

Special Contribution

Reflections on the Political Background of Gender Bashing

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In response to Professor Pető's lecture, I will comment as one of the plaintiffs in a case against a member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the House of Representatives, Sugita Mio, which we filed at the Kyoto District Court in February 2019.

I am very interested in how the people gathered here today feel about the national and social attacks on gender studies in Hungary and against Prof. Pető that have been described here today. This is because here in Japan we underwent fierce "gender bashing" about fifteen years ago, that attacked the concept of gender, particularly the use of the term "gender free" in the educational context.¹ The events in which some members of the LDP put political pressure on the government to stop "extreme sex education" and also to end the use of "gender" remain fresh in our memory.²

And the legal case I will discuss now is also based on ongoing Japanese politics.³ Our current prime minister, Abe Shinzō, led the gender bashing campaign fifteen years ago and was the chair of the team that led an investigation into "extreme sex education." As I will take up again later, shortly

¹ For example, Yamatani Eriko, an LDP member of the House of Councilors, is famous for her attack on sex education, and her political priorities even now circulate around stopping "extreme" "pressure-free education" and "extreme" sex education, ending "gender-free" education, implementing moral education and religious education. <http://www.yamatani-eriko.com/old/policy/index.html> [visited on 1 September 2019].

² For more on the debate on "gender free bashing" and the use of the term gender, see Kimura (2005) and Ueno (2006)

³ See Okano (2015) for the interrelationship between the current constitutional reform, historical revisionism, and the political situation surrounding gender studies and feminist research.

after he became a member of the House of Representatives in 1993, he joined the “History and Review Committee” and in 1997 he became the secretary general of the “National Congress of Young Legislators Thinking about Japan’s Future and History Education” and began blatant political interventions and attacks on history education.⁴ Abe has now had the second-longest running administration in postwar Japanese history, and his LDP boasts more than two-thirds of the seats in the House of Representatives, needed to propose constitutional revision. We began our legal trial in this political context.

Here I will briefly introduce the contents of our legal trial. I have shared copies of our pamphlet for the “Joint Support Association” opposed to congressional intervention into academic grants and against feminism bashing.⁵

From April 2012 to 2017, I conducted collaborative research with the other plaintiffs—Muta Kazue (Professor, Osaka University), Ida Kumiko (Professor Emeritus, Osaka Prefectural University), and Furukubo Sakura (Associate Professor, Osaka City University)—using a government grant on the theme of “Bridges and Networking between Researchers and Activists to Contribute to the Realization of a Gender Equal Society.” Our project had been approved for funding after a rigorous review by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), from which we received the grant (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research B). The impetus for our research was the realization that developing research on gender and feminism often diverges from the actual experiences

⁴ On the political context of Abe’s political intervention regarding the “comfort women” issue, Wada Hiroki, one of the people who called for the formation of the 1995 “Asian Women’s Fund,” is a good resource (Wada 2015). In particular, how the current Prime Minister Abe became the Deputy General Secretary for Parliamentary Association against the Diet’s resolution fifty years after the end of war, who insisted on “no apology or reflection,” and how he contributed to the growth of the Association suggest much to us about the historical perception of Abe—then only a first-term politician—and his long-running administration. Since that moment fifty years after the war, the number of LDP lawmakers who will not allow any national resolution that recognizes the history of a system of sexual slavery has rapidly increased (Ibid., esp. 112).

⁵ For more on this, please see the associated website, which includes the details of the legal complaint we filed: <http://kaken.fem.jp/>

of women involved in citizen's movements, and that such knowledge of this research on gender and feminism may not have been utilized in such activism and social movements. Our purpose was to revitalize feminist theory and gender theory, which originated in the feminist movement, by linking it again with contemporary women's activism in a society in which we seem to see deepening gender disparity.

Incidentally, of all the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research B awarded in 2012, two out of eighteen of the research topics featured gender research. We pride ourselves on the recognition of the social and academic significance of our research topic. In addition, I believe that we have achieved much to be proud of over our four years of research.⁶

Since, as I mentioned, the research title included "Bridges and Networking between Researchers and Activists," we did use our research funds to hold symposiums and public events with women who were activists involved in movements that opposed various policies undertaken by the Abe administration: policies related to militarization in the name of state security, the construction of US military base at Henoko in Okinawa, the restarting of nuclear power plants, the destruction of the spirit of the current constitution and an emphasis on family responsibilities through rewriting Article 24. Assembly member Sugita Mio began to attack us because one such event was written up in a newspaper. Our intent with these events was to understand, as a research subject, the chronology of how a women's movement could start, issues of sexism within social movements, and also, what measures connect women's movements and build solidarity. Sugita, however, could only understand this as an anti-Abe—and even unpatriotic—movement. She began to declare that our research was nothing more than political agitating, and that we misappropriated our funding, using it for political purposes.

