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Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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JAPAN

Dealing with the backlash: Promoting dialogue and discourse rather than division



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Introduction

Although there had been an increase in the use of the internet by Japan's feminist movement at the time of the Beijing women's conference in 1995, this was not sustained. For example, scholars in gender and women's studies have barely used the internet to share their work, and have mostly published books since the mid-2000s – even as a means to oppose the “backlash”¹ against feminism in the country, which had been spreading through the mainstream media.

Although women's rights advocates have started to use the internet recently, it is difficult to say – because of the relatively low number of online activities – whether they have constructed effective media strategies. Furthermore, using the traditional media for advocacy, which was an advantage feminists had in the past, has also weakened,

This report looks back at the history of internet use by feminists and highlights some of the issues involved.

Policy and political background

The Japanese government coined the phrase “danjo kyodo sankaku” in 1991 (although it literally means “co-participation and planning between men and women”, the official English translation is “gender equality”). It also put the Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society in force in 1999. There were two reasons for the government to promote the “co-participation” policy. The first is the trend in the United Nations and in the international community more broadly to promote gender equality, and the second is the need to create a new labour force given a low birth rate and high life expectancy, as well as a protracted economic slump. The side effect of this second reason has been to weaken traditional grassroots feminist movements.

The Tokyo Women's Foundation also introduced a new term – “gender-free” – aimed at changing gender

consciousness, especially in school education. It proposed to use the term instead of “equality between genders”, which was used conventionally and was felt to be a concept that ignored the history of the women's movement until then. They explained that Houston² had advocated for the use of the concept, and argued that the term “gender-free” was also used in Europe and North America. Later, it became clear that such an understanding is a fundamental misconception.³

The “co-participation” policy and “gender-free” education faced intense backlashes from many conservative groups using various media in the first half of the 2000s. At the same time, the feminist movement could use neither the internet nor conventional small-scale communication effectively, and had turned into the information “have-nots”.

Internet usage by women's groups

The Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 was an opportunity to realise the possibility of the internet for many women's movement organisations and activists in the world. Of course, this was not necessarily exceptional. Japan Computer Access (JCA, now called JCAFE), the partner node of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) in Japan, has supported Japanese women's groups since the time of its establishment in 1993. It circulated electronic information and documents at APC e-conferences organised for Japanese women's groups, including the draft Beijing Platform for Action, as well as hosting computer training courses, amongst other initiatives.

The APC Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) led an all-women team of 40 participants from 25 countries at the Beijing conference, where they provided email and web access to

2 Houston, B. (1994) Should Public Education Be Gender Free?, in Stone, L. (ed.) *The Education Feminism Reader*, Routledge, New York.

3 Yamaguchi, T. (2004) The root of confusion in the issue of 'gender-free': Part 1 ['Gender-free' wo meguru konran no kongen (1)], *We: The connection between life and education* [Kurashi to kyoiku wo tunagu we], Vol. 27, p. 10-18, Femix, Tokyo. For further references, see also: Yamaguchi, T. (Forthcoming 2013) (Un)making Sense of “Gender Free”: Mainstreaming and Backlash against Feminism in Contemporary Japan (accepted by *Feminist Studies*) and Yamaguchi, T., Saito, M. and Ogiue, C. (2012) *Social Movements at a Crossroads: Feminism's “lost years” vs. grassroots conservatism* [Shakai Undō no Tomadoi: Feminizumu no “ushinawareta jidai” to kusanone hoshu undō], Keisō Shobo, Tokyo.

1 This term was coined by feminists, who described conservative anti-feminist groups as “backlashers”.

over 10,000 delegates. It was a powerful message to the world: there is no innate barrier to women using computer technology. JCA sent three female members to join the APC team. They constructed internet servers, held email training for many women's rights activists, and reported from the venue using the net.

