
Voices from the Contemporary Japanese Feminist Movement.
**Emma Dalton & Caroline Norma. Palgrave Macmillan Studies on Human
Rights in Asia, 2022, 137 pp.**

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Feminists, both in and outside of Japan, may believe that the situation for women in Japan is fairly equitable, perhaps because of the seemingly gentle culture, or the appearance of order and affluence. Then, however, they are reminded of conditions that contribute to Japan consistently being ranked low on gender equality scales. Comparing Japanese women to women who are worse off in other countries deflects from the fact that Japanese women, *relative* to Japanese men, are indeed much worse off, especially in terms of employment, political representation, and victimization through violence. This erratic yoyoing of delight and frustration with the gendered status quo in Japan can be partly mitigated by acquiring a more nuanced understanding of how Japanese residents, whether nationals or foreign, experience and create this non-monolithic country. Dalton and Norma's concise, yet informative, book succeeds at deepening such understanding by capturing the lived experiences of women who are navigating and challenging the male-dominated, often misogynistic, landscape in Japan.

The Australia-based authors, who have lived in Japan as both academics and activists, present interviews with six Tokyo-based feminist activists, building on the tradition of using women's own voices (Buckley, 1997) to illuminate meaning making regarding the layers of change over institutionalized rigidities (Krook, 2011). While publications written in Japanese have covered the accomplishments and herstories of some of these women, this book addresses the lacuna of academic books written in English about Japanese feminist activists.

Several key institutional rigidities that require amelioration continuously resurface throughout the book: the lack of laws to guarantee women's equality, the dearth of political representation, the difficulties many women have in gaining economic security, and the ubiquitous gender segregation enforced by social norms that sometimes include different forms of violence against women, violence that is often obscured. The authors and the feminist activists, like feminists in Japan and worldwide, turn to the United Nations Convention of the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) for guidance on attaining gender equality. CEDAW is envisioned to be a guideline to eradicate *cultural* practices that enshrine discrimination against women. Japan has ratified CEDAW, but international laws can only be enforced through domestic institutions, therefore, maintaining the existing gendered status quo and upholding the social

harmony that reinforces male domination and the accompanying misogyny are counter to CEDAW.

As Mitsui Mariko elucidates in Chapter 6, there is no discrimination recognized in Japan—at least not illegal discrimination—since laws in Japan on sex discrimination are non-existent (p. 61). One of the activists, Tsunoda Yukiko (Ch. 5), a feminist lawyer who was involved in Japan’s first sexual harassment case in 1992 (p. 59), argues that sexual violence (harassment) is unfortunately dealt with in the civil code using tort law, which is “not suited” to addressing sexual exploitation as it does not deal with sex discrimination (p. 63), sex inequality (p. 64), nor the long-term “physical and mental incapacity” (p.63)—the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—that survivors experience. She states that Japanese law does not reflect “international standards of human rights” (p. 65).

In her activist work with young women, Nito Yumeno (Ch 4, p. 50) found there is a dearth of legal mechanisms to support vulnerable women (p. 61). For example, she describes the recent public outrage over a judge’s *not guilty* ruling of the rape of a 12-year-old girl by her father, even though the court acknowledged there was serial rape (p. 23). Is a child responsible for indicating she is not consenting to incest rape? Despite public outrage over legal cases of men not being charged with sexually assaulting unconscious women (unconscious from being drugged or force-fed alcohol), the law requires victims prove they did not consent (p. 23); being unconscious is not considered to be a sufficient legal argument (p. 23). Nito notes that men are generally silently complicit with exploiters, commenting that “bystander men turn a blind eye and don’t say anything” (p. 50). Several of the activists in the book, such as Tsunoda Yukiko, are working to overturn the narrow legal definition of rape (p. 61) despite resistance from lawyers, most of whom come from often male dominated university law faculties. Yamamoto Jun (Ch. 3), who has worked with the Japanese Diet (the government, whose members are also mostly male) on changing sexual violence laws (p. 30), argues, “inequality is at the root of sexual violence ... (and) most sex crime victims are women” (p. 34-35).

The book also deals with constraints in mobilizing public activism. One piece of the puzzle as to why public mobilization is generally ineffective is the lack of media coverage of gender equality struggles. This is primarily due to tight control over mainstream media by corporations and those with political influence, such as the powerful, right-wing Nihon Kaigi (Japan Conference), as well as the institutional structures that limit information accessibility (Ito, 2021; McLaren, 2019). Tsunoda Yukiko (Ch. 5) argues that male journalists do not report on women’s issues due to the topic’s perceived insignificance, although she writes that this pervasive attitude is now being counteracted through the increase in female journalists who do (p. 67). While public outrage

generally does not lead to ongoing widespread protests, one example of success described by Kitahara Minori in Chapter 2 is the Flower Demo that supported women survivors of violence. Inspiringly and shockingly, activists such as Mitsui Mariko (Ch. 6) describe their own struggles with harsh, sometimes violent backlash, including rape threats (p. 78), job loss, and various forms of harassment, due to their feminist actions.

The authors argue in the introduction and in their conclusions that there is a critical need for the international feminist community to gain awareness of and give support to Japan's women's movement (p. 6). However, this sentiment is not without complications given the political narrative of anti-feminism, anti-western sentiment, and conservatism that Japanese feminists such as Fujimura-Fanselow Kumiko (2011), Osawa Kimiko (2019), and Ueno Chizuko (as interviewed by Buckley, 1997) have previously documented.

The featured activists acknowledge that international influences have informed their practice, citing diverse sources including French law, Norwegian quota systems, a Canadian training program, and American academics like Catherine MacKinnon. Of note, activist Yang Ching-Ja (Ch. 7) writes about connecting with the South Korean feminist movements. Networking with feminists in South Korea is perhaps a lesser-known international link likely to be of interest to readers. Yang articulated how as a Japanese resident she experienced exclusion in Japan more as a Korean than as a woman (p. 96). This is a welcome explanation on some intersectional insights. Feminist activists working with foreigners is barely mentioned in the interviews, and this may reflect the scant attention generally given to non-dominant groups in a country that still sees itself as predominantly homogeneous.

This book can be used effectively in either language or content-based classes as the chapters are short, each one featuring a specific activist. The interviews cover an array of major issues, as well as lesser-known struggles such as Kitahara Minori's success in providing women's sexual health products and the backlash this garnered (Ch. 2). Surprisingly, the chapters are unusually formatted with an abstract and key words preceding the content, which is more in keeping with academic articles versus book chapters. This somewhat initially interferes with an expected organizational flow but does not detract from the chapters' contents.

Despite the breadth of issues covered by these Japanese activists, the book is not comprehensive, nor does it claim to be. Dalton and Norma offer the reader the voices of long-term feminist activists; women who have been practicing feminist philosophies and at times reject the femininity requirement to not challenge or disrupt harmony, as they search for ways to be effective, evoking

Sara Ahmed's *Feministkilljoys* (2013). The book captures the lived experiences, challenges, failures, and successes of change through social action.

An economically wealthy country such as Japan has the resources to ameliorate women's inferior situation *relative to* men. The rigid institutions that enshrine gendered cultural practices and bolster the male-dominated society require customized strategies towards that end. There have been many changes in the lives of women in Japan, including conceptual changes in the links between sex and reproduction that have shifted across East Asia (Iida, 2014; Jackson, 2019). However, the worldwide system of neoliberalism creates a multitude of common issues for women in capitalist economies, least of all the push and pull between family structures and work. It is these commonalities that have created the existing links with international feminisms and continue to validate the need for strengthening such connections.

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