

The female institutions in Japan and the Capabilities Approach

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.The history of the Female Institution

Although the impact of female groups' activities on Japanese society may not have been as large as on Western countries, Japanese female groups have been doing many things. For example, some of them introduced the idea of feminism counseling and others researched taxation and pension systems relating to women. The female institutions, especially the ones which are called Josei(Female) Center, have supported them. These institutions have helped women by offering them rooms for little money, and special seminars to enhance their leadership abilities and so on.

In order to understand the role of Josei Centers, let me explain how the female institutions have developed in Japan.

According to Editorial meeting of Josei Shisetsu Journal (1995) ,the history of female institutions has had three phases so far. Firstly, female institutions were established by private organizations. Before World War , the two female institutions, Tokyo YWCA Jinbouchou Kaikan and Jiaikan were funded by donations from a canadian woman or the international organization. After World War , Japanese female groups voluntarily established and operated their institutions in various areas. Although some of them seemed to be set up for mutual support in daily life, they enabled women to improve their social and political status. Among them, the Fusen Kaikan (female election) was famous as a place to learn law and politics. They always suffered from financial problems because they were set up by private organizations. When Japan experienced high economic growth, many people thought their quality of life would improve as their income increased. The lack of money and interest from society prevented them from developing. In some areas the female group became inactive, in other places like Yokohama city, the philosophy of female groups was followed and developed by public female institutions which I mention next.

In the second stage, Josei Centers were founded by the local government in advanced areas of Japan in the 1980's. The mainstream of the female institutions gradually changed from private to public. It is not wrong to say that the International Women's Year in 1975 had an impact on this trend. In line with this global gender movement, the ministry of education agreed to subsidize the construction of the female institution. As a result, this pushed ahead the construction of the Josei Centers' buildings. Unlike the private institutions, the planning and management of Josei Centers were done by the civil officers of local government. The main purpose of the Josei Centers was still the enlightenment of women and their principle services was to give information about gender-equality by holding seminars and lending books. Gradually some of them began to expand its services, such as collecting data about women and offering free consultation. Back then, there was no financial need for women to work because husbands could earn enough money to support their families owing to the economic growth. So, many wives stayed at home and looked after their families, especially if they had young children. Reflecting this situation, the main users of Josei Center were housewives. Most of them were housewives after raising children. To meet their needs, Josei Centers offered the program in order to help them reenter the job market.

As the fiscal burden became severe, some local governments reformed the system of Josei Centers by setting up the foundations and letting them operate them.

This change arose from fiscal problems, however, it granted them wider discretion. They could hire the proper staff so that services which they offered improved.

Two laws and a change in society's values had great impact on their development. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law came into effect on June 1, 1985. Literally, this law aims to guarantee equal opportunities and treatment in employment for men and women and to develop the vocational ability of women and see it through to its application. Consequently, some women, such as, university graduates have been given the chance to be treated as equals.

But the situation for housewives, who want to work again, has remained the same and they have been treated as unskilled workers. Most of them worked in the service industry as part-time workers with low wages and little chance for promotion¹. Even the women that got an equal chance of promotion had trouble after they were married or had children because they did not get enough support from their husbands at home. They were supposed to work like men at the office where overtime work was common and do house work and raise children by themselves. According to the Bureau of Statistics, Management and Coordination Agency, Japanese men did less than 1-hour of house work per week in 1996. So several women who had been given the right to be treated equally resigned and this became a social issue. Gradually Japanese Society came to understand that the woman's role at home should be altered.

The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society² became regulated in 1999. This new law accentuates the need to promote gender equality not only in the working place but also in the family. It is made up of 4 pillars: (1) respect for human rights of both sexes, (2) consideration of the social system and tradition, (3) participation of both sexes when a law is made, and (4) balance between home activities and other activities. This law may lead to a new era of Josei(Female) Centers.

