Feminist Agency and Praxis in Contemporary Japan

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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, undertaken at The University of Western Australia, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Discipline of Asian Studies, 2006.
Declaration

I declare that this work is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for degree or award at this or any other university. To my knowledge it does not contain material previously published or written by another person where due reference has not been made in the text.

Laura Dales
Submitted 19th April 2006.
Feminist Agency and Praxis in Contemporary Japan

Abstract

This thesis is an examination of some of the forms of feminist agency and praxis of Japanese women. It aims to investigate the features and effects of feminism and feminist identification in contemporary Japan, in non-government (NGO) women’s groups and government-run women’s centres, and explores the ways in which women’s participation in these produces and reflects agency.

Based on two years of fieldwork conducted in Japan between 2000 and 2002, the thesis draws on interviews and participant observation of three women’s groups and one women’s centre in Kansai, interviews with feminist activist Kitahara Minorī, and discourse analysis of resources produced by women’s centres as well as feminist authors.

The thesis begins with a discussion of the research process, and an introduction to the concept of agency. The second chapter offers an analysis of women’s movements and feminisms in Singapore and India, and a survey of feminisms in Japan, focusing on contemporary developments. By placing feminist organising in its specific historic, economic and cultural context, I argue that aversion to the term “feminist” does not preclude feminist praxis, or the promotion of women’s agency. In the third chapter I survey Japanese ideals and expectations of femininity and the family, delineating the broad patterns of change and development of the last century, and particularly since the end of World War II. This chapter explores the impacts of feminist organisation and activism on Japanese women’s lives.

Using a discussion of critical feminist diversity as a starting-point, in the fourth chapter I explore NGO women’s groups as sites for potential feminist agency, and address the implications of such a reading for feminist discourse in Japan. The following chapter explores recent legislation on gender, specifically the Law for a Gender Equal Society. The sixth chapter examines the functions and limitations of government-run women’s centres and their relationship with NGOs. In examining both government-funded and
non-government bodies, I aim to delineate the relationship between legislation, policy and NGO work in women’s issues in contemporary Japan.

I extend the discussion of feminist agency and praxis through analysis of the work of contemporary Japanese feminists, television personality and author Haruka Yōko and Kitahara Minori, author and founder of the Love Piece Club, a sex-goods shop for women. This analysis is based on interviews with Kitahara and examination of the publications (including websites and e-publications) of both authors. Following this analysis, I investigate the potential for reading agency into the “parasite single” issue, aiming to problematise both feminist and non-feminist analysis of such women’s issues, while addressing possible future directions for Japanese feminist discourse.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of the relationship between agency and praxis, and of the possible roles of women’s groups, women’s centres and individuals in the promotion and development of future feminisms. I argue that the work of individual activists and women’s organisations examined in this thesis promotes real and potential change to gender roles and expectations among Japanese women. It is on the foundational inclusiveness of such feminist engagement that future Japanese feminisms and women’s organisations will be formed, and through which future gender inequalities addressed.
Notes

In this thesis Japanese informants are introduced by family name, followed by given name, e.g. Yamazaki Risa is Ms Yamazaki. Long vowels are indicated with macrons.

The Spring Centre, Benkyō, WWW and Women’s Projects are pseudonyms given to the organisations examined in this thesis. Website information and resources from these groups are similarly pseudonymous, but are available upon request.

Individuals who are quoted and were specifically interviewed for this research are introduced (using pseudonyms) in Tables 1.2 – 1.5. They are cited in-text by name, group and the date of interview. Observations and quotes taken from outside formal interviews are cited under the speaker’s name and the date of comments, to facilitate the inclusion of the (many and insightful) dialogues that occurred outside meeting times and spaces. In the Chapter Nine discussion of parasite singles, the speaker’s age is also given, and biographical details (including living arrangements) are noted in Table 1.1. In all quotations, Japanese interviewees are referred to by their family name and the honorific –san, following my practice in fieldwork engagements and interviews.
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SECTION ONE

An introduction to feminisms and feminist agency
This section introduces the aims of the thesis, and the framework within which feminist praxis and agency will be examined. Chapter One sketches an outline of the project and its development, and locates myself within the study as (inter alia) a feminist, a researcher and a non-Japanese woman researching in Japan. Chapter Two gives a theoretical overview of feminist diversity, and addresses the implications of cultural, linguistic and historical differences in feminist research. Chapter Three focuses on feminism in modern and contemporary Japan, examining women’s movements and women’s groups, and exploring the changes in feminine ideals and roles in Japan.
CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

Feminist agency and praxis

The aims of this work relate primarily to questions of feminism and its scope in contemporary Japan. Using various sites and individuals as case-studies, I explore the ways that feminist agency and praxis are created, promoted and limited among Japanese women. In addressing agency as both a function and gauge of feminism, I highlight the connection between feminist praxis and the potential for inclusiveness in feminist theory.

This project began with the broad question of defining Japanese feminism and its role in women's lives. The decision to focus on women's groups and women's centres reflected my first realisation of the need to contextualize questions and knowledge, and to evaluate the epistemology of my inquiry – what was I seeking when I asked the question "what is feminism for you?" The realisation that existing knowledge shapes potential knowledge is therefore one of the foundation stones of this thesis. The following discussions of feminist practices, women's groups, women's empowerment and legislative reform, are underpinned by the implicit acknowledgement that all questions reflect back to the questioner, and are therefore inherently skewed to her (my) point-of-view.

It is easier to find evidence of feminist praxis when one is looking through feminist lenses. This is not to discount the validity of the feminism found – which may well be judged ‘feminist’ by a researcher lacking feminist sympathies – nor does this preclude
soundness and incisiveness in the research. Rather, I recognise the need to explicate the ways in which research is shaped by the researcher, and to understand that the knowledge that flows from research is similarly moulded.

My focus on agency reiterates this recognition: that the search for agency and its manifestations is inevitably shaped by the conviction (or hope) that such agency exists. Women who work in groups or as individuals to promote empowerment and action, even when avoiding the term “feminist”, are active proponents of feminist agency and praxis. This label cannot be applied uniformly within each group or organisation, nor universally as a feature of Japanese women’s groups. However, the NGO groups and government-run women’s centres studied in this thesis illustrate the ways in which women-centred space can potentially enable at least some women to challenge gendered inequalities as individuals (in families, workplaces and the community) or as group members.

Certain parallels may thus be drawn: If women can be feminists without explicitly self-identifying as such, then they may also practise agency without intentionally or explicitly challenging power structures or their own status therein. It is the potential for both feminism and agency that interests me here, primarily because this represents an increase in the scope of these two concepts in social research and scholarship. Such an increase acknowledges the diversity of women’s experiences, of cultural and historical influences, and also acknowledges the need for fluidity and inclusiveness in academic discussion of women and women’s issues.

Agency can be seen as both cause and effect of feminist engagement. In the context of the women’s groups examined, agency is rarely revolutionary, but rather manifests in
the subtleties of ongoing participation. It is this subtlety that challenges the expectations of those feminist scholars (including myself in the early stages of this project) whose focus is trained on dramatic and disruptive displays of agency and/or resistance. The implications of expressions of agency may be less obvious in these contexts, but they are not necessarily less significant, and neither are they of less value as an academic subject. Rather, I would go so far as to argue that in projects of feminist enquiry the subtle expressions of agency should be considered central to the study, because they reflect the everyday experience of most women. As Parker observes, "(m)ost women exercise agency in much less public, less organised and less institutionalised ways than through political activism, as part of their daily lives" (2005:219). The more subtle the act, the more likely it is to slip beneath the radar of social (or familial) regulation, and therefore the less likely it is to be controlled or proscribed. In this way, it may be the less radical and therefore less obvious expressions of agency that have the potential to impact more broadly on the daily experience of women's lives.

If agency is manifested as a capacity to act (or not to act), then feminism can be understood as the specific enabling of women to exercise agency. Extending on this, feminist praxis (as distinct from feminist theory) can be seen as an actual exercise of agency. I emphasise that the exercise of agency cannot always be simply equated with 'doing' feminism – the "parasite single" issue, where adult children live with their parents until marriage, is one example of the complexity of this relationship, and is discussed in Chapter Nine in greater depth. However, I suggest that the reverse should hold as a rule: that feminism, by definition, enables women to exercise agency.

Misciagno (1997:85) draws a similar connection between autonomy and de facto feminism. Defining autonomy as the "freedom from restrictive patriarchal structures
and mores as well as the capacity to pursue economic independence”, Misciagno argues that the capacity to choose is a central function of feminism (1997:84). By focusing on autonomy (and particularly on autonomy as freedom), however, Misciagno limits the scope of what can be understood as de facto feminism, disallowing acts which directly or indirectly support the gendered status quo.

In Misciagno’s reading it is the capacity, rather than the actual choice made, which reflects feminism or feminist praxis. The distinction here is between the choices made by women, and women’s capacity to make choices. A similar distinction can be made between an act, and the capacity to act. To focus on feminist praxis then involves focusing on the capacity as well as the act, gauging not only the immediate implications of an action, but also the broader, less obvious consequences.

Such a focus has its limitations. By widening the net to include even acts which only imply capacity, we risk the reduction of all feminist agency to its lowest common denominator, and the collapse of all achievements from grand to trivial. Thus it could be argued that a broadened scope challenges the integrity or ‘purity’ of the concept – such that we begin to see feminism and/or agency in even the most banal of everyday behaviour (<i>The Onion</i>, 19/02/03). However, I suggest that a reasonable extension of the boundaries of “feminism” is inherent to the ongoing development of feminism, enabling it to address, explore and deconstruct issues of contemporary significance for current and future generations of women. This thesis aims to provide examples of the kind of feminist agency and praxis possible under this re-defined boundary, and to provoke discussion of the possibilities for future feminist discourse among women in Japan.

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1. <a>www.theonion.com</a> This article is no longer freely accessible online.
Identifying (my)self in fieldwork

This thesis is partially the product of two years of fieldwork, conducted in Japan between 2000 and 2002 and funded by a Monbukagakusho (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) Research Scholarship. Further fieldwork was enabled in by the Inaugural Nobuyuki and Midori Nakashima Postgraduate Scholarship, allowing me to spend a further two months in Japan in early 2003.

(E)xperience, and the specificity of my experience – a particular human being who encounters particular others at a particular historical moment and has particular stakes in that interaction – is not opposed to theory; it enacts and embodies theory (Kondo 1990:24).

From the outset of fieldwork I was aware of the limitations that I faced as a non-Japanese, non-native speaker embarking on a project of observation and analysis. These differences touch on my own background, but also on the nature and operation of the organisations I explored. The interplay between these sets of variables should therefore be understood as integral to the overall fabric of this thesis.

The two year period I spent living in Kyoto shaped the form, pace and outcome of my research. As Yano observes, “fieldwork is not only about research, but also about the needs, stresses, and pleasures of day-to-day life in a foreign community”, and the negotiation of these aspects inevitably watermarks the final work (2003:280). Before entering the field I was a competent Japanese speaker and reader, and having already lived in Japan for a year, was comfortable and relatively fluent in Japanese cultural practices. Despite this background, it took a considerable time until I felt truly able to participate in groups, attend seminars and conduct research at the level of an academic researcher. By the end of my fieldwork period I still carried an electronic dictionary.
everywhere, but I was more comfortable in asking for clarification before switching it on! Through this experience I learnt the significance of specialist language and the implications of having (and lacking) such language in social (inter)action. At least partially for this reason, issues of translation, interpretation and linguistic difference run as undercurrents throughout this thesis.

Fieldwork can be described as a process of negotiations. Some of the most significant negotiations occur among the multiple selves of the researcher – the changing faces presented to the field and then reconstructed for the academic audience not only shape the fieldwork experience, but also form the epistemological foundation for the research and its outcomes. Of course these multiple selves are not concrete categories, and more than simply acknowledging this, feminist research aims to emphasise the blurring and overlap of binaries. Thus while the categories of, for example, “researcher” and “researched” are on one level objective – insofar as I am the one actually introduced in groups as a “researcher of Japanese feminism”, I am the one receiving a scholarship to study – the shifting import of these categories in different contexts means that neither category is fixed, and particularly not for the purposes of my research and writing.

Roth observes that the different identities of a researcher can be invoked in inclusive and exclusive ways, depending on the context and audience of an exchange (2003:344). Within the context of the Women’s Projects English study group, I was introduced as an “Australian graduate student researching Japanese women’s issues”, and sometimes “studying Japanese feminism”. By contrast in WWW, a women’s group with a number of non-Japanese members in which most group members were professionals, I was “Australian” (in contrast to Japanese and other non-Australian foreigners) and also “a
graduate student of Ritsumeikan University". During my six month internship at the Spring Centre, a prefectural women's centre, I was identified as a “university student” and one of three “interns”, accepted as part of an NPO experience programme organised by the Kyoto University Consortium.

In the context of Women’s Projects – specifically, the meetings and functions they organised – my position was interpreted along the lines of intercultural study, and extension of Japanese cultural study. At the same time, there was an assumption of expertise on my part, and I was brought into discussions with the question “And what is it like in Australia?” on many occasions. Similarly, the head of the group Tanaka-san would often greet me at the door with “Oh, we were hoping you would come, we have something to read!”, meaning that the day’s English study material had been chosen because of perceived connection with my research. My identity as “researcher” overshadowed my identity as “group member”, and was in turn bound up with my Australian nationality and English language fluency.

On two occasions I was invited by Women’s Projects and Women’s Projects members to give presentations on Australia at local cultural centres, once on the general topic of “Australian Society” and the other (more interesting for me) on “Women and young people I have met in Japan”. The flier for the latter featured the blurb: “Laura Dales is in the middle of researching Japanese women’s situations. We will be able to hear lots of unexpected stories, so please come along”, along with an example “quote” on Australia: “In Australia, you can be fined if you don’t vote!”.

2 The names of groups and individuals involved and referred to in this thesis are pseudonyms, with the exception of Kitahara Minori and Haruka Yōko. I have also used the real names of government-run women’s centres, excluding the Spring Centre, where I conducted fieldwork. The use of pseudonyms is designed to protect the privacy of the women who participated in my research, and to ensure that this research does not impact negatively on the individuals, groups and centres studied.
In this way I was regularly reminded of the significance of nationality as a defining characteristic of my self in Japan and in women’s groups. While generally I tried to minimize my Austalianness, both to avoid stereotyping and mis-representation, I found that in certain contexts I was encouraged to raise my nationality, a marked flag to wave in support of women’s issues. I found this feature of participating in Japanese women’s groups particularly challenging.

I was involved with a group of women who had been involved with a major national company in an expensive, well-known and long-running sexual discrimination suit. My knowledge of the case came through a member of the women’s support group, Working Women’s Network, a well-organised national group promoting the case and other inequalities in Japanese labour practices. The member, Ohara-san, who introduced me to the women plaintiffs, was also a founding member of one of the women’s groups, WWW, which I had joined and was researching. I was introduced to the group as a graduate student of Japanese, studying in Kyoto and interested in women’s issues in Japan. The aspects of my self which were of significance to the cause, then, were the critical, feminist and non-Japanese aspects, which were drawn out in opposition to the apathetic Japanese law courts and discriminatory labour practices experienced by the women plaintiffs.

My involvement in the legal case was marginal. I attended a few hearings, and participated in two protests held outside the Osaka District Court. At all of these I was asked to speak, and at one protest I was interviewed by newspaper journalists in English and Japanese (See Figure 1). My knowledge of the case was fragmentary, and there were dozens of Japanese women there who had been far more involved in the case than

\[3\] At least one of the other foreigners (who numbered no more than five) at the protest was also interviewed in Japanese and English. Figure 1 is the newspaper article and accompanying photograph, which shows us next to the Japanese banner held by the plaintiffs and a few protesters.
I was – and yet I was asked firstly where I was from, and secondly what I thought of the case. Given my lack of knowledge I was reluctant and embarrassed to be singled out, but Ohara-san and others in the group were encouraging, telling me that “Japan is easily influenced by outside” (Nihon wa gaiatsu ni yowai). Implicitly, I was there to represent the outside world, and my judgment on the situation was assumed to be a gloss for a critical international (perhaps Western) view of gender inequality in Japan.

In this case the complex and sometimes contradictory details of self are masked by the magnification of a few aspects. My politics in this case were reduced to my nationality and my sex, and while I felt uncomfortable as a representative of the group, speaking either for “the world” or for “Japanese women”, I also felt bound to help the group in the ways they wanted, for as Roberts notes, in fieldwork “reciprocity goes hand in hand with the process of getting along” (2003:311).

This “researcher/researched” binary had a different import again in the women’s studies group Benkyō. The young women in this group had all studied gender studies at tertiary level, and three of the group intended to train further to pursue careers in feminist counselling. They had come together to form a “gender studies group” in their own time, and were a highly self-motivated and critical group of young women. After my first meeting with this group, I wrote that I looked forward to the next meeting because in this group, “I’m not expected to be the gender / women’s studies expert – everyone has experience, and probably more than me” (Fieldnotes 26/11/00). From these women, and as a student, I learned much about feminist psychology, Japanese approaches to domestic abuse and the possibilities and strategies for negotiating work, study and relationships with a feminist consciousness.
Still, when discussing questions of feminist theory, I found that my position as group member conflicted with my intentions as researcher. Before conducting official interviews, I often spoke in the group about ideas of feminism, about what I believed feminism to be and the connotations of the word “feminist” as I perceived them. We discussed the idea of feminist backlash (bakkurashu), and other concepts from the translated English books the group read. To move from these discussions to interviews in which I asked the question “What do you think feminism means?” (which at that time was central to my research), felt extremely un-academic and inappropriate. As a group member I wanted and was expected to be involved in these discussions, but as a researcher I wanted a “pure” source of subjects.

This dilemma was magnified for me in the Japanese/foreigners group WWW. The group was in a constant state of flux during my fieldwork, with foreign members leaving the country, power plays between remaining members and the constant threat of rift or collapse. Members of WWW spent a great deal of time discussing what its role should be, what stance it should take on issues such as pornography, whether the group should be more visible and whether it was after all a discussion group or an action group. Throughout this, I maintained my attachment to the group in the name of research. While my personal interest and energy were waning, I was selfishly determined to retain a hold on “my subjects”. The group was listed in local magazines and directories with my name and number as contact details; I organised meetings and contacted absent members and wrote minutes for the meetings. At times it felt very much as if I had become the group I was studying, and I wondered if there were any academic value at all to the field notes I attempted to keep. The “researcher” was very much submerged, not only by the “researched”, but by the connections formed outside
group meetings, with group members and subjects who happened also to have become close friends.

In hindsight, I see these dilemmas as inevitable and integral to the process of fieldwork within women’s groups. First, there is no way to be a part of a group without being a part of the group – in this context, observation is unnatural without participation. Second, social research needs to address conflict as well as conflict-resolution, and particularly in feminist research I see a need to explore the cracks, splinters and turbulence of women’s groups. Feminist research must address these micro conflicts if it is to critique the broader social problems intrinsic to gendered inequality, and, most importantly, if it is to offer the potential for re-evaluation and reform. Finally, these dilemmas are the real products of ethnographic engagement with women’s groups, and therefore reflect the complexity of organisations founded on human relationships, and what Hume and Mulcock describe as the “awkward and uncomfortable nature of …fieldwork relations” (Hume and Mulcock 2004:xi).

When I expressed fear of being over-involved in WWW, I was reminded by Akagi-san that, “if people don’t move it, the group is just like a car without tyres”. As my engagement with my “subjects” was inextricable, I am therefore bound to identify myself at least as much as any other subject in my thesis. Further, the ambiguity that such an inclusion of self engenders in a study is inherent to social research, which addresses “the contradictory, inconsistent, conflictual, as well as positive emotional affinity shifts that occur over time and place” (Chalmers 2002:11).

Sites of study
The groups and organisations examined in this thesis are diverse in structure, size and function. The three women's groups examined, Women's Projects, WWW, and Benkyō, are non-government organisations (NGOs), though none have applied for official status as such under the law. Of these groups, only Women's Projects currently requires membership fees, which fund the production and publication of the group's magazine.4 The magazine has about 600 subscribers globally, but only seven to ten members regularly attend the weekly meetings, which comprise English language study and discussion, shared lunch and magazine-related work. Women's Projects is run out of the Kyoto home of its founder Tanaka Mariko, and is the only group with a long-term membership record and website. Almost all regular members are married and aged from their late 30s to early 50s, and of the married women, all but two have children (See Table 1.2).

WWW was established in 1998 as the sister-group (for non-Japanese women, but with Japanese members affiliated) of Working Women's Network, a Japanese group supporting plaintiffs in sexual discrimination lawsuits. The group's membership base shifts regularly, with non-Japanese members leaving the country and both Japanese and non-Japanese members dropping out of the group. WWW has a contact list that includes past members no longer living in Japan, but tends to attract only six to eight members to monthly meetings, generally held in cafés in Kyoto. Members are aged from their early 20s to early 60s. Most members are single, either divorced or never-married (See Table 1.4).

Benkyō comprises five members in their 20s, and was established as a gender-studies

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4 WWW had the practice of collecting a participation fee from members at each meeting. This money was placed in a kitty, for future projects. However, the practice was questioned by some members and after some debate about the amount that should be charged, fee collection was ultimately abolished.
group in 1999. The group meets monthly over dinner in a Kyoto fast-food restaurant, to discuss lectures, seminars and other gender-studies related events in which members have participated over the month. Three of the five Benkyō members aspire to a career in counselling, with an explicitly feminist approach. Another member, not present during the period I attended, works as an advocate at an NPO (non-profit organisation) targeting domestic violence. All but one member of the group are single (See Table 1.3).

The Prefectural Women’s Centre, popularly known as The Spring Centre, was established in 1994, after 10 years of campaigning and planning by the women of the prefecture, and particularly those involved in women’s groups such as Network Kansai. The centre is funded and administered by the Prefectural Gender Equality Foundation, established by the Prefectural Government in 1994, with the aim of “achieving a gender equal society in which women and men can cooperate in every field to create a more humane life” (Spring 1997:12).

Kitahara Minori and Haruka Yōko are contemporary Japanese feminists. Haruka is a TV personality and writer, while Kitahara is a business woman, writer and advocate for women’s erotica. Kitahara is also founder of the online and real-space women’s sex-goods store, the Love Piece Club. Both women are based in Tokyo, and both have published books on gender and feminism, as well as regular magazine or newspaper columns on related themes.

