, with a total membership of 6 million, affiliated with the National Federation of Regional Women's Organizations i.e. CHIFUREN. Women, especially middle class urban women, have also played a major role in Citizens Movements that arose in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s. Women have also been a major source of support for the Peace Movement in the post war period.

The feminist movement in Japan, made up of groups and organizations committed to improving women's status,

has a number of sources of support. The women's and young Workers' Bureau of the Ministry of Labour has played an active role in promoting the status of women.

### CONCLUSION:

Change in the status of Japanese women has become more evident only during the post war period. Their legal rights have broadened since then. The new constitution of Japan passed in 1946 provided equality and respectability for women under the law. Other laws were passed abolishing discrimination between the sexes in conformity with the provisions of the said constitution. Older women (20 years and above) were given the right to vote and to be elected to public office. Thus, in the same year i.e. 1946, approximately 76% of the women electorate casted their ballots, and 39 out of the 89 women candidates were elected to the National Diet,<sup>13</sup> according to an official report on the women's participation in the elections at that time.

Since then through the elections of members of the House of Representatives, of the House of Councilors, and of the local assemblies, the voting rate of women has always been over 60%.<sup>14</sup>

Women's organizations are numerous and engage in diverse activities. They range from mass organizations, religious groups and occupational organizations to international organizations and groups linked with labour unions. They have organized many women in such activities as consumer campaigns, peace movements, political movements, campaigns against political corruption, antipollution drives, and volunteer activities. Labour Unions which have organized a total of 3.4 million working women, undertake many activities denoted to the protection of women's rights at work as well as for the welfare of working women, with their women's divisions as the central driving force.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, women gained much legal independence after World War-II, and they are now legally equal to men at home and work. Women have the right to practice birth control, which was encouraged at the end of World War-II. They also have right to file for divorce but because of financial constraint they prefer to remain married.

In the post war period, women have been active in citizen movements concerned with such issues as pollution consumer rights, and nuclear dangers. Now voting in greater numbers than men, women's representation in local assemblies is notable. As such, it is beyond doubt that Japan has changed significantly in post war period its women, by giving them their new legal rights.

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