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Two Sides of the Suffrage in Japan: Women's Political Agency and General Elections of 1946

Four months after the end of World War II, in December of 1945, Japanese women were granted suffrage. With the general election set in April of 1946, women were expected to exercise their voting rights for the first time in history. While this was a significant milestone for women in general, it was also achieved suddenly and during a period when most Japanese women were not ready for such a role. This paper aims to illuminate the contrast in adapting to new political rights between the Japanese suffragettes and an average Japanese woman in the context of the first post-war general elections. The paper argues that on the one hand, suffragettes who sought women's rights even before the war, promptly and successfully adjusted to the aftermath of the war. On the other hand, an average Japanese woman lacked political education and was largely still influenced by tradition and her submissive role. Furthermore, as Japan found itself in a state of disarray, questions of food and survival were often more pressing, leaving most Japanese women indifferent to voting, and politics overall.

KEYWORDS:
women's history, Japan, suffrage, Occupation of Japan, political agency, general elections

Introduction

The Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952), which, among others, aimed to demilitarise and reform the social and cultural norms of the country, brought momentous changes for women. One of the most significant reforms for Japanese women during this period was enfranchisement. Even though there were prior attempts at achieving suffrage for women, it was only after a defeat in World War II, and with the start of the Occupation that Japanese women were able to participate in politics equally with men. However, Japanese women gained the right to vote under the complex circumstances of destroyed, yet reforming post-war Japan. The infrastructure was severely damaged with many cities in ruins, the economy in collapse, and many were left homeless. Given the previous status of women, as well as being raised and educated in the spirit of a 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*) ideology, the emancipation of women that came with the reforms often represented challenges. Considering these factors, this research hopes to contribute to both existing debates regarding the course of the suffragette movement in Japan, and to the discourse concerning the life of ordinary Japanese people, and women in particular, during the Occupation period. More precisely, this paper aims to examine the political activity, as well as the consciousness, of women across Japan just before and after the exercise of the right to vote for the first time. The guiding question is how this varied from activists and suffragettes, on the one hand, and average women lacking political education or motivation on the other.

The research for this paper is partially based on the Records of the General Headquarters Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ SCAP)[1] available at the *National Diet Library Digital Collections* site. Another relevant source is *The Japan Times*, Japan's largest and oldest English-language daily newspaper, founded in 1897, which, among others, reported on significant events during the Occupation. Since not only were the media subjected to censorship during the period of Occupation, especially by GHQ, but also *The Japan Times* was primarily aimed at foreign readers, the research took into consideration the fact that the analysed newspapers may lack more objective and deeper domestic context. Therefore, a combination of these sources was used to provide a broader insight into the narrative of women's enfranchisement in Japan.

Although the focal point of this paper is political awareness and activities of Japanese women, it recognises that there was a background permeated by ideologies and relations between race, gender, and imperialism behind many decisions and events during the Occupation. Yoneyama takes a critical approach to the narrative of women's emancipation as a major achievement of the American Occupation of Japan.[2] Takeuchi

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1 With the GHQ SCAP Records providing insights into various segments of the Occupation period, including administrative and governmental reports, financial, political, legal, military, and security matters, as well as social and cultural reforms, a large body of existing literature on the history of Allied Occupation of Japan relies on them.

2 Lisa Yoneyama, "Liberation under Siege: U.S. Military Occupation and Japanese Women's Enfranchisement," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005), http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068320.

highlights the imposition of American Cold War family values disguised as women's liberation.[3] Takenaka notes that women's suffrage was a significant symbol for various interest groups at the time.[4] Concerning the attitudes of Western women involved in the Occupation process, Koikari notes that their efforts to empower and civilise women in non-Western societies often arose from a perception of these women as helpless and incapacitated victims trapped in pre-modern and uncivilised traditions[5].[6] Sugawara states that while the 'MacArthur gift'[7] theory of women's suffrage contains some truth, it oversimplifies the issue. Granting women's suffrage was a relatively straightforward task compared to the complex issues of the Emperor's treatment, war criminals, and constitutional reform, and did not require any diplomatic strategy.[8] While we cannot talk about a single-homogeneous strategy for the emancipation of women during the whole Occupation period, it was essential for the United States to accomplish its objective of democratising and demilitarising Japan. Therefore, the enfranchisement of women was, essentially, a tool for achieving these goals, not an end in itself. Furthermore, despite the discriminatory practices in the US during the same period, such as the Jim Crow Laws, it promoted itself as the embodiment of democracy and the leader of the free world. They used democracy and freedom as ideological instruments in a fight against communism in Asia thus implanting their vision of a 'free woman' in Japan.

Overview of the Suffrage Movement in Japan before 1945

When Japan opened its doors to the outside world (1853), the gender equality movement and the campaign for women's suffrage had already begun in Europe and the United States. This trend naturally made its way to Japan, giving rise to the indigenous theory of gender equality and its counterarguments.[9] At the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912), much of the deliberation

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3 Michiko Takeuchi, "At the Crossroads of Equality versus Protection: American Occupationnaire Women and Socialist Feminism in US Occupied Japan, 1945–1952," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 38, no. 2 (2017), https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.38.2.0114.

4 Akiko Takenaka, "Gender and post-war relief: Support for war-widowed mothers in occupied Japan (1945–52)," *Gender & History* 28, no. 3 (2016).

5 A pattern of thought not foreign to the Western mind in the context of Orientalism.

6 Mire Koikari, "Exporting Democracy?: American Women, 'Feminist Reforms,' and Politics of Imperialism in the U.S. Occupation of Japan, 1945–1952," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 1 (2002), http://www.jstor.org/stable/3347272.

7 Since the enfranchisement of Japanese women was one of MacArthur's 'Five Major Reforms' directives, it is often promoted with the notion of MacArthur as the singular architect of women's suffrage, with little regard for the prior activities of Japanese suffragettes or the post-war initiative taken by Japan's Ministry of Home Affairs to grant women suffrage.