All but one of the women’s organisations (groups, centres and sex-goods shop) are located in Kansai (western Japan), and can be classified as urban in location if not breadth of field. The Tokyo-based organisation Love Piece Club can be seen as urban-based, though the centrality of its online-shopping and website services enable a greater
transcendence of boundaries. Similarly, while Women’s Projects is based in Kyoto, the newsletter is distributed to 87 countries worldwide and the founder and leader Tanaka Mariko has travelled widely overseas, and gives lectures throughout Japan. WWW (at the time of study) included Australians, New Zealanders and Americans, as well as Japanese members, but its members were generally well-travelled and interested in international issues and societies beyond their own.

I emphasise that the women’s groups, centres and businesses that I visited and engaged with are not intended to be taken as a representative or random sample of women’s organisations in Japan. They are quite explicitly non-random, and the overlap between groups is significant not only to my study and its findings, but to the way that these organisations continue to operate and evolve. All of the groups and activists can be linked via one or more individuals, and these connections, formed before my own entry into the field, in turn shaped my location within the groups. The nexus of the groups included in this study is therefore greater than the study or its coordinator, and the mutual familiarity (if not collaboration) of groups and individuals suggests that the function and potential of women’s organisation extends beyond the boundaries of set meeting times, official policy and organised activity.

I was introduced to the Spring Centre by one of its employees, who was also a founding member of Benkyō. I was introduced to Women’s Projects by Akagi-san, also a member of WWW and a regular user of the Spring Centre’s information library (where she was later employed briefly as a part-time worker). The Love Piece Club and Kitahara’s writings were discussed in Benkyō meetings, and I received my first of Kitahara’s books from a postgraduate colleague at Ritsumeikan University, where I was based. Haruka Yōko’s best-selling book, Tōdai de Ueno Chizuko ni kenka wo manabu
(Learning to Fight At Tōdai with Ueno Chizuko), was recommended by the same colleague, and Kitahara and Haruka have collaborated in written projects including the book, *Femi no Kirawarekata* (The Ways Feminists Are Hated). These links between groups and individuals can be seen firstly as evidence of an existing "feminist community", comprising those interested in and critically engaged with women’s issues in contemporary Japan. However, the linkages may also be understood as illustration of the ways that fieldwork creates a web within which the researcher constructs his/her conceptualisations of the field, and thereby shaping the world of the research. As Bestor observes, such network choices guide the research project by determining the perspective of questioning (2003:321).

Study of the women’s groups and women’s centres was conducted through interviews, observation and participation, as well as the survey of group literature where available. I interviewed members of groups and staff of women’s centres during meetings or at specially organised times, in their home or at a café or restaurant. Discussion with women’s centre staff tended to be less personal and more focused on workplace issues than those conducted with women’s group members, to whom I asked specific questions of personal experience. Even in the former group however, the interviewees often disclosed relatively personal details and life experiences relating to womanhood and femininity. Such disclosure tended to illustrate the paths by which women develop a critical awareness of gender and the ways that this awareness informs choices in work, family and social life.

In contrast with my participant observation of groups and my internship at the Spring Centre, interviews represented a clearly demarcated section of fieldwork time, marked by the start and stop of a tape-recorder and each featuring a similar set of questions and
discussion. However, increasingly over the two year period I found "the field following me home", as my social (informal) interactions with groups members became more frequent (Muir 2004:195). I took notes on conversations with members that occurred during and outside meetings, and which I considered illuminating or significant to my research. These exchanges often flowed from more general conversation, appearing during social gatherings in spaces such as cafes and pubs, and also, frequently, in train stations and on trains at the end of such gatherings, but reflect the "inevitable slippages between language, assertion, contestation and avowed knowledge through long-term observation" (Weiner 1995:6). The value of these exchanges in terms of fieldwork cannot be denied, for it was in these conversations that I clarified, queried and built on information obtained and observations made during formal meetings. However, like Muir I found this uncomfortably close to spying, and my notes on these conversations are less comprehensive than those made during meetings and formal events (2004:196).

Organisation of the thesis

The thesis is divided into three sections, comprising two or three chapters each. The first section aims firstly to address the inadequacies – in breadth and perspective – of literature on feminism in Other (namely Asian) societies. In Chapter Two I analyse aspects of women’s movements and feminisms in Singapore and India, and survey the history of feminism in Japan, focusing on contemporary developments. By placing feminist organising in its specific historic, economic and cultural context, I argue that aversion to the term "feminist" does not preclude feminist praxis, or the promotion of feminist agency. Furthermore, women’s engagement with organisations such as women’s groups need not be bound to an explicitly feminist agenda in order to effect positive "feminist" impact. In Chapter Three I survey Japanese ideals and expectations
of femininity and the family, delineating the broad patterns of change and development of the last century, and particularly since the end of World War II. This chapter explores the impacts of feminist organisation and activism on Japanese women's lives.

Section Two examines the functions and relationships of government and non-government groups addressing women's issues. Developing the theme of agency in women's lives, in Chapter Four I analyse three Kansai-based non-government women's groups, focusing on the outcomes of women's participation, and members' perceptions of the groups' explicit and implicit functions. I argue that non-government women's groups operate to create space for women and women's issues, and offer potential for critique, resistance and activism, as well as companionship and support. This potential reflects and promotes feminist praxis among women who might otherwise avoid political engagement with gender issues.

Chapter Five examines government-run women's centres in Japan. Intertwined with the work of women's groups, government women's centres promote and implement official and legislative reform on issues of gender inequality. While non-government women's groups encourage reform at the personal (particularly familial) level, government-funded women's centres in Japan implement official gender reform policies with the aim of promoting broader social and structural change. In light of current demographic trends, particularly low marriage and fertility rates and the ageing of the population, changes in women's lifestyle and life-cycle represent change in wider social constructions of the family, and of ideals of gendered maturity. Government women's centres address the implications of women's issues, working within and sometimes beyond official (legislative and bureaucratic) guidelines on family, reproduction and gender roles.
In Chapter Six I address the Law for a Gender-Equal Society (*Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shakai Kihonhō*) as a case study of official legislative reform, and of the potential impact of such legislation on women's lives. I argue that the potential success of the Law is linked to the language of gender harmony in which it is couched and promoted. However this language also detracts from the Law's effectiveness, and reinforces heterosexist ideals of the family. While the Law represents attempts by women's groups and the Japanese government to redress gender inequality in society, its potential as a tool for women's empowerment is limited by its language, scope and application at prefectural and local government levels.

The third section examines the work of two contemporary Japanese feminists, Kitahara Minori (as founder of the Love Piece Club) and Haruka Yōko, as possible models for future feminist development, and introduces a critical analysis of agency in the “parasite single” phenomenon. Chapter Seven introduces Kitahara Minori and the Love Piece Club, an online and Tokyo-based sex-goods shop for women. This chapter explores the possibilities for women's agency inherent in the creation of a space for feminist erotica. I argue that promotion of women's sexuality as symbiotic with feminism extends the possibilities for feminist consciousness among women, and particularly among women who may not otherwise be engaged in feminist politics.

In Chapter Eight I explore the written work of TV personality and writer Haruka Yōko, who entered the feminist spotlight after studying gender theory at Tokyo University and publishing a book about her experiences, entitled *Tōdai de Ueno Chizuko ni kenka wo manabu* (Learning to Fight at Tokyo University with Ueno Chizuko). In her most recent work, Haruka proposes a new model for feminist living which seeks to solve some of the conflicts and issues raised in earlier works. Straddling radical and liberal feminist
approaches, Haruka’s popularly appealing critique points to new directions in the ongoing development of feminist discourse in Japan.

Chapter Nine focuses on the phenomenon of parasite singlehood, its perceived causes and impacts, and the relevance of the notion of agency for its elucidation. Phenomena such as parasite singlehood challenge social constructs of feminine maturity, drawing into relief the centrality of heterosexist ideals of reproduction and family. Reading parasite singlehood as an expression of agency, however, does not imply a uniform or universal resistance to these ideals, but reflects the diverse, intertwined and dynamic expectations which shape women’s lives and lifestyles.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of the relationship between agency and praxis, and of the role of women’s groups, women’s centres and individuals in the promotion and development of future feminisms. While many women’s groups and centres work to promote women’s collective empowerment, other sites develop feminist praxis through focus on individual resistance to mainstream heterosexist gender ideals, and the promotion of agency through education and discussion. The work of individual activists as well as women’s organisations, promotes real and potential change to gender roles and expectations among Japanese women. It is on the foundational inclusiveness of such feminist engagement that future Japanese feminisms and women’s organisations will be formed and future gender inequalities addressed.
CHAPTER TWO

Diversity, Inclusiveness and Agency in Feminist Discourse

Japan: On the intersection of (imaginary) borders

In planning a survey of feminist literature for this thesis, I decided to start by addressing the gap I first discovered some years ago, when looking for discussion of Japanese women in English-language textbooks of general feminist theory. Located somewhere at the junction of First/Third World and East/West binaries, Japan is not easily placed in standard categories of Other — post-colonial, socialist or post-socialist, or “developing nation”. Straddling the divide between what Caplan calls “the imperialising Subject and the colonised Other” (1991:321), Japan can thus be seen as the site of a selective and specific blurring of binaries, and as such represents a challenge to those frameworks — feminist included — founded on the constructs of Similarity and Difference.

The literature of borderlands has reflected on the deterritorialising and transformative potential of the border, and on the lives — “bilingual, bicultural, biconceptual reality” — lived by border-crossers (Hicks 1991:xxv; Alarçon 1996; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996). Borders can be seen as “zones of interchange, interdefinition, and mutual contamination as much as lines of separation” (Jackson 2003:3). Borderlands offer new perspectives on the conceptualisation of lived experience, and suggest new frameworks within which the past, present and future may be (re-)viewed and resisted (Hicks 1991:xxxi; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:15). Reflecting a space of resistance against the cultural and economic hegemony of the West (or the First World), the borderlands perspective offers a new framework with which to understand Asian (or Third World) feminisms.5

5 In this chapter “West” and “west” are used with different import. The former is intended to acknowledge the binary through which the “East” (and “Asia”, and “Japan”) has historically been
However, Japanese experiences of borderlands are complicated by the historically specific fluidity that renders them variously—and simultaneously—majority and minority expressions. That is to say, the borders of Japan-in-Asia offer different perspectives of power to those of Japan-in-the-West, and both perspectives reflect the socio-political negotiations of the moment. Constructions of “Japanese” womanhood must therefore be understood as embedded in specific relational contexts that reflect international relations (including wars and globalisation) as much as domestic social trends. A study of women and women’s experiences in Japan thus evokes the various “figure(s) of difference”, including but not limited to, those which mark women from men, Japanese from Asian and Japanese from Western (Caplan 1991:315).6

Where to place Japan (and its feminisms) in the world is therefore a contentious issue. Jayawardena’s (1986) inclusion of Japan in her historical study of feminism and nationalism in the Third World is premised on the Japanese experience of the “economic power of Western imperialism”, depicting Japan’s subsequent industrialisation and modernisation as an archetype of (Asian) development (1986:7). To this end she quotes Nehru’s declaration that Japan was “the representative of Asia battling Western aggression” (Nehru 1949:440-4, as quoted in Jayawardena 1986:7). From the historical and political perspective of some Asian nations struggling with Western imperialist colonial legacies, Japan can be constructed as Other to the West.

6 It is therefore imperative to avoid conflating the experiences of ethnic Japanese women with women Othered by Japanese society, such as Anglo-American women, Filipina women or zainichi (long-term resident) Korean women in Japan.

defined (Said 1978). The latter refers to that part of the world that is neither “Asia” nor “Africa”, including Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, which articulate this binary in discourse with political, cultural and economic Others from Asia and Africa. The intrinsic difficulties of both terms, particularly in essentialising and collapsing differences, are acknowledged and discussed below.
Post-colonialism offers a possible starting point for discussing Other feminisms, illuminating the relationships between Empire and Subject(ed), and state and society. However, this division fails to fully incorporate states such as Japan, which has experience as both Imperial power and Subject. Jayawardena argues that Japan, like countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, was “subjected to aggression and domination by imperialist powers interested in establishing themselves in the region, or indirectly manipulated into serving the interests of imperialism” (1986:1). However, I argue that the Japanese experience of such “indirect colonialism” is not comparable with, for example, that of India, and furthermore that the implications of Japanese imperialism are more manifest, if not more significant, than its experiences of colonialism.7

It is critical to recognise that Otherness is multifaceted, and the face seen depends on the viewer’s place in the spectrum of domination and marginalisation (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:4). Nehru’s (recalled) declaration was made at a time when Japan promoted itself as Asia’s alternative to the West, ostensibly as an ally but ultimately and essentially as a colonial power. The Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere was promoted by the Japanese as a means to strengthen the alliance of East and Southeast Asian nations, to be orchestrated under the political and economic ‘guidance’ of the Japanese (Beasley 1963:259). From the point of view of those who would promote Japan’s dominance in Asia, the promotion of Japan-as-Asian subsumes the diversity of Otherness, presenting instead the face of an homogeneous Other to fit the strategic binary of Asia/West. The diversity encapsulated within the “Asia” half of the binary was significant to those (non-Japanese) Asians whose interests were marginal to the mainstream, and from their position(s) we see the face of Japan-as-Other to Asia.

7 A further limitation of Jayawardena’s categorisation is the non-reflexive conflation of “Third World” with “Asian”, clearly excluding other countries of the “South”, in South America and Africa.
The Otherness of Japan to Asia was reinforced by the Japanese campaign of colonisation and militarisation in China, Taiwan, Korea and Southeast Asia – Singapore, Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines. From the perspective of nations, Japan was one of the colonising forces in reaction to which nationalist endeavours were organised. Issues relating to the conditions of Japanese presence have in turn shaped the direction of feminist development in these colonial and postcolonial societies, and have created grounds for coalition between women’s rights activists and newer, postcolonial states. In this sense then, Japan is the dominant and colonising force which Others the indigenous society. In this context, issues such as the (official) recognition of Korean “comfort women” and the legal rights of Filipina workers in Japan are rendered national, constructed in the language of international negotiation but embedded in nationalist discourse.

The unrivalled economic growth of post-war Japan, and its subsequent status as the leader of modernisation in Asia have further complicated the position of Japan and the Japanese vis-à-vis other Other (particularly Asian) countries and peoples. As in the case of Singapore, the achievement of First-World economic and living standards marks Japan as outside of “Asia”, as that term is interpreted as synonymous with “Third World” and therefore “poverty”. Of further consideration are shifting perceptions of Japan among Southeast Asian nations, related to regional security and political developments, as well as Japan’s industrial and economic presence in the region (Singh 2002:295). Historically the term “Ajia” (Asia) has operated in Japan to differentiate (geographically, culturally and politically) Japan from its closest neighbours. “Ajia” as defined in Japan refers to a geographical area including East, North and Southern Asia (as well as Southeast Asia) and extending to Iran and Iraq (Suehiro 1999:153). While
“Ajia” had been in use since the Tokugawa period, it was replaced in the Meiji era with the term Tōyō (eastern ocean), a matching partner for Seiyō (literally, western ocean). The binary of Tōyō/Seiyō represented an East/West divide at a time when the Japanese government equated modernisation with westernisation, and aimed to incorporate wakon yōsai, or “Western knowledge/science, Japanese spirit” (Wakabayashi 1986:39). With the rise in expansionism in the late 1930s and early 40s, however, both Ajia and Tōyō were neglected in favour of the imperialistic Greater East Asia (Dai Tōa) concept (Suehiro 1999:154).

“Ajia” in contemporary Japan popularly refers to the “exotic” Other of Southeast and continental Asia, and is as much a tool of merchandising as a description of geography. Use of “Ajia” in the promotion of products such as Indonesian batik, Thai jewellery and Vietnamese ao dai dresses targets the increasingly well-travelled Japanese youth market, and blanks out the historically colonialist import of the term. It is because of the various imports of these terms that neither Tōyō nor Ajia fully explains the position of Japan in relation to Asia and the west. Invoked at different times to include or exclude, the (culturally-based) distinction between “Westerners” (Seiyō-jin) and “Easterners” (Tōyō-jin) — into which the Japanese fit — resists the construction of a perfect binary. Japan can claim Otherness or Sameness, but for the West the latter will always and only ever be a partially-accepted claim.

The limited Sameness of Others (in this case, Japanese) in the West is crystallised in the experiences of diaspora communities. For people living in these communities, identification with the mainstream is compromised by the differences which flow from

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8 I have also heard people in Japan described as “Ajia-ppoi” (Asianish) in features, implying the existence of a distinctively “Japanese” face, with which the generic “Asian” features can be contrasted.
dual obligations to present and past “homes” (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:14). For Japanese in the U.S, differences can translate to invisibility, or to hyper-visibility, as a caricatured sketch in mainstream surveys (Kondo 1996:98). The conflation of “Japanese” (or “Chinese, or “Korean”) with “Asian”, and of “Asian” with “Asian-American” suggests that even within the Other(s), strands of difference can be teased out and separated. The re-rendering of “Orientals” as “Asian-Americans” reflects what Kondo calls the “historical specific and politically constructed identity”, marking Others from Sameness and imbuing the diaspora with ambivalence (Kondo 1996:98).

From a Western perspective, the experiences of diaspora Japanese draw a complex compromise between difference/sameness, or exclusion/inclusion relative to the white Anglo mainstream.9 Alexander and Mohanty suggest that in white society women of colour – that is, women who are neither white nor African-American – are “less threatening” than African-American women, because their Otherness can be read as “foreignness” rather than racialised difference (1997:xv). This conceptualisation can be extended to include Japanese women in the west, for whom “foreignness” takes precedence over racialisation. Japanese women (and men) are thus allowed a qualified inclusion, a kind of “honorary whiteness”, extended by the west to a selective (educated, elite, English-speaking) group.10 The picture is further nuanced in a settler society such as Australia, where indigeneity may be more threatening than “blackness” in the U.S, and where geography has encouraged the (settler population’s) historical discourses of “Asia” as neighbour/invader.

9 The term “Anglo” in this chapter denotes both Anglophone (English-speaking or English-language) and Anglocentric (derived from and/or focused on English), particularly but not exclusively referring to Britain and North America. While the term obscures difference within those societies, it is also intended as an alternative to “Western”. See below for a further discussion of the problematic nature of terms.

10 This designation has also been adopted in reference to (non-diaspora) Japanese, most notably by the South African government in their categorisation of the Japanese as “‘honorary whites’…a designation which permitted them to access to all white areas, housing and cultural activities, and allowed them to engage freely in business” (Payne 1987:168-9).
The ambiguity of Japanese location in a binary-bound East/West framework is crystallised in the discussion of women’s issues. It is at this intersection of Othered/Othering identities that analysis is most vexed by rigidity, and therefore demanding of a flexible and self-conscious approach. A flexible approach is that which follows the jagged and shifting lines between fractured binaries, as it is in such places that Third World and Other feminisms have developed and flourished. It is with this approach in mind that I preface my study of Japanese women’s groups, women’s centres and feminist agency with a brief examination of the foundations and discourse of Other (Third World, Asian) feminisms.

Addressing a silence

(F)eminism is a politics as much as it is an epistemology – where questions of representation must deal with who speaks for whom, along with what is being said (John 1996:19).

The inclusion of a survey of comparative feminisms in this research aims to address a silence that historically underpinned women’s studies and feminist research on and in the West. This silence could be seen to have worked both implicitly and explicitly to centralise the West in feminist discourse. Implicitly, Western feminism has needed to subsume the diversity of the non-Western Other in order to promote the universal “woman” as defined in relation to the (universal) “man”. More explicitly, Western feminists have fought for rights and freedoms that are tied to very specific social, political, religious and ethnic loci, and which may only be desired or enjoyed by women.
inhabiting those loci. An Australian example is national suffrage, achieved by and for white women in 1902, but not for indigenous women (or men) until 1967.  

The silence referred to holds the experiences of women located — geographically, linguistically and culturally — outside the Anglo-phone and Anglo-based centre of feminist theory, in Third World, indigenous and Other societies. In feminist studies, as in art, it is the Other woman who knows what the West is doing, not vice versa (Clarke 2002:2). What is missing is not simply knowledge of the Other within the West, but also knowledge and referral of non-West to non-West – the Other always reinforces its own inferiority by reference to the West and not to other peripheries (Jackson 2000:951; Jackson 2003). In this way, the West maintains its central presence in absentia, and feminism may retain the implicit and derogatory “Western” tag that is identified both in local conservative criticism and western feminist discourse on Third World women (Jayawardena 1986:2).

In order to address this silence, it is first necessary to examine the ways in which women have been excluded – the terms by which feminists in the West know what they do of others’ experiences, and the way that these terms (Third World, developing nations) have masked similarities and diversities within the groups encompassed. When discussing this theoretical framework I use the plural word “feminisms” to further signify the diversity of women’s experiences, the particularities of which shape the needs and demands addressed by feminist organising. The term establishes heterogeneity definitively, implies historical reflexiveness and resists nostalgia (Miller 1999:225). Having examined the framework of the discourse, I survey Third World

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11 I refer in this case to the right to vote at Commonwealth level. The dates on which state and local suffrage were granted in Australia, as in other nations, vary between states. In South Australia, Aboriginal men of eligible age were entitled, as were all citizens of suitable age, to vote in lower house elections from 1894 (Crowley 2001:1; Tarrant 1996:58)

12 Clarke is referring to Asia in this context, but I have extended the argument to the broader “Other”.

13 My thanks go to Lyn Parker for her insights on this point.
feminisms in brief, identifying the issues which have been addressed and emphasised in feminist theory from outside the West. Most significant among these is the need for self-reflexivity and blurring of categorical borders (such as First/Third World, subject/object, ‘race’/gender), to address the fragility of borders which have often limited Western feminist theorising. I then focus on two specific case studies – India and Singapore. I address problems related to the term “feminism” and feminist identification in non-Anglo/non-Western societies, locating resistance in the specific historical experiences of the West in colonised and Othered societies. On this point I aim also to acknowledge the voices of those theorists who reject the West/Other binary, and who criticise conflations of westernisation and feminism. Finally, I explore agency as an aspect of feminist praxis and a concept, like feminism, that can be re-conceptualised to encompass the breadth of women’s experiences and the specific conditions of its development.

Third World, “developing nations” and Other places

Bulbeck writes that “Third world is a category produced and reproduced by capitalist imperialism, referred to in the oppositions between industrialised north and developing south, or core and periphery” (1998:35). Structured around dichotomies, the term is therefore a brittle support for feminist analysis which emphasises blurred borders and overlapping oppressions.

