

Special Contribution

It Should Be Stunning: Thoughts on Gender, Gender Studies, and the Future

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It should be stunning the number of conservative politicians in Japan who fail to comprehend the nexus between women's social status and rights here in Japan and the severity of the so-called "*shōshika mondai*," the problem of the declining number of children being born. And by children, most of those aforementioned conservative politicians surely mean the number of *pure* Japanese children being born to *pure* Japanese parents—as if there were such a thing as being *purely* Japanese. It should be stunning how nationalism and racism and even Japan's imperialist past and perhaps future are woven into this discourse.

It should be stunning that just over a week prior to this emergency symposium, yet another politician here in Japan, the repeatedly disgraced Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Sakurada Yoshitaka, was forced to apologize after telling women—meaning, I am quite sure, *pure* Japanese women—that they should give birth to at least three children to help counteract the *shōshika mondai*. This calls to mind the wartime slogan "*umeyo, fuyaseyo*," urging women to give birth to increase the population. This population increase was for the sake of the imperialist expansion project which demanded that mothers send their sons off to die for the sake of the nation. For nationalism.

It should be stunning that just over two weeks prior to Sakurada's truth-telling gaffe, neoconservative Nippon Ishin no Kai party member Maruyama Hodaka drunkenly urged war with Russia to take back the Northern Territories, territories which Russia took from Japan at the end of that war for which

women were asked—or rather, demanded—to give birth to, raise, then sacrifice their sons. This he said as the conservative LDP continues to push for the revision of Article 9 of the Constitution, renouncing the use of war. It should be stunning.

Maruyama was forced to resign from his party, Nippon Ishin no Kai, for going too far. Sakurada evidently didn't go far enough. Perhaps he should have asked—or rather, demanded—that women have at least four children instead of three. Or if he really wanted a return to Imperial Japan's wartime glory, he should have increased that number to five, the number of children the Imperial government urged women to have, women who were increasingly called to take a greater role in public life, to play a greater role in the workforce to make up for the shortage of men. If he had increased the number to five children and made more explicit the ties between his comments about the birthrate and Imperial Japan, that would have been stunning, wouldn't it? It's increasingly difficult to say.

Sakurada later explained that he merely wished to emphasize the importance of making Japan a place in which it is easy to have and raise children. But that's not what he initially said, nor is there much sign that his party, the ruling LDP, is actively working toward that end. It's somewhat uncanny that the conservative Sakurada's explanation resonates so strongly with one of the slogans of the radical feminist *ūman ribu* (women's liberation) movement in the early 1970s: "*Umeru shakai o! Umitai shakai o!*" This means, roughly, we call for "a society in which [women] can give birth! A society in which [women] want to give birth!" When I Googled "*Umeru shakai o!*"—the call for a society in which women can give birth—to make sure I had the slogan right, I ran into Twitter and a large number of comments calling on Sakurada and the LDP to do just that, to create a society in which women can give birth to three children if they want to. Dripping with contempt, one person wrote, "Say that *after* you've created a society in which women can give birth to at least three children! That's your job, politicians! If you can't do it, keep your

mouths shut!”¹

Today, Japan is not confronting a shortage of soldiers combined with a shortage of male bodies to fill the labor force driving the push for women to have more children while playing an increased role in society. Instead, it’s in the face of a severe labor shortage—due in part to the extremely low birthrate—that Japan’s conservative leaders are again calling for women both to return to the workforce in full force and to have more children for the sake of the nation. But these conservative politicians have still not amended tax laws that punish women for working more than part time; nor have they assured access to reliable, quality childcare; nor have they restructured labor laws to reduce the long hours demanded of so many workers such that men in heterosexual couples are able to share equally with their wives the burden of caring for children and the home.

Indeed, the same conservative politicians who have so recently called for the creation of “*josei ga kagayaku shakai*” — a society in which women shine — and done little concrete to make that a reality are responsible for the shift in the 1990s from legislative advocacy of “*danjo byōdō*” to legislative advocacy of “*danjo kyōdō sankaku*.” The former term, translated literally, means “male–female equality” and is usually translated into English as “gender equality.” The latter, rather difficult to translate term means, very roughly, “male–female collaborative participation.” In other words, men and women don’t need to be treated equally, but they should collaborate, they should work together. Intriguingly, in the face of an overt conservative backlash against the very idea of gender equality, the official English translation of “*danjo kyōdō sankaku*” — a term that was coined to do away with equality of the sexes as a policy goal — is “gender equality.”

This *should* be stunning, but it isn’t. We’ve come to expect nothing less from

¹ たっちゃん [Heriko111], (2019, May 31), 「子供最低三人産んでほしい」なら、最低三人産める社会を作ってから言え!! それがお前ら政治家の仕事だろ! 出来ないなら余計なこと言うな! [Twitter post], retrieved from <https://twitter.com/heriko111/status/1134232257168719872>.

Japan's leaders. And nothing more.

What these politicians sorely lack is an understanding of gender, training in gender studies—that which Professor Andrea Pető explained in her talk at this symposium has been attacked for being unnecessary as well as distracting from the Hungarian government's policy goal of demographic growth. Demographic growth? Indeed, an understanding of the nexus between women's social status and rights and the birthrate in Japan might help these conservative politicians see that it is their conservative policies that are preventing the creation of a society in which women actually can shine, in which women actually do have equal opportunities and participate fully and equally in all areas of the public and private spheres, in which women actually want—and are able—to give birth to even one child, much less three. Without this knowledge, without policies and legislation informed by an understanding of how gender intersects with all aspects of Japan's culture and society, there will be no demographic growth, not in Japan at least.

Training in gender studies, an understanding of gender helps us all see the intersectional relationships between nationalism, racism, sexism, and even the birthrate. Training in gender studies allows us to see that it is no coincidence that alongside revising Article 9 of the Constitution, the article renouncing war, the LDP also wants to revise articles guaranteeing equality of women and men, including equality within the family. This could be stunning. But training in gender studies means that these moves are being undertaken simultaneously is, in fact, not at all surprising.

Training in gender studies helps us see that the LDP's vision of the future offers little hope for any future. And that's why gender studies is so dangerous—and so powerful. Most of us here at this symposium today—all of us, I hope—understand this, understand the necessity of gender studies, whether in Japan, Hungary, or elsewhere. We as scholars must continue to push back collaboratively and collectively—and this is a kind of “male-female

collaborative participation” I can support—against moves to restrict academic freedom, including gender studies. The future depends on it.