. Josei Centers' services

80% of prefectures have Josei(Female) Centers in 2003³. Although there is a difference in history, scale, and management among them, they have common objectives, that is, to serve and enlighten women. Specifically, they offer free consultation, free job training courses, information and a place to do a wide range of activities for women and sometimes men. Recently most of Josei Centers changed their names to Prefectural Centers for Gender Equality. To tell the truth, only 42.1% of Prefectural public female Institutions are called Josei centers and the rest of them Prefectural Centers for Gender Equality. I continue call them Josei Centers in this paper.

According to Josei Centers' web sites, 78.9% of Josei Centers prepare general consultation in 2003. Also, 78.9% of them offer opportunities to talk with lawyers. 36.8 % of them offer mental counseling but only 21.1% of them arrange free consultation for men.

We can understand what Josei Centers think as their mission when we see 86.8% of them offer seminars about gender issues and 100% of them have libraries. Both of two services are for enlightening women. Some of Josei Centers seem to think knowledge of their body is important. 26.3% of them present seminars about women's

¹ It is true that Japanese wives whose husbands get high salaries tend to work less than 103 hours per year. If they work more, the family after-tax income will decrease because the wives salary was taxed.

² In English, the law uses 'Gender-Equal Society', but in Japanese it is more like 'doing something together' .

³ This research excludes Josei Centers in cities.

health. 31.6% of them prepare chances for self expression. They are also eager to foster female leaders and grass roots activists. 63.2 % of them arrange special seminars to enhance their leadership abilities. Almost of all Josei Centers lend places to female groups for little money. More and more Josei centers concern working women and women who want to work than before. 63.2 % of them offer special seminars to improve business skills. Seminars for IT literacy are popular reflecting employers' demand. Some of them offer seminars in which women can learn how to set up businesses by themselves. Especially in Kanagawa Prefecture, a group of energetic female entrepreneurs use the facilities of the Kanagawa Josei Center institution to distribute their business information using its network. While doing so, they are unconsciously acting as mentors to help women who want to set up businesses.

Josei Centers are eager to invite men to seminars. 42.1% of Josei Centers have seminars for men to learn housework which is often thought as womens' work.

. The problem of the Josei Centers

The significance of Josei Centers existence has been questioned. It is often said that Josei(Female) Centers are useless because female discrimination is not severe any more. These kinds of remarks are often heard at the local councils. So far, almost all of the participants and users of Josei Center are women. The comment that the public institution should serve for both sexes after regulation of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society is heard. The supporters of Josei Centers say that Josei Center is still needed because a gender-equal society is not realized in Japan(Editorial meeting of Journal of Female Institution 1995). They also say that the Josei Center will be for both sexes if men stop living work-focused life and trying to balance between work and family life.

As female groups gained power, criticism mounted. In some areas, law makers who were leaders of female groups were elected. There are people who are worried that the networks of the female groups through Josei Center activities became too political. They think that the public institution should be neutral. Considering this critique, some Josei Centers' head offices keep their distance off from female law makers in order to be politically neutral.

Finally, that ordinary people, especially women, did not know much about Josei Centers. They may not care much if a Josei Center in their area is closed. Why don't Josei Centers get support from citizens?

This is partly because Josei Centers are not familiar to them. Still the number of Josei Centers is not enough, so people have to take a lot of time just to go there. Even they live near Josei Centers, they don't have a lot of chance to go there because Josei Centers are closed when workers have free time. In some areas, the Josei Centers try to open for working people but most of services are closed.

I think the main reason that people show no interest toward them is because what they offer is not in demand.

The notion of female participation in society ,which government led to introduce in the 1970's, was interpreted as joining society except the labour market. Female policy hasn't promoted female participation in the labour market and politics, and it has limited its field to social education. As a result, the main service which Josei centers offer has been study for enlightenment. (Editorial meeting of Josei Shisetsu Journal(1995)).

Some associated people think the Josei Center is powerless when it comes to improve female status. This is because the Josei Center don't have the authority to do so. They wouldn't take initiative if a woman consulted them and claimed that she was discriminated against in employment exam. According to Group Mikoshi's research(1995), only 53.8% of Josei Centers have regular meeting with female policy sections of local government. As is often said that relationship between Josei Centers and labour sections is not strong. Even in Josei Centers, cooperation among each sections is weak. This may be the reason that 96.2% of Josei Centers don't do antenna services and pilot services⁵. The number of well experienced staff is always short because Josei Centers can't afford to hire enough proper staffs and staffs from local government transfer within a few years .