Any discussion of women’s experiences or feminisms has the potential to replicate the historical hegemony of colonisation and imperial exploitation. To place Black women’s studies, Third World feminism or Japanese women’s experiences at the forefront of a discussion may mean to realign the (white) focus of the analytical lens. Yet it may also
create a false foundation, on which all women’s experiences are equally footed and able to engage independently (Ram 1991). While neither “Third World” nor its binary “First World” represent homogeneous, self-contained or concrete entities, discussion of the material relationships and differences between the various groups necessitates some (artificial) nomenclature (Ram 1991:92; Jackson 2003b:39).

I use the term “Third World” with some reservation, noting the diversity within and between individual societies encompassed by these terms and the implicit distancing of my own location from these (Papanek 1993:596). Alternative terms such as “developing nations, or “the South” are similarly problematic, evoking a static and dichotomised world-view untenable to my theorising. “Developing” countries may be marked, as suggested by Rajan, by “the severe inequities in class, caste, community and gender relations which generate the endemic violence of their social structures” (Rajan 1993:6). However, a similar definition could easily be applied to “developed” countries such as Australia and the United States, particularly when the focus is trained to indigenous, migrant and otherwise marginalised communities within those countries. Furthermore, “developing”, implies a society which has not attained maturity, lagging behind the “developed” nations – by no coincidence those which devised the development scale that places them at the fore. Furthermore, some feminist scholars have argued that the white exclusiveness within “the West” effects a division which leaves non-white (namely Black and coloured) women closer to the “Third World” (Moraga 1983; Anzaldua 1983). Similarities between women of colour, in experiences of marginality and feminist agendas, mean that the Third World can be located within the First World, exploding the concrete geographical binary of Us and Them. As Mohanty argues, the term “Third World” is defined in terms of “geographical location as well as particular sociohistorical conjunctures” (1991:2).
Despite these limitations, the use of "Third World" and "Other" in this thesis on Japan is intended to contribute to the overall aim of identifying and exploring difference and its impacts within established boundaries of similitude – namely, within western feminist discourse. While feminist agency and praxis in Japan may be dissimilar to the agency and praxis of India, it is also (and in different ways) dissimilar to that experienced in Australia or the United Kingdom. In identifying this common difference, I emphasise that it is not my aim to obscure the differences between cultural and social systems in order to privilege difference within a single locale (that is, Japan) (Jackson 2003b:45). In this sense there is consciousness in the use of terms such as "Asia" and "West", which ineluctably "sweep away differences" within while highlighting differences between (Parker 2005:16). However, what is of interest here is not how Japan is similar or different to India, but rather that both Japan and India are constructed as Different to the West, and that this Difference in the context of feminism can be understood as both reflective and productive of broader social discourses. It is with these limitations always in mind that I follow the example of feminist writers such as Jayawardena in using the term "Third World" as a gloss for the general socio-economic and political conditions that effect differences (both material and perceived or symbolic) between women in countries such as the U.S or Australia and Bolivia or Vietnam.

Similarly, I use the terms "white," "western" and "Anglo-based" out of a similar dissatisfaction with the available alternatives. I am reluctant to use "Euro-American" and "North", largely as these exclude those (myself included) born in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa – and yet I recognise the similarity of experiences and perspectives shared by many women from these societies vis-à-vis women from Asian, African and Latin American societies. Where "West" rather than "west" is used, it
refers the historically specific (if imaginary) economic, cultural and political body constructed against and through the "East", and to the collective discourse of nations involved in this construction, explicitly and implicitly, through colonisation and Orientalism (Said 1978).

Finally, I employ the word "Other" throughout this thesis with an awareness of its homogenising potential. What specifically does "Other" refer to, for example, in the case of a queer Japanese woman living in the U.S? Which aspect of difference is the primary ground for "Otherness" and can the term accommodate double or triple burdens of difference? I therefore adopt "Other" as a reflexive and dynamic term, dependant on the social, historical and political context of the subject, as well as on my own location and relationship to my research. My frustration with these labels grounds the construction of this thesis. I thus proceed conscious of the need to extend analysis beyond binaries and constructed dualisms, whilst at the same time acknowledging the concrete and symbolic impact of such imagined borders.

**Third World Feminisms: A survey of Others**

Jayawardena identifies subjection to imperialist aggression (indirect or direct) as one common characteristic of Third World societies (1986:1). The implications of this are broad, framing operation of the state and economy and therefore impacting the organisation of feminist development. At a primary level this aggression is directly linked to the rise of nationalism and nation-building movements, in which the state was constructed, and construed, in opposition to the colonising forces.
Imbricated in this construction are discourses of religion, tradition and culture, underwriting anti-colonial/pro-nationalist policy, whilst at the same time producing multiple and subversive readings of the state's development. Through colonialism and related processes such as modernisation, the nature and meaning of women's roles changed. In particular, understandings of maternity and marriage, of childbirth, childrearing and household work were transformed in many places by the implications of anti-imperialist and/or nationalist struggle (Abu-Lughod 1998; Ram and Jolly 1998). Parallel to this process, where national identities are constructed on masculinist, militaristic terms, women's productive and reproductive roles are simultaneously obscured and harnessed (Choi 1998:20). The adaptability of culture and tradition features strongly in the development of feminism in countries which fall into the Third World category.

In light of these complexities then, what exactly do social scholars mean by Third World feminisms? What are the foundations of feminist development in "developing countries", and are there identifiable similarities between women's experiences in geographically and culturally disparate societies? What are the specific issues identified through and in the struggles of women outside the theoretical centre of western feminism?

The exclusion of Third World/ Other feminisms from western feminist discussion has been particular visible in the (western) academy, where feminism itself has encountered a thorny reception. Where the white, western (male) institution has excluded women and women-centred perspectives, women's studies have often in turn excluded those with Other (and non-western-centred) perspectives. Thus opens a gap between those women privileged by the text of women's studies and those excluded from it. Studies of
Other (for example, non-English speaking) women have been separated from the mainstream of women’s studies, appearing as footnotes to the main text and re-casting artificial binaries between Us/Them, West/East, First/Third World (Alexander and Mohanty 1997:xvii; Russo 1991:303; Bulbeck 1998:4).

Calls for “global sisterhood” have aimed to address this gap, employing “sameness” as a premise for solidarity amongst women. Not surprisingly this strategy has been criticised by Other women – women of colour and Third World feminists particularly – for its essentialist overtones and reproduction of colonialism and hierarchy (Alexander and Mohanty 1997:xxviii). Centring the call to unity around the social and political demands of white, western women renders invisible the needs of women outside these domains, conferring normalcy and marginality respectively.

Charges of essentialism by women of colour against Anglo feminists have thus underwritten the drive towards an awareness of multiple discriminations and the risks implicit in universalisation of women’s experiences (hooks 1984; Minh-ha 1989, Spelman 1988, Collins 1990). Speaking in Other voices, women of colour have argued the limitations of Anglo-based feminism in theorising on the lives of women specifically and systematically excluded from Anglo society (Barrios de la Chungara in Davies 1983:41; Minh-ha 1989; Collins 1990; Mohanty 1991; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1993; Alexander and Mohanty 1997). These limitations relate to the culturally and historically specific conditions in which women live, and which resist collapsible definitions constructed outside these conditions. The varied and interwoven impacts of phenomena such as colonisation, genocide, nationalism and militarism contest the singular attention that western feminism gives to gender, because it is only within the nexus of these impacts that feminism can be formed. Challenging the hegemony of
white feminism means reviewing the theorisation of gender, in light of the positions of power held by the theorists (Alexander and Mohanty 1997:xvi).

Other feminisms have also pushed for self-reflexivity within western feminism, exposing the term “ethnic” as synonymous with non-Anglo, simultaneously reducing the diversity of the Other and projecting the homogeneity of the “West”. Ong describes western feminism as “an oppositional subculture (that) requires an Other with whom it does not share experience”.14 Western feminism can thus be accused of adopting an Orientalist attitude towards Asian and Third World women, in which difference (read: exoticness) produces only cursory relevance to a white, English-speaking, western feminist monolith. Furthermore, normalising “white” does not simply marginalise “black” – it also fails to acknowledge the meanings of colour in between, and the meanings of being white or black vis-à-vis “historical legacy, political context, class and generation” (Afshar and Maynard 1994:2).

Looking to the west, we can see that indigenous women, diaspora women from (Other) non-western societies and other women of colour have questioned the “whiteness” of western writing (Bulbeck 1998:2). Acknowledging diversity within feminisms in Britain, Australia and North America is not uncovered ground. Indeed, the use of classic tripartite classification – radical, liberal and socialist/Marxist feminism – draws specific attention to the differences within white western feminisms. Thus the issue is not whether diversity exists, but rather why feminisms in these societies have not always structured their framework to address that diversity as it operates within western society, and in relation to the feminisms of women outside the west. This manifests both as the tendency to use non-western (especially Asian) societies as evidence of the

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14 http://humanities.ucsc.edu/CultStudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_3-4/aihwaong.html. Last accessed 16/03/06.
“universality” of Western theories, and as the failure to imagine Others as a site of theoretical innovation or production (Jackson 2000:951).15

Clearly within western feminism there is a need for re-evaluation of the borders by which we define ourselves as well as others. Distance is more than a matter of geography, and relational place – the interplay of social relation and locale – creates diversity of experience even within limited Cartesian spaces (McDowell 1999:5). As this diversity in turn influences women’s needs and perceptions, it is likely that multiple feminist approaches evolve. Within this context, and against a backdrop of class, political and economic power relations, it is predictable that “feminism” has come to be read by some as exclusively descriptive of one place. While this can be described as a “white, western” place, it may equally be described as “capitalist”, “heterosexual” and “Anglophile”, depending on the nature of its exclusiveness. Thus boundaries exist even within the “white, western” realm of feminism, although of a different form, structure and dimension to those that mark the frontiers. To assume the uniformity of western, Third World or eastern European feminism is to ignore the complexity of transnational discourse, in which “multiple versions of feminisms are present and where contradictions arise within as well as between groups defined by nationality” (Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2000:1158). Indeed, women from eastern Europe have distanced themselves from the word “feminism”, which they view as a “specifically western European view of women’s emancipation” (Sperling, Ferree, Risman 2000:1168).

The collapse of inter and intra-national diversity into a single rubric (be it “West” or “Third World”) is thus inherently problematic. Analyses which seek to address this by advocating a cultural relativist approach do not necessarily improve the situation, merely replacing a broad generic with a slightly narrower one, reifying culture through

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15 My thanks go to Lyn Parker for her astute observations in regards to this point.
what Narayan (2001) calls the "Package Picture of cultures". In this model, cultures are viewed as discrete and clearly defined packages, "having distinctive contents that differ from those of other 'cultural packages'" (Narayan 2000:1083). This approach has been adopted not only in academic work but also, and to greater practical effect, into popular and nationalist discourse (Handler 1996:32). Depicting certain cultural values, traditions and practices as static and independent of human (interactive) functioning, offers dangerous credence to colonialist discourses of "Western" and "Other cultures", applying Orientalist logic to justify domination and repression (2000:1083).

Furthermore, the "Package Picture of cultures" assumes that for each individual, culture, like a pigeonhole, can be decided easily and without complication (2001:1085). Thus, the model implies, all those living in Japanese society share (a single, homogeneous) Japanese culture, which can be clearly and precisely distinguished from other cultures. Interestingly, this statement is frequently validated in political and business spheres, as "Japanese culture" is reified in reference to management practices, government/private sector relations and labour trends (Clark 1977; Vogel 1979; Dale 1986) Transpose "Japan" with "Australia" or "America", however, and the universalising (il)logic becomes more obvious.

If Third World women can be represented by a single term (that is, "Third World"), and this term is critiqued as inadequate by those represented, likewise the rubric of the "West" must be the subject of western feminist deconstruction and critique. Such critical discourse should preface feminist texts produced by western writers, encouraging what Boellstorff calls a "reconfiguration of the grid of similitude and difference" (1999:480). In reconfiguration, the specifics of women's experiences are not only read in light of their differences, but also reviewed in terms of their similarity. In
this way diversity is woven into comparative analyses of “feminist organising, criticism, and self-reflection”, while still framing similarities of women’s experiences of marginality, invisibility and empowerment (Alexander and Mohanty 1997:xx).

The representation of culture as an independent entity obscures the historical, transnational processes (such as colonisation and industrialisation, with globalisation being the most obvious), which generated distinctly classifiable cultures, often where they did not previously exist (as in the cases of India and Indonesia, for example). The effects of these processes – dialogue, unequal trade and subjugation – on the feminisms of Asian and Third World societies are considerable, for it is largely through and in reaction to these that contemporary feminisms have developed and feminist agendas planned (Jayawardena 1986:10).

The development and growth of feminism amidst these intertwined discourses owes much to the particular nature and flexibility of women’s organising. The implementation of “strategic mantles” of feminism can thus be seen to characterise post-colonial and Third World feminisms, which negotiate the framework of critical discourse in conscious relation to the state (Heng 1997:34).

Subaltern reflections on multiple and forgotten voices of colonial societies introduce another significant thesis to the examination of Third World women’s experiences: namely, that class (and its accoutrements – including education, exposure and legitimacy) has added another filter to the already selective channelling of women’s voices, and particularly so in a colonialist discourse which privileged demonstrably “authentic” histories (Burton 1999:220). The inclusion of high-class or caste, highly-educated and wealthy women under the Third World rubric essentially complicates the
picture of Third World women and their experiences. In this way divisions arise between women within one society – known to the West as homogeneous – while class and wealth draw global connections. The “authenticity” of Third World experience is thus tied to the experience of a certain class, or perhaps a certain marginality, so that those beyond these classifications are rendered inauthentic. Reaction to this construction has paradoxically led to increased demand for demonstrable and verified “Otherness”, of concrete significance to women’s NGOs seeking international funding (Ford-Smith 1997:257; Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2001). Ford-Smith observes that international funding agencies have a tendency to romanticise grass-roots organisations, overlooking or excluding the work done by middle-class women’s groups (1997:257). This emphasis overlooks the complexity of the work done by NGOs, and obscures the processes by which gender and class may “reproduce the very conditions funding is supposed to alleviate” (Ford-Smith 1997:257).

Minh-Ha condemns this preoccupation with authenticity as a silencing tool of hegemony (1989). Proscribing the self-constructive speech of all but the “truly different”, firstly enforces the right of the west to construct the subject, as true or false, authentic or fake. “They...are in a position to decide what/who is ‘authentic’, and what/who is not” (1989:88). Controlling the channels and volume of Other’s (re)presentation also supports the centralisation of the west, rendering normal (and therefore invisible), the discourse infrastructure of cultural and political assumptions, ideals and customs.

In support of this unbalancing of discourse, Other women are obliged to explain and substantiate their feminisms, to deliver knowledge to the west as the centre of mainstream knowledge production (Minh-ha 1989:95). This burden should be shifted,
to reflect the de-centralisation of western feminism and to legitimise theory and activism produced outside the west. Thus, if dominant western versions of feminism are to accommodate Other women, the standards and objectives held universal to women must be reflexively constructed, contextualising rather than universalising women’s experiences of subordination.

**Translation**

Acknowledging this need for reflexiveness places certain demands upon me, as an Anglophone, Australian-based researcher of non-Anglo women. Most critical, I believe, is the need to recognise the highly subjective centre from which I approach this topic. Consequently I acknowledge that from the most fundamental level onward, a Japanese researcher working from an entirely different centre would obtain different results to my own (Bulbeck 1998:3). My real relationship with Japanese women and society and my intellectual or textual relationship with Japanese materials, create a bi-focal lens through which my work is filtered. Spivak notes that the first step in cultural translation is “learning (the) mother-tongue” of the women in focus, grounding cultural fluency in the concrete process of language (1992:189-190).

On an elementary level, this is particularly significant in my research, where attention is focused on the currency and operation of non-indigenous language and terms (such as “feminist” and “feminism”). On a deeper level however, Spivak refers to the critical consciousness of perspective demanded by ethnography and other works of cultural translation, in which the researcher’s voice filters the speaker’s words.
While I have learned and continue to learn the language of the women I engage, my understanding of their realities is limited by my own subjectivity as a non-Japanese. In this way, the process of linguistic translation (my questions, their responses, their actions and my observations) becomes a feedback loop by which I gain cultural fluency and facilitate further discussion. My language (in)ability affords me the room to ask for clarification — which a Japanese researcher may not receive — but then limits the translation I can produce from my non-Japanese background.

In this thesis I am not arguing for the privileging of Japanese perspective over non-Japanese, nor do I advocate reification of a single perspective as the “authentic” Japanese woman’s view. Discussions of who-may-speak-for-whom aside, there should be no ranking of “truth” to this assessment of subjectivity. It simply acknowledges the potential for different outcomes given different perspectives, reflecting that the view is largely dependant on the vantage point (Rupp 1999:191).

Translation is an issue of particular importance to those advocating or involved in international feminist organisation, in which English speakers are privileged and non-English speakers therefore silenced and/or spoken for (Hsiung and Wong 1999:140). As hooks suggests, the monopoly of English as a language of feminist discourse can be overcome by the learning of other languages, but the potential for Anglophone domination at international levels remains a significant issue, and one which demands the attention of (Anglophone) feminists (1986:56). While questions of representation extend this discussion, it is also worth noting that to allow fears of projection or universalism to silence all but “Third World Women” simply legitimates Western ethnocentrism, allowing western feminists’ theory to remain focused inward (Reinharz 1992:121).
Translation can therefore be described as critical to the development of inclusive feminist dialogue. Overcoming the gaps created by linguistic and economic/political privilege – an overlapping/intertwined hegemony – requires western feminists to move beyond the use of rigid terminology, and in doing so to recognise paradigms of feminist activism that may differ from their own (Hsiung and Wong 1999:130). As I discuss in Chapter Three, this recognition shapes the boundaries of "feminism", challenging the definition of who is "feminist", and also the understanding of "what feminists do". One significant aspect of this reconceptualisation is the recognition and celebration of difference within Difference – that is, diversity among groups already differentiated from the mainstream or main (western) focus of analysis. A survey of women's organisation and feminism in India illustrates the significance of this diversity, and the way in which historical context shapes contemporary views and practices of feminism.

India is a particularly useful example, as an Asian society (and therefore outside mainstream discussions of feminism), and also, in contrast to Japan and Singapore, as a "developing" or less economically prosperous society. A discussion of India therefore underscores the (overlapping) differences in categories such as "Asia", "feminism(s)" and "non-Western feminisms".

**Feminism and the Indian women's movement**

The Indian women's movement (IWM) developed in conjunction with the political push against imperialism and the social push for reforms of "traditional" (social, tribal) practices (Jayawardena 1986:76). As a project of social justice bound by "shared concepts of oppression and struggle", the IWM can be compared with women's movements in Other/Third World societies in both its aims and its limitations –namely,
geographical breadth, class and caste differences and the varying needs of local communities (Gandhi and Shah 1992:26). Gandhi and Shah characterise the IWM as “amorphous, multiclass, issue-oriented and sporadic” (1992:23). The description “multiclass” may reflect the collaborative work within women’s groups, but more likely refers to the multiple levels at which women’s organisations occur.

The dynamism and adaptability of the women’s movement can be traced to the volatile conditions of colonialism and post-colonialism, with which it formed specific alliances, while maintaining independence in its focus on women as women (Gandhi and Shah 1992:23). As Heng notes, anti-colonial nationalist movements have historically nurtured women’s movements in order to access the labour force of female supporters (1997:31). In this way, feminist issues such as reproductive rights, land reform and education remain enmeshed in the nationalist discourse, suggesting a sometimes uneasy connection between post-colonial state and feminist interests in India.

However, in resisting state control the IWM recognises that nationalist or state policy does manipulate women’s issues for its own benefit, and still embodies a potential threat to the operation of women’s movement collectives and activities. In this case vulnerability is the mother of invention, as the Indian women’s movement attempts to overcome caste and class differences by utilising grassroots networks to sidestep political authoritarianism, which could lead to the exclusion of women on political grounds.

The decentralisation of the women’s movement is acknowledged as a product of this and other complications, in particular the problem of communication (limited by low levels of literacy) and dissemination of information (due to limited resources and sheer
geographical inaccessibility) (Purushothaman 1998:343). These material restrictions have encouraged small scale and experimental networks and collectives, which focus on specific regional issues and organise towards the direct needs of local women (Gandhi and Shah 1992:26). This kind of organisation is exemplified in the Chipko movement of the 1970s, in which rural women dispossessed of land and economic means confronted the (male-dominated) local government, at the same time criticising men within their community for collaborating against the interests of women (Ganguly-Scrase 2000:92). In this case the women’s activism addressed a dual-layered hegemony of class and gender, typifying the problems faced by feminism in caste and class-divided India.

Narayan notes that Indian feminism has faced and refuted charges of “Westernisation”, or mimicry of western fads (1997:12). These charges have been laid not only within the conservative institutions of Indian society and academia, but also by western feminists, imposing ‘cultural authenticity’ as a yardstick for the value of feminist theory (Narayan 1997:20). Advocacy of feminism can therefore sound to certain conservative nationalist ears like advocacy of westernisation. This is a particularly dangerous proposition in light of (middle-class) women’s responsibilities as the “on-going bearers of ‘Indian tradition’” (John 1999:196). Such a reading may nonetheless be a useful corrective to the concept, not exclusively Indian or even Asian, of women as essentially “traditional” (Bulbeck 1998:30).

The conflation of westernisation and feminism discounts the existence of indigenous structures of subordination, causally linking one political process with the other. Narayan argues that the “selective labelling” and rejection of western theory or practice overshadows the interaction of the local and colonial structures, the hybrid of tradition and modernity which comprises the specific reality of women’s subordination (1997:23).
It is the genealogy and nature of this hybrid with which Indian feminism is concerned, as Karlekar observes, "(t)he quest for new realities is firmly rooted in women's experiences, and their expression of these" (1994:137).

