

Women and Politics in Japan

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Abstract

The unit on “Women and Politics in Japan” aims to show the empirical and theoretical relevance of the study of Japanese society to courses in the social sciences. In focusing on the political activities and careers of women and housewives in Japan, the unit explores a topic central to the study of democracy, women’s rights, and gender inequality in contemporary societies. More importantly, the readings in this unit discuss the role of the housewife as a public and potentially political role and thus offer an opportunity to explore alternative conceptualizations of women’s citizenship, the public/private divide, the scope of formal and informal politics, and the role of the housewife. In integrating theoretical concerns with empirical case studies, the unit intends to go beyond comparisons that emphasize cultural difference, and instead illuminate the theoretical challenges posed by international comparison.

1. Themes and Goals

The unit provides a case study of women’s political activities in Japan. Going beyond conventional approaches to politics, students will learn about the political activities of women in formal politics as well as those of housewives. The first part of the unit discusses the opportunities and constraints women face in attaining political office in postwar Japan, as well as the potential influence of their role as wives on the legitimacy of their political activities. The second part examines women’s and housewives’ movements and their active involvement in political activities as part of their domestic role as wives and mothers. In discussing the role of the housewife as a public role, the unit subverts the idea of the housewife as a traditional gender role limited to the private

realm. In describing housewives' involvement in grassroots politics, it also extends discussions of politics and the exercise of citizenship to activities outside of formal politics.

This unit aims to provide the opportunity to integrate international comparison and alternative theoretical perspectives into the units on women in politics, which are part of courses in sociology, political science, and women's studies. The topic of political women in general and housewives in particular should be accessible to students without background in Japanese studies, who are interested in family, gender roles and gender perspectives on politics. The theoretical implications of the readings also extend theoretical discussions of politics, social movements, and citizenship in general.

The materials in this unit encourage students to think critically about the following issues:

- Although women in Japan have formally the same rights as men, it remains difficult to compete with men in formal politics. Traditional gender roles, interestingly, can become a barrier as well as a resource in running for political office. The readings should allow students to gain a more complex understanding of the role of gender in shaping women's access to political office.
- The role of the housewife is conventionally associated with 'traditional' values, the private sphere, and a low status. This unit inverts this view, in describing forces, which have influenced the role of the housewife over time. It also portrays the role of the housewife as a position which receives considerable respect, and which justifies involvement in public affairs and politics. Students should come away with a sense of the multiple dimensions of a supposedly traditional and private role, and the significance of grassroots politics in contributing to political debate and policy changes.

2. Audiences and Uses

This unit is intended to fit into the following undergraduate courses:

- Contemporary Japanese Society
- Modern Japanese History
- East Asian Civilizations
- Gender in Contemporary East Asia
- Introduction to Sociology
- Sociology of Gender
- Introduction to Women's Studies
- Women in politics

3. Instructor's Introduction

A. Women in Japanese politics

Brief introduction to the development of women's political rights and access to formal politics in Japan:

- Women's suffrage had become an issue with the beginning of Japan's modernization in 1868 and had been taken up by various groups in the prewar era.
- Japanese women obtained full political rights in 1945, after Japan's defeat in World War II.
- In 1946, women voted and ran for office for the first time. Women voted in very high numbers, and a comparatively large number of women obtained national political office, although few took positions in local level politics.
- Women's voting patterns and representation in local and national politics raise the question of how political rights can translate into political office and power.

B. Housewife politics

Introduction to the role and status of 'professional' (full-time) housewives in postwar Japan:

- The 'professional' housewife performs tasks similar to a stay-home mother in the United States. Professional housewives manage their husbands' salaries and assure the physical health of their families, but also manage social relations, and ensure their children's educational success. Domestic responsibilities can also translate into a public role in the economy and politics. An example of this is the formation of a consumer group, the Seikatsu Club.
- Japanese housewives created the Seikatsu Club to address concerns regarding their families' health and welfare, household budget issues, and the healthy upbringing of their children. The group, which is now well-known worldwide, has campaigned to counteract rising prices, assure freshness and safety of products and limit waste (see the Seikatsu Club website for more information: <http://www.seikatsuclub.coop/english/top.html>). These activities and concerns have also involved the members of the movement in politics; some members run for office to make their concerns heard.

