

Looking at the World Through the Eyes of Japanese Women

by Miyako Murayama

Deux questions revêtaient une grande importance pour cette déléguée japonaise à Beijing : l'attitude historique et

contemporaine concernant l'abus des droits des femmes et l'importance grandissante de la prise de pouvoir économique des femmes.

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It has been 20 years since the first United Nations World Conference on Women, held in Mexico, adopted the "World Activity Plan." The Fourth Conference was recently held in Beijing and once again women from around the world met to discuss the issues that face them and their efforts to confront these issues. Two issues in particular seemed of importance to me as a Japanese delegate: historical and contemporary attitudes to abuse of women's rights, and the increasing importance of women's economic empowerment.

One of the aims of the Beijing Conference was to motivate the participants by bringing them together to exchange ideas and to share knowledge. A great many projects and programs have been carried out under the theme of "equality, development, peace" and hearing of these and the results they have achieved was inspirational. Furthermore, by showing the widespread concern women share—some 30,000 were reported to have attended the Conference—the meeting also aimed to stimulate public opinion.

One point generally agreed upon at the Conference was the important role NGOs would play in improving women's situations in the twenty-

first century. Sexual discrimination has been socially and historically entrenched and a grand step forward is needed if we are to realize a society that embraces sexual equality. The Beijing Conference emphasized the importance of empowering women everywhere in order to achieve results, and the participants agreed that positive self development lay at the heart of this. Although the action programs proposed at the Conference are not legally binding, each country's representatives planned to submit a program for future activity.

An issue that Japan must address in the near future is the human trade carried out in ancient times, a trade that received the tacit approval of women at that time. Furthermore, the sexual abuse perpetrated by the military during World War II, now commonly known as the "comfort women" issue, must be regarded as a case of gross infringement on human rights and must be discussed.

Professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi, of Chuo University, an expert on the "comfort women" issue, points out that the root of the problem was the Japanese soldiers' failure to recognize basic human rights. Conditions in the military at that time were severe and institutionalized brutality between the ranks was common. Morale plummeted, and in an effort to reverse this the authorities decided to facilitate the "comfort women" system.

The outcome of this system was recounted in the testimony of an ex-comfort woman from Korea who attended the Beijing Conference. Entitled "My Grudge Against Japan's Soldiers," it was a harrowing account delivered through tears:

I was forced to keep company with 40 to 50 Japanese soldiers each day. I fainted many times from the extreme hardship, and

I tried to commit suicide. However, I was saved; I could not kill myself, and instead I swore to myself that I would return to my country alive and make the disgrace I suffered known to the world. Today, I have achieved that aim. And yet, I am still suffering from the mental and physical pain I endured 50 years ago. The Japanese government tries to obscure the issue, but it should fulfill its responsibility to apologize and make reasonable compensation.

So far, the Japanese government has maintained that this is a diplomatic matter between nations and that the issue of reparations has been settled.

On September 4th, while the Beijing Conference was in progress, an Okinawan girl was sexually assaulted by soldiers stationed at the local American military base. A high-ranking United States official commented that the soldiers could have more easily "bought" a girl instead of committing a crime. Women's groups in Japan immediately protested his statement and successfully demanded his resignation. A protest was also made to the United States President and the Japanese Prime Minister.

But how would this have been received in Japan in general? In all probability public opinion would have deemed it acceptable for a man to "buy" a woman. With this attitude, is it any wonder that Japan continues to be a major player in the international sex trade? What must be questioned is the attitude of Japanese men that causes this, the attitude of women that allows it, and the powerlessness of those groups trying to combat the situation.

As the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in a socialist country in Asia, there seemed to be many participants from the Asian

area and its neighbours. Maori representatives from New Zealand emphasized how they have been deprived of their land, sky, sea, and even their language. They told stories of how young women are abused every day, how there are few jobs available, and how this has enervated them. Delegates from Nepal reported that their young women often disappear or are sold by their parents as

of a male worker. Furthermore, as the economic recession deepens, many business enterprises will not employ female workers. The Male-Female Equal Employment Opportunity Law, drafted to help overcome inequality in the Japanese workplace, has proven to be largely ineffective as it cannot really penalize those found to be in violation of its requirements. Japan's rise as an economic giant

largest in that field. Furthermore, those workers received only 40 per cent of the salary received by male workers who had been employed at the same time. Though they appealed to the labour union for pay increases, their case was ignored. Finally, in August 1995, they filed a "Progress-Wage Discrimination" claim in the Osaka District Court.