One of the important themes that we considered in our research was that

⁶ For example, you can find the results of our joint research here: <https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/repo/ouka/all/67844/kakyousturufeminizm.pdf>.

of the Japanese imperial military's use of "comfort women," a topic on which I have worked for many years, and that involves issues of violence against women and of sexuality. We linked this to research that critically considered, from a historical perspective, the fierce criticism that meets victims of sexual violence in Japanese society.⁷ Regarding this "comfort woman" issue, as I also touched on earlier, Abe Shinzô has consistently asserted, ever since becoming a member of the Diet, that there was no coercion—for women to act as sexual slaves—because no materials that clearly give such an order has been found.⁸ Abe is the kind of politician one can call a "historical distortionist." He made Sugita Mio an LDP assembly member through the election system of proportional representation. Although recognition of the Japanese "comfort women" as a "system of sexual slavery" has gained consensus in the international community, the remarks of assembly member Sugita have repeatedly rejected the conclusions of the UN Human Rights Organization and other global associations. What I want to emphasize here is that this rejection of global consensus is the official view of the current Japanese government.⁹ Also, before her selection by the LDP, Sugita Mio stated in 2014 that—as a member of the Party for Future Generations—"gender equality is an immoral delusion that can never be realized." And last summer, she published an article that declared that LGBT people, since they don't have children, are not productive and disrupt the social order.¹⁰

In response to assembly member Sugita Mio's accusations—repeated in

⁷ For my basic position on the "comfort women" issue, see my article "The 'Comfort Women' Issue and Japan's Democratization" (Okano 2015: Chapter 2).

⁸ As for Abe's claims that there are no official materials that confirm coercion of "comfort women," see the records published by the study group, Association of Young Legislators Thinking about Japan's Future and History Education (1997). For example, in the military tribunals concerning the Dutch-held East Indies, the Dutch government in 2007 demanded an apology and criticized Abe by name for his minimizing of past atrocities.

⁹ For example, see the government response to reports and recommendations from the UN Human Rights Commission, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e.g. the response to the 6th summary of the 2014 Freedom and Covenant Committee: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000101437.pdf>

¹⁰ For criticism of this article, see Okano 2018.

magazines, on television, and online—that our research is “fabrication” and “misappropriates research funds,” and that it “supports political activities, not research,” we sued her for defamation. At the same time, the background to this legal case consists of the larger political currents we have discussed, in particular, the hostility to constitutionalism that has emerged since 2012. I think we need to also think about how this corresponds to the shocking political attacks on gender studies in Hungary, and the changes brought about by Orbán’s government, symbolized by the 2013 passing of a constitutional amendment by an overwhelming parliamentary majority.

Professor Pető touched upon the wider context in which gender studies has been attacked and analyzed the characteristics of what she identifies as the “polypore state.” The more it corrodes the core of the nation, the more it grows. For those of us living in Japan, we may reflect on the Abe administration and find that we can see here a government we can liken to a fungus that rots out the core as it grows.

In order to kickstart a stagnant economy and a devastated labor market, the government makes policies that burden each laborer but reduce per capita productivity. While neglecting the poverty of women and children, they appeal to morality and urge women to have more babies. Although the crisis of a foundering Japan through the nuclear disaster at Fukushima was only accidentally averted, we hear again the myth of safety asserted to support a forced restart of nuclear power plants on a land even more fragile, while residents are trained to evade the threat of incoming nuclear ballistic missiles launched by neighboring countries with duck and cover drills. While they disrespect the individual protected by the constitution, we also hear they strongly oppose same-sex marriage because it is unconstitutional.

We could say that the nation of Japan is being rotted, rapidly, just now. However, what I prefer to emphasize is that the imagination to live freely, and the latent faculties each person should have, is being rotted out in Japanese society. I believe that feminist research, historically and also now, has been

research conducted not only to understand respectfully the potential capabilities of women and other minorities that have been oppressed by the nation and society, but also research to reclaim their power. Therefore, the Abe administration seeks, through its denials of the voices of women who raise their voices to reclaim respect regarding the “comfort women” issue in particular, to demonstrate what kind of response one meets when challenging authorities who parasitize the nation.

The current situation we see in Hungary has already begun in Japan. Assembly member Sugita is an aberration, but if you are obsessed with only those who seem like small examples you may lose sight of the propagation of parasites in Japan so far, and how they have rotted the core. Through our legal battle, I would like to make clear the original power through which assembly member Sugita was created.

On this occasion, examining what Prof. Pető dubs the “polypore state” in her presentation, I felt chills run down my spine, but I also feel encouraged by her calls to solidarity in the midst of her own battles. In Japan as well, in the lead-up to World War II, there were calls to preserve academic freedom through risking life, and there were those who died doing so. This past is a bit further back for us than in Hungary, which experienced Soviet totalitarianism, and so is a past we can only relive through our history books.

I would like to note one personal response to Prof. Pető’s keynote speech. Certainly, even in Japan today, freedom of thought is being chipped away at. Still, I don’t believe that feminists should ask themselves if they should die for academic freedom. The readiness to die, from Heidegger onward, has been a feature of humanity celebrated by patriarchal philosophy, and has been mobilized to repress women as the symbols of life.

We must survive for the freedom of knowledge. Through these kinds of symposiums, I would like to combat attacks on academic freedom while also nurturing our collective wisdom about survival. “Comfort women” finally achieved recognition as victims of a system of sexual slavery through

international networks of women. I want to end my comments with hope, by emphasizing that feminist research survives through forging networks. Thank you for your attention.

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