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## **CONSERVATIVE CHALLENGES TO FEMINISM ON THE JAPANESE INTERNET: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**

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### **Introduction**

Many people are concerned that Japanese society and politics have been drifting to the right in recent years. Abe Shinzo, current prime minister, is an extraordinary right-wing nationalist. He repeatedly said that the "comfort women" were not coerced into becoming sexual slaves by the former Japanese Imperial Army during WWII. He also broke an unwritten agreement and visited Yasukuni shrine on December 26, 2013, where hundreds of war criminals are enshrined. This irritated not only China and Korea governments but also the U.S.

Among the supporting groups for this tendency are rightist groups and Internet users with rightist or racist ideas who are also largely anti-feminist. In the early days of the Internet in Japan, networking among minority groups, such as minority activism, feminism, environmentalism, and peace movements, thrived through online communities that were utilized as electronic conference spaces (Hamada & Onoda 2003:41-43). However, in recent years we are facing a paradoxical situation in which the Internet is being used by backlash groups to attack feminists and minority groups in Japan. This paper argues that one of backgrounds of this phenomenon was the marginalization of feminism in Japan both on the Internet and in real politics. We describe how and why feminism became marginalized based on historical research. Through stressing the role that ICTs have played in this marginalization we show how there are strong connections between the techno and the social in Japan.

### **Internet usage by women's groups**

The 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 was an opportunity to realize the possibility of the Internet for many women's movement organizations and activists in the world. There were also other kinds of activities by feminist organization on the Internet. For example, "Fem-net," a network for women's movements initiated in

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March 1999, is an electronic forum for those who engaged in the women's movement, and those who are interested in women's issues. It was a combination of mailing lists, APC newsgroups, and web bulletin boards (Yamaguchi, T. et al 2012:299, 310). However, the activities slowed down gradually. There were three reasons; (1) Internet phobia among some feminists, (2) harsh online attacks by conservative groups, (3) ICT illiteracy among many feminist users. Around the early 2000s, while local organizations that work internationally continued to use the Internet as a useful vehicle for information exchange, feminists who act locally tended to avoid the Internet out of fear of online attacks. Haneko Inoue, a founder member for an online feminist group "Woman in Kansai," invited feminism organizations to attend lectures about to use the Internet for feminist ends. However, her offers of help were often refused harshly by some feminists who disliked the Internet and the ease of access it afforded to anti-feminist material such as pornography (Inoue 1999:169). Intense criticism of feminism by conservative groups also escalated online in the first half of the 2000s. Activities by scholars in gender and women's studies were few and far between on the Internet. There were only a small number of counterarguments to the conservative backlash published online, such as Ida Hiroyuki's blog<sup>1</sup>, and the website of the Women's Studies Association of Japan<sup>2</sup>. In order to protest the backlash movement, Chizuko Ueno, a famous feminism scholar and a board member of "Woman Action Network" started their web site.<sup>3</sup> However, many other board members confessed that they were ICT illiterate (Yamaguchi, T. et al 2012:314).

### **Backlash spreads online and offline**

On the other hand, the backlash groups were ICT literate. The Internet became a pivotal field of discourse for conservatives. They set up personal websites with the aim of actively criticizing feminism and successfully organized the "digital disruption" of early feminist online activism. In addition, reactionary bloggers were also active. Feminist bashing also occurred on 2channel<sup>4</sup>, the biggest Japanese Internet forum, and many people engaged in editorial battles over terms such as "feminism", "gender", and "gender-free (Japanese expression for gender equality)" on Wikipedia. Moreover, criticism of feminism was active also in social networking websites in Japan such as mixi<sup>5</sup>. When the mass media reported on "gender-free"-related subjects, conservatives posted many critical articles on 2channel and other websites (Yamaguchi, T. et al 2012:21).

This online anti-feminist activity spilled over into real politics. The Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society (Danjo Kyodo Sankaku Shakai Kihon-ho; hereafter, called the Basic Law) came into effect in 1999. This was followed by municipal governments across Japan, starting with Tokyo and Saitama, which developed their own Gender Equality Promotion Ordinances. However, conservatives successfully passed the conservative-friendly gender equality ordinance in Ube City, Yamaguchi Prefecture in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.zaq.ne.jp/spisin/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.joseigakkai-jp.org/index.php?p=12>

<sup>3</sup> <http://wan.or.jp/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.2ch.net/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://mixi.jp/>

June 2002. In 2003, Domoto Akiko, feminist (and female) governor of Chiba prefecture, failed to pass the Gender Equality Ordinance bill. In April, 2004, the cabinet office indicated that it is better not to use the term "gender-free", supported by the Gender Equality Bureau. The term was, as a result, also absent from the second Basic Plan on 31 January, 2006. After the notice, the term "gender-free" disappeared from administration-sponsored projects both at the national and local level (Yamaguchi, T. et al 2012:35).

In late 2000s, the situation got worse. The racist and rightist group *Zaitokukai* which originated on the Internet commenced hate speech demonstrations on the street (Noma 2013:44; Yasuda 2012: 51-2; U.S. Department of State 2013). Since they were quite harmful and violent, some male citizens took a masculine presentation in response. A typical case is Otoko Gumi (The Menfolk) (Yamaguchi, Y 2013:133-136). As shown in its name and official twitter icon, it is very masculine. Although they declare support for LGBT people, attaching a rainbow circle to their icon and participate in anti LGBT discrimination actions, from point of view of traditional feminism, their mode of representation is not very compatible. Although some feminists have cooperated with these groups, others have distanced themselves from them<sup>6</sup>.



**Figure 1 Official Twitter icon of Otoko Gumi**

## **Conclusions**

Although women's movement organizations were pioneers in using ICTs practically, inspired by the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995 and the Internet has had a positive effect on organizations that work internationally, many feminist organizations and activists who work locally appear to be "fearful of the Internet." There are comparatively few high profile feminists or women's groups who use it actively. From the end of the 1990s to the 2000s, the backlash against feminism became intense, mainly driven by the conservative media. Conservative media and organizations have used the Internet proactively, and negative and distorted accounts of feminism increased in visibility in the 2000s. The current trend of masculine support for feminism and LGBT rights requires us to rethink how both men's and women's groups need to

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<sup>6</sup> See discussion on <http://togetter.com/li/602035>

cooperate using ICTs to challenge the power of backlash groups on the Internet in Japan.

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