8 Kazuko Sugawara 菅原 和子, "Fujin sanseiken no seiritsu kei saiko: Kato Shizue no yakuwari o megutte," 婦人参政権の成立経z緯再考: 加藤シヅエの役割をめぐって, *Kindainihon kenkyū* 近代日本研究 24 (2007): 324.

9 Misako Iwamoto岩本 美砂子, "Josei o meguru seidjiteki gensetsu Nihon ni oite, josei no seidjiteki daihyō (fujin sansei-ken josei seijika) ni kanshite ronji rarete kita koto" 女性をめぐる政治的言説日本において、女性の政治的代表 (婦人参政権・女性政治家) に関して論じられてきたこと, *Nenpō seiji-gaku* 年報政治学 54 (2003), https://doi.org/10.7218/nenpouseijigaku1953.54.0_15.

about women's rights was closely linked to debates about women's education. Cultivating a good, moral, and responsible person was the goal of Confucian teachings, as well as of the introduced Western style of learning. Therefore, the immediate goal of educating women was not to prepare them to vote, but to form ethical women and mothers who would be role models in family and civic life.[10] From the mid-1870s, at the initiative of the Liberals, a draft constitution that included provisions for women's political rights was circulating the country.[11] However, even if women wanted to campaign openly, they had to fight against the Security Police Act of 1900, which not only prohibited women's right to political association but also prohibited them from organising or attending political meetings.[12] Therefore, during this period, activists believed that certain rights of women related to their political participation were necessary. They linked the demand for women's empowerment with the request to revise the law that prohibited women from political participation.[13] While some sought to find a place for women in the liberal movement, others tried to do the same through the position of women workers in industrialised Japan. These efforts were visible in the establishment of the first socialist organisations, such as the Society of the Common People, *Heiminsha*, founded in 1903, which included several women.[14]

During the Taishō period (1912–1926), significant flexibility towards liberalism in Japanese society was visible, as the Universal Manhood Suffrage Law took effect in 1925. After World War I, the notion of individual freedom was on the rise and a new era in the women's movement became apparent.[15] Suffragists in Japan united various women's rights activists through lobbying and mass rallies to advocate for enfranchisement as a fundamental right. In 1919, the New Women's Association, *Shin-Fujin Kyōkai*, was founded. The goal of the Association was to gain acknowledgement of women as a class so they could be included and protected. The three founders of the Association – Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971), Ichikawa Fusae (1893–1981) and Oku Mumeo (1895–1997) – were all important figures in the Japanese suffrage movement, as well as politicians of the 20th century.[16] Amid escalating demands for political freedom, the First All-Japan Women's Suffrage Congress was held in 1930, and the women's movement itself peaked just before the Manchurian Incident outbreak in September 1931.[17] Nevertheless, the movement had relatively little effect as it was argued that women's place was in the home and their political involvement would lead them to neglect their duties of raising children and caring for the family. This would ultimately bring forth the

10 Barbara Molony, "Women's Rights, Feminism, and Suffragism in Japan, 1870-1925," *Pacific Historical Review* 69, no. 4 (2000): 643-44, https://doi.org/10.2307/3641228.

11 Vera Mackie, *Feminism in modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment and Sexuality* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.

12 Iwamoto, "Political Discourses on Women," 16.

13 Molony, "Women's Rights," 644.

14 Mackie, *Feminism in modern Japan*, 32.

15 Dee Ann Vavich, "The Japanese Woman's Movement: Ichikawa Fusae, A Pioneer in Woman's Suffrage," *Monumenta Nipponica* 22, no. 3/4 (1967): 410, https://doi.org/10.2307/2383075.

16 Molony, "Women's Rights," 645, 660-61.

17 Yūko Nishikawa, William Gardner and Brett de Bary, "Japan's Entry into War and the Support of Women," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal, English Supplement*, no. 12 (1997): 50, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772108.

destruction of family life. It was also argued that women were too emotional, narrow-minded, superstitious and prone to extremes and ultra-radicalism.[18] Therefore, even when the government in 1931 supported the bills for suffrage and the right for women to assemble, the proposal did not pass the vote in the upper house of parliament.[19]

Over the next few years, successive Suffrage Congresses passed resolutions against war and fascism, with parallel struggles to win the support of the ruling elite. However, in September 1937,[20] the Japanese government launched an all-out campaign of spiritual mobilisation. Liberal women's groups were thus faced with the choice of cooperating with the national mobilisation programme to survive or maintain their opposition to the war while risking dissolution or arrest. In response, during the same month, they founded the Japan Federation of Women's Organizations, *Nihon Fujin Dantai Renmei*, uniting eight national women's groups. With this, not only did they officially begin efforts to support the country, but soon, in 1938,[21] they abandoned peace initiatives.[22] Finally, the suffrage movement itself virtually disappeared when, in 1942, all women's associations were subsumed under the state-run Greater Japan Women's Association, *Dai Nippon Fujinkai*, organised to support the war effort.[23] Japan's women's suffrage movement grew and gained some political support, but ultimately failed to achieve widespread mobilisation or its primary goal of a full franchise for women.[24] Although the suffragette movement in Japan did not reach its goals during the 19th and first half of the 20th century, it laid the groundwork for post-war efforts. The suffragettes, such as Ichikawa, Hiratsuka, and Oku, were all pioneers of women's rights who recognised that women's welfare could not be improved until their enfranchisement was achieved.

Political Activity of Japanese Suffragettes Immediately After the End of War

Since the end of World War II,[25] Japanese women have become increasingly aware of their situation in the country which led to a growing demand for women's rights.[26] During the early stages of the Occupation in Japan,[27] suffragettes, like Ichikawa, believed that achieving suffrage should be the main priority for women's political mobilisation, rather

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18 "Woman in Politics," *The Japan Times*, September 17, 1945, 2.

19 Nishikawa, Gardner and de Bary, "Japan's Entry into War," 52.

20 Two months after the Marco Polo Bridge incident, which marked the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

21 In March of the same year, the National Mobilization Law was legislated to prepare the country and nation for a total war.

22 Ibid, 57.

23 Susan J. Pharr, *Political women in Japan: The search for a place in political* life (Univ. of California Press, 1981), 18-19.

