

**Article: “Incorporating Gender Equality at Local Politics: A Case of Toyonaka”**

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### **Incorporating Gender Equality at Local Politics: A Case of Toyonaka**

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This paper examines the development of gender-equality policy in the City of Toyonaka and compares it to policy development at the national and prefectural levels to illustrate how the concept of gender is being incorporated into local politics. My analysis reveals the importance of focusing on the local political process to understand and promote gender equality in Japan.

The national government passed the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999. Corresponding to this development, and reflecting the general trend in Japanese politics to promote bottom-up local initiatives, prefectural and local governments were encouraged to develop their own ordinances to reflect the spirit of this act according to the conditions of each local community. To date, 142 local governments and all but five prefectural governments have enacted ordinances, some of which were in effect as early as April 2000.

A close examination of a gender-equal society was influential in the implementation of gender-equal policies at the local level. Those prefectures that developed policies early on, such as Saitama and Yamaguchi, closely followed the language of the national Basic Law; however, latecomers were more likely to either specifically acknowledge manhood and womanhood in the ordinance language, or to have the whole process of enactment delayed due to disputes over language. Many local councils have responded to political pressure imposed on them to be a national movement opposed to the basic idea of gender equality. This conservative movement regards the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society as a radical attempt to d-gender Japanese society.

If we accept the definition of gender as the imposition of socially constructed differences on individuals, rather than as an immutable characteristic inherently attached to biological sex, then clauses acknowledging an

essential distinction between masculinity and femininity are inconsistent with the spirit of gender equality. The Japanese public's low level of interest in, and understanding of, issues concerning gender created an opportunity for conservatives to dilute the effectiveness of gender-equal ordinances by inserting gender-specific language. Not only is the concept confusing to the general public, but the basic structure of society is still based on unconscious assumptions about rigid gender roles that are accepted by a large portion of the population, including women. Furthermore, conservatives have successfully used the tactic of dividing women into opposing camps and encouraging one group to contest gender-free policies by portraying them as threatening to female identity and family life.

The outcome of local debates over the use of gender-free language depends partly on how well women's perspectives were represented on the local councils responsible for writing the ordinances. The lack of women's representation in the conservative parties is quite striking at the local political level, and even when local ordinances were passed without including a masculine-feminine clause, the pro-inclusion arguments attracted little criticism during the sessions. Survey results indicate that women and men differ in their perceptions of women's slow advancement in the political arena. Although women are more sensitive than men to the effect of gender role attitudes on women's low representation, women also report that women are poorly represented because they are "no positive enough." This self-criticism may be a product of exposure to the gendered image of women as followers.

Given the slow speed at which perceptions of dichotomous gender role change, it seems more, rather than less, important to work toward embracing gender-free ideology. Attempts by conservatives to reverse the trend toward women's advancement in society in the name of Japanese tradition and culture have resulted in considerable backlash against the gender-equality movement. Because advocates for gender-equal policies lack adequate resources to counter conservative activities, at-

tempts to implement genuine social change through the enactment of gender-equal ordinances could be futile. The fundamental task, it seems, is to make the concept of gender more widely understood among the population at large, not just among certain interested individuals, and to redefine women's issues as issues critical to every member of society.

### **Advance of Japanese Women in Politics: The General Local Election of 2003**

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After Japan held the Fifteenth General Local Election on April 13 and 27, 2003, the percentage of women in local assemblies increased from 5.4% to 8.8%. Although young male candidates also increased their political representation in this election, this paper focuses on the women who ran as Independent candidates. Independents make up the largest group of women elected to local assemblies in the 2003 election.

My research indicates that there were three distinct pools of women candidates—the political group, *Seikatsusha Nettowaaku*, or Consumers' Network (Netto hereafter); participants from the political training programs known as "Back-up Schools"; and the relatively new local government program designed to raise women's political interest and involvement, the Simulation Women's Assembly (SWA). The SWA is of particular interest because it appears to be an important new mechanism for promoting women's election to local assemblies in rural towns and villages, where women's representation is considerably lower than in cities.

Netto, which was founded in Tokyo in 1977, originated from the COOP collective purchase consumer movement, or Seikatsu Club Cooperative. By April 2003, Netto had produced 144 female local assembly members. According to Netto's basic philosophy, elected representatives are there by