One lens through which Indian feminism can be viewed is the concept of autonomy. Autonomy has been criticised as an essentially Western-centric idea, delimited by individualism and a focus on the self and individual capacities (Parker 2005:12; Strathern 1987i:24). However, Basu identifies female autonomy as a concept of increasing importance in Indian feminism, limited by factors such as custom (conditioning), the absence of material means of control and the authority of other individuals (1996:51). Implicit in the definition of autonomy as "the right to exercise of choice" is the qualification of freedom by these factors (Basu 1996:52). Women's autonomy in apparently trivial matters such as shopping or household expenditure, may reflect a deeper control over more significant matters such as fertility, and also indicates the levels at which autonomy can impact on women's daily lives (Basu 1996:57). It is also important to note that autonomy in this sense does not necessarily curtail fertility, but aims to inform the decisions affecting the number and frequency of pregnancies. The potential for control, informed by education and without unqualified dependence on other social actors, in this way represents the core of autonomy as sought by Indian feminisms.16

Women's capacity for agency through solidarity represents an aspect of Indian society drawn out by feminist analysis. Solidarity within organisations draws on women's shared experiences, but extends beyond gender hegemony to encompass other forms of

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16 I emphasise that the concept of autonomy here should be interpreted with reference to Parker's observations on agency: thus, given that all humans and their actions are in some ways socially bound, "pure" autonomy would necessitate a "denial of sociality" (2005:8). For this reason autonomy, like agency, incorporates a degree of implicit connectivity, while prioritising the relative independence of and capacity for an actor's self-determination.
oppression, and include people oppressed in other systems of power (Gandhi and Shah 1991:314). Chaki-Sircar argues that for the north-eastern Indian Meitei society, women's solidarity challenges socially-sanctioned male gender hegemony (1984:194). Collective power stems from the support of kinship networks as well as economic autonomy, and while women are agents of this process, exercise of power requires collaboration with men (Chaki-Sircar 1984:197). While women's organisations have represented spaces for fostering women's solidarity and may theoretically propose independence from men, in actual practice "no (Indian) women's group has so far denounced men or male organisations" (Gandhi and Shah 1991:310). Autonomy in this context, distinct from separatism, requires definition in relation to others and through processes of engagement with men, the state and institutions (Gandhi and Shah 1991:313).

Paradoxes of power and subordination infuse sociological analyses of Indian culture and feminism (Gold 1994:27). The furious power of female divinities in Hindu mythology is sharply contrasted with the subordination and systematic oppression of women (particularly the lower class majority) in reality. This paradox is problematised by feminist critiques which trace material discrimination to cosmology, linking the subordination of women to mythological or religious powerlessness.

Part of this contradiction may be rooted in western misinterpretations of "power" and gender definition in Indian culture (Gold 1994:27). Shakti, meaning power or feminine energy, is also the name of a goddess and is associated with creation (Chaki-Sircar 1984:194; Gold 1994:31). Given that one source of power is understood to be self-restraint and suffering (for which women are seen to have greater natural capacity), it is
not incongruous that the concept of *shakti* is associated with the feminine gender (Gold 1994:31).

Secondly, the ascription of certain values and ideals to gender roles is clearly culture-specific. Nandy argues that gender roles are more fluid in Indian society than in many western societies, so that men may appropriate "feminine" traits such as intuition and creativity (as in the case of ascetics or artists) (1988). Similarly, feminine identity can be adapted so as to integrate "the participation in what by western standards are manly activities" (Nandy 1988:79). These interpretations of the paradox between power and subordination de-emphasise the historical context within which the Indian women's movement expanded beyond the private and individual resistance of women, from "unconscious, solitary acts" to collective activism and organisation, on and off the political stage (Gandhi and Shah 1991:15).

Negotiating through the complex influences of nationalist and colonial discourse, the Indian women's movement has maintained its primary focus on women and the challenge to patriarchal hegemony (Ram 1998:624). Issues relating to education, gender roles and living conditions are examined outside the politicised binary of "tradition" and "modernity". Eschewal of this largely artificial dichotomy allows critical examination of indigenous and historical patriarchal practices, as well as hegemonic state policies. Ram notes, however, that as a "child of modernity" (like other feminisms), Indian feminism is more vocal in its criticism of the "traditional" than of contemporary patriarchal practices bred of India's colonial genealogy (1998:622). Nonetheless, the increased visibility of Indian feminism in the international women's studies arena, and the strengthening of transnational women's networks have drawn Indian women's
attention to the interplay of global, national and local issues and its effects on Indian women’s lives (John 1999:199).

The conceptualisation of women’s oppression reflects the diversity of opinion and approach within Indian feminism(s). Gandhi and Shah note that a common premise of all Indian women's movement groups is the acknowledgment of women’s oppression as socially constructed but ultimately dynamic (1991:40). Struggle against the social constructs of oppression for some groups entails the repudiation of capitalism, while others focus on elimination of custom such as dowry. The editors of popular women’s journal *Manushi*, founded in 1979, reject the construction of patriarchal authority within the family as a primary source of women’s oppression, and as a primary goal of the wider women’s movement.

...(T)he tradition of the benevolent patriarch who caringly and justly looks after the interests of every member of the family remains as prevalent and real as the tradition of the self-effacing and nurturant mother-figure (Kishwar and Vanita 1984:16).

This journal serves as a forum for women in which they can tell their own stories. The ideologies of the journal also reflect the concerns of “everyday” (lower class, rural) Indian women, and suggest that an emphasis on practical theory and inclusionary collectivism remain central to the aims of the Indian women’s movement.

The divergence of this model from an anti-patriarchal feminism suggests that not all women trace the source of their oppression to men or the traditions of male domination. Thus, just as the objectives of feminism are moulded by their social and political environs, so too is the infrastructure of critical awareness on which feminist theory is developed. For this reason then, feminism is at some level inextricably culture-bound,
dependent on the specific experiences, needs and values of the women who create and support feminist discourse.

The following section examines Singapore as a second example of a "non-Western", Asian site of feminist organisation. Like India, Singaporean society has been historically shaped by colonialism and imperialism. Like Japan, Singapore's economic prosperity has allowed it a status apart from its "developing" Asian neighbours. As a politically stable (albeit strongly state-controlled), cosmopolitan and economically prosperous state, it does not fit into general Orientalist definitions of "Other", nor is it a "developing nation" in economic terms. Sharing a colonial past with India, and with a level of economic prosperity similar to contemporary Japan, Singapore can be understood as a useful middle-ground case-study of feminist organising. In particular it offers illustration of the implications of state involvement in women's organisations, and of explicit feminist identification by individuals and groups.

Singapore: Negotiating feminism and the state

Heng observes that feminist organisation in Singapore was, from its inception, openly subordinated to the nationalist movement (1997:34). The continuous political dominance of the People's Action Party (PAP) has allowed the implementation of authoritarian patriarchy to proceed unhampered, such that women's rights and feminist organisation continue to be shaped by and in relation to state discourse (Chan 2000:54; Lyons 2000:20). The implications of one-party "democracy" on feminist organisation are similarly fraught in Japan. While the space available for feminists to gain purchase in these societies may be limited, feminist scholarship and organisations in both
Singapore and Japan reflects the strategic and agentive negotiations of feminist individuals and groups with state structures.

The Woman's Charter of 1961 marked the formal introduction of women's rights in law. As well as prohibiting polygamy, it legislated for the rights, duties and responsibilities of both women and men in the family. In focusing on the rights of women specifically in relation to the family, however, the Charter effectively codified a feminine identity bound in traditional roles of wife and mother.

The fulfilment of these roles became the crux of debate in the 1980's, sparked by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's now infamous response to a drop in the birthrate of graduate women. Following the 1983 speech in which Lee addressed the problem of dropping fertility rates among educated women, the Singaporean government introduced policy measures specifically designed to "increase childbearing among well-educated Singaporean women and to further reduce fertility among their less advantaged compatriots" (Lee 1987:179-180). Depicting increased opportunity in education and employment for women as having potentially adverse effects on national competitiveness, he implemented policies to encourage tertiary educated women to bear children, at the same time penalising those with lower incomes or education (Lyons 2000:4; Chan 2000:51). Lee adopted the eugenicist argument that the promotion of fertility among the highly-educated would ultimately produce a highly-intelligent population, and argued that hypergamy or polygamy should be (re)introduced and promoted among the "successful" elite (Lee 1987:180, 185). In a later 1987 speech, Lee suggested that Singapore should learn from Japan, given their shared "Chinese-based Confucianist culture of male dominance" and the Japanese provision of "clearly defined role" for women (Lee 1987:182-3).
In response to the state-sponsored regression to “traditional values”, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) was formed in 1985 with three general objectives:

1) to promote the awareness and participation of women in all areas;
2) to promote the attainment of full equality;
3) to promote equal opportunities for women.

(AWARE Constitution 1990, cited in Lyons 2000:5)

Initially a confrontational and politically “vociferous” group, state intervention in 1987 led to the arrest of two founder-members and initiated a change of tactics for the group, which now advocates a non-confrontational and explicitly non-political approach (Heng 1994:41; Lyons 2000:5).

Distinct from, but related to pressure from the state, is the threat of social censure attached to feminist identification. Lyons (2000:1) notes that more than simply “an expression of individual political belief, (feminism) is often perceived as a rejection of dominant group identity”. Feminist identity can thus be seen to evoke images of an encroaching West, the disintegration of “traditional Asian values” and a repudiation of femininity and its associated ideals (Lyons 2000:3, 10). Choosing to identify as feminist necessitates an active critical engagement with these negative images, and risks alienating both those who remain unconvinced and those who lack the space or drive to engage themselves. For these reasons AWARE eschews explicit feminist identification, while at the same time organising around a feminist praxis that promotes women-centred research, support and public discussion.
Wong suggests that the apparent conservatism of Singaporean feminism flows from the need to balance state and individual (or group) interests (1994:27). She argues that while “feminism is action for women”, women must adopt a broad perspective in their struggle for equality and empowerment, or else risk marginalisation as an “interest group” (Wong 1994:27). It is this approach that can be said to characterise Singaporean feminism. Negotiating state influence — direct and indirect — has required a feminism premised on compromise and selective subversion, “hydra-headed” in approach and not necessarily convergent with western feminist demands (Heng 1994; Lyons 2000). That feminist identification is largely implicit in this approach indicates that where the word “feminism” represents more a liability than a benefit, lack of identification enables flexibility and the potential for a more inclusive feminist organisation.

“Feminism” and “feminist” outside the west: Identifying problems

In the midst of transnational feminist discourse lies the problem of definition: what does “feminism” mean? Growing from this are questions relating to the translation of (or potential for) “feminism” and “feminist”, and to the implications of identification as “feminist” in non-Anglo societies. 17

While some women activists have embraced the potential of “feminist”, others have rejected it as exclusionary, inappropriate and dangerous. The difficulty of the word in non-Anglo societies is rooted in the inextricable tangle of factors including religion, capitalism and (post)colonialism, the combined effect of which shaped, and continues to shape, inter- and intra-national discourse. Here I briefly examine religion, not because it

17 Implications of identification in Anglophone/Anglo-centric societies are also diverse and of significance, but due to their breadth will not be expanded on here.
is the greatest factor but because of the enduring connection it forges with women’s marginality, empowerment and praxis, in the Third World and beyond. Furthermore, the significance of religion represent aspects of (some white) western women’s experiences most likely to be underplayed or obscured in mainstream feminist analyses.

It is firstly necessary to note that discussion of religion and its impact upon feminism is contingent on the concrete meaning of “being religious” in the field of study (Rouse 1998:552). The economic and political implications of being a social minority or majority are inextricably linked to the demands and approaches developed by a feminism. Thus, even without examining the actual religious differences within Islam or the syncretism within Muslim societies, it is clear that the subject “Muslim women” does not offer a consistent platform on which to base feminist theorising. When analysis posits “feminism” as bracketed or qualified by a religion (for example, “Islamic feminism”), it is unclear whether “Islam” is understood as a gloss for a specific cosmology (involving the individual and her God), or if it refers to social prescriptions, legal systems and/or moral practices (Moghissi 1999:126). The differences within religions that simultaneously operate in varied social, linguistic, political and economic spaces present further complications to analysis. Thus the subject “Catholic women”, for example, is problematised with reference to socio-political makeup — thus accounting, in part at least, for differences in the feminisms of Catholic women in Northern Ireland, India and the Philippines.

Historically, the introduction of Christianity to Korea in the 17th century highlights the multiple levels on which religion worked for women and their agenda, particularly used as a weapon against patriarchal “custom” (Oh 1993:309). Closed by state policy to the Western missionary movement which swept through other countries, proselytisation
came at the hands of Koreans themselves (Jayawardena 1986:218). The missionary-sponsored movement towards education of both women and men propagated the concepts of women’s equality and rights to emancipation. Implicit in this, however, were ideals of sexual morality and chastity and the primacy of woman’s roles as mother and wife. Functioning also to support modernisation, the education of women was thus intended to raise the status of women only insofar as it was conducive to nationalist interests (Jayawardena 1986:219, 161).

Paradoxically, while this education served to constrain women, it also allowed access to the tools which would eventually be used to good effect in struggles for emancipation and women’s rights. This appropriation of the master’s tools, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, is paralleled on a macro scale in the wider colonial state, where the Western secular thought that underpinned hegemony also inevitably enabled liberation (Lorde 1983; Jayawardena 1986:6).

The weight of religion against women’s interests can be seen in the promulgation of certain religious dogma in which women are subordinate to men, or forced into dichotomies of good/evil. The negative construction of female sexuality translates to social morés and ideals of chastity and feminine servility, supporting state efforts in controlling reproduction and women’s bodies. However, it is important to acknowledge that religion alone is unable to enforce such dichotomies. The appropriation of religious doctrine and rhetoric by the State and other institutions enables a blurring of the “multiple systems of power” through which women negotiate their agency (Abu-Lughod 2000:53).
Resistance to feminist identification is considerable where feminism is equated with immorality and the corruption of “traditional” codes of conduct founded on religious teaching. Benoit and Franz reflect that in predominantly Christian Haiti, “the word ‘feminism’ seems to put the fear of death into people... (W)hen we use this word, we’re accused of being lesbians, anticlerical...” (in Kuppers 1994:37).

Certain (fundamentalist) reading of religious scriptures and the use of the pulpit in anti-feminist diatribe have fostered the construction of feminism as anti-religion, and therefore anti-social and anti-state in religious states. Thus where feminism is perceived to demand repudiation of religious values, it faces the double-layered barrier of institutional and societal/popular opposition, and feminists can be easily constructed as bad, disloyal citizens.

While religious opposition to “feminism” as a concept can be significant, as discussed above in the case of Indian shakti, religion has also enabled feminist praxis, in giving women legitimate power to effect social change. The “militant nuns” of the Philippines exemplified this power, symbolising political activism during the martial era and exercising unofficial, “moral” power to effectively bring about political change (Roces 2000:113). This practical power runs parallel to official (malestream) politics and represents a subversive use of the traditional feminine role.

The relationship between religion and feminism therefore cannot be understood as universally or entirely antithetical, even where the term “feminist” is rejected by religious practitioners or establishments. Furthermore, it is important to note that stigma (religious or otherwise) attached to feminist identification does not necessarily deter women from engaging in feminist praxis. In women’s organising in Uruguay, for
example, Camusso acknowledges the potential for misinterpretation of the word and therefore advocates "feminism by example" (in Kuppers 1994:123). Similarly, in Islamic societies, the label "feminist", whether qualified as "Islamic" or not, is rarely taken up by women (and men) activists working for equity and women's rights (Moghissi 2002:127). Moghissi's review of emancipatory women's movements in the Middle East and North Africa illustrate that absence of the literal label "feminist" has not historically meant a dilution of feminist praxis or feminist agency (Moghissi 2002:126-30). It is thus a focus on feminist praxis and feminist agency—in concrete terms, the qualitative enablement of women—rather than feminist identification that has characterised women's activism in many parts of the world.

Chicana feminists have recognised the role of feminist praxis in connecting feminist development to the material conditions of everyday life, and laying "a foundational role in the articulation of theory that looks at the intersections of gender, race, and class" (Flores 2000:696). The political empowerment and increased agency of women has featured strongly in the aims of feminist activism throughout the Third World, reflecting the prioritisation of concrete improvements in women's living conditions over theoretical discussions of inequality (Collins 1990; Maier 1994:42; Ariffin 1999:418; Flores 2000:696; Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2001:1169)

Badran suggests a similar approach, distinguishing between feminist (identified) and pro-feminist (non-identified), but employing the term "gender activism" to cover political activities of both these groups (1994:203). Definitions of feminist activism shift according to perspective, such that action may be named feminist by feminists but not by other (pro-feminist) groups (1994:204). This flexibility of perspective is related to that which produces the "strategic interpretations" of feminism in state-engaged
feminist groups (Heng 1994:32). Such selective identification offers the potential for (non-feminist-identified) women to participate in women-addressed politics, and effects a feminist praxis common among Third World and Other feminisms.

However it is necessary to qualify this discussion by acknowledging the many women in Third World and non-western countries who do adopt the term “feminist”. Some feminists have drawn on concepts of indigenous feminism to support claims for women’s rights, invoking “declension narratives” in which an “essential” and “original” culture allowed women independence, power and equality with men (Shoemaker 1991:39; Bulbeck 1998:20). Feminists from non-western societies have to this end criticised the conflation of “westernisation” with “feminism”, noting that “(I)t is not simply out of the historical experience of the West that women started to assert themselves and express themselves…” (Heda Lutfy, quoted in Badran 1994:220).

**Women’s agency: beyond binaries**

One of the central themes to be explored in this thesis is the nature and implications of women’s agency in Japan. I aim to examine the realised agency of women’s groups and women’s centres in Japan, with a cautious eye to extending the scope of “agency” as a theoretical concept. The caution in this endeavour, as in the survey of feminisms above, reflects a desire to avoid analytical extremities that engender binaries and exclusion, moving instead towards a more subtle understanding of the processes involved in theorising women’s experiences. It also reflects my desire to avoid romanticising resistance, to borrow Abu-Lughod’s term (1998). The search for and study of agency in women’s organisations is not a move calculated to observe the “most” or most abundant
forms of agency. Rather, it reflects the development of my interest of agency as tied to the experiences of my fieldwork, centred on such organisations and their workings.

My original aims in observing and participating in women’s groups related to assessment of an explicit feminist “potential”, presumably a quantifiable fulfilment of certain (at that point unexplored) criteria. This assessment was based on a conceptualisation of feminism as theoretically informed and self-reflexive, both a product and a source of self-awareness in a gender-unequal society. In the process of observation and participation, however, my attention was drawn to the ways in which Japanese women’s groups work outside, or on the borders of, this definition. Even in groups which proclaimed a feminist focus, members were not uniformly comfortable with a feminist agenda. My preconception of the group as a source and product of feminist consciousness was challenged by women who marked themselves as “not feminist”, by boundaries drawn around certain (feminist) issues, and by widespread aversion to explicitly political identification and projects.

What became clear to me through observation was the importance of agency as a sometimes explicit, but more often implicit, consequence of women’s organisation. The potential of women’s participation in group and centre-organised activities represents space for movement. In many, though not all cases, this movement can be interpreted as progressive, constructive and empowering. My conceptualisation of women’s organisation is therefore based on an understanding of the movement and, underpinning movement, of the agency that it promotes.

Unconsciously, my conceptualisation of agency is tied to my understanding of feminism. Analysis of the “parasite single” issue has challenged both my (perhaps hopeful)
feminist expectations of individuals, and my conceptualisation of agency as intrinsically feminist. The latter has been particularly problematic, suggesting some (blurry or imaginary) lines between “action” and “feminist action”, and casting shadow over the meaning of empowerment – if agency is the goal, do all means justify the end? This is clearly an element for further contemplation, both in the context of this thesis and beyond.

It is interesting that the concept of “agency”, which may be read to imply movement or freedom, may be conflated with the concept of “agency” as a structural or institutional body. The overlap of these two meanings is neatly encapsulated by the work of agencies such as government women’s centres, which I argue aim to bridge non-government and bureaucratic programmes for women’s empowerment. While an “agent” may be either an actor or a representative, the potential capacity of women’s centres rests on the fulfilment of both roles, acting for material change while also representing women to, and through, government bureaucracy. It is in the latter capacity that legislation, such as the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, becomes a significant tool for increased gender awareness, and its implementation a means by which, to some extent at least, women are empowered to act and to resist certain gendered expectations.

To take advantage of “feminine” faults and strengths can be seen as subversion of role expectations and inequalities which underpin them, an example of the “everyday resistances” by which women negotiate multiple systems of power (Scott 1985; Kandiyoti 1988; Abu-Lughod 2000:53). Accordingly, agency itself is manifested in diverse ways, dependent on the circumstances. I argue that to address agency in its multiplicity requires that the definition of “agency” be seen to encompass pragmatic
acts of unintentional resistance. This means discarding the view of agency as “a synonym for resistance to relations of domination” (Mahmood 2001:5).

The terms of agency do not transcend the historical and cultural specifics of the act and the actor. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the evaluation of agency in any social act speaks not only of the actor and the structure within which she acts, but also of the evaluator’s criteria. My perception of the actor’s action reveals my own guiding influences, insofar as these effect the lens through which the act is seen and understood. The conceptualisation of agency in terms of independence, of self-containment and of choice, reflects a particularly informed understanding, in which the individual (with agency) is a free actor. Such a conceptualisation overlooks the complexity and diversity of lived experiences and socio-cultural practices, and therefore limits the definitive scope of agency.

As Abu-Lughod observes, “(i)f the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels” (1990:53). It is important to note that the multiple systems of power need not be overarching or grand in nature to be significant to women’s lives and their expression of either resistance or agency. For example, while Japanese teenage girls who skip school to shop may have extricated themselves from the influence of parental, state and school rules, they are still bound to their parents by their need for pocket money to finance such trips. The parent-child relationship in this case is underpinned by capitalist power-relations, and the girl remains subject to both of these systems of power, though to differing extents. This is of course a relatively shallow example of the implications of the power systems under which women operate, but it can be seen nonetheless as a complicating factor in conceptualising agency.
While Scott's (1985) "everyday resistances" represent expressions of power in certain circumstances—most notably among the disempowered underclass—the desire and direction of even minimal resistance is dependant on a complex set of factors. These include the nature and relation of the multiple systems of power, the actor's investment in those relations, and the type of moral conceptualisations which underpin social action. For women in Japanese workplaces, resistance may be manifest as accommodation, insofar as it may purchase future power through reciprocity or obligation (Ogasawara 1998:161). What generates this particular form of resistance (which I would argue reflects the agency of the women actors) is, among other factors, an awareness of the nature of workplace power relations, of the expected roles of women working within the workplace, of the potential for women to rise up in the workplace hierarchy, and subjective experiences of self in the workplace and outside.

The need to address these factors contributes to the complexity of analyses of both resistance and agency, and involves a grounded conceptualisation of the meaning and impact of a (particular) action in a particular place and time. In such analyses it is also significant to acknowledge the way that women perceive themselves, even if this is understood as no less of a filter than that used by the feminist researcher. In teasing out agency in women's acts, the researcher can end up with subjects constructed such that they would not recognise themselves in the study (Constable 2005). It is therefore imperative to acknowledge the labels by which women themselves identify, and to address this facet in analyses of agency.