24 Mire Koikari, *Pedagogy of Democracy: Feminism and the Cold War in the US Occupation of Japan* (Temple University Press, 2009), 46.

25 Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan on August 15, with the official Instrument of Surrender formally signed on September 2, 1945.

26 "Japanese Womanhood Desires to Raise Status," *The Japan Times*, October 3, 1945, 3.

27 The first Allied troops reached Japanese soil on August 28, and MacArthur arrived in Tokyo on August 30, 1945.

than being imposed by an external force.[28] Therefore, on August 25, 1945, Ichikawa, along with Akamatsu Tsuneko, a shopfloor union organiser who had headed the Women's Division in the prewar Japan General Federation of Labor, and liberal educator Kawasaki Natsu, mobilised more than 70 women leaders into the Women's Committee for Postwar Measures (WCPM), *Sengo Taisaku Fujin I'inkai*.[29] During the mid-September 1945 session of the WCPM, discussions were held on the participation of women's suffrage in politics, countermeasures for unemployment (especially for mobilised women workers), ways in which women could help prevent inflation, and how to address the issue of food shortages. Additionally, the issue of women's behaviour concerning potential hasty actions by Allied troops towards them, as well as the matter of providing protection and assistance to demobilised soldiers, the wounded, and other war victims, were discussed.[30] Soon after, the Ministry of Social Welfare established a committee to evaluate the launch of a comprehensive women's organisation. However, some of the women on the committee informed the Ministry that the experience of the Greater Japan Women's Association did not support the creation of such an organisation. They believed that voluntary cooperation of existing women's associations or a completely different approach than the one proposed by the Ministry should be implemented.[31] During the same month, the WCPM had already prepared a request to the government, asking for women over 20 to be granted the right to vote. They also proposed that women over 25 should be eligible for the House of Representatives. In addition to that, WCPM called for a law revision to grant women equal rights to join political organisations and participate in any administrative body.[32] The promptness of suffragettes to act even before the first Occupation troops landed in Japan showcased their keen understanding of the power dynamics in the play. They knew that their struggles for women's rights would be linked to larger reform processes initiated by the SCAP, and therefore overshadowed.

Wishing to rally women further, on November 3, Ichikawa organised young women under the New Japan Women's League (NJWL), *Shin Nihon Fujin Dōmei*. The NJWL aimed to achieve women's suffrage, promote women's political education and encourage extensive participation of women in regional autonomous organisations.[33] The NJWL also issued publications which included an association report, a pamphlet entitled 'How to Vote,' and a monthly paper, 'Women voters,' *Fujin Yūkensha*.[34] Long-standing members of the women's movement gave lectures on politics, and a major forum on women's political empowerment was organised in Tokyo in November. One of the speakers, Harada Kiyoko, disagreed with the prevailing view that "women

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28 Koikari, *Pedagogy of Democracy*, 48.

29 Eiji Takemae, *Inside GHQ: The Allied Occupation of Japan and Its Legacy*, trans. Robert Ricketts and Sebastian Swann (Continuum, 2002), 241; Koikari, *Pedagogy of Democracy*, 48.

30 "Vital problems probed by women's committee," *The Japan Times*, September 17, 1945, 1.

31 "Japanese Womanhood," *The Japan Times*, October 3, 1945, 3.

32 "Women leaders initiate campaign for suffrage," *The Japan Times*, September 26, 1945, 1.

33 "2 Big Organizations For Women Created," *The Japan Times*, November 3, 1945, 2.

34 National Diet Library Digital Collections (NDL Digital Collections), GHQ/SCAP Records, Box no. 3446, Folder title (number): 451 (13), Women's Organizations in Tokyo, January, 1947, 77–78, https://dl.ndl.go.jp/en/pid/12976869/1/77.

should now return to their homes." Harada also argued that the economic and social progress achieved by Japanese women during the war should be preserved and used to build a peaceful social order.[35] Members of the aristocracy also joined the discourse on the new position of women, with Countess Ōtani Tomoko, sister of the Empress, declaring that male politicians have not yet grasped the idea of democratic principles.[36] It is also worth noting that in October 1945, fifteen Osaka women organised a Housewives' Association and staged a protest demanding the provision of rice. Likewise, within the same month, the first women's union was formed by nurses at the Tokyo Police Hospital, who also managed to negotiate a pay rise.[37] Despite the ongoing confusion and uncertainty that came with the loss of the war, gradually, women took over an active role in rebuilding the community. While we cannot talk about some grandiose number of women's protests or active political participation during the initial period of Occupation, it was important for women to see and hear that there is a place in society for them outside the house, and that they are entitled to better living and working conditions.

At long last, in October 1945, the Japanese government decided to grant voting rights to women over the age of 20, as well as to lower the voting age for men from 25 to 20.[38] On December 17, 1945, the election law was finally revised to grant Japanese women the suffrage. Soon after, SCAP initiated a massive campaign to inform Japanese women about their new rights.[39] It should be noted that even before the arrival of the Occupation forces, the Minister of the Interior, Horiuchi Zenjirō, and the Prime Minister, Shidehara Kijūrō, supported women's suffrage, citing their contributions during the war as justification. However, General MacArthur's reform demands, which included women's enfranchisement, were presented to the Japanese government before it could implement the decision on its own.[40] Regardless of whether the Japanese or the Occupation initiative was more influential, it can be said that women's suffrage was introduced not as an agenda to be debated, but as an unspoken demand of the times.[41] Ultimately, this demand granted around 20 million women the right to vote in the first post-war general elections in Japan.[42] Considering those 20 million voters had little to no political knowledge or experience, the educated participation of women in politics was further emphasised. Furthermore, this change also called for revised principles and goals of political parties to include women.