4. Instructor Readings

- *** Most important
- ** Recommended
- * Optional

A. Women in Japanese politics

- *** PHARR, Susan J. “The Background to the Contemporary Struggle: Gaining Political Rights in Japan.” Chap. 2 in *Political Women in Japan: The Search for a Place in Political Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981. Pages 15-41.

Brief overview of the historical development of women’s political rights, patterns of voting and holding of political office in postwar Japan. Skim pp. 28-34, which focuses on women’s voting patterns.

B. Housewife politics

- *** HENDRY, Joy. “The Role of the Professional Housewife.” Chap. 10 in *Japanese Women Working*, edited by Janet Hunter. London: Routledge, 1993. Pages 224-241.

Portrayal of the role and status attributed to housewives, as well as their role in the economy and the state. While similar to stay-home mothers in the US on the surface, the chapter underlines the responsibility and status attributed to the role of the housewife in Japan. Also contains a brief description of the Seikatsu Club movement discussed in other readings.

- ** NARAYAN, Uma. “Towards a Feminist Vision of Citizenship: Rethinking the Implications of Dignity, Political Participation, and Nationality.” Chap. 3 in *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Mary Lyndon Shanley and Uma Narayan. University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997. Pages 48-67.

Pp. 55-60 provide a brief introduction into several feminist perspectives on citizenship and political participation. The author problematizes a focus on representation in formal politics alone, and emphasizes the need to consider other forms of political participation as well. The student readings for this session add to this discussion with examples of different forms of political activities and political involvement of women in supposedly traditional and domestic roles.

- * Seikatsu Club: details on the history, main goals, and activities of the Seikatsu Club are available on the official website at <http://www.seikatsuclub.coop/english/top.html>

5. Student Readings

Ideally, you should use all the required readings listed below. If however you prefer to assign a smaller amount of reading per session, choose readings according to the star* system:

- *** Most Important
- ** Recommended

* Optional

If you have only one day to devote to the topic, choose either A. or B.

If you have more than one week of time, consider using Robin LeBlanc's *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife* (see annotation below and further reading) in conjunction with the readings by Hastings and Uno (below) and the Instructor's crib readings.

A. *Women in Japanese politics*

The readings for this session address the question of Japanese women's involvement in politics from two different angles: Hastings presents a survey of the varying motivations and political careers of women elected into the upper house in postwar Japan, while Leblanc provides a close-up view of one housewife's campaign for political office and her experience as a housewife politician.

- *** HASTINGS, Sally Ann. "Woman Legislators in the Postwar Diet." In *Re-Imaging Japanese Women*, edited by Anne E. Imamura. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. Pages 271-300.

Examines several generations of postwar woman legislators and their strategies to get access to political positions. Provides a range of examples of different paths to political office from devoted wives, to professionals and members of social movements.

- * LEBLANC, Robin M. "The Ono Campaign: A 'Regular' Housewife in Elite Politics." Chap. 6 in *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Pages 164-193.

Case study of a housewife who entered national politics as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party. Discusses how she uses the image of the housewife in her political rhetoric as well as the barriers she faces in her campaign.

Note: LeBlanc's chapter is taken out of an ethnographic study. Although the chapter stands by itself, the term 'bicycle citizenship' needs explanation (see the first couple of pages of the introduction). Whereas regular politicians use taxis (which are fast, run along main streets, and cost money) for transport, housewives usually use bicycles (which are slower, allow you to take shortcuts through narrow side streets, and require stamina rather than money). One's mode of transportation, here taken as a metaphor of different resources and perspectives, significantly alters one's view of the social and political world. The book attempts to take a 'bicycle' view of politics and social life.

B. *Housewife politics*

The readings for this session explore the role of the housewife as a public role, and the political significance of housewives' activities. The essays by Arimura and Sasakura illustrate the motivations and goals of housewives involved in politics.

- *** ARIMURA, Junko. "Working at a Consumer Cooperative." Chap. 24 in *Voices from the Japanese Women's Movement*, edited by AMPO. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. Pages 190-193.

Essay on the objectives and activities of the Seikatsu Club movement by one of the movement leaders.

- *** SASAKURA, Naoko. "Aokage Takako: Housewife Turned Political Representative from Seikatsu Club Seikyo." In *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda. New York: The Feminist Press, 1995. Pages 374-383.