On the top of that, there is no consensus to how much extent that Josei Centers can take part in family problem. They are more expected to treat family issues after regulation of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society. However, nothing but offering information has done for problems such as husbands don't participate in raising children, in which most of women are interested.

Associated groups were worried that philosophy of Josei center was vague in many areas. They thought that the mission of a Josei Center should be clearly defined in ordinance in order to make Josei Centers' services more effective.

4. Josei Centers and the Capabilities Approach

It is true that the Josei Centers can be a place where men can go to be enlightened about the women's situation. Josei Centers have a possibility to be places for human development. I think that the capabilities approach, especially Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach, will have impact on Josei Centers which are expected to be a base of gender equality. I want to discuss how to reflect the idea of capabilities in Josei Centers.

The capabilities approach gives good suggestion when the role of Josei Centers is defined. The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society asks prefectural governments to design basic plans for gender equality. Then, the role of facilities relating to gender issue will be more obviously defined in accordance with basic plans than before. If governments accept that they should satisfy human capabilities: what people are actually able to do and to be, the significance of Josei Centers is more deeply understood. The principle that each person is valuable and worthy of respect as an end is instructive when we think about the purpose of Josei Centers. This principle will be a keyword for changing Josei Centers for both sexes.

The capabilities approach will give good criteria. Josei Centers, which are always blamed at using money, can choose effective and less expensive program among many options. Recently, Osaka Prefectural Women's Center is thinking to commit parts of services to NPOs. Once standards of services to satisfy human capabilities are determined, the next step is to check whether NPOs as well as dawn center itself can meet the standards, then dawn center choose the best way. The capabilities approach helps Josei Centers abolish services which fill their role. Some of Josei Centers' services will be out of date as gender equality advance in Japan. The capabilities approach help Josei Centers cut costs in this ways.

⁴ Group Mikoshi consists of local government officials and a scholar in Kansai Area. Their research cover Josei Centers in Kansai Area and advanced cities.

⁵ Antenna services mean services to address problems which staffs often see and hear from users.

The problem of politics and Josei Centers can be discussed in terms of the capabilities approach. I think that the truth that law makers whose foundation was Josei Centers were elected doesn't mean that Josei Centers supported specific groups. Female groups' political activities are not matters as long as the activities are voluntary ones and the groups don't use Josei Centers for election campaign. Rather female groups' political activities are fruits of Josei Centers' services. Their activities look significant with the capabilities approach's point of view. They converted several capabilities into functioning: they chose their own candidates, they worked as election campaigners, they voted and so forth. It is right that Josei Centers should be politically neutral. I am afraid that refraining from inviting female lawmakers to meetings may take opportunities to exchange views with law makes from citizens. Indeed, Josei Centers should make chance for citizens to discuss the gender issues with not only female lawmakers but also male lawmakers.

I am regret that the idea that the shape of family structure and privileges and rights of family members are in many respects artifacts of state action⁶ is not widely spread in Japan. The capabilities approach and the principle of each person as end support Josei Centers to treat family problems. It is difficult for Josei Centers to treat family issues in this situation where central government doesn't revise laws relating to labour, taxation, pension and so on. However, there are still many things that Josei Centers should do for realizing a Gender-Equal Society. Josei Centers need to give information for both sexes. The number of seminars for men is going to increase in a few years. So, Josei Centers should design contents of seminars for improving men's misunderstanding about womens' care giving. Josei Centers can enhance mutual understanding between couples by preparing seminars and counseling for couples. It is also important to offer chance for young people to think about marriage and housework sharing. Further Josei Centers are able to improve atmosphere of workplaces for holding seminars about gender issues at companies and ranking family friendly companies.

⁶ See Nussbaum(2000)

Reference

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