Broadly speaking, the introduction of democracy contributed to the appearance of new political parties as early as 1945, and the re-emergence of some hitherto repressed parties, such as the Communist Party. When it comes to the programmes of Japanese political parties, since the end

35 "Women Suffragists Deliver 2 Lectures," *The Japan Times*, November 18, 1945, 3.
36 "Elimination of Class Barriers in Japan Voiced by Countess Otani to UP Scribe," *The Japan Times*, October 16, 1945, 2.
37 John W. Dower, *Embracing defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (WW Norton & Company, 2000), 242.
38 "Women's Franchise Decided by Cabinet," *The Japan Times*, October 15, 1945, 1.
39 Koikari, *Pedagogy of Democracy*, 50.
40 Ibid. 48-49.
41 Iwamoto, "Political Discourses on Women," 22.
42 Mackie, *Feminism in modern Japan*, 123.

of the war, most major parties have recognized women's problems in their platforms. The Liberal Party's programme included recognition of women's suffrage, equal opportunity for education for both sexes, co-education[43] and the abolishment of laws and acts that have restricted the rights of women. The Social Democratic Party also emphasised the principle of equal rights for both sexes and further advocated for the abolishment of laws, acts, customs, and social systems which have kept women's legal and social status in inferior positions. The Party also supported the abolition of the public prostitution system[44]. Their programme further included the improvement and extension of welfare establishments for mothers, babies, and infants. The Communist Party advocated for the emancipation of women from feudalistic slavery, the establishment of equal rights for men and women, equal opportunity for higher education by granting scholarships and the spread of democratic education among young people. When it comes to the Progressive Party, its political platform had not yet been publicly advertised by March 1946. Although it did not go into detail about reforming the legislative system in its manifesto, the party's chief executive director believed that something should be done to help women's status.[45] This increase in the inclusion of women's issues in the programmes of various political parties did not emerge purely from empathy towards women and their welfare, but also from political adaptation to the newly created situation. In other words, the parties recognised the voting power of these new voters. Admittedly, irrespective of the reasons for including these matters in party programmes, women's problems started to gain more and more recognition in the public discourse.

From the moment Emperor Hirohito announced capitulation and preparations for the arrival of Occupation forces were underway, the Japanese suffragettes spared no time in organising to finally obtain suffrage. Regardless of the discourse which argues the role of the Japanese government and General MacArthur in finalising women's enfranchisement, it is indisputable that the suffragettes themselves did not just observe while others decided their fate. They provided remarkable guidance to other women despite the general confusion that came with the loss in the war and the start of the Occupation. The suffragettes wanted to be heard, both among the higher-ups and among other women as well. In the end, not only was suffrage finally granted to Japanese women, but most political parties included in their programmes issues regarding women.

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43 Since the Meiji period, elementary school has been mandatory for both sexes, but girls and boys were segregated starting from the second grade.

44 During the Edo period (1603–1868), prostitution was licensed by the Tokugawa shogunate. Women and girls working in the pleasure quarters, most of whom ended up there due to their own or their families' poverty, were bound to these areas with almost no personal freedom.

45 NDL Digital Collections, GHQ/SCAP Records, Box no. 3446, Folder title (number): 451 (13), Women's Legal Status in Japan, March 11, 1946, 103–104, https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/12976869/1/103.

Political Awareness of Japanese Women Across the Country Before the General Elections of 1946

The beginning of the Occupation was indeed a turning point for Japanese women. However, for an average Japanese woman who was never part of the suffrage movement, the enfranchisement came suddenly and left her unprepared. The women themselves were aware of the problematic situation in which they found themselves. Although they understood the importance of emancipation and suffrage, they were equally aware that their previous education was not sufficient to enable them to make thoughtful political decisions on their own. In addition to that, tradition and the subordination of women created an atmosphere in which women were previously unable to openly express themselves politically.

> "It has been customary with women, when asked for their opinions, to be shy and hesitating, and abstain from speaking out even when they have something to say. If they were interested in politics or published their criticises about it, they were branded as "conceited". But now they can avail themselves of the five opportunity of enfranchisement. (Shibushita Michiko, aged 22, a clerk)
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> As far as I know, very few among the women of the farming community know anything about women's suffrage. "Premature" is the word of those who have some interest in political participation. Of course there are exceptions, but the farmers are mainly apathetic, or rather, they may inwardly regard it as an unwelcome gift. This no wonder in agrarian districts where they have no time to spare for either newspapers or radios. Some say the time spent in going out to vote is a burden. (Mito Yoko, aged 30, a farmer)
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> Not only in the agrarian villages, but among the public in general will there be many who give up the right to vote because of prevailing general confusion. If we prod them on they will be dragged into the views of their fathers, brothers or husbands and the result will be the loss of honest vote which are especially expected of women. (Shigeta Takeyo, aged 28, teacher in an elementary school)"[46]

While some women, due to their socio-economic privilege, were afforded greater opportunities to express their rights as citizens of democratic Japan, many working-class women were constrained by their economic commitments.[47] In general, there was widespread discontent over continuing food shortages, with protests across the country demanding free distribution of groceries.[48] Besides hunger, Japanese women also faced unemployment. With the onset of World War II, many women were made wage earners for the first time, resulting in changes in their roles within the family.[49] However, the main industries were destroyed in the war, and the streets were

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46 NDL Digital Collections, GHQ/SCAP Records, Box no. 3446, Folder title (number): 451 (14), Political Education for Women Provincial Newspaper, Chugoku Shimbun (Hiroshima) December 19, 1945, Translator: T. Kitayama, https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/12976870/1/18.

47 Christopher Gerteis, *Gender Struggles: Wage-Earning Women and Male-Dominated Unions in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 22.

48 Takemae, *Inside GHQ*, 242.

49 Thomas R. H. Havens, "Women and War in Japan, 1937-45," *The American Historical Review* 80, no. 4 (1975), 914, 927, https://doi.org/10.2307/1867444.

full of demobilised soldiers and returnees from former Japanese colonies. As the Japanese government tried to provide jobs for men, it encouraged the sacking of women workers.[50] Among those women who continued to work, from the beginning of the Occupation, the largest proportion of them was in agriculture.[51] Nonetheless, even throughout the Occupation, the main employment of most women in the country remained unpaid family work, even within this group of agricultural women.[52] It was these women on the farms and non-urban areas who were often the main focus of discussions regarding women's rights, voting, and politics in general.