Parker (2005i:86) argues that agency and victimhood should not be viewed as binary opposites, where the realisation of one precludes the other. Rather, these two should be seen as acting in combination, in a fluid and malleable social context and influenced
implicitly by the subjectivity of the onlooker (Jeffery 1998:223). Incorporating social and cultural context into analysis of agency is a critical means of situating both researcher and actor, acknowledging the messiness of the “experiences, emotions, motivations and intentions” that characterise life (as well as social research) (Parker 2005:86). Acknowledging fluidity, social context and ambiguity is similarly vital in discussions of feminism. In proposing a more inclusive definition of feminism I therefore argue in support of discourse and analyses which “address the interconnections and intricacies of racism, classism, and imperialism” and which are self-reflexive of their own origins and development (Russo 1991:304).

Conclusion: Feminisms, agency and intersectionality

A discussion of Third World/Other feminism is premised on three problematic conceptions: first, that the space occupied by “Other” can be mapped and delineated, and that the vast diversity encompassed within its border can be compressed into a single practicable rubric for analysis. Second, there is a premise that a framework of analysis and organisation identifiable as feminism can be constructed from the experiences of women within the borders of this space. And finally, it is assumed that the intersection of these premises – Other feminism – can be adequately represented through the singular and subjective lens of theoretical analysis implicit in such a survey.

As I have shown in this chapter, the faultiness of these premises renders this discussion vexed from the start. Recognising the unsteady ground I tread in my attempt, then, I explore the field with a critical consciousness of our own perspective, and of the artificial boundaries marked by those working before me. As Jackson observes, the world cannot be collapsed into “West” and “Rest”, but without certain boundaries of
“site” neither can it be contained for the purposes of analysis and understanding (Jackson 2003b:39). In concrete terms, I acknowledge that there are blind spots in the perspective of Anglo-based feminist theory, resulting from the specific rigidity that accompanies economic and political privilege and the systems of cultural analysis which have historically supported this privilege.

As exemplified in postcolonial states such as India and Singapore, feminisms of Other/Third World nations are shaped on the premises of intersectionality, viewing experiences of oppression as multifarious, multi-layered and intrinsically linked (Flores 2000:695). Feminisms negotiate this intersection with conscious reference to the institutions and ideals which support and contest oppression. These negotiations should not be interpreted as weakness, nor the strategies employed devalued as insignificant (Afshar 1996:1). It is clear that religious ideology, state policy and nationalism are significant factors in the shaping of feminist agenda, in the aims and methods of organisation and in the popularisation of women’s issues.

Similarly, feminist agency among women must be explored and understood within the religious, social, economic and political milieu. These factors mark not only the act and the actor observed, but also the researcher/observer. Analyses of feminist agency must acknowledge these markings as both productive and by-productive of feminist discourse, and as both potential source and side-effect of feminist praxis among researching and researched women. The capacity of feminist discourse to incorporate diversity of women’s experiences is not simply a trick of theoretical elasticity. Rather, it requires the self-reflexivity of those involved in the production of discourse, their attention to the specific loci of discourse production and awareness of the ways in which different circumstances produce different forms and directions of feminist praxis.
The definition of the term "feminist" and "feminism" must ultimately be contextualised in the transnational dialogue which comprises women's organisation and theorising. While the words themselves may be, as Sperling, Ferree and Risman note "contested terrain", it is the process of their definition — an innately continuous process — which marks the value of the contest (2001:1168). In and over blurred borders, feminisms develop in response to women's needs and experiences, offering the potential for convergence without compromising diversity.
CHAPTER THREE

Women, feminism and the family in contemporary Japan

Introduction: Ideals, roles and gender performativity

I begin this chapter with some reservations about my task in introducing Japanese women. As an overview of Japanese ideals and expectations of femininity and the family, this chapter aims to address the broad patterns of change and development of the last century, and particularly since the end of World War II. Focusing on broad themes of family, sexuality and work, I aim to delineate the historical relationship between women’s organisations (including feminist movements) and the lived experiences of contemporary Japanese women. Furthermore, in this chapter I emphasise the diversity of Japanese feminisms and feminist approaches, and the broad scope of women’s organisations that have operated and continue to work in Japan.

In focusing on broad patterns among a large and diverse population, I am very conscious that these patterns are bounded, and that beyond the boundaries are women for whom these assertions and models are inappropriate and/or inadequate. Thus while my attention in other areas of this thesis is consciously trained to the actual perceptions and experiences of Japanese women, at this point my focus diverges. The distinction between cultural ideals and lived experience underpins this examination. While I may present individual women’s experiences as illustrative of certain values or expectations, these examples do not imply a universal truth about Japanese women (Long 1996:158).
By definition an ideal is aspirational, an objective pegged at a higher plane and therefore above individual experience. The ideal may be partially embodied by individuals, but as a symbolic model it remains beyond the real individual’s potential. Ideals may change (or more specifically, be changed), as for example, ideals of beauty have changed. Because of this, ideals can be seen as illustrative of the specific historical and social contexts in which they are grown. However, because ideals exist beyond individuals, changes in ideals cannot necessarily illuminate the breadth or nature of changes occurring throughout society for individuals, nor can an ideal be seen as uniformly applicable to all members of any one society. Thus while ideals of Japanese femininity do reflect actual changes in women’s perceptions and experiences in general, they do not reveal the variation within these experiences, in the subtle and specific adaptations each woman makes in her attempt to live out the expectations which create the ideal. In light of these limitations, this chapter examines the ideal as an influence rather than determinant of women’s experiences, and of varied relevance to the individual’s interpretation of her life and the lives of others (Long 1996:158). This discussion brings me to the problematic framing of gender in analysis.

The discourse of “role” is one of the frameworks through which the concept of gender has been defined – that is, as a cultural or social representation of a biological state (sex). Thus, as Oakley argues, to be a woman or a man “is as much a function of dress, gesture, occupation, social network and personality, as it is of possessing a particular set of genitals” (1972:158). Mead observes that the conflation of biology with culture is enabled by certain social assumptions – namely, that certain behaviours, traits and temperaments are specifically and exclusively masculine or feminine (1962:30–31). These traits and behaviours can be understood as the foundation blocks of “roles”, being the bases on which ideal packages of femininity and masculinity are built.
The problems of "role" revolve around its rigidity, and its potential to essentialise and to mask the self-determination involved in living and acting a certain way. In a role-based analysis of any given act, it is the role (insofar as it is represented by the act), rather than the actor that is central. In Japan the acts of being female, married and not engaged in (full-time) paid labour thus become the role of being a sengyō shufu, or full-time housewife.

Judith Butler offers an alternative to "role", viewing gender as performative, "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a "stylised repetition of acts" (Butler 1999:179). In this framework, the body is constituted by the acts (gestures, dress, behaviour) that appear on and through it. The acts of standing in certain postures, wearing certain clothes and using certain gestures all represent ways in which gender is inscribed on and through the body, to be interpreted in light of numerous specificities (including culture, history, language etc). Furthermore, it is in the repetition of these acts that gender is effected, that the meaning and implications of gender are created and conveyed (Butler 1999:179).

Moving beyond the binary of masculine and feminine, gender in this framework is not a firm foundation, but a "social temporality", constituted in specific cultural and historical contexts and intersecting with "racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler 1999: 179, 6). While gender "roles" imply continuity, gender performed is necessarily fluid. As with roles, the emphasis in this framework is on the actor – as Butler points out, "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed'...the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler 1999:181).
While performativity is a persuasive discourse for analysing gender and particularly in specific acts, “roles” can be employed to understand certain social phenomena. Roles can neatly package a broad range of women’s experiences, elucidating trends and general pressures on women. Furthermore, the rubric of role still allows for a distinction to be drawn between the general and the specific. So while we may speak of the role of housewife or mother, this does not speak conclusively of any individual housewife or mother. The trend for women to marry at a later age, for example, can be seen as a reflection of the residual symbolic significance of roles in society, firstly because the nature of a trend necessitates a generalised and simplified picture of complicated and multiple human behaviours. Secondly, the rise in the age of first marriage implies that a certain life-pattern or lifestyle is favoured more than in previous years – namely, that not-marrying is preferable, at least for a longer period, than it had once been. If the choice to adopt a new (married) lifestyle for women in general is less attractive or feasible, then the element of commonality suggests a broad shift in social understandings of what it means to be married and female, of what social expectations and ideals are inherent in the overlap of these, and of the desirability and attainability of such ideals. At the societal level then, “role” is useful as a method of elucidating analysis, for sketching and shading broad changes in the way that women as a group or in general have behaved.

However, at the level of individual analysis, “role” is an inadequate framework for analysing gender and its construction. The individual woman who remains single longer than her peers does not necessarily consciously adopt or repudiate a particular model of femininity, and neither can her single status be understood purely as a product of general changes in social ideals or expectations of “womanhood”. Rather, her status as
an unmarried woman must be seen in the milieu of her specific circumstances, noting the adaptations and subversions involved in the individual’s engagement with external pressures and internal desires. As Sakai Junko observes in the Japanese context, single, unmarried, childless women over 35 years may be single for a number of reasons, but irrespectively all women in those circumstances are societally tagged as “losers” (2003). For the individual woman, and therefore in scholarly analyses of individuals, it is the specific, contextual and transient implications of the act and its repetition that create meaning as gender. The identified social trend under which the individual/act is subsumed is therefore of little value to the individual analysis.

For these reasons, “role” and “performativity” sit side by side in my discussion of gender in this chapter. An additional term which I use advisedly is the “model”— for example the housewife/sararīman model and family models. In this context “model” should not be interpreted as representing a universal pattern, nor does it reveal the subtle variation and adaptations which are made by those encompassed. It is precisely this that makes them useful in an overview of this nature, yet also limits their applicability in detailed analysis of women’s issues.

It is with these limitations in mind that I proceed. This chapter opens with a brief synopsis of the pre-World War Two Japanese family and inherent ideals of femininity. This includes a brief discussion of the early (first-wave) Japanese feminist movement, with particular attention given to the work of Seitōsha activist Hiratsuka Raichō and her contemporaries. I examine post-war developments in the roles of mother and wife, and the impact of waged labour on the ideals and actual perceptions of these roles among Japanese women. I focus on the significance of care as a feminine ideal, and the impact of work – both full and part-time – on women’s roles in the family. After addressing the
rise of the second wave of feminism, particularly the emergence of the women’s liberation movement, I examine the current status of marriage and changes to women’s life cycles, from the post-Women’s Liberation period through the high-economic growth period of the 1980s and into the 1990s. The shifts in this period are illustrated by a discussion of the rise of “housewife feminism” and eco-feminism, supplemented by examination of legislation addressing gender and employment. Finally, I offer a brief outline of the feminist discourse on sexuality over the last two decades, concluding with an overview of contemporary feminist (or woman-centred) organisation.

**Women in Imperial Japan – Family and feminism**

Women’s lives are nothing but a series of services, first to parents when young, then to husbands and parents-in-law when married, and when children come, they are busy caring for them and supervising the food and kitchen work (Fukuzawa, cited in Fujiwara 1988:19).

The words above belong to liberal social critic and proponent of Western thought Fukuzawa Yukichi, and illustrate the status of the majority of Japanese women towards the end of the nineteenth century. Influenced by the work of John Stuart Mill and inspired by the work of Japanese female activists, Fukuzawa’s critique of female subordination in society serves to illustrate two key points: that feminist thought had taken root in Japan long before the Women’s Lib movement bloomed, and that advocates of gender equality could be found even within the depths of the Meiji revival of patrilineal and patriarchal customs (Fujiwara in Kiyoka 1988:viii).

In Imperial Japan (1890-1945) the family was the crucible of feminine duty. The responsibilities of the daughterly role gave way to those of the wife and daughter-in-law, and mother in turn. The Meiji (1868-1912) abolition of the distinct class system and
permeation of the aristocratic (samurai) code meant that women who had previously enjoyed relative flexibility of status were now bound to the Confucian “three obediences” to which the above quote refers (Iwao 1993:5). The catch-phrase *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) exemplifies the ideal of femininity prescribed by the Meiji state, and the promotion of women’s education reflected this emphasis on women as “intelligent incubators”. This ideal also reflected the emergence of the nuclear family, a first step towards the full-time housewife feminine ideal of post-World War II (Nolte 1987: 92).

The Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) eras represented a peak in state-promulgated patriarchy, as codified in the Meiji Civil Code, which defined the father/husband as head of the household (*ie*) and authority on family matters from marriage to property ownership (Tachi 1995:21). In most areas and for most women, marriage rendered a woman the property of the household, and awarded ownership of her possessions to the family, specifically the most senior male of the house (Mackie 1995:2). The family was in this sense a political structure, the lowest unit in the Imperial hierarchy. Ideals of self-sacrifice and duty were instilled through family structure, rendering control a domestic, as well as internalised function (Aoki 1995:23). Furthermore, as the *ie* ideal entailed continuity beyond the life expectancy of individual

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18 Policies to implement this included long-term study tours abroad, such as the Iwakura Mission to the U.S, which included 6 girls from aristocratic families, ranging in age from six to 14 years (Kuno 1993: 53). While the experience was intended to improve the girl’s performance of idealised roles, the ultimate effect was a handicap to marriage and related norms (Chapman 1987:94). Returnees from these trips struggled to reconcile their liberal Western education with rigid Japanese social structures, giving rise to a feminist advocacy which ultimately subverted the original project aim.

19 The term *ie* (literally, house), refers to the particular patrilineal and patriarchal family system idealised in Imperial Japan. After this system was abolished in the post-war Constitution, the term *katei* (household) came to be used as a gloss for the “modern family”, contrasting with those families (*ie*) that remained “feudal” (Nishikawa 1995:224-5)

20 Bachnik observes that the *ie* is not strictly definable as “patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal and primogenitural”, because legitimate exceptions for each rule are not uncommon (1983: 160). The common and lawful practices of “passing over” first-born sons and “adopting” sons (mukoyōshi) therefore suggest that “succession in the *ie* is dependent on corporate rather than individual continuity” (Bachnik 1983: 164).
members, the family power structure reflected and reinforced the reproductive role of women members (Long 1996:159). To this end, the transition from new bride to mother represented an increase in authority, while failure to produce an heir was legitimate grounds for divorce. The position of women in the family was prescribed via these official family ideals and maintained not only through marriage and family laws, but also through legislation such as the 1890 Law on Political Associations and Meetings, which prohibited women from active political involvement and organisation (Mackie 1995:4-5).

From this rigid and structurally reinforced discrimination came the first-wave feminist campaigns for women's suffrage and women's rights. Although the attainment of women's political rights was its primary target, the suffrage movement also addressed wider women's issues, including the protection of mothers and children and value of the domestic sphere (Tachi 1995:21-2). The movement encompassed several distinct strands of feminist approach, reflecting the diversity of women involved as well as the breadth of women's issues at the time.

The first political women's group, the New Women's Association (Shin Fujin Kyōkai) was formed in 1919, by Hiratsuka Raichō, Ichikawa Fusae and Oku Mumeo (Tachi 1995:21). All three women were journalists, and by no coincidence — the ban on women's political organisation (lasting until 1922) meant that journalism played a central role in raising women's issues to public attention (Nolte 1987:93; Mackie 1995:5).

In 1911, Hiratsuka had been the founding editor of Seitō (Bluestocking), a journal whose original objective was self-expression — as the first journal exclusively by and for
women, *Seitō* addressed the experiential aspects of women's issues in the Imperial State (Nolte 1987:97). At this point in her career, Hiratsuka opposed suffrage as an ultimate goal, viewing it as a means for women's inculcation into the State machine of modernisation and industrialisation (Tachi 1995:22). Informed by studies of Buddhism and Christianity, Hiratsuka emphasised the ultimate importance of love as life's meaning, and focused on the oppression experienced by women within marriage and the family (Nolte 1987:98; Tachi 1995:22). Adopting a binary distinction of public (male) and private (female) spheres, Hiratsuka promoted the reproductive role of women as a valuable "hidden power" to be valued and recognised (Tachi 1995:25). The first editorial in *Seitō* featured her now famous declaration on the decline of this power and the status of Japanese women:

> In the beginning, woman was the sun. She was an authentic person. Today she is the moon. She lives by others, shines with the light of others; she is the moon with the pallid face of an invalid...We must restore our hidden sun (Hiratsuka, translated in Nolte 1987:97).

This restoration, as advocated by Hiratsuka, involved protection of the rights of mothers and the provision of family benefits and maternity leave (Tachi 1995:22). Hiratsuka's stance on this issue contrasted with those of fellow *Seitō* writers and activists, the poet Yosano Akiko and socialist Yamakawa Kikue. Yosano rejected State intervention, promoting economic independence as the key to resolving women's child-care problems (Mackie 1995b:61). However, while Yosano focused on suffrage as a means of achieving social reform, Yamakawa argued that only the ultimate destruction of the capitalist system would redress inequality between men and women (Mackie 1995b:61).

The first-wave feminist movement thus encompassed considerable diversity, in theoretical as well as practical aims and ideals. While Yosano and Yamakawa were wary of the state, New Women's Association member Ichikawa Fusae believed that
only women’s participation in the political sphere would enable the creation of a gender equal society (Tachi 1995:24). Ichikawa’s willingness to co-operate with the State led to increased organisation around women’s issues, and increased engagement with government structures and functioning (Tachi 1995:24). However, this increase also enabled the State to co-opt women’s groups that had risen to prominence by the 1930s into the war effort (Mackie 1995:5). The implications of women’s participation in the Imperial State are recognised and criticised in the work of contemporary Japanese feminists such as Matsui Yayori.21

The Imperial era was a time of flux for women and women’s issues. The Meiji state’s implementation of traditionalist laws and policies was designed to emphasise women’s reproductive role and exclude women from political participation, and women’s resistance and political organisation strengthened in correlation. While the theoretical approaches of first-wave feminists were varied, discussions and debates brought foundational feminist issues such as social welfare, the value of motherhood and women’s political roles, to the attention of a modernising Japanese society.

The Post-war period: Changes in constitution, family and gender roles

The Allied (American) Occupation of post-war Japan (1945-1952) brought changes in the official state treatment of women and women’s issues. Most significant was the introduction of an equal rights amendment (ERA) into the 1947 Constitution, drafted by the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces (SCAP), General Douglas McArthur and the forces beneath him (Pharr 1987:224). Article 14 of the Constitution explicitly guarantees women’s equality in the eyes of the state:

All people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin.

Even more radical though, is the provision of Article 24, drafted by Beate Shirota, a 22 year-old member of the Occupation force who had grown up in Japan. This article states:

Marriage shall be based on mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual co-operation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis.

With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes.

As a guarantee of women’s equality in the domestic sphere, this article extends “well beyond anything found in most constitutions of the world today” (Pharr 1987:231). The Constitution not only defines women’s rights in marriage as equal to those of men, but in doing so codifies the family as an egalitarian unit based on principles of gender equality (Mackie 1995:8). This re-definition of women’s status within the family made the shift from Imperial to post-war Japan all the more dramatic for Japanese women and women’s rights activists.

Even prior to the constitution, however, the SCAP had indicated its support for women’s rights by encouraging women’s entry to the government and supporting bureaucracy. With women’s suffrage finally obtained in December 1945, the first post-war election in April 1946 welcomed 36 women into the Diet, bringing to 8.4 percent the Lower House female constituency (Pharr 1987: 233; Mackie 1995:6).²²

²² This percentage has only recently been matched. Mackie noted in 1995 that women represented around 6 percent of the combined total of Upper and Lower Houses (Mackie 1995:6). By 2000 this
The rapid economic growth of post-war Japan was accompanied by a revolution in family models and ideals. The trend of urbanisation and the increase in nuclear families led to reforms in housing design and development (Ueno 1988: 231; Nishikawa 1996: 228). The nuclear family model encompassed distinct gender roles, namely the housewife/"salaryman" (sarariman) binary, which influenced the design and space-utilisation of the family home. The ideal post-war family house therefore included a spacious kitchen with conveniences for the housewife, in which to prepare the various meals with which to nurture her children and husband. For the "corporate warrior" sarariman, the home was quickly becoming just a place to eat and sleep (Nishikawa 1996:228).

The term sengyō shufu (full-time housewife) appeared in the early 1970s, following the almost universal popularisation of this ideal in the 1960s (Ueno 1988:172). The role of housewife represented the modern feminine ideal, and also, as Ueno points out, the sole road to upward mobility for women (1988:173). The housewife was the feminine complement to the sarariman, itself an ideal promoted by a state fervent in its push for economic development, and, as I will discuss below, remains entrenched in popular perceptions of women's roles.

The term sengyō shufu itself emerged as a means of distinguishing between those wives who were engaged in paid labour (kengyō shufu, part-time housewives) and those who were not. While the majority of female full-time workers remained outside of marriage through the 1960s, by 1975 51.3 percent of female employees were married (Prime Minister's Secretariat statistics, cited in Ueno 1988:174).

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The figure was 7.3 percent, in 2001 this rose to 10.8 percent and in 2004 the figure fell to 9.7 percent (White Paper on Gender Equality 2004: 178).
Nonetheless, for women in the immediate post-war period, and particularly those from well-to-do families, work outside the home no doubt represented a divergence from the domestic ideal. Working women were seen as "low-class", and in a society which considered itself mostly middle-class, for young women this represented a serious threat to marriageability and performance of feminine ideals (Lebra 1986:60). However, it was the popularisation of the housewife model that in fact enabled women’s participation in the workforce, albeit on the limited terms devised by the capitalist market. In order to fuel its rapid growth, the post-war economy demanded a large and flexible pool of manual workers, and women proved ideal (Ueno 1988:175). For this reason the feminine labour cycle developed its distinct M-pattern: the peaks of women’s employment occurring before marriage and after child-rearing, dipping in the middle to allow for childbirth and early childhood-care, and tapering off at either edge.

The post-war decline in fertility can be understood as a consequence of shifts in women’s lifestyle and work trends. The fertility rate fell from 4.5 children per woman in 1947, to 2.0 in 1957, and then stabilised at replacement level until 1974 (Tsuya 1994:94). Since 1974 it has declined steadily, but as Roberts observes, the problem was only seriously addressed by government when the total fertility rate fell to 1.57 in 1989 (2002: 54). Declines in fertility can be read as the by-product of modernisation, evident in most economically-developed societies. What is of significance in this case is that the drop in total fertility to below-replacement level (that is, less than 2) and the steady decline since, are not related to marital fertility rate – rather, the drop in fertility is the direct result of a drop in the marital rate itself (Ninomiya 2001:39). It also reflects the absence of an increase in the number of births outside of marriage in Japan (Roberts 2002:56). Changes in marital models and ideals can therefore be understood as key
factors in the drop in popularity of what was formerly an essential stage in the ideal feminine lifecycle.