Short essay on the political career of a housewife who reached political office as a member of the Seikatsu Club.

- ** UNO, Kathleen S. "The Death of the 'Good Wife, Wise Mother'?" Chap. 11 in *Postwar Japan as History*, edited by Andrew Gordon. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Pages 293-322.

Kathleen Uno's chapter traces the origins, as well as continuity and changes in the ideal of women as 'good wives, and wise mothers' from prewar to postwar Japan. The chapter illustrates the creation and reinforcement of women's 'traditional' role in the home and shows how the ideology and its reinforcement also influenced women's public and political activities. Rather than limiting women's activities to the home, the ideology also enabled women to justify their involvement in public and political activities.

6. Student Activity: Discussion questions

A. Women in Japanese politics

1. What have been the main barriers to women's entry into politics in postwar Japan?
2. How do gender roles, particularly women's roles as wives and mothers, influence their position in electoral politics?

B. Housewife politics

1. To what extent is women's role as housewives a barrier to their ability to be politically active? How can the identity of the housewife strengthen a woman's political campaign?
2. What makes the activities of housewives involved in the Seikatsu Club politically significant? What are the limitations of focusing on political rights and political representation as the key indicators of women's political empowerment?

7. Comparative Opportunities and Theoretical References

Housewives and political participation in the US

- MATTHEWS, Glenna. *“Just a Housewife”: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Examines the ‘cult of domesticity’ in American culture in the mid-nineteenth century. There are striking parallels between the American ‘cult of domesticity’ and the ideology of the professional housewife in contemporary Japan. Also in the US, this ideology validated women's role in the home and justified women's need for education as well as involvement in political activism about slavery. Chapters 1 and 2 are particularly pertinent.

- YALOM, Marilyn. *A History of the Wife*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001

Chapter 10 (“Toward the New Wife, 1950-2000”) provides a lively account of the changing images and attitudes toward marriage, and the role of wives and mothers in the US. The concerns about the role of the wife and mother addressed here are quite different from those discussed in the case of Japan. These differences in conceptualizations of the role of the wife and the goal of liberation may raise interesting questions when viewed in comparison.

Citizenship, women's political participation, and the public-private divide

- LISTER, Ruth. “Private-Public: The Barriers to Citizenship” and “Women's Political Citizenship: Different and Equal.” Chapters 5 and 6 in *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Discusses women's participation in formal and informal politics and considers the utility of maternalist arguments about women's political citizenship. Contains a range of relevant theoretical points touched upon by the unit.

- PHILLIPS, Anne. “Public Spaces, Private Lives.” Chap. 4 in *Engendering Democracy*. University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

Examines the distinction between private and public, private constraints on public involvement, power and gender division of labor in the family, and the wider meaning of politics and political involvement. Useful reading on the relationship between the domestic sphere and politics.

8. Further Reading

- FUJIMURA-FANSELOW, Kumiko, and Atsuko Kameda, eds. *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1995.

Comprehensive and accessible collection of short essays mostly written by Japanese scholars on women in history, feminist movements, education, at work, in the family, society, and politics. Includes bibliography on women in Japan.

- GELB, Joyce, and Margarita ESTEVEZ-ABE. "Political Women in Japan: A Case Study of the Seikatsusha Network Movement," *Social Science Japan Journal* 1, no. 2 (1998): 263-279.

Detailed description and analysis of the Seikatsu Club movement, its effects on the consciousness and values of members, success in local elections, and its potential impact on policies.

- GORDON, Andrew. "Society and Politics from Transwar through Postwar Japan." In *Historical Perspectives on Contemporary East Asia*, edited by Merle Goldman and Andrew Gordon. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. Pages 272-296.

Short overview of main political and social changes in postwar Japan.

- HAYES, Louis D. *Introduction to Japanese Politics*. New York: Marlowe and Company, 1995.

Provides basic information on the structure of the Japanese political system and parties (Chapters 3 and 4).

- IMAMURA, Anne. *Urban Japanese Housewives: At Home and in the Community*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.

Ethnography on the everyday life and role of housewives in postwar Japan.

- LEBLANC, Robin M. *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Study of housewife politics as a form of women's exercise of their citizenship. Includes chapters on women's relationship to their identity as housewives, volunteerism as a form of political engagement, and case studies of women in local and national politics.