The survey conducted in November 1945, among women voters in some 1,200 farming communities across the country, showed that only 1.6% were interested in the newly acquired right to vote. Those few who did show interest were seen as eccentric and strange. The women voters in these farming communities were too busy with their farms and household chores to pay attention to government and politics. It was also revealed that only three out of 299 respondents felt that women's suffrage was essential for fostering a spirit of self-government in emerging communities. The survey further concluded that the lack of political awareness among rural women was mainly because virtually all women in rural communities had no political education. Additionally, the family system that still prevailed in farming communities had norms that made women less interested in politics.[53] Therefore, even though there were about 2.7 million more female voters than male voters, politics was still a secondary consideration for most women in agricultural communities, as well as factory girls:

> "There are millions of women workers in this country, but they are not organized. Moreover, the women workers in factories and farms are engrossed with their everyday problems and have no time to take any active part in a political movement. For factory girls the freedom of going out of the factory compound after the regular working hours is more important than the exercise of political franchise. For farm women the question of reducing their farm rents is more important than voting. It seems natural that the women workers of the country should first join in industrial and farm unions before they can take an active part in political organizations. Heretofore, Japanese women had no right to form a political association. This is why parties seem so alien to them."[54]

Furthermore, it was clear that the creation of political awareness among women will not be fully realised unless the education system itself is changed, especially if co-education of girls and boys is not adopted:

> "One of the underlying causes of backwardness of women in political and social intelligence is the system of education segregating girls and women

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50 Manako Ogawa, "The Establishment of the Women's and Minors' Bureau in Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal, English Supplement*, no. 13 (1997), 60, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772117.

51 Takashi Koyama, *The changing social position of women in Japan* (Unesco, 1961): 103.

52 Andrew Gordon, ed., *Postwar Japan as History* (Univ. of California Press, 1993): 349.

53 "Female Farmer Voters Are Indifferent To Suffrage Right; No Time For Politics," *The Japan Times*, November 22, 1945, 3.

54 "Woman suffrage," *The Japan Times*, October 27, 1945, 2.

> from the other sex. [...] The objective of women's education in this country, particularly in recent years, has been [o] more than to make good mothers or housewives; the full development of womanhood, with its rights and responsibilities as an independent human being, has not been sought after as an ideal in their education. The first step in the political education of women, therefore, consists in their liberation from such discriminatory institutions."[55]

The general after-war confusion among the Japanese, paired with years of patriarchal and feudalistic sentiment, created uncertainty among the population regarding female participation in politics. While there were some optimistic views about the outcome of suffrage, this could be mostly found in the urban areas. Since the political mobilisation of women was stronger in cities, and women of higher socio-economic status had greater opportunities to participate in politics, there was a discrepancy in how the enfranchisement was acknowledged in different regions in Japan.

The doubt of whether Japanese women were willing and ready to get involved in politics was constantly being brought up. Questions of how and for whom would women vote were also a trending discourse. Therefore, in February 1946, two months before the election, another survey of women voters across the country (see Map 1) was conducted by the *Jiji* newspaper and reported by *The Japan Times*. The survey showed that most female voters were willing to vote for those candidates or parties who would increase the portion of rice even by little. Regionally, in Osaka Prefecture, a survey of 100 female voters, living in a middle-class residential area that the air strikes had not damaged, showed that 22 of them would vote for the Liberal Party, the same number for the Social Democratic Party, seven for the Progressive Party, only one for the Communist Party and one for another political party. The remaining 47 said they were either undecided or uninterested in the election. Again, most of those who expressed party preferences said they would vote for the candidates who would increase the current rice ration. Many refused to express an opinion, saying they wanted to consult their husbands first. In Kyoto Prefecture, spokespersons for the local branches of the Progressive, Liberal and Social Democratic Parties, as well as intellectuals, agreed that at least 80% of women voters in the prefecture would abstain from voting. They felt that housewives were too concerned with providing daily food for their families to pay attention to politics, while younger single women were disinterested in politics.[56]

Female voters in Nara and Hyogo Prefectures shared a tendency to oppose the Communist Party for its advocacy of abolishing the imperial system. They also expressed the intention to vote like the men in their lives. Okayama and Yamaguchi Prefectures demonstrated a strong preoccupation with food and less with political issues. Admittedly, in Yamaguchi Prefecture, a small number of female voters who were known to have some political awareness were somewhat sympathetic to the Communist Party and the

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55 "Liberation of women urged from centuries-old customs," *The Japan Times*, November 1, 1945, 4.

56 "Food is uppermost in minds of Japanese women voters," *The Japan Times*, February 14, 1946, 4.

Social Democratic Party, mainly due to the active debates among their party members about the problems of the imperial system. In Shimane Prefecture, most women voters expressed a strong apathy towards all political parties whose platforms included abolishing the imperial system. In addition, 16 housewives – farmers' wives, teachers, and office workers – were asked about their attitudes to voting. The farmers' and merchants' wives said they would not vote because going to the polls was too painful, adding that if they were forced to vote, they would do so only after consulting their husbands. The professors, on the other hand, said that they wanted to make the best use of their newly acquired right to vote, but that they knew practically nothing about political parties and their candidates, so they would have to study a little more to know how to use this right. The office girls were not enthusiastic about voting, saying that all the political parties they knew of 'just say nice things that don't mean anything.' They also added that they did not like the parties that advocated the abolition of the imperial system.[57]

Although many female voters in Fukuoka Prefecture were uninterested, the few politically oriented younger female voters preferred either the Communist Party or the Social Democratic Party, as both parties were more active among female citizens than any other party. However, even among these women, there was a greater affection for the Social Democratic Party. Apart from a small number of upper-class women, most women voters showed little interest in the Progressive and Liberal parties, while the majority of them, especially middle-aged women, were willing to support the imperial system. In Ehime Prefecture, most female intellectuals favoured the Social Democratic Party. More precisely, a third of all female voters in the area. On the other hand, it was assumed that the rest of the women would vote like their husbands or male relatives, with the possibility of their votes going to Progressive and Liberal candidates.[58]