While the full-time, at-home mother represented the model for Japanese femininity in the post-war period, by the late 1960s this model was extended to include a number of non-mothering activities, including study groups, part-time work and hobbies (Imamura 1996:3). The economic growth of the time led to labour shortages, which in turn led to the development of the new category of “part-time workers”, by employers keen to harness women-power (Ueno 1987:80). For women who took up the full-time housewife role, opportunities to work or learn were slotted into the day between housework, childcare and cooking, adding to but never detracting from the main nurturing role. The growth of consumer culture, manifested in the rise of supermarkets and convenience stores, encouraged women’s participation in the labour market, both as consumers and, significantly, as workers (Imamura 1996:3).

Women’s Liberation and the second wave of feminism

In terms of political organisation, the 1960s saw a rise in left-wing activism, exemplified by the student-led demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the US-Japan Security Treaty (Mackie 2003:146). While women were active in these protests and in radical organisations, the organisations themselves often retained and enforced the gendered inequalities and role division of mainstream Japanese society (Mackie 2003:147; Pharr 1981:69). Some of these women, together with radical feminist groups and women from outside the New Left, formed feminist collectives and groups, including the dynamic and radically feminist Tatakau Onna (Fighting Women) (Pharr 1981:70).
The political stance and approaches of women’s groups at this time were varied. While some activists (and groups) advocated radical women-only feminist organisation, others promoted sexual freedom, and argued that the fight for sexual equality should be a joint struggle with like-minded men (Pharr 1981: 71). Tanaka Mitsu, who drafted the 1970 manifesto for Tatakau Onna, problematised heterosexual relations without condemning heterosexuality wholesale (Mackie 2003:144-5). The tactics of radical group Chūpiren (Alliance for Abortion and the Pill) represented one extreme of the spectrum, though disproportionate media attention depicted the group as representative of second-wave Japanese feminism (Mackie (2003:167)).

The issues of reproductive health and women’s bodily autonomy had featured in first-wave feminist discourse, specifically addressed by women including Hiratsuka Raichō and Ichikawa Shidzue, who helped to form the Abortion Law Reform League in 1932 (Mackie 2003:52). Reproductive control had been a state concern since the Meiji period, manifested in legislation such as the 1940 National Eugenics Law (Kokumin Yūsei Hō) and its subsequent revisions (Mackie 2003:165). The 1949 revision of the Eugenic Protection Law (Yūsei Hogo Hō) authorised abortion in cases “where the mother’s physical condition or economic circumstances meant that continuing the pregnancy or giving birth would endanger the mother’s health” (Mackie 2003:166). Broad medical interpretations of the connection between maternal health and economic circumstances allowed the relatively liberal practice of abortions, and conservative efforts in the 1970s

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23 In the early 1970s Chūpiren organised for the legalisation of abortion and contraception (Ehara 1990: 101). One of their activities was the public embarrassment of men who had engaged in extramarital affairs, by members wearing pink crash helmets (Mackie 2003: 167)

24 The clause on economic consideration is not the only feature which marks Japan’s policy on abortion liberal by comparison with other industrialised nations. Abortion in Japan is based on foetal viability and may be conducted through to the 22nd week, where countries such as the U.S. prohibit abortion beyond the first trimester (12 weeks) (Norgren 1998: 61).
to remove the economic clause met with strong resistance from feminists (Norgren 1998:62; Mackie 2003:166).

Second-wave feminist discourse on reproductive health and sexuality emphasised awareness and freedom for Japanese women. Mackie notes that the liberation of the body featured significantly as an aim of the Women's Liberation movement (Umran Ribu) and its activities (2003:157). Women's appropriation of the physical represented a challenge both to the state's and individual men's efforts to control women's bodies and bodily experiences. The first step in this re-appropriation was education among women themselves.

Women's Lib activists challenged the stigmatisation of women's bodily functions and illnesses and related feminine ideals of endurance and suffering (Mackie 2003: 167). The negative sociolinguistic implications of language associated with women's bodily functions, in combination with over-complex medical jargon, left women literally without language to speak about their bodies (Nakanishi in Buckley 1997:192). To address the problem, feminist book store, the Women's Bookstore Shōkadō, compiled and published the Japanese version of the book “Our Bodies, Ourselves” in the late 1980s, including new linguistic terms without negative implications (Buckley 1997:185; Ogino in Buckley 1997:202). The book aimed to inform, reassure and connect women: “Alone we are confused, but in our shared power we can find inspiration” (Kono, in Buckley 1997:200).

25 Ogino reports that the Japanese terms for women's sexual organs frequently incorporate kanji characters meaning shame/disgrace and secret/negative (Ogino in Buckley 1997:202). The word for labia is thus written “dark/shaded lips”. The “Our Bodies, Ourselves” version translates to “sexual lips”, removing the implication of shamefulness or secrecy. Similarly, a desire to avoid sexist or sexually stereotyped language sees the feminine character in the term “nurse” (fu in kangofu) replaced with a gender-neutral character (shi in kangoshi) (Ogino, in Buckley 1997:203).
Sexuality featured strongly in the discourse of physical re-appropriation. Tanaka Kazuko observes that the women's liberation movement “made sexual liberation the central point of its theory”, addressing the sexual oppression of Japanese women, as a class, by men (Tanaka, quoted in Mackie 2003:155). The focus on sexuality as a source of oppression recognised the private implications of hegemony on women’s lives, and challenged popular ideals of femininity. Tanaka Mitsu’s manifesto for the group Tatakau Onna, for example, rejected the binary construction of women as “either the expression of maternal love: a ‘mother’, or a vessel for the management of lust: a ‘toilet’.” (Tanaka, translated in Mackie 2003:144).

The issue of prostitution, associated with feminist groups of the first wave, rose to prominence again in the 1970s. Provoked by the increased popularity of men’s sex tours in Asia, feminist groups and individuals such as Matsui Yayori campaigned against the men who engaged in engaging prostitutes. Matsui, a journalist whose writing has focused on issues related to women and development, including the environment and grass-roots politics, emphasised the political and economic hegemony of Japan’s relationships with its Asian neighbours (Buckley 1997:131). In this critique, Japanese women were urged to recognise the costs of Japan’s economic success, incurred in other (often developing) countries, and frequently paid by the women in those countries. Anti-prostitution critique addresses the link between economic oppression and the increase in foreign sex workers in Japan, and emphasises the role of (Japanese) men in the maintenance of this dual-faceted oppression. The actual term “prostitution” (baishun) was altered to reflect this critical awareness -- the original Chinese characters of the term meant “selling spring”, implying the woman’s instigation. The character

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26 The Asian Women’s Foundation, founded in 1977 by Matsui and her colleagues, educates and campaigns against the effects of Japanese industry and tourism in Southeast Asia, emphasising the interconnection of Japanese living standards and poverty and environmental degradation outside Japan (Matsui, in Buckley 1996:56). The impact of this double marginalisation on women from other Asian countries is reflected in the phenomena of trafficking and prostitution within Japan.
“selling” was replaced with a homophone meaning “buying”, shifting the emphasis to the man who supports the industry (Okura 1996:113). For Matsui, the size and significance of the Japanese sex industry (known euphemistically as the mizu shōbai, or water industry) reflects the gendered inequality of the family system, and related constructions of female sexuality (Matsui, in Buckley 1997:141).

Women’s Lib activists engaged prominently in consciousness-raising, organising women’s collectives and women’s weekends, providing spaces in which women could write, discuss and plan feminist strategies for resistance and reform. The promotion of women’s space and women-centred organising encouraged the development of many small groups around the country, and the newsletters for these groups created a new communications structure— the *mini-komi* (mini communications) alternative to the *masu-komi* (mass communications) (Mackie 2003:156). *Mini-komi* involves the production and dissemination of newsletters and pamphlets, detailing group activities, events and developments and providing information for active and potential members. The *mini-komi* has allowed women a forum in which to discuss local and group concerns at a wider level. *Mini-komi* also challenges the reduction and homogenisation of Japanese feminism that occurs in mainstream media, allowing diverse foci and strands of critique (Buckley 1997:187). While *mini-komi* remains an integral feature of women’s groups, particularly non-government and small-scale groups, the internet has provided an alternative forum for communication, allowing national and international co-operation and organisation (see Warf and Grimes 1997; Polletta 1999; Onosaka 2003).

Media treatment of the Lib movement reflected the conservative norms of mainstream public and private organisations. Mackie notes that feminists of the time worked at
many parallel levels, both to reform existing media and its representation of women, and to develop new networks and publishing houses (2003:194). Ueno compares the mass media’s selective and negative treatment of the Women’s Lib movement to its treatment of the gay movement, focusing on stereotypes and “elite gays” only (Ueno and Ogura 2002:214). Apart from its treatment of the feminist movement, the mass media also elicited criticism for its role in the promulgation and promotion of stereotypical sex roles and ideals, particularly evident in advertising (Mackie 2003:174).

As second-wave feminism, characterised by the Women’s Liberation movement, drew to a close in the late 1970s in Japan, the economic growth years of the 1980s introduced a number of different perspectives on women’s issues. The economic and political stability of the 1980s encouraged a revival of conservatively defined gender roles, specifically the sararīman/sengyō shufu models.

From Lib (back) to housewives

Marriage aspirations among young women in the 1980s increased, reflecting the contemporary economic prosperity of the society in its economic “bubble” years. Women’s efforts to combine motherhood and career in the 1980s met with criticism from social commentators and educators, including women themselves. Tanaka Sumie’s piece, “Working Mothers and Lonely Children”, published in 1979, recognised women’s dissatisfaction with their lives, but argued that women who do not quit work and their hobbies to care for children are acting purely out of selfishness (Tanaka, cited in Fujita 1989:75).
This anti-working mother discourse was based on three assumptions: that the mother is the ideal caregiver; that the mother-child relationship is essential and natural; and that mothering is the most important or suitable job for women (Fujita 1989:72). Middle-class women who married during the economic growth years were likely to aspire to the full-time housewife role, even if in practice the ideal was compromised.27

Young women’s desire to become housewives – and specifically, to become full-time housewives – both supported and reformed the feminine role ideals established and promoted prior to Women’s Lib. While the full-time housewife of the 1980s remained defined by her devotion to the family and household, the decision to take up this role was influenced by negative perceptions of the workplace and career path. As Ueno notes, the 1980s trend for “marriage retirement” (kekkon taishoku) differs from previous generations in that it embodied choice (1988b:104). By choosing to become housewives, women were choosing the perceived “easy option”, defined in comparison with a standardised masculine role ideal (embodied by the sarariman), and its related hazards (karōshi, or death from overwork, fatigue and social isolation, a recognised phenomenon in Japan by this time). Exercising the option of leaving a career to become a housewife could thus be read as an exercise of agency, made in consideration of both gender role ideals and personal experiences of full-time work and/or housework. The housewife lifestyle is perceived as one in which women can pursue their own interests, constituting a kind of aristocratic class (kizoku kaikyū) (Ueno 1988b:129).

The ideal of the full-time housewife in the 1980s is thus not simply a reflexive acceptance of “traditional” gendered norms of masculine productivity and feminine

27 Ueno (1987:80) observes that by the late 1970s the sengyō shufu were being challenged to take up part-time work – the new category of kengyō shufu (part-time housewives, or housewives with part-time jobs). While the ideal of full-time mothering remained dominant, played out in advertising and media images of women-as-housewives, the rising costs of living and stagflation made the ideal increasingly inaccessible (Ueno 1987:80).
reproductivity. The idealisation of the housewife/sararīman model reflects more than a celebration of conservative and polar gender roles, though backlash can be seen as one element in support. Beyond this, however, it is important to recognise the (perceived) potential for flexibility and freedom implicit in the full-time housewife ideal. In 1988, Ueno Chizuko’s college student reflects that

No matter how much the law or society becomes able to recognise (women), it’s clear that we will not be allowed to work the same as men. Those are formal changes, and the reality is that people’s fixed ideas about women’s position will not disappear. The idea that, given this, women should try to be active in the territory that’s available to them, is linked to the full-time housewife goal (quoted in Ueno 1988b:130).

Feminist opposition to what became known as “‘housewife feminism’” led to considerable “bashing”, reflecting the reluctance of many activists to engage in radical critiques of family and heterosexuality. Ogura Chikako’s statement (in biographical data for her first publication “A New Dismantling of Sex Myths” in 1989) that her three major dislikes were “natural food, Lamaze technique and feminists who are married” provoked considerable anger, particularly among the housewife feminists organising prolifically at the time (Ueno and Ogura 2002:132). Ogura’s statement was seen as “oppressive”, and she herself a “woman who doesn’t understand women” (Ueno and Ogura 2002:133, 138). Focusing their critical lens outside the family, housewife feminists organised to facilitate changes in policy and practice in education, environment and social issues.

**Housewife/sararīman as marriage model**

The housewife/sararīman model represents a perfect gendered division of labour. The idealised interconnection between wife and housework is offset by the idealised link between husband and company, and the balance of these roles requires exclusivity. That
is to say, the housewife/sararīman model is dependent on both parties fulfilling specific duties – should the woman choose to work full-time outside the home, or the man choose not to, the balance of exchange is upset. Expressed another way, to become a full-time housewife necessitates a husband with a good income. This model assumes that the housewife wants a husband to earn a suitably high salary to support the family, and that the sararīman wants a wife who will maintain the house and raise the children.

Inherent in the housewife role is the performance of care, particularly manifest in the mothering role. As McKinlay notes, cultural constructions of motherhood have rendered nurturing natural and central to the feminine ideal (2002). The ideal of care thus encoded comprises three key strands: a focus on physical comfort, the minimisation of conflict in providing care, and the “totality of the caregiving experience” (Long 1996:160). The first of these translates to the requirement of physical attention, as illustrated by emphasis on the provision of home-cooked meals with ofukuro no aji – the taste of mother’s cooking. Indeed, the term ofukuro, (literally “honourable pocket”, but used nostalgically as a gloss for “mother”), indicates the function of physical protection implicit in the mothering role. The importance accorded to physical care may also account in part for the popularity of the “parasite single” model, discussed below. When children remain at home with their parents, the provision of physical care, such as cooking, cleaning and washing of clothes, is likely to remain the mother’s duty.

29 The emphasis on nutrition as care-giving extends beyond child-rearing period. The idealised mother’s concern for her child’s eating patterns is reflected in a 2001-2 TV advertisement for the Kansai-based Hokka Hokka Tei chain of boxed-lunch takeaway outlets. The ad depicts a young man frantically combining university study, part-time work and play (in a rock band). It ends with the young man enthusiastically consuming a hot lunch box, handed over by the young female Hokka Hokka Tei worker, and a direct spoken reassurance to the viewing mothers that “We are taking good care of your busy son”.

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The second element involves endurance and self-sacrifice, traits synonymous with the traditional mothering ideal (Iwao 1993:138). Avoidance of conflict and the maintenance of harmony are recurring themes in cultural analyses of Japan, and are simply concentrated in the mothering role, bound as it is to two distinct and sometimes conflicting subjects of obligatory care — child(ren) and husband.\textsuperscript{30} The self-sacrificial demands of childrearing may also incorporate an implicit contract of care over time — the mother cares for the child and in return the child will care for the mother in her old age (Iwao 1993:138). While care of the elderly was formerly a key feature of the daughter-in-law (\textit{yome}) role, increasingly daughters are the preferred carers.\textsuperscript{31} In this sense the perception of marriage as a contract between families, fundamental to the old \textit{ie} system, has faded. As Yamada notes, for unmarried women the birth family has replaced the marital family as the source of (unmarried) women’s economic power, because an unmarried woman may live with (and is therefore financially supported by) her birth family (1998:120). Beyond marriage, the birth parents have replaced parents-in-law as the object of women’s care, but even this relationship is weakened by changing expectations on the part of mothers and daughters.

The totality of the caregiving role reflects the primacy of care as a feminine ideal. As the performance of care is placed at the centre of the ideal woman’s daily life, activities which do not relate directly to this care — namely, work — are viewed as secondary priorities (Long 1996: 162). Work outside the home may be seen as an indirect form of

\textsuperscript{30} For more discussion of harmony and conflict avoidance in Japanese culture, see: Nakane (1970) and Hendry (1987:43-6, 203-4).

\textsuperscript{31} In my discussions with Japanese women I encountered a definite resistance to the old model of \textit{yome/shūome} (daughter-in-law/mother-in-law) care, on the part of both potential mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. While in general women expressed disinclination to be cared for by their daughters in old age, questions of traditional (three-generation) living arrangements clarified the distinctions between daughter and daughter-in-law, “a stranger” (\textit{tanin}). There’s definitely a difference between a daughter and daughter-in-law...So even if you fight, you worry and...so you’ve made up by the next day (Masaki-san, 53, housewife 20/01/02).
care, in that many women enter the part-time labour market to pay for the increasing costs of education rather than luxury consumption. However, given that even part-time work detracts from a woman’s physical capacity for care-giving, it remains counter to the feminine ideal. This conflict of ideal and actual performance raises some pertinent questions: how has paid work influenced the construction of contemporary feminine roles, and to what extent have legislative reforms altered idealised gender roles in the family?

**Women at work and/or at home**

Yoshizawa argues that the Women’s Lib movement in Japan focused on the deconstruction of the “fantasy of the modern family” (*kindai kazoku gensō*) (1990:99). She suggests that while post-war Japanese society successfully transplanted the Western nuclear family model promoted by the U.S Occupation, the concept of “family” remained essentially Japanese, grounded not in an Oedipal patriarchy but in the “myth of maternity” (Yoshizawa 1990:100). Thus it is the myth of maternity, in which a woman “does not become a mother through giving birth to a child, but through marriage becomes an all-encompassing mother”, that oppresses modern Japanese women (Yoshizawa 1990:100). The centrality of maternity in Japanese feminism is reflected in its presence in core debates in suffrage, second-wave and later theoretical debates, including the ecological feminist debate between Ueno Chizuko and Aoki Yayoi (Yoshizawa 1990:102)

In May 1985, at the end of the United Nations International Decade for Women, the Japanese government introduced the Equal Employment Opportunity Act or EEOL (*Danjo Koyō Kikai Kintō Hō*), which became effective the following April (Mackie

The significance of the term “equality” is reflected in conflicting interpretations of the word (in this case kinto) in employment practice. Mackie argues that protective legislation prohibiting women from working late nights is grounded in assumptions of maternity – the legislation protects not only physical mothers, but all potential mothers, that is all women (2003:181). Furthermore, the translation by employers of “equality” to “equal treatment” justified the removal of provisions for gender-differential services such as maternity leave, and drew on an implicitly masculine model of the worker (Mackie 2003:182). The inability of female workers to perform “equally” in this sense is directly related to their performance of non-paid work, namely household labour and childcare, promoting the ideal of full-time maternity among female workers in general and mothers in particular.

The Agnes Chan debate of the mid-1980s drew the “motherhood versus career” problem into the public and feminist spotlights. Chan, a popular singer, was roundly criticised
for bringing her three month-old son into work (at a TV station) and for breastfeeding him in the workplace (Chan and Hara 1992). Feminists such as Ueno Chizuko saw Chan as an example of feminist capability, successfully combining child-rearing with career and only incurring public wrath because the former (ideal) was seen to be compromised by the latter (incidental). Feminist critics such as Ehara Yumiko point out, however, that breastfeeding her baby in the workplace creates a perfect performance of motherhood, “pure and blameless”, drawing motherhood as an essential feature of womanhood (Ehara 1990:103). Putting motherhood at the fore reflects not so much the balance of career and motherhood, as the overriding significance of motherhood vis-à-vis career. For this reason Ehara argues that the equation of Agnes Chan with “working mother” is potentially harmful to Japanese feminism (1990:103).

In line with the 1992 Day Care Leave Act, all workers (irrespective of gender) in the public and private sector are entitled to one year’s leave after the birth of a child (Hayashi 1995:82). However, these laws have been limited in effect, simply because they fail to acknowledge family models and ideal gender roles. When combining career and family, women balance economic and social demands. When the economic (and other) rewards of paid labour do not balance the costs incurred (socially, emotionally and physically), it is work that is likely to give way to family.

Renshawe draws an analogy between women in industrialised societies and the puppeteers of traditional bunraku (Renshawe 1999:140). While women perform essential roles within the home and in the labour force, they are rendered invisible by a “collective, unconscious agreement” to view only the “on-stage” masculine component (Renshawe 1999:140). This masking undermines women’s efforts to collaborate as a

32 In bunraku, life-size puppets are operated by puppeteers dressed entirely in black. While at first somewhat obvious, the skill of these puppeteers is such that they soon become invisible, entirely overshadowed by the expressive puppets they control.
group, by ensuring that the greatest chance for success is as an exceptional individual rather than a typical representative. This is because the exceptional individual does not make – or need to make – demands for gender equal treatment in the workplace, because she is an individual and (presumably) has overcome all personal obstacles already. If women were successful collectively, “acknowledged as leaders or key actors”, then they would be able to demand more and the benefits would be spread further (Renshawe 1999:140).

Of course, given the ideals and expectations of work placed on men, it is not surprising that many women shy from the male work pattern. Pictures painted of the (middle-aged) Japanese male typically depict overworked, under-stimulated and physically exhausted individuals whose labours ultimately alienate them from the family, the very group for whom all labour is undertaken (Woronoff 1997:229). Karōshi, alienation from the family and a lack of intimate social connections represent the dark side of the masculine ideal of (full-time) work, and create a distinctly narrow world for the typical sarariman (Renshawe 1999:217). For these men, retirement may actually widen the gap between self and family. The phrases sodai gomi (oversised rubbish) and nure ochiba (wet fallen leaves – hard to sweep out of the house), clearly illustrate the perceptions of retired men as clinging, lacking in purpose and a nuisance to their wives and family (Higuchi 1990:52).

Women may be discouraged (implicitly or explicitly) from pursuing a fast-track career, but it is the flipside of this very discrimination which exempts them from the pressure of

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33 According to a Nippon Hōsō Kyoku (NHK) population survey, in 2000, 30% of working men were working ten hour or longer days. For women, the figure is 9% (White Paper on Women 2001: 282). The gap reflects the relative proportion of part-time work for women, and suggests that the sarariman lifestyle is physically incompatible with household work and family participation.

34 Higuchi further defines the nure ochiba man as “a ‘company person’ who, after retirement, cannot become independent in the household” (家庭で自立できない随年人間の夫).
having to have such a career, and from the side-effects of the career lifestyle. Thus, without overlooking the significant obstacles to women’s participation in the full-time workforce, it is important to acknowledge that women’s work patterns may reflect a selective appropriation of feminine ideals, prioritising flexibility and informal authority over wage and structure.