This story surprised many people. An Indian delegate noted that she had been told by her employer to learn from Japan and the United States, and yet a serious social issue facing her society was the increasing number of Japanese businesses coming to India for inexpensive labour. "I never imagined," she said,

that Japanese women faced the same problems as us. There are unions in India, but they are ineffective. Many people have no job security; indeed many have no idea by whom they are employed. It is important for us to work together to improve their situations.

In response, a Chinese delegate added, "The American economy was driven by immigrant labour, and the Japanese economy by cheap female labour; the Chinese government now seeks the same from our farmers."

An Australian woman reported that her employer had adopted a Japanese labour system and that this was a common trend throughout the world. Having heard of the situation facing Japanese women, she said she would report the conditions of Japanese female workers to the labour union and urge them to reconsider the adoption of a Japanese labour system.

The worldwide problem of lower wages for women was taken up in heated discussion. Why, delegates asked, had not Japanese labour unions done more to address this problem? The large business group mentioned earlier responded that in Japan the status of the company was generally given more consideration than the individual worker and therefore Japan lacked the means of deal-



Korean delegates at the ngo Forum in Huairou, 1995.

Photo: Brenda Cranney

prostitutes for New York, Europe, or India.

Such testimony provoked widespread agreement that women must have access to more power in society thereby enabling them to implement programs that can deal with these problems. The effort of a single nation is insufficient; an international effort is required if real progress is to be made. One of the main points made at the Beijing Conference was that international economic reformation is required if we are to protect women's environments and human rights in general.

Even in a wealthy country like Japan, the average wage for a female worker is less than 60 per cent of that

can be partly attributed to its practice of underpaying its female work-force. In recent years, numerous Japanese companies have set up overseas bases to take advantage of the inexpensive labour to be found in developing countries, and these companies are often seen as models of economic success. For this reason, many delegates at the Conference were interested in the conditions of Japanese female workers.

In response to this, delegates from one of Japan's largest business groups reported that there were only three female workers in administrative positions in the company's metal industries division, despite the fact that this division is one of the world's

ing with issues facing female employees. However, they intended to organize a "network" to deal with this immediately following the Conference and would even be ready to take part in legal presentations.

Many companies in Japan have adopted a two-tiered employment system specifically for female workers: generalist and specialist. Advances in office automation have lowered the number of generalist positions available and left female university graduates facing reduced job opportunities. However, the real problem is the ratio of female workers in specialist occupations, the majority of which are occupied by men.

Questions were also raised about the low degree of female participation in the political process in Japan. It is indeed shameful that Japan ranks 149th in the world in regard to women's participation in government. It is one of the larger issues Japan must tackle if it is ever to truly realize a society based on equality.

Asian delegates also alleged that

Japan's economic expansion and development assistance were destroying social structures and increasing poverty and danger in many places, particularly for women.

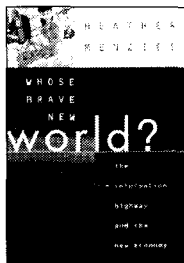
There is still a tremendous amount of work to be done in Japan. Japan has been a male-dominated society for a long, long time, and many Japanese males still fail to recognize the need for change. During the 16 years I have spent as a volunteer community worker I have witnessed the strain this has caused within our society. Domestic violence brought on by economic hardship, the collapse of parent-child relationships due to our society over-emphasizing examinations for higher education, runaway children, and youngsters' suicides caused by school bullying are all a result of the currently prevalent attitudes in our society.

How does one start to deal with these problems? The Kanagawa Women's Council, to which I belong, together with a nation-wide association, has been expanding the

counselling shelter facilities we organize. Other post-Beijing activities have been the organization of a media project dealing with young people's cartoon magazines, and various rallies concerning the comfort women issue. Ultimately, however, change must be at the grass-roots level. If everyone becomes aware of his or her dignity, the dignity of others, and of the value of human life, then we will be able to realize a world of peace, equality, and social development. It is important that everyone strives towards this end, to develop themselves and establish a society where the human rights of all people, men and women, are truly valued.

Miyako Murayama currently lives in Yokohama, Kanagawa prefecture. She is a member of several citizen's groups including the Lifelong Learning Support Committee, the Yokohama City Women's Association, and the Kanagawa Women's Council.

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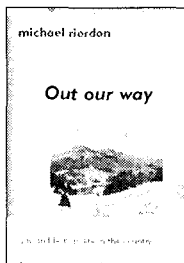


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