In Nagano Prefecture, known for its high literacy rate, a women's organisation surveyed 50 women on voting rights based on their political party preferences, but only 21 responded. Of those who answered, 14 said they would vote but had not decided which party to vote for. Five preferred the Progressive Party, while two said they would vote for the Liberal Party. On the other hand, in Aomori Prefecture, where it was known that about 70% of female citizens did not even read newspapers, about 20% of those who did read intended to vote like their husbands or other male relatives, most likely for Progressive or Liberal candidates. The remaining ten per cent were relatively well-educated women with some interest in politics and a certain aversion to the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party. Finally, in Fukushima Prefecture, where the number of female voters was estimated at around 540,000, mostly in rural villages, more than 70% of them were considered indifferent to the upcoming elections.[59]

The survey reaffirmed that women in farming communities were noticeably disinterested towards politics and voting, as providing food for

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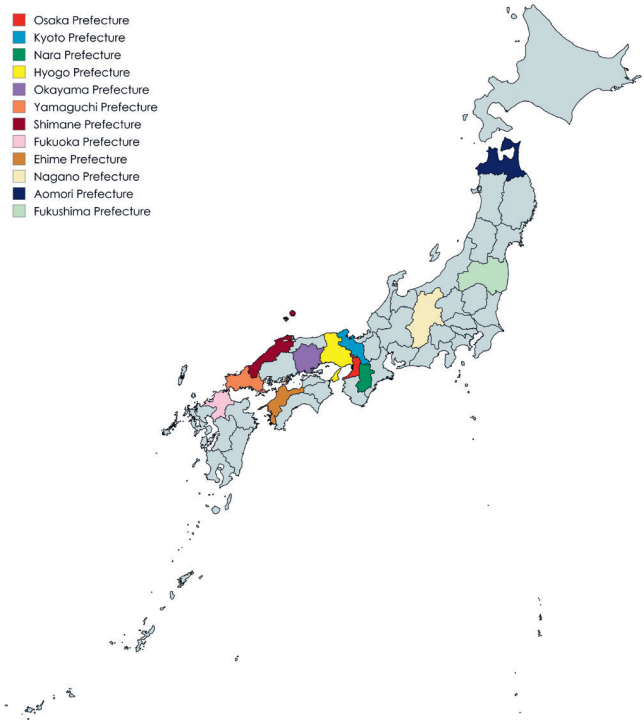
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.

their families was a more pressing concern. It further showed that women in urban areas were also more anxious about the food than elections. It is also notable that even though three out of four major parties openly advocated in their programmes for the emancipation of women, equal rights and general improvement of women's lives, those factors did not have as much influence as one might expect. While some respondents showed interest towards the parties that promoted women's rights and social reforms, tradition still had great influence. This was most evident in two types of responses. First, the remnants of feudalism can be found in the views on the question of the emperor. Most women were more favourable towards parties that would preserve the imperial system. Second, the patriarchal sentiment in answers was also inevitable, due to which many respondents planned to vote like their husbands or other men in the family. Throughout history, Confucianism, which placed women as inferior to men, had a significant impact on the relationship between men and women in Japan. This was especially apparent in the concept of "Three Obediences," according to which a woman is first obedient to her father, after the marriage to her husband, and then to her son (after the death of her husband). In summary, traditional values and roles, dependence on husbands, economic issues, and women's previous education and political awareness, or rather the lack of it, were the main factors influencing their opinions regarding the upcoming elections. Therefore, rather than by their inner ideological preferences themselves, women's political attitudes in the wake of the first post-war general elections were mostly influenced by the external circumstances that shaped their lives.



Map 1. Prefectures Surveyed in 1946

General Elections of 1946 and Post-election Political Activities of Japanese Women

Despite all the obstacles and predictions, the elections, held on April 10, 1946, ultimately showed a more positive outcome of women's political engagement than expected. When the results were announced, the number of female voters far exceeded the most optimistic assumptions. The turnout was 67% for women and 78.5% for men, a very small difference, especially when compared to other countries where the first elections were held after women were given suffrage.[60] After years of living under the fascist regime, this percentage of women's voter turnout was a progressive indicator of changes in social norms and perceptions of the role of women in Japan.

Out of the 79 women who stood for election, 39 were elected to the House of Representatives, *Shūgiin*, the lower house of the National Diet of Japan, *Kokkai*. It should be noted that a considerable number of voters were encouraged to list women as their second or third choice by the multi-member, plurality voting constituencies of the new electoral law.[61] The party affiliations of the women elected included the Social Democratic Party (8), the Progressive Party (6), the Liberal Party (4), and the Communist Party (1). Eleven elected women were members of various parties and nine were independent members (although two members joined the Liberal Party, and one joined the Progressive Party after being elected). Considering the background of the candidates at the time of their candidacy, they represented various professions: teachers (6), managers (4), doctors (3, including dentists), writers (2), and directors of organisations (2). Others included a company employee, a midwife, a farmer and 19 unemployed, out of which 15 housewives, reflecting the state of the times.[62] The youngest elected female member, Matsutani Tenkōkō (1919–2015), later Sonoda, was only 28 years old. Despite her young age, Matsutani showed that she was not afraid to express her opinions and criticisms when she publicly accused the government of being completely incompetent in overseeing the problem of "how to feed the nation." She also pointed out that the main political parties were ignoring the critical issue and only engaging in behind-the-scenes political manoeuvring.[63] Other newly elected women politicians also continued to advocate for better living conditions for women and children. Some resolutions they proposed included a proposition on measures for infants, children and women's issues that required urgent solutions. Some also advocated the repatriation of Koreans living abroad, the establishment of a domestic relations court, the promotion of peace movements and the reform of the education system. There was also a petition to increase the production and proper distribution of pharmaceutical products; a petition to ensure milk and dairy products for infants; a petition to eradicate tuberculosis; a bill to prohibit alcohol for

60 Pharr, *Political women in Japan*, 24.

61 Takemae, *Inside GHQ*, 265.

62 Fukiko Hashimoto 橋本 富記子, "Fujin sansei-ken kakutoku undō kara sengo-hatsu no josei giin tanjō made: Josei no seiji katsudō ni tsuite," 婦人参政権獲得運動から戦後初の女性議員誕生まで：女性の政治活動について, *Chiba Daigaku Daigakuin Jinbun Kōkyō Gakufu* 千葉大学大学院人文公共学府43 (2021): 11-12, https://opac.ll.chiba-u.jp/da/curator/900119885/.