Alternatives to the masculine corporate model of employment, including part-time work and office work, are marked by society as age-specific and/or bound to the periods between care-giving. Part-time work (pāto) attracts women on the second slope of the M curve – that is, women whose children have entered schooling and therefore no longer require twenty-four hour attention.

Part-time workers may challenge the masculinisation of work, in which “company warriors” compete to display the greatest physical effort and sacrifice of self (Kondo 1990:298). Exchanging security for flexibility in the workplace, the women workers in Kondo’s study of a confectionary factory adopt a feminised work style. By this I do not mean simply that part-time work is itself feminised (read: marginalised, under-paid and unstable)— this is a truism. Of significance at a sociological level is that these women do not aspire to the working patterns of the men who are rewarded within the conventional company structure. That is, for such women it is by remaining marginal that they are, in effect, empowered (Kondo 1990:299). This potential for resistance is greatly qualified, however, by the fact that in many cases “part-time” is actually a gloss for “without benefits”, as hours of work match those in the “full-time” sphere (Bishop 2000:24).
For working wives and mothers, working patterns are further complicated by attachment to ideals of nurturing and care. Work outside the home conflicts with the full-time aspect of the ideal of care. Thus having children may be seen — both by women and their employers — to compromise a woman’s capacity to work (Renshawe 1999:146; Roberts 2002:73). These concerns reflect the discomfort of divergence from the feminine ideal, where the family and its well-being are central. However, the actual competency with which many women do combine part-time work with child-rearing suggests the inadequacy of the ideal as a measure of women’s experiences.

The work of child-rearing for full-time working mothers has two problematic strands. Firstly, the woman must eschew the socialised demands of total care-giving, nurturing and self-sacrifice which underpin the ideal of Japanese motherhood (Long 1996; Fujita 1989:68). Secondly, a full-time worker must have or create a network of people who are willing and able to support her in her efforts. This network is likely to be comprised of the woman’s husband, her mother and/or mother-in-law, relatives, neighbours and day-care workers (Fujita 1989:68). While women with greater financial resources may be more able to shift the centre of the network to paid workers, it is clear that even women in executive positions depend to some extent on the good-will of their immediate family (namely husbands) in order to maintain the balance. Furthermore, this good-will depends not just on the personal beliefs of the family or husband, but also on the material conditions of their own workplace, for example in allowing flexibility in working hours. The expectations inherent in ideals of gender norms, and particularly femininity, are at the foundation of workplace structure. These expectations are supported by the limited availability, restrictive conditions and prohibitive cost of childcare (Jolivet 1997; Roberts 2002).
Similarly, Haruka argues that it is not simply the physical demands of pregnancy and child-rearing, but also attitudes surrounding these which prevent women from combining family and career (Haruka 2001:243). She suggests that it is the socially prescribed label of “too hard” which causes women themselves to sacrifice their careers. Without this label, and with greater social encouragement, women might choose more readily to continue working.

Women’s balancing-act of family and career remains a central concern of Japanese feminists, even as the number of women choosing to attempt the balance diminishes. It is in part the failure to address such core issues that has seen Japan’s marriage and fertility rate drop in the last decade, and that has encouraged the rise of feminist discourse which deconstructs, problematises and sometimes repudiates marriage and motherhood as goals for women. Legislation such as the Law for a Gender Equal Society aims to reduce the unqualified demands of care placed on women in the household, but does not problematise the presumption of heterosexuality, let alone the ideal of motherhood.

**Legislative changes and the workplace**

Inoue Reiko, in her introduction to the AMPO (Japan Asia Quarterly Review) collection on the Japanese women’s movement, predicted that in the 1995 UN Beijing Conference Japan would focus on two challenging goals: equality and the role of Japan in global poverty (Inoue in AMPO 1996:xxi). The development of legislation such as the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society (discussed in greater depth in Chapter Five) and the Anti-Stalker Law reflects efforts to achieve the former of these goals, powered by women’s groups and activists and implemented by the government. The recognition of
Japan's role in global poverty has been taken up both at a governmental level, and by the non-government organisations (NGO) and non-profit organisations (NPO) that proliferated in Japan through the 1990s.35

While young women's perceptions of formal versus substantive change may have changed since the 1980s, the prospect of a gender-free workplace remains distant to many, if not most, Japanese women. What has arguably changed, however, is the expectation that the maintenance and care of the household will be exclusively the housewife's responsibility. The promotion of "gender-free" within families is tied to the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society, which aims to encourage "gender-free" at all levels from government down.

The drop in marriage and fertility rates can be seen in part as a response to the perceived gap between formal change and substantive change. While laws such as the EEOL officially mandate gender equality in the workplace, workers, and particularly full-time workers, remain bound to gender ideals and expectations, and individual compliance with the law remains subject to external socio-economic factors. The EEOL in particular has been criticised as a law "without teeth", for its lack of explicit penalties (Hayashi 2000). Furthermore, predictions for the EEOL, even in its infancy, noted that it is contingent on social practices and gender mores (Edwards 1988:249). Similarly, while the Law for a Gender Equal Society encourages the development of "gender-barrier-free" households, the expectations of marriage (including responsibility for children and household management) represent an obstacle to career promotion.

35 Hirata reports that while Japan became the largest aid donor in the world in the 1990s, the target regions and makeup of official aid has reflected the Japanese economic and political agenda (1998). "Soft aid" projects focusing on poverty alleviation and the development of human capital have involved collaboration between the government and an increasingly influential NGO sector (Hirata 1998: 317).
Ogasawara observes that analysis of the gendered workplace needs to address links between collective status and individual opportunities (1998:6). While women have succeeded at the executive level, the majority of Japanese women do not aspire to let alone attain managerial and high-level employment positions (see Renshaw 1999). The connections between gender-specific opportunities and obligations complicate depictions of the workplace as oppressive for either gender exclusively. The responsibility and potential success attainable by salaried men (at all levels of power) should not be seen as the binary opposite of the respective unavailability of these to female colleagues. There are a number of factors – including the nature of labour-organisation in Japanese companies, and attitudes towards gender roles outside work – which affect the ways and extent to which success within the company is desirable and attainable to female workers.

This is certainly not to say that the gendered imbalance of opportunities in the workplace is equitable or justifiable on social grounds. My point is rather that women who work as “office ladies” (OLs) or who choose the non-career track, are not necessarily acting under purely patriarchal pressures. Rather, the OL track can represent an informed escape from the work-related, gender-based norms which see men as workers and women as housewives. Conceding the possibility for promotion and “legitimacy” as full-time workers, OLs also avoid the responsibility and expectations placed on such workers – or perhaps merely avoid the penalties for breach.

Eco-feminism, the “Housewife Movement” and women’s groups
Women’s involvement in environmental, education and consumer-rights issues does not necessarily flow from a feminist agenda, and in fact women activists may distance themselves from the women’s movement, women’s lib and/or feminism (Brown and Ferguson 1995:146). However, in Japan in the “bubble” years of the 1980s, particular strands of feminist theory dovetailed with the activism of women and women’s groups, promoting the mainstreaming of concepts such as feminism and women’s issues in post-Women’s Lib Japanese society.

One theoretical stand promoted and incorporated into activism during this time was ecological feminism (eco-feminism). The eco-feminist movement in Japan grew from engagement with Ivan Illich’s 1983 book *Gender*, and its discussion of the impacts of industrialisation and modernisation. Japanese eco-feminism posited that pre-modern society was founded on the binary opposition of the masculine principle and the feminine principle (Kanai 1996:10; Sakamoto 1990:205). Industrialisation caused an erosion of these binaries, leading to a more mechanised humanity. Eco-feminists argue for a revival of the more “human” pre-modern social model, and emphasise sexual difference as the natural result of this model (Sakamoto 1990:205). The symbolic equation of masculinity with industrialisation and civilisation, and femininity with maternity and nature underpins the eco-feminist critique of modernity (Sakamoto 1990:212). The focus on motherhood as a natural function of femininity provided theoretical support for the housewife feminist movement, promoting women’s organisation in areas tied to care and nurturing. Eco-feminist theory thus drew on the assumption of an essential and natural femininity, tying issues of ecological and social concern to inherently feminine and (in some cases) inherently Japanese notions of nurturing and harmony with the environment (Kanai 1996:11; Aoki, in Buckley 1997:2).
Opposition to the eco-feminist discourse emerged in the “Eco-Feminism Debate”, also known as the “Ueno and Aoki Debate”, after its main players (Sakamoto 1990:205; Buckley 1997:2). Ueno and other feminist opponents of the eco-feminist model argued against the naturalisation of sexual differences and the romanticisation of pre-modern society (Sakamoto 1990:211-4; Aoki, in Buckley 1997:5). The conflation of femininity with motherhood and a strong opposition to reproductive technologies drew particular criticism, with the former stance labelled “particularly risky” and “dangerous politically” by Ueno (Ueno, in Buckley 1997:281). However, Buckley argues that Aoki’s critique of reproductive and other forms of technology reveal attention to the gaps between first and third-world women, refuting suggestions of technophobia (Buckley 1997:2-3).

Organisations such as the Seikatsu Kurabu Seikyō (Lifestyle Club Co-operative), which has 240,000 members nationally, rely heavily on housewife labour and support, but this is not exclusively the result of a consciously-focused feminist agenda. Rather, as Iwane observes “People who work are not in the community. The people who are left there are children and housewives” (Iwane, in LeBlanc 1999:128) The feminine bias of the Co-Op and other community groups is therefore tied to women’s physical availability, which is in turn related to feminine ideals of family-centredness. In this way women’s participation in community-based organisations is intrinsically tied to the housewife status or performance, not only in terms of physical presence but also significantly in the performative experiences of the housewife role – the practised ideals of nurturing, family-centredness and hard-work. As Iwane-san, one of LeBlanc’s informants notes, “If you don’t become a mother, you won’t understand a mother’s point of view” (quoted in LeBlanc 1999:149).
The incorporation of housewives and by extension femininity into large organisations such as unions has a two-way effect: both legitimising the authority of women who would otherwise be excluded from public or corporate power, and legitimising (by “feminising”) organisations which would tend to be seen as hierarchical, impersonal and politically corrupt (LeBlanc 1999:149). While the performance of housewifely duties may be jeopardised by women’s involvement in community organisations (in terms of time and energy constraints), participation in the Co-Op and related community organisations can also be seen as an extension of the kind of household-centred consumption that has powered the Japanese economy since the 1960s, a decade which saw the “three household treasures” (TV, refrigerator and washing machine) became institutional in Japanese homes.36

The “housewife” label is not simply an ascribed ideal, but an identity taken up, sometimes strategically, by women themselves (LeBlanc 1999:28). The title reflects a woman’s marital and to a certain extent, economic status, implying reliance on a single, masculine wage. It also connotes a full-time focus on care-giving, an inherent ideal of femininity and implicit marker of feminine achievement, even in light of career and domestically unrelated achievements (Long 1997:156). Women who are focused full-time (or even part-time) on housework (kaji), child-rearing (ikuji) and care of the elderly (kaigo), may therefore be seen (and see themselves) as the agents for the house, children and the physically/mentally incapable and elderly. This implication of agency means that “housewife” can become a gloss for “one who works for the interests of home, family and those without a voice in society”. This definition echoes Strathern’s observation that agency does not necessarily involve acting for oneself, and neither is the self “necessarily the source of the act’s effectiveness” (Strathern 1987b:22). The

36 The “three household treasures” represented by ownership of black and white televisions, for example, jumped from 7.8% in 1957 to 90.3% in 1965 (Uchino 1983:122).
irony of this agency is that it rests on the tenuous and marginal authority afforded to
housewives: “the same label that makes them recognizable to the public seems to
disqualify them from participation in much of public life” (LeBlanc 1999:28).

“Housewife feminism” (and organisation that has flowed from the housewife feminist
movement) focuses on issues relating to the family, the household and its practical and
theoretical maintenance. While eco-feminist models encourage women’s political
engagement on the grounds of essential femininity (the feminine principle), I would
argue that contemporary activists have disengaged the theoretical basis of the model
while maintaining the structural support of the “feminine as nurturing” ideal. While
women in the Co-op therefore may not see themselves as feminists, their manipulation
of the housewife role is nonetheless transformative and empowering in the feminist
sense.

Aoki Yayoi argues that the incentive to organise in a political capacity must be tied to
ideological goals rather than simply the maintenance of material comfort (in Buckley
1997:9). She sees feminism in the 1990s as lacking such ideological foundations, bound
up in the pursuit of individual comfort and prosperity, and failing to acknowledge the
relationship between Japanese women and women in other (specifically developing)
countries (Aoki, in Buckley 1997:8,10). The lack of consciousness, argue Aoki,
overrides the positive effect of the international activities of certain women’s groups,
such as sending blankets to Africa (Aoki, in Buckley 1997:10).

Women’s involvement in the Co-op and similar community organisations, such as local
residential and cultural committees, is therefore intrinsically tied to their status as
housewives, because it is as representatives of the family (or household) that women
join (LeBlanc 1999:138). It is the intrinsic connection between the household – and implicitly, the roles performed there by women – and the organisation, that forms the foundation for “housewife feminism” and has encouraged the subsequent spread of non-government and non-profit women’s groups in recent years. While I concur with LeBlanc’s observation that women join co-ops primarily as housewives and secondarily as women/individuals, in other (non-residential or community-based) groups, housewives participate as women, and as women whose concerns and identity are pinned to their domestic status as mothers, wives and daughters. Focus on issues directly related to these roles reveals a feminist perspective that looks to affirm “women’s power and experiences (by focusing) on women’s activities as they are” (Khor 1999:648).

Furthermore, while the term “feminism” and eco-feminist theory may no longer feature conspicuously in women’s activism, the promotion of women’s organisation – the capacity to effect social change through collaboration, education and action – retains its significance for contemporary Japanese society.

Ueno Chizuko has argued that “(m)ore than anything, feminism was a movement for self-liberation and self-rescue” (Ueno and Ogura 2002:27). While some feminists may be critical of the extent to which such self-liberation can occur within the boundaries of marriage, the roles of mother, wife and daughter represent focal issues for women’s groups, and strategic ground upon which to organise. The incorporation of community activism as an extension of the “housewife” role, and the organisations which have grown as a result of women’s participation, represent the potential yield of feminism developed within the borders of family and marriage.
The "woman-centredness" of Japanese women's groups noted by Khor reflects the gendered expectations, ideals and role-divisions experienced by their members (1999:651). While this has the positive outcome of legitimising women's experiences and women's viewpoints, the potential for change beyond these roles may be limited by the agenda of the groups and the feminist praxis they create. There is inevitable, if unintended, exclusion in the projects of wives and mothers working to improve the social, legal and political situation for other (and future) wives and mothers.

Women's groups which can be characterised as part or reflective of the "housewife movement" may be similarly criticised for their failure to problematise the patriarchal socio-political framework within which they (comfortably) reside. The tendency to organise around gender-specific goals, particularly related to household, family or childrearing roles, reflects the significance of these roles in women's lives and identities, and reveals the considerable extent to which gendered role division has been incorporated into feminist praxis in women's groups in Japan.

While some non-government women's groups organise around specific issues, in many cases the underlying objective is reform of gender norms and ideals which impact negatively on women's (and men's) lives. In some cases it is precisely because the women are married that they are able to organise and participate in groups working towards reform. Women who work full-time to support themselves and/or dependants have limited time and access to groups which meet during the day, often in suburban residences and without child-care available, and are therefore removed from the "community" referred to by LeBlanc's informant Iwane-san.
(Hetero)sexuality and feminism since Lib

Questions of women’s sexuality and gender roles have featured in contemporary feminist activism and discourse in a number of ways. While Ogura argues that Japanese feminism ignored sexuality until the recent advent of sexuality studies, arguably the construction and implications of women’s sexuality have long been reflected in critical engagement with issues such as prostitution, reproductive health and feminine role ideals (2003:212). Anti-prostitution activists challenge the hegemony of masculine sexuality over female bodies, ecofeminists question the implications of medical technology for women’s bodies and advocates of gender equality challenge the full-time housewife/full-time mother ideal of femininity. Sexuality features, sometimes explicitly and often implicitly, in discourses that address Japanese women’s inherently subordinate position in the family, the workplace and society. While a central focus on queer or lesbian sexualities has not been a feature of mainstream contemporary feminism, and remains outside the scope of official government discourse on women, the recent work of feminists such as Kitahara Minori (discussed in greater depth in Chapter Six) challenges normative heterosexuality and promotes sexuality as a (or perhaps “the”) central feminist concern.

According to Miya Yoshiko, individual women’s liberation is essential to the success of feminist politics (in Buckley 1997:160). “Liberation” for Miya refers particularly to the status of the physical female body, and requires the recognition and deconstruction of taboos around sexuality and reproductive health (Miya, in Buckley 1997:161). The promotion of sexuality as an issue separate from but related to reproduction represents one aspect of this process, and, while initially identified during Lib and post-Lib feminisms, remains a “women’s issue” for address in government and non-government
forums. An indication of this focus is in the number of seminars organised around reproductive health and rights.

Hara Minako argues that Japanese women's sexual self-determination and freedom of expression have been won by the work of self-identified lesbian and bisexual women (1996:129). This work has involved the deconstruction of heterosexuality and marriage as central to ideals of femininity, promoting critical engagement with the family as the site at which these ideals are maintained. While this critique of heterosexism has its roots in queer and lesbian activism, Hara suggests that the implications of the heterosexual ideal extend to non-queer women.

Heterosexual marriage openly justifies sanctions against any voluntary expression of women's sexuality in any other context, so the 'lesbian wife' is not considered worthy of protection, and the 'lesbian lover' appears to deserve punishment (Hara 1996:131).

According to Hara, sexual self-determination represents an obstacle to the fulfilment of ideal (domestic) femininity, which is primarily reproductive and responsive. However, as Kitahara argues, it is not heterosexuality but rather heteronormativity that impedes women's sexual self-determination.

As a sex goods business-owner and writer, Kitahara promotes women's sexuality as a central feminist issue and her work represents an amalgamation of radical and popular feminist approaches. While publishing frequently in mainstream newspapers, women's magazines and online, Kitahara's message remains strikingly left-of-centre: Women, enjoy your sexuality in whatever way and with whatever partner you choose. The feminist message in Kitahara's work stems from its women-centredness more than theoretical sophistication, and insofar as she remains outside academia, her work is likely to continue to navigate a path between subculture and mainstream.
When Ogura Chikako made the comment “I hate married feminists” fifteen years ago, the reaction was dramatic and critical. Ueno reflects that the resulting backlash was a “litmus test”, proving the extent to which marriage was ignored by Japanese feminists (Ueno and Ogura 2002:213). The comment touched a raw nerve particularly for women who had married and then “realised” feminism – the Japanese women experiencing Betty Friedan’s “problem with no name”, for whom a (married) “housewife feminism” represented the only feminist option (Ueno and Ogura 2002:124)

Drawing Ogura’s comment as reference, Kitahara Minori replaces “married” with “de facto” (jitijitsukon) feminists (Kitahara 2003). She is critical of “(f)eminists who say ‘I have no intention of marrying’, as they go home every night to a house owned by a man”. For Kitahara, it is not simply whether women enter the marriage system, but rather the physical act of living with a man that challenges feminist integrity.

Similarly, it is not simply the act of heterosexual sex, but rather the assumptions of heterosexuality which stimulate Kitahara’s critique. Ogura is critical of the promotion of queer theory, arguing that appropriation of gay and lesbian subcultures by mainstream and apolitical media diminishes the actual (presumably social and political) meaning of gay and lesbian identity (Ueno and Ogura 2002:216). By contrast Kitahara, who “sleeps with boys and also sleeps with girls”, places her heterosexual self as a premise in her discussions of sexuality, because it is this self which is most conflicted and therefore least developed (Kitahara 2003). Accused of “pretending to be hetero”, she argues that she “must not run away from her heterosexuality”, but rather should challenge the aspect of her sexual self most easily obscured in contemporary Japanese

37 http://www.lovepiececlub.com/kitaharaframeset.html 24/02/03 No longer online.
society, founded on heterosexist norms and ideals (Kitahara 2003). Further, argues Kitahara, lesbians and bisexual women are not free from heterosexist ideals simply by virtue of their female partners: "(e)ven if pussy-owners are having sex with each other, it doesn’t mean they can escape from heterosexist society" (Kitahara 2003).³⁹

In her critique of de facto marriage, Kitahara acknowledges that she herself has twice lived (romantically) with men. By implicating herself in the discourse both as critic and subject, she presents feminism as fluid and grounded, set within the context of women’s lives and therefore contingent upon experience and growth. The connection between experiences of sex and sexuality and feminism is underscored throughout Kitahara’s publications, and represents the kind of feminist praxis that Misciagno (1997) details.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided a brief synopsis of the changes encountered and engendered by Japanese women over the last century. By referencing these changes to developments in feminism, I aimed to achieve two specific goals. The first is simply to illuminate the relationship between feminist organisation and the lived experiences of Japanese women – the causal connection between the activism of the first-wave feminists and (for example) contemporary OLs. This is an acknowledgement of the dues paid and opportunities gained by women for self-determination and empowerment, and it is this acknowledgement that underpins this thesis as a whole.

Secondly, my aim in this chapter has been to introduce the diversity of theoretical and practical interactions among women and women’s organisations. While legislative and

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³⁸ [http://www.lovepiececlub.com/kitaharaframeset.html](http://www.lovepiececlub.com/kitaharaframeset.html) 24/02/03 No longer online.
³⁹ [http://www.lovepiececlub.com/kitaharaframeset.html](http://www.lovepiececlub.com/kitaharaframeset.html) 24/02/03 No longer online.
political reforms allow women today more freedom to combine work and family, and may thus be seen to represent an element of feminist success, the greater success is the debate and discussion which such reforms have stimulated, and the analysis and organisation that have arisen from dissent. Thus while the 1986 EEOL aimed to promote equal employment practices for female and male workers, it operated on the assumption that women are able (as well as willing) to engage in paid labour under the same conditions as men (Mackie 1995b:98). The insufficient provision of (often prohibitively expensive) public-care facilities, for children and the elderly, has further compromised the capacity of women to engage in labour outside the home and family (Roberts 2002: 58). The creation of an “equal playing field” meant (in effect, if not intention) that expectations on women were stepped up to match those placed on men – hence the loosening of restrictions on women’s working hours and the potential for job transfers which had previously been an exclusively male obligation (Nakano 1996:65; Mackie 1995b:100).

Opposition to the underlying assumptions of the law manifested in some areas as a revival of the housewife ideal. For others, dissatisfaction with this law was a stimulus to develop a broader-based, socially-focused legislation, and helped to produce the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society, discussed in greater depth in Chapter Five. This legislation has in turn provoked debate over the nature of families and the implications of resistance to marriage and childrearing.

