

Women's Leadership and Power Relations in a Local Community in Japan

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1. Gender Expectation in a Local Community and Gender Equality

In this seminar I presented my examination of women's leadership and power relations in a local community in Japan from feminist theoretical perspectives based upon the ethnographic study on the community Yosugi (pseudo-name). I conducted the fieldwork from 1996 through 1997 for my doctoral dissertation titled "An Examination of Power and Identity Construction among Japanese Women in a Local Community from a Feminist Perspective". This presentation includes my follow-up research in 2001. In this presentation I mainly focused on the three female powerful actors who established their leadership base through their activities in local women's groups in the community. I attempted to give voice to women in the community and analyzed how the concept of gender influenced their daily lives and identity construction. I closely observed the usage of Japanese language which indicates the definition of women's various identities and their relationships to power in the web of relationships. Although more than a decade has passed since the initial fieldwork, a similar sense of values and concept of gender still prevails in the community culture. People's way of thinking and behavioral patterns based upon their core values do not change in a short period of time even if there have been structural and institutional changes by the implementation of gender equality policies by the Japanese Government.

I argue that gender research on identity, power, and leadership needs more intense and qualitative research in order to understand how complexly these issues have been intertwined in people's everyday lives in a local context. Examination of gendered identity construction and unrevealed and sensitive human relationships, whose subtlety and complexity cannot be observed by quantitative and statistical analysis, requires detailed qualitative analysis. My research closely observes the actual behavior of people and attempts to listen to the actual voices of women who are alive. In the local context where people established relationships over a long period of time, creating a shift in people's concept of gender is very difficult and challenging even though the government has attempted to implement gender equality policies institutionally.

2. Issues in Feminist Theories and 'Japanese Women'

Through the theoretical development of feminism the dilemma of establishing sisterhood among different kinds of women has become prominent. Universal applicability of feminist

theories to the people who are situated in various local contexts has been questioned in the development of feminism, and the feminist movement centered on Western perspectives has been critically examined by scholars who have awareness of the differences among women and the women located in the periphery. Mohanty (2003: 34) describes, "...concepts such as reproduction, the sexual division of labor, the family, marriage, household, patriarchy, and so on are often used without their specification in local cultural and historical contexts".

I argue that this dilemma exists not only among women with different cultural backgrounds, but also among women from the same country and culture. Women from the same country could still be divided according to the multiple factors which define their identity. Race, nationality, society, culture, religion, class, age, education, and other factors can variably divide women in the world, and similarly, specificities within the culture can divide women. Concomitantly, the category of "Japanese women" needs to be more critically examined. Japanese women can easily be divided based on the differences in education, social status, family background, age, marital status, and class consciousness, which tend to be invisible. Similarly, women within one community can be divided by specific identities which shift in various contexts, and this needs more careful analysis.

My analysis of the women's organizations in Yosugi attempts to see the complexity of women's identity construction and its positionality in its correlation with power relations in the community politics. This is not only to question the unification of women's identity within one community, but also to examine the complexity of one woman's multiple identities in various contexts. I closely observed the hidden dimension of power of women in private and public spheres, and the way women exercised power as leaders in a local community through my participant observation, which critically questions the dichotomous view of power relations: men as powerful versus women as powerless. In community politics, women and men are related to each other in the web of complex human relations established throughout their lives. People's identity shifts variably depending on the specific context, and concomitantly it shifts the power relations among people.

3. Female Leaders in a Local Community in Japan and Gendered Behavioral Code

My research revealed, through my observation of the interactions of people, women's power and leadership is not necessarily exercised in visible ways and that invisible power exertion significantly influences the community power politics. Among the three powerful female actors, the President of the Yosugi Women's Association (YWA), who was eighty-two years old in 1997, established her status as a substantial community head after half a century of her community service gratis. The decision making process in the community gatherings indicated her unofficial status as the community's head. In the local community Yosugi, the nativity of the person has been a crucial factor to be approved as a genuine leader in the community, as this is proved by the way leaders have been selected and also by the way the historical record of the community selected the important figures to be covered. However, the

status of the President of the YWA, who was married into a native family, proves that even without her own nativity, she could be approved as a leader with her prominent leadership. In the approval of a leader, the conventional code of nativity could be overshadowed by the distinguished leadership and high education.

Among the three powerful female actors, the other two were from Yosugi. One of these two women, who is a native in Yosugi, has married into another native family in Yosugi, and has established herself as a leader through her wide range of connections, using her communicative and social skills and work experience in the Community Center. The other female power actor is from a noted family in Yosugi and her mother was the first President of the YWA. She has also established her power base through her active involvement and leadership in local women's groups and the Parent Teacher Association. In the examination of these three female leaders, the dichotomous division of men as powerful and women as powerless was not operating in the community. Being a woman is one kind of identity among the multiple identities one woman has, and other factors such as education, leadership skills, communicative skills, nativity, and family background significantly influence the establishment of the leadership status.

Yosugi is a local community where gender concept strongly influences the way people behave. For example, this is observed clearly in gender role divisions in the traditional festival of the community: men exhibit their physical strength and power by carrying the heavy portable shrines (*mikoshi*) and ship (*ofune*), whereas women play a supportive and caring role such as providing meals for men and taking care of children who also perform in the festival such as dancing, playing the traditional Japanese flute, hitting the Japanese drum (*taiko*), and carrying small portable shrines. Women's leadership in Yosugi is still not free of a gender behavioral code, however, just one identity as a woman does not locate her in a powerless position. Multiple factors complexly define a woman's identity and status, and a woman could possibly become a powerful leader in the community.

Reference

Mohanty, C, (2003). *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.