63 "Hits Government's stand," *The Japan Times*, April 30, 1946, 3.

young people, etc.[64] Considering that 38.5% of elected women to the House of Representatives were housewives, they were aware of the struggles ordinary women faced and advocated for changes that would improve their daily lives and position in society. The contributions of other members were equally significant, as they understood the challenges women faced in medicine and healthcare, education and the work sphere. Therefore, even though most of these women did not have prior experience in politics or activism, they had a concrete knowledge and understanding of women's predicaments.

Like their efforts prior to the election, the suffragettes continued to mobilise women through public lectures and debates following the election. More than 2,000 women, mostly young women, attended the first all-women's political meeting held after the general election. Some of the problems discussed during and after the meeting included immediate solutions to the food problem, relief of mothers, ways to simplify the duties of housewives and birth control.[65] The percentage of women who voted indicated that they were willing to participate in the reconstruction of Japan. Women's political activism did not cease with the attainment of enfranchisement; rather, the fight for equal inclusion in society continued. As the primary means to achieve this, the importance of abolishing all customs and institutions that discriminated against women as equal members of society was emphasised, along with recognition of the difficulties women faced.

Formation of Women Organisations

Not long after achieving the enfranchisement, there were already numerous women's groups in Japan, which showed significant progress in shaping the political awareness of women. On May 25, 1946, the 39 elected women Diet members formed the Women Diet Member's Club, *Fujin Giin Curabu*. The aim was to establish friendship and contact among Diet members, as well as to support activities in which all women are interested.[66] Furthermore, according to the report by Public Opinion and Sociological Research, by January 1947, there were 49 active women's organisations in the Tokyo area. One of the bigger organisations was the Japan Federation of Labour Unions, Women's Section, *Nippon Rōdō Kumiai Sōdōmei, Fujin Bu*, established in August 1946, with 200,000 women members. Another labour organisation was the Kantō Federation of Labor, Women's Section, *Kantō Rōdō Kyōgikai, Fujin bu*, established in February 1946, with 40,000 women, averaging in age from 19 to 22.[67] As noted earlier, many working-class women were limited by economic conditions in exercising their new political rights. However, through active participation in their unions, they found their new political rights.[68] By December 31, 1946, the number of women workers who were members of Japanese trade unions was 1,169,783, or about 24% of

64 Hashimoto, "From the Beginning," 13-16.
65 "Women's World," *The Japan Times*, April 22, 1946, 3.
66 NDL Digital Collections, GHQ/SCAP Records, Women's Organizations in Tokyo, January 1947, 59.
67 Ibid, 54-89.
68 Gerteis, *Gender Struggles,* 23.

the 4,849,329 organised wage earners.[69] Women also played a vital role in labour strikes. Tokyo's 123 union strikes organised between October 1945 and February 1946 included 19,280 women and girls. As for the strikes themselves, it was estimated that 80% of them succeeded in achieving their goals, which included better treatment of workers, recognition of the right to collective bargaining, and other demands.[70]

Other bigger organisations included the Cooperative Democratic Party, Women's Section, *Kyodō Minshu Tō, Fujin Bu*, established in May 1945, with the women's section formally initiated in October 1946. By 1947, it had 30,000 women members. Furthermore, the Social Democratic Party, Women's Section, *Nippon Shakai Tō, Fujin Bu*, was established in November of 1945, accounting for 100,000 women members by January 1947. Worth mentioning is also the Japan Women Doctor's Society, *Nippon Joi Kai*, with 8,500 women doctors whose aim was the re-education of women regarding medicine, as well as the promotion of medical science. The Society also published a magazine, *Joi Kai Zasshi*. Other women's organisations included: Japan's Alliance for Birth Control, *Nippon Sanju Chōsetsu Fujin Dōmei*, Japan Women's Artists' Society, *Nippin Joryū Bijutsu Kai*, Japan Women Reporters'Society, *Nippon Fujin Kisha Kai*, Bereaved Families of War Victims League, *Sensō Giseisha Izoku Dōmei*, New Japan Women Teacher's League, *Shin Nippon Joshi Kyōikusha Dōmei*, Young Women's Christian Association, *Kirisuto Kyō Joshi Seinen Kai Nippon Dōmei*, and others. It should also be noted that there were also women's organisations that were sub-sections of the 1,000 or more neighbourhood associations in Tokyo that the report did not include.[71]

Considering that before 1945, women were legally prohibited from political association, and organising or attending political meetings, the number of newly founded women's organisations in the early years of the Occupation was another positive indicator of women's progress in the world of democracy. A fortiori, these associations covered a wide range of interests and needs within which women could act. Even though many women did not have resources or the opportunity to enrol in universities, speak on political matters, run for the Diet etc., organisations provided them with the possibility to connect with other women, as well as to explore their potential outside the home and housework. Labour unions were especially important as they were often the first or the only organisation working women were a part of. It was through these associations that they managed to have their voices heard and actively participate in negotiating better conditions and rights.

