

Alisha Romano

Japn 311-01

Dr. Wright

October 24th, 2019

“Vitalizing Democracy at the Grassroots: A Contribution of Post-War Women’s Movements in Japan” Article Review

The author of the article “Vitalizing Democracy at the Grassroots: A Contribution of Post-War Women’s Movements in Japan” is Mikiko Eto. Dr. Eto is a professor at Hosei University in Tokyo. Her degree is in political science with a specialty in gender and politics. She has examined the impact of women’s movements on society, as well as politics on a transnational level. During her research she has also examined, at an intricate level, the ratios of women in politics in different nations, especially comparisons between nations like Japan and Scandinavian countries. Her body of work includes women’s impact on the way social welfare is constructed in Japan, as well as examining the ways women’s movements in Japan can influence politics and policy changes. In her current article she discussed in further detail the different ways that women’s movements, both ones that are feminist in nature and those that are not, have been capable of enacting differences in Japanese politics and culture.

Dr. Eto discusses in the article all the ways that women’s movements have formed and disbanded during the post-World War II period up to the modern period. Through her historical analysis of women’s movements in Japan she distinguishes the different types of women’s movements that have existed and continue to exist. She defines movements in general as “... I identify social movements as a series of collective activities which autonomous individuals, who

lack political power and material resources, are voluntarily engaged, and which aim to change the status quo..." (Eto, 119). Through this definition she further explains that women's movements do not have to be movements that specifically target women's social issues, but instead are movements that are run by women that address issues that directly concern them. She discusses the fact that in Japan organizations that are run by women do not always take up the goal of feminism but instead try and address issues that may be important to them in general. Dr. Eto's description of how women's movements in Japan goals have not always started from a place of feminism, but still has impacted society as a whole, is one held by her peers. One such peer mentions, "Such grass roots activism has not only resulted in critique of existing state policies and pressure for policy changes, but also an increasing recognition and successful effort on the part of women to directly influence the decision-making process" (Sheel, 4097). One such example of this phenomenon was the groups formed by women immediately following World War II, during the Korean War. These women formed groups and protested to try and ensure that no one in Japan would participate in another war. They used their position in order to gain public support and helped to form larger anti-war protests in Japan. Using this basic definition of what a women's movement could be, she starts describing them. She examines the fact that women's movements in Japan have been historically split into three types.

Dr. Eto identifies these types as: the elite-initiated movement of feminist, the second wave participatory feminist movement, and participatory non-feminist movements. The first kind was started prior to World War II, but in the post-war period lost favor with younger women and eventually the role that they played was taken over by the second wave feminists. The second wave feminists were able to address feminist and women's issues that everyday women

struggled with while also attempting to engage in larger feminist struggles. One of the examples that she gives is Networks of Violence against Women in War, VAWW-NET, and its international goals. She describes one action VAWW-NET took, “The group suggested establishing the Women’s International War Crime Tribunal [...] The Tribunal was held in Tokyo, from 8-12 December, 2000” (Eto, 129). The tribunal was held to hold Japan responsible for the atrocities that women faced during Japan’s imperialism, such as the practice of comfort women. Though the court had no legal authority it brought feminist groups from all over Asia together and had them try and convict Japan for the treatment of women during the war period. The third group were comprised of organizations that argued for specific issues but were run by women and often ended up having a feminist position despite that not being the root cause of the organization. Such examples would be organization that had the primary goal of providing better services for the elderly. These organizations were run by women and though they did not directly impact feminist issues, they did argue that the government was using an outdated idea and forcing an undue burden on women to care for the elderly when it was the state’s job to do it. Throughout the article Dr. Eto mentions the ways that women in Japan were and continue to be able to enact political change through their groups despite the differences in the goals and initial structuring of the organizations.

Dr. Eto concludes her article by examining the ways that the non-feminist and feminist organizations have been able to work together to solve larger problems in Japanese society. She examines the cooperation of these movements and how they have allowed for more female representation in politics, as well as the ways that the combined forces have allowed for bigger issues facing the nation to be, not only brought to the national attention, but also explained to the

everyday woman. One of the effects of their interactions was, “Political collaboration between the feminists and the non-feminists activists was realized in the Tokyo Metropolitan gubernatorial election of April 2003” (Eto, 137). The two worked together to campaign for a candidate that held interests for both groups. Despite the candidate not winning the race, this initial collaboration started a dialogue between these two movements and allowed for both organizations opinions to be considered regarding future issues. The political involvement of both groups also allowed for there to be a continual support for female candidates as these organizations have the tools and finances needed to support female campaigns.

During Dr. Eto’s examination of the ongoing influence of women’s movements in Japan she used histories, as well as concepts from others in her field. In her article she mentions that there are few sources in Japanese about contemporary women’s movements and in English there are slightly more than ten. Due to this disparity, she extensively used works by Mari Yamamoto and Diana Khor to examine the history of women’s movements in Japan and how they define women’s movements in general. These works examine how the movements have structured themselves, what activities they have engaged in, and what ideologies the movements are centered on. Yamamoto examines the roles that housewives have played in Japan and how their participation in women’s movements have caused the issues that they address to focus on larger societal concerns. Whereas Khor examines the feminist movements in Japan and how they have enacted social change that favors women’s rights. Both authors allow for Dr. Eto to better explain the split between women’s movements in Japan and how ideologically they differ. Through this examination, she is able to make her case for the importance of the two sides cooperating to overall improve the representation of women in Japanese politics.

Dr. Eto's article was exceptionally thorough and able to cover a large range of times, as well as concepts, in a way that was not difficult to follow. In the process of explaining the history of the movements she often connected the abstract ideas with examples that increased the understanding of how these theories worked in practice. Initially her definition of social movements and women's movements is too general to be practical in use, as almost anything could be defined as a women's movement in these parameters. Her explanation of women's movements in Japan must be defined to make a compelling case for such a broad definition. Her historical analysis, as well as her culture explanations behind women's movements in Japan, makes it clear that the movements that occur in Japan are approached differently because of their understandings of gendered labour and gender disparities that prevented women from taking action sooner and more directly. Her examination of these movements have impacted the ability of women to run for political office in Japan was insightful, but for a western audience would be necessary to explain these links. Dr. Eto's article spans a long period of time and a variety of women's movements and masterfully ties their connections to the increase in female candidates in politics and women's movements overall ability to make their voices heard in a political setting.

Bibliography:

Eto, M. (2008). Vitalizing Democracy at the Grassroots: A Contribution of Post-War Women's Movements in Japan. *East Asia*, 25(2), 115-143.

Khor, D. (1999). Organizing for Change: Women's Grassroots Activism in Japan. *Feminist Studies*, 25(3), 633-661. doi:10.2307/3178660

Ranjana Sheel. (2003). Women in Politics in Japan. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(39), 4097-4101. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4414071>

Yamamoto, M. (2004). Grassroots pacifism in post-war japan : The rebirth of a nation. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>