JCA also started JCA-NET in 1997 as a business unit, which provides internet services for social movements, and carried out the following projects in cooperation with the Asia-Japan Women's Resource Center (AJWRC):

VAWW-Net

In November 1997, AJWRC and the Asian Center for Entrepreneurial Initiatives (ASCENT) organised an international conference on violence against women in war and conflict situations (VAWW) in Tokyo. Fifty female experts gathered for this conference, where all of them presented cases detailing their individual circumstances and discussed possible responses to such cases. They compiled the discussions into the "Tokyo Declaration". The event was meaningful in that they were able to highlight cases from Asia.

They decided to organise a network – VAWW-Net – acting on issues concerning violence against women in war and conflict situations. They started a mailing list to exchange their knowledge, as well as their views. The mailing list has been quite instrumental in facilitating their activities. It is linked to the APC network's newsgroup called "women vaw", which has been accessed by many women around the globe.

AWORC

The Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC) is an internet-based women's information service and network in Asia. It is an initiative geared towards developing cooperative approaches and partnerships in increasing access and exploring the application of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) for women's empowerment.

AWORC resulted from a workshop organised by Isis International-Manila on 20-23 April 1998. They explored strategies for electronic resource sharing and networking among women's information and resource centres in the region. It is part of their continued effort to develop empowering information and communication models that strengthen the women's movement in Asia.

fem-net

A network for women's movements initiated in March 1999, fem-net was an electronic forum for those engaged in the women's movement, and

those interested in women's issues. It was a combination system of mailing lists, APC newsgroups and web bulletin boards. Although it became the foundation for a culture of using mailing lists among feminists, it did not strategically share information through the web, and activity by fem-net slowed down gradually.

In the early 2000s, while local organisations that work internationally continued to use the internet as a useful tool for information exchange, feminists who act locally tended to avoid the internet out of fear. One significant cause was the intense criticism of feminism by conservative groups in the first half of the 2000s.

Backlash against "co-participation" and "gender-free"

The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (Danjo Kyodo Sankaku Shakai Kihon-ho, hereafter referred to as the Basic Law) was approved unanimously in 1998, and came into force in 1999. Subsequently, municipal governments across Japan, starting with Tokyo and Saitama, developed their own ordinances for the promotion of gender equality. A large amount of tax revenue was injected into municipalities all over the country for the construction of gender equality centres and for many educational initiatives.

However, as mentioned, the notions of "co-participation" and "gender-free" resulted in a backlash from conservative groups. The conservatives successfully passed a conservative-friendly gender equality ordinance in Ube City, Yamaguchi Prefecture in June 2002. The ordinance included phrases such as "We must not unilaterally dismiss the idea that there is innate masculinity and innate femininity" and "We must not dismiss the role of the full-time housewife." These were directly contrary to the aims written in the Basic Law. The following year, 2003, Domoto Akiko, the feminist (and female) governor of Chiba prefecture, failed to pass the Gender Equality Ordinance bill; it was the first time that a bill proposed by a governor had failed to be passed in the history of the Chiba Prefectural Assembly. While the conservatives became energised as a result of the Ube ordinance, the cases in Ube and Chiba shocked feminist scholars and activists, and they started to be more vocal on the issue of the conservative backlash.

Backlash spreads online

The internet became a pivotal field of discourse for conservatives. Former Tokyo Women's College psychology professor Hayashi Michiyoshi, journalist Chiba Tensei, independent writer Okamoto

Akiko and teacher Nomaki Masako (whose online name is Nomarin) set up personal websites with the aim of actively criticising feminism. In addition, reactionary bloggers, including Brucknero5, Mt. Fuji 2000 and Nameneko (“licking cat”), were also active.

Feminist bashing also occurred on 2channel,⁴ the biggest Japanese text board, and many people engaged in editorial battles over terms such as “feminism”, “gender” and “gender-free” on Wikipedia. Attacks on feminism spread to social networking websites in Japan such as mixi⁵ as well. When the mass media reported on “gender-free”-related subjects, conservatives posted many critical articles on 2channel and other websites.