Political Awareness of Women after the General Elections of 1946

While there were some significant changes in women's political activity, a year after the first post-war General elections showed that women were still shackled by tradition and norms. In April of 1947, a study of the

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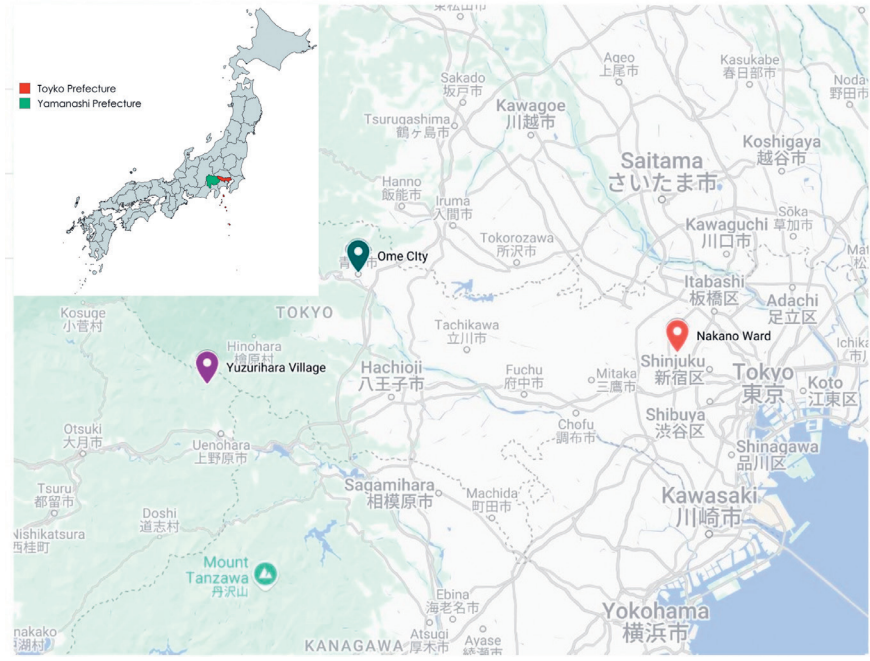
69 NDL Digital Collections, GHQ/SCAP Records, Box no. 3446, Folder title (number): 451 (13), Organization, Membership, and Activities of Women in Major Labor Federations, July 30, 1947, 36, https://dl.ndl.go.jp/en/pid/12976869/1/36.

70 "220 Labor Disputes witnessed in Tokyo," *The Japan Times*, March 27, 1946, 3.

71 NDL Digital Collections, GHQ/SCAP Records, Women's Organizations in Tokyo, January 1947.

independence of women's political attitudes was conducted by the *Mainichi* Newspaper Public Opinion Room. The aim was to study the way women exercised their 'equality of franchise,' and to measure their political interest. Three areas (see Map 2); Nakano Ward in Tokyo, Ome City[72], and Yuzurihara Village[73] were selected in terms of differences in urbanisation and degree of familial control. In each place, 100 couples were interviewed on their voting intentions toward the Diet elections.[74]



Map 2. Nakano Ward, Ome City, and Yuzurihara Village

The study concentrated on how familial restrictions and the disparities between urban and rural areas impacted women's political beliefs. Employing two ballots, on the first ballot the wife and husband were interviewed separately and by direct interview procedure. In this ballot, both the degree of political interest and the amount of agreement between the spouses were measured. The second ballot was administered by leaving the interview form with the same respondents, to be filled in overnight and collected the following morning. In this ballot, changes in the degree of political interest and changes in the amount of agreement between the spouses were measured to ascertain the rate of agreement change from the first ballot. The study was accomplished using a double set of ballots asking

72 A small country market town, part of Tokyo Prefecture, which had an extended family system, then partially broken down because of increasing pressures from the metropolis.

73 A farm village in Yamanashi Prefecture near Tokyo with a strongly extended family system.

74 NDL Digital Collections, GHQ/SCAP Records, Box no. 3446, Folder title (number): 451 (13), The Mainichi Study of Women's Political Attitudes Public Opinion and Sociological Research, November 28, 1947, 25-34, https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/12976869/1/25.

the identical question: 'In the coming House of Representatives election, what political party do you intend to support?'[75]

On the first ballot, women were less interested in political issues than their husbands, with only 42% making a decision. Rural women were least interested (29%), city women most interested (53%) and town women intermediate (46%). Furthermore, the response rate for both husbands and wives declined from urban to rural communities. On the second ballot, there was a significant increase in the change of interest. This was especially true for wives, as they showed an increase of 121%, suggesting that they were strongly influenced by their husbands. Disagreement between husbands and wives about voting intentions in the first round was about the same in town, city and village. Of those who disagreed on the first ballot, later on the second ballot 76% of rural women, 52% of town women and 36% of city women changed their minds in the direction of their husband's choice. Only a small percentage of men changed their minds towards their wives' choice on the second ballot. Generally, 44% of all couples agreed on the first ballot, while 75% of them agreed on the second ballot. The study concluded that compared to city women, rural women were often seen as less educated, less interested in politics, and less likely to cast independent ballots. This was especially due to the conservative rural farming communities which placed significant pressure on others, especially on women. [76]

Although this is only one survey that covered certain communities, it is a good indicator of the tendencies of the time. The elections of 1946 demonstrated significant political activity of Japanese women, but by 1947, women still showed dependence on their husbands regarding political matters. Despite the democratisation of Japan leading to greater opportunities for women's education and employment, rural communities were still strongly tied to traditional values and roles. In addition, resistance to the new ideas of liberalism and socialism, which promoted women's rights and gender equality, was still apparent, both between men and women alike. Therefore, it was evident that the change in women's political awareness and activity did not happen all at once but required continuous effort and education.

Conclusion

With the end of the war, Japanese suffragettes continued their mission of women's enfranchisement, and their efforts bore fruit when the Japanese government decided to grant women suffrage because of their contribution during the war. While this success was overshadowed by the rapid intervention of the SCAP to implement democratic reforms, the suffragettes were not swayed by this. They organised various committees, gatherings and lectures to spread political awareness among other Japanese women, as well as to achieve the emancipation of women in other segments of life. Women further found support in various organisations which opened the way for all women to be part of something bigger. However, not all women

[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

in post-war Japan were able to experience political mobilisation or activism. The political consciousness of most women in early post-war Japan was shaped by the remnants of patriarchal relations, tradition, poor education, political ignorance and largely by socio-economic circumstances. The majority of women were more concerned about food and whether they would be able to feed their families. The question of politics was only in the context of which party would increase the food rations. Women from rural areas were particularly indifferent to voting and politics in general. Although women achieved an unexpected turnout in the general elections in April of 1946, as well as a share of seats in the House of Representatives, it was evident that it would still take time to break free from the shackles of traditional roles and norms. While it is important to acknowledge the achievements of suffragettes, it is equally essential to recognise the struggles of the average Japanese woman in adapting to her new role as an equal citizen of Japan.

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