Activities by scholars in gender and women’s studies were few and far between on the internet. There were only a small number of counter-arguments to the conservative backlash published online, such as Ida Hiroyuki’s blog, and a resource called “Q&A: Present point of argument involving gender equality” on the website of the Women’s Studies Association of Japan.

Results of the backlash

In April 2004, the cabinet office indicated that it was better not to use the term “gender-free”, a decision that was supported by the Gender Equality Bureau. This was evident in the second Basic Plan for Gender Equality drafted in December 2005. Moreover, the bureau issued an administrative circular to municipal governments instructing them not to use the term. After the notice, the term “gender-free” disappeared from administration-sponsored projects at both the national and local level. That is, the administration propagated the “gender-free” concept, and then the administration itself denied and erased it.

Dialogue with backlashers

Tomomi Yamaguchi and Masami Saito, who are feminist researchers, interviewed the “backlashers” and tried to understand the background and thinking which resulted in the action. They also met local citizens and feminists who confronted the backlash, and listened to their experiences and thoughts. They were able to understand how the phenomenon called the “backlash” had been built by listening attentively and carefully to the words of the people who played key roles in the anti-feminist movement.

Current situation

Many people are concerned that Japanese society and politics have been drifting to the right in recent years. In the general election in December 2012, voters gave the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) a landslide victory, ejecting the Democratic Party of Japan from power after three years.

Abe Shinzo, who is the president of the LDP, was elected as the prime minister. He is viewed as a right-wing nationalist. When he first became the prime minister in 2007, he said that the so-called “comfort women” were not coerced into becoming sexual slaves by the former Japanese Imperial Army during World War II, and repeated this in 2013, when he became prime minister for the second time.

His views are reflected elsewhere. Hashimoto Toru, the mayor of Osaka and co-leader of the Japan Restoration Party, has also denied that Japan abducted and trafficked women for frontline brothels during World War II based on the will of the state authority.

Given these developments, it seems that the struggle for gender rights in Japan may be entering a new phrase – and it is this that activists need to take into account.

Conclusions

Women’s movement organisations have used ICTs practically, being ignited by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Although the internet has had a positive effect on organisations that work internationally, many of the organisations and activists who work locally appear to be “internet fearful”, and there are few who use it actively.

Moreover, the backlash against feminism became intense, mainly driven by the conservative media from the end of the 1990s to the 2000s. Conservative media and organisations used the internet proactively, and negative and distorted accounts of feminism increased in the 2000s.

Although many feminists avoid direct dialogue with backlashers, Yamaguchi and Saito interviewed both the feminists and the backlashers actively, and made the origins of opposing ideas clear.

The confrontational interactions between conservatives and feminists are unproductive. A positive way of thinking is needed, wherein both sides try to learn, look for common ideas, and improve society. The confrontation might have been unnecessary, but was the result of continuing disputes based on surmises without talking to each other face to face.

It is necessary for feminists to re-examine their positions, including developing an understanding

⁴ www.2ch.net

⁵ mixi.jp

of the circumstances that led to the introduction of the “gender-free” concept, and the responses and criticisms from the conservative side.

Action steps

Many women’s movement organisations and activists are fearful of the internet, and are not comfortable with using it, especially when it comes to information dissemination. In order to master the internet, feminists need to understand its characteristics, advantages and disadvantages deeply. As Josh Rose wrote in his blog, “The Internet doesn’t steal our humanity, it reflects it. The Internet doesn’t get inside us, it shows what’s inside us.”⁶

The work of Yamaguchi and Saito is very important. If we avoid encounters with conservative “backlashers” because they intimidate us, or we feel they are enemies, nothing will change.

We propose the four following points of action which we feel should help with the situation:

- Hold workshops dealing with the practical use of the internet for women.

- Develop and offer spaces (both of real and virtual) which women or women’s groups can use with a sense of security.
- Measure and quantify social issues relating to the internet, especially when it comes to privacy.
- Advocate for an improvement in the social environment so that women’s rights are guaranteed.

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6 mashable.com/2011/02/23/social-media-culture