The diversity of Japanese feminism is intrinsic and inevitable. To attempt to define Japanese feminism seems an enormous and unnecessary task, demanding elision, generalisation and categorical divisions catastrophic in a discourse that avoids all such tools. Divergence among feminist scholars and activists has featured strongly in each
wave of feminism. These differences have stimulated productive dialogue and have encouraged the development of feminist analysis and critique, but have also led to redefinitions of the feminist playing field. Essential differences in key issues make feminists such as Ueno Chizuko wary of the implications of the generalised term “feminist”. Referring to a feminist who supports the separate-surname reform, Ueno observes that she does not feel confident that simply “because (a woman is) a feminist we can understand each other” (Ueno and Ogura 2002:90).

The implication that feminism bridges all gaps between women is politically strategic but ideologically and practically conflicted. Ueno’s observation suggests that the term “feminist” should be interpreted as a self-ascribed identity as much as an identification decided by the reader or subject of the discourse. The fluidity of the term and its definitions is a critical factor in its public reception and currency, allowing for women with significantly conflicting stances to fall together into one political and theoretical box. The drawing of subjectively defined borders of “feminism” at once enhances and stifles the potential of feminist organisation and critique – while including all feminists means feminism has greater chance of public support, compromise require the collapse of the principles from which critical engagement and reform develop.
SECTION TWO

Government and Non-Government Sites for Feminist Agency
This Section examines the functions and relationships of government and non-government groups addressing women’s issues, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and observations made in Kansai, from 2000 to 2002. Focusing on three particular women’s groups and one government-run women’s centre, this examination aims to explicate the roles played by these organisations in promoting feminist agency and praxis among a relatively diverse audience.

Presented between the studies of women’s groups (in Chapter Four) and women’s centres (in Chapter Six) is a discussion of the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society and related legislative reforms that have brought women’s issues into the political and social fore. The Law represents a foundation for official campaigns to address the changing gender-related needs and concerns of contemporary Japanese society. Built on this foundation, women’s centres function as an intermediary between state and non-state, and represent a physical site for co-operation on issues related to women’s health, family roles, education and status in society. In the dialogue between the Japanese state and its citizens, legislation represents a key expression of the official government stance, and women’s centres represent this expression writ large and publicly accessible.

Criticism of the Law for a Gender Equal Society shares some similarities with criticism of government-operated women’s centres. Both are criticised by women’s groups for their limited efficacy – the Law, for being too vague and the centres for being too rigid. Anti-feminist critics have argued that the Law has been forced upon the Japanese public by the government and governmental organisations, both Japanese and international (namely the International Labour Organisation and United Nations). Women’s centres, with their feminist counselling services and assertiveness-training courses, might
similarly be viewed as government (and therefore tax-payer)-sponsored sites for the deconstruction of Japanese ideals relating to gender, the family and social morés.

The limitations of the Law and government-run women’s centres are rooted in their bureaucratic nature, as official implements of gender reform. The rigidity and inefficiency that bind women’s centres are linked to the source of their power – government resources, which flow through government structures.

Non-government women’s groups represent a forum for focus on questions of gender and gender inequality in a personal context and in the broader society. In contrast with women’s centres, these groups can be as focused, specialist and efficient as their members determine. While non-government women’s groups encourage reform at the personal (particularly familial) level, government-funded women’s centres in Japan implement official gender-reform policies with the aim of promoting broader social and structural change. Women’s centres work within and sometimes beyond official (legislative and bureaucratic) discourse on family, reproduction and gender roles, and represent a bridge between government and NGO actors involved in women’s issues.
CHAPTER FOUR

Women’s groups, agency and feminist identification

My aims in this chapter are twofold: Firstly, I examine the perceptions of feminism and women’s organisation amongst group members. Intertwined in these perceptions are issues of cross-cultural interpretation, the language and perspective of feminist discourse and the social and self-created expectations of women. I propose that implications of the word “feminism” in the Japanese context render problematic its use by women’s groups and individual members, such that explicit feminist identification can be seen as the specific product of certain social, cultural and linguistic factors. What do Japanese women mean when they identify themselves as “feminists”, and how is this perception developed or stifled within a women’s group? What implications flow from feminist identification for women in these groups and in the broader society?

Secondly, I provide an overview of the ways that Japanese women’s groups can stimulate feminist practice among members, and examine the agency of women as members and outside the groups. In doing so, I am conscious of the distinction between “resistance” and “agency” discussed in Chapter One, and of the need for particular care not to “romanticizing resistance” (Abu-Lughod 1990). I follow Parker’s definitions of “agency” as referring to “a capacity for pragmatism, for meaning- and identity-making, which is not necessarily radical or revolutionary in intent” and of resistance as “more specifically reserved for intended, directed, radical or revolutionary practice” (Parker 2005b:65).

My attention to these aspects of women’s organisations is not incidental. The initial decision to participate in and observe women’s groups grew from the observation that
feminism tended not to be explicitly identified by Japanese women as a force in their lives. Thus while feminist texts abound in bookshops and gender studies courses have become common in universities, feminism as an ideological practice – that is, as an explicitly-identified and consciously adopted way-of-life – remains outside most women’s experience.

And yet the sheer number of women’s groups in Japan, with their enthusiastic attention to “women’s issues” (including child-rearing, elder-care, sexual discrimination and media literacy) suggested that in certain forums at least, feminist practice is a significant force in women’s lives. Furthermore, through participant observation and interviews conducted in three women’s groups, it became clear that group participation can and often does have a subtle but distinctly enabling impact on individual members. Members spoke of the group as a space in which they could question, learn, discuss and sometimes share. Beyond these explicit acknowledgements, the informal discussions and exchanges between members indicate the capacity of the group to extend and increase feminist knowledge, in the sense that such knowledge flows from critical examination of women’s lived experiences. This capacity is not uniform or constant across the three groups examined, and of course this observation should not be taken as descriptive of all Japanese women’s groups. However, I argue that organisation around “women’s issues”, that is, the issues flowing from women’s experiences, inherently offers the potential for producing feminist knowledge and praxis, and it is from this potential that agency can grow and develop.

My focus on the three women’s groups then addresses two linked questions: To what extent do these groups facilitate agency, and to what extent does this agency and its
facilitation constitute feminism? I explore the relevance of groups as a site from which to explore feminism and women’s agency in contemporary Japan.

**Interpreting feminist language**

The English terms “feminist” and “feminism” are laden with a variety of assumptions in Japan. Etymologically, the katakana-isation of the word – feminism to feminizumu – renders it an import (gairaigo) in exactly the same way as words such as curry, soccer or t-shirt (karē, sakkā and ti-shatsu respectively). What is problematic about the use of feminizumu is that it may encourage the mistaken implication that the concept, like the t-shirt, is of Anglo origin and therefore “not indigenous” to Japan, and as being positioned “outside the boundaries of patriarchal Japanese thought and traditional notions of female identity” (Chaplin 2001: 56).

In all my discussions and interviews I have used the word feminizumu, which is listed in all Japanese dictionaries and is a commonly recognised (if not understood) term in social studies spheres. My concern is not that the word is unfamiliar or out of popular currency, nor would I suggest that the word be replaced with a character-based Japanese word such as fujin kenronja (women’s rights theorist), which has its own imports. Rather I suggest a need for awareness of potential distance which the word “feminizumu” can create, supporting the belief that feminism as a concept is transplanted and non-Japanese.

Saitō notes that while an intercultural flow in feminist information can influence the development of local feminism, “it is not so simple for a foreign feminism to take root

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40 Chaplin here refers to the katakana word *moga*, a Japanese English term referring to “modern women” (modern girls) of the Meiji period.
as the basic ideology of a movement in another country" (in Buckley 1997:256). Setting aside questions of the origins and influences of non-Japanese feminisms, what is of significance is the way that these influences are perceived by women, and particularly those outside the academic sphere in which these issues circulate.

Coming here... (I've become aware) that you have to be careful with words, like saying "mailperson" instead of "mailman". I'm doing this more and more but I'm the type who doesn't really notice whether it's "man" or whatever (laughter) (Taguchi-san, Women's Projects, 13/04/01).41

Taguchi-san identifies non-sexist language in English, as a signal of feminist consciousness. While the Japanese language offers a number of asexual words (such as hito, or mono) for "person", the association of feminism with this particular linguistic issue – of using "man" as a gloss for "human" – suggests that this issue has been absorbed from English-language feminists.42 In this sense, interpretation of the word "feminism" is a partially transforming process – it is an English word filtered through Japanese language but retaining its foreign accent.

When the group contains both foreign and Japanese members, the problem of interpretation becomes more complicated, as negotiation of language leads to negotiation of identities – that is, the identities of individuals within the group and of the group as a whole. Thus, the use of English words such as "feminist" "wimmin" and "women" is problematic when the members are from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The political and cultural nuances of the word "wimmin", for example, reflect a specifically English language opposition to the linguistic definition of women as "of men". For this reason, the word has a different import outside of English-

41 See Table 1.2 for biographical details of Women's Projects members.
42 Representations of non-Japanese societies, particularly Western societies, as progressive and liberal to women appeared frequently in both Women's Projects and Benkyō discussions. My own positionality as an Australian significantly influenced the direction and nature of these discussions. These representations were explored in Chapter One.
speaking societies, which may lead women of non-English backgrounds to question the relevance of the word to their feminist organisation (Bulbeck 1998:200; Ariffin 1999; Prindeville 2000; Flores 2000).

This issue was of considerable significance in the group WWW. Much discussion was held over the implications of a certain term, its meaning to Japanese women, and whether or not it was an appropriate term for that group to use. Most of this discussion occurred between the native English speakers and English-speaking Japanese women, while the other Japanese members were less involved. From this it seems that where the nuances of certain English terms do not translate into Japanese, the negotiation of a feminist language, as defined in English, is unlikely to be perceived as an issue of consequence.

However, issues of linguistic significance in groups are not purely translational. The words used by members in formal and informal discussions reveal the degree to which feminist praxis impacts on everyday life and in everyday relationships. In the use and absence of certain words we can see the slippage between feminist ideals and practice, and in the negotiation of the two that the impact of the group is observable.

The conflict between ideal and practice is crystallised in the discussion of what it means to be “erai”, a word which translates to “great”, “excellent” or “admirable”. I had encountered the word myself most frequently as a compliment offered in response to my domestic habits – I was “erai” to bring lunch (made by myself) each day to university, to cook for myself regularly, to be living alone and to go to university or study on the weekend. As a student, the expectations were presumably that I would tend

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43 See Table 1.4 for the composition of WWW and biographical details of members.
44 Tamarah Cohen (unpublished, 2000) discusses this issue, and the interpretation of “womyn” and “wimmin” by English-speakers of various backgrounds, in great depth. I thank her for her insights.
to buy meals or live with someone who would provide for me, and that my studies would be of secondary importance to leisure. Generally these compliments came from peers (male and female) and sometimes also from older women – generally mothers. The word implies that these acts were admirable and unusual, and thus in some sense an ideal put into practice.

“Erai” was also used regularly in discussions of women’s relationships with their husbands. In one discussion in the Women’s Projects group, Nomura-san mentioned an acquaintance who uses a savings plan involving envelopes, in which she puts her husband’s pay in cash into envelopes allotted for bills and loans. She allocates pocket money to her husband, and thus controls the family finances. Nomura-san said she thought the woman was “erai” for her money-sense, but that “just thinking about it makes me tired!” (Fieldnotes 9/3/01).

Women’s Projects convenor Tanaka-san observed: “There are many people who believe that a good mother/wife is like a maid”. There was general agreement among other members that women who do all the cooking and housework in a family are praised as “erai”. Tanaka-san argued, “We need to reconsider – what is ‘erai’?” (Fieldnotes 3/10/00). On another occasion, in a casual discussion of a local Australian woman married to a Japanese man, group members praised her as “great” for (inter alia) looking after his relatives when they come to visit. When Tanaka-san questioned “What is ‘erai’ anyway?”, Kano-san responded, “Well, that’s what we think you should do (caring for relatives, fulfilling family responsibilities etc), isn’t it?” (Fieldnotes 6/10/00). For Kano-san, ‘erai’ in this context reflects the ideal of domestic feminine duty. From

45 These expectations tended to view “student” as a uniform category, lumping undergraduate and postgraduate studies together. My informal observations suggest that postgraduate students tended to work far more intensively, with less leisure time and more enthusiasm, than undergraduates, and that thus most postgraduate students were “erai” on a number of counts.
Tanaka-san and other members’ responses however, there is contrast between this idea of a socially accepted “should”, and the more critically-informed and gender-equal construction of “should” – what is implied by Tanaka-san’s suggestion that “we need to reconsider – what is ‘erai’?” The ground between these two ideas is the site for some of the group’s most fruitful work, because it represents the convergence of socially-accepted and/or practised ideas of femininity, and the critical, feminist discourse which challenges these ideas and practices.

Exchanging experiences and the functions of women’s groups

Interpretation of “feminism” is significantly influenced by an individual’s perception of her own womanhood and life experiences. Young observes that while the category “woman” sketches the social constraints on and roles expected of an individual, it makes no prediction as to how she addresses those roles (1994: 733). Motivation to join a group may initially relate to the official function of the group, in this case, English discussion or gender studies. However, participation also reveals the desire for connection with other women with similar experiences and/or perspectives.

Khor notes that women’s groups in Japan tend to be organised around specific concerns, rather than broad concepts of “women’s issues” (1999:636). Extending on this, while groups may form officially to address, the incentive to participate draws on a broader understanding of “women’s issues” – the issues which affect women’s lives. Thus when asked for a definition of “women’s issues”, Tanaka-san observed that “(i)ssues regarding nursing the elderly are women’s issues. Education issues are women’s issues. ‘Women’s issues’ covers pretty much everything!” (Women’s Projects, 27/07/01).46

46 The term used in this case was josei mondai, which is literally translated as “women’s problems”.

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While the groups studied are limited in their capacity to address issues, the boundaries themselves are suggestive of particular forms of feminist praxis and its Japanese manifestations. Issues which receive less attention reflect both individual members' beliefs or experiences, and the overall "flavour" of the group, as well as its management. The issues flagged as too difficult or inappropriate remain for some members silent markers of the group's limitations, and can become sources of conflict between members.

**Connection and conflict in WWW**

In the case of WWW, the non-Japanese members identified a desire for intercultural exchange among women as their primary motive for joining the group.

> Well I guess one of the reasons why I wanted to get involved in the group was because I wanted to know more about...like I wanted to meet Japanese women and find out more about their problems from their point of view. 'Cos, as an Australian woman, it's easy to look from the outside and think, 'well, you know, this is...(really bad)'", but I wanted to, sort of, have some sort of...understanding of their ideas (Sarah Weller, WWW, 30/04/01)

Sarah anticipated that the group would provide a forum for Japanese and foreign women to share their understanding of women's issues. Another foreign member expressed frustration at the lack of such sharing, and at what she perceived as the Japanese members' narrow grasp of the group's purpose and potential.

> ...(I)f we don't talk about what's...what everybody feels, then we're not going to get anywhere. We're not going to find any critical issues, points that might need to be focused on, that we might be able to tell other people about in society. (Rachel Tanaka, WWW, 30/04/01)

Expectations of such sharing, as a facet of feminist organizing, clearly reflect the individual's previous experiences of women's groups, gained in her native country (Australia) and native tongue (English), and therefore influenced by language ability.
There is a clear contrast between this woman's experience, and that of Kano-san, a member of Women’s Projects (cited below) who felt that her group provided an environment conducive to free expression.47

Akagi-san, a Japanese member of WWW who is also a member of Women’s Projects, expressed a similar desire or expectation that the group would allow for intercultural exchange of personal issues. Significantly, this woman had spent several years outside Japan, and has participated in women’s groups in a native English-speaking background. Akagi-san also identified a gap between Japanese and non-Japanese members’ positions in the group.

…(W)e can share many things both among Japanese and foreign people, but sometimes I feel that their attitudes are divided, or that Japanese women think slightly different from foreign women.

LD: Where do you place yourself in that?

Just in between. (laugh). (Akagi-san, WWW, 22/05/01)

The divisions within the group in fact shifted on several axes. Thus, while the Japanese women who had lived overseas were sometimes “grouped” (or grouped themselves) with the foreign women, in other discussions language ability enabled Japanese-speaking foreign women to be grouped with the Japanese members, excluding non-Japanese speakers. The flexibility of these categories ensures an escape from a full-blown “them-and-us” binary on cultural grounds, while nonetheless stimulating and complicating the dynamics of the group.

47 This difference is arguably related to the difference in evolution of the two groups, WWW and Women’s Projects, the latter being more defined in its objectives and methods than the former. Linked to this is the matter of history: while WWW had been running for nearly four years, Women’s Projects was established more than ten years ago.
Debate around issues for group attention featured strongly in the group’s meetings and influenced members’ social interactions and discussions outside meetings. The debates reflected the diversity of members’ interpretations of the group’s nature and functions, as well as personality-related difficulties and connections.

During one of many discussions on the group’s focus and activities, I suggest that we might look at repeating an anti-pornographic flyer (pinku chirashi) campaign conducted by the group a year before. The campaign involved placing stickers in telephone boxes around the city, specifically targeting the popular nightclub districts. The bright yellow stickers featured a border of the words “Stop! Stop! Stop!”, with the words Sekuhara Porno Chikan Pink Chirashi” (“sexual harassment”, “porn”, “pervert”, “pink flyers”, in Roman script) set in a circle diagonally bisected by the words “Shauto auto!” (Shout out!) in katakana. While sticking these stickers up, we would remove the proliferation of phone-sex club stickers which covered the phone box walls. The idea was raised by a member Nakanishi-san, who reflected that the group used to be more active “before the millennium”, when other members had organised one such anti-pornography stickering night. She mentioned that as there were still five hundred odd stickers left, and the campaign had been limited to Osaka, it might be a project for the group to take up (Nakanishi-san, interview 18/04/01). At this discussion, four group members (three Australians including myself and one Japanese member) were interested in participating, and three members were uncertain or opposed. Ohara-san, one of the founders of the group, said that neither she nor Takahashi-san (another founder) participated last time because “obviously making the city dirty (like that) is illegal, although probably because you’re a foreigner they’d be easier on you” (WWW, 13/05/01). At that point it was agreed that only members who chose to would participate, but ultimately the campaign was never conducted.
Ohara-san’s reluctance to engage with specific issues reflected not only her individual demographics – she was the oldest group member, the only member married, and has two grown children – but also her long-term work with the organisation Working Women’s Network, which supports women involved in litigation against their employers for discrimination. In debating issues for the group to examine through surveys, Ohara-san said “I think sexual harassment would definitely be better to do than pornography...Because with porn, the yakuza are involved so the problem is too big” (WWW, 13/5/01). What was interesting about this comment was that Ohara-san herself was (and continues to be) involved in a group engaged in a complicated legal action on sexual discrimination, involving local and national government petitioning, demonstrations and hearings with the International Labour Organisation in Switzerland and New York. Her reservations around pornography and the yakuza can therefore be seen to reflect other considerations, such as the perceived intimacy of sexuality and sex issues.

In an earlier personal interview, Japanese member Nakanishi Haruko reflected on the participation of other Japanese members, specifically Ohara-san:

She’s not really interested in (talking about) pornography or other issues, she’s not really interested in rape. Because the yakuza control it, and to some extent there’s nothing to be done, so she thinks we should focus on discrimination in the workplace or wage inequality. (Nakanishi-san, Fieldnotes, 18/04/01).

Interestingly, Akagi-san, the member of WWW who also participated in Women’s Projects and was most vocal in that group, tended to be quiet in these debates around group direction. In the discussion on pornography versus sexual harassment above, she remained silent throughout, eventually making an observation that “(a)ll the problems
are linked, so if you fight sexual discrimination then it will help with fighting porn” (Akagi-san, WWW, 13/05/01).

Thus in WWW, conflict arose not only from socio-linguistic issues, but also from explicit differences in interpretation of the group’s function. Some members believed the group should remain tied to its original functions and foci (namely, supporting a Japanese group that worked against sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace). For other members, this represented stagnation. They believed the group should develop new aims and activities, and make concrete moves towards (either) activism or discussion. As an active member of the group, my participation required positioning on one or the other side of the boundary, but in negotiating the discussions between members (in and outside meetings) I found that I was frequently caught in the middle. The fluidity of group membership, due to the transience of the foreign population as well as group tensions, in combination with this ambiguity, made WWW the most difficult group to “track” for research. However, I believe the instability and ambiguity in the group were neither exceptional nor unexpected in a women’s group in Japan, and the inclusion of WWW in this study can be seen as highlighting the changing nature and composition of contemporary Japanese women’s groups.

**Common elements among Women’s Projects group members**

In the largest group studied, Women’s Projects, membership reflected a range of commonalities. While the observable common elements among group members relate mainly to age, marital status and employment, group members identify other bonds. Sone-san suggests that the women in Women’s Projects have in common that they have
worked before marriage, identify as “not just a homemaker”, and are unable to get jobs after marriage (Women’s Projects, 25/07/00).

While English language-study is the official aim of weekly meetings, Women’s Projects members emphasized the social element as an incentive to remain with the group.

For me, the first motivation was learning English, but after talking like this, (I felt) that here I could talk honestly about things that I couldn’t talk about in my other friendships, about what I think and in my own words. And afterwards it wouldn’t be a case of “Oh, so and so said that!” (Kano-san, Women’s Projects, 27/04/01)

Setting discussion of their personal issues within the framework of social issues exposes the double layer to the group aim of information-exchange. As the women advise, question and encourage each other, they generate real knowledge of the “women’s issues” that appear in the studied articles, and offer perspective gained from personal experience of these themes. It is this activity which represents the intersection of two main roads to women’s solidarity: the celebration or sharing of experiences as nurturers and/or childbearers, and the acknowledgment of a common oppression (Offen 1998: 154).

**Household labour**

The division of household labour was a particularly relevant issue for many Women’s Projects group members. It was interesting to me that in such discussions the ideal of a burden shared between husband and wife was most clearly displayed implicitly, in contrast to the inequality of women’s actual families. In one meeting, a member confessed that she often felt bad talking about her day when her husband spoke of all his work worries – she “‘just’ does housework and has lunch with her friends”. She was
reassured by other women that she need not feel bad – for, as Tanaka-san observed, “If there weren’t someone to support him he couldn’t earn” (sasaeru hito ga inai to kasegenai). Thus, the discussion continued, housework is as important as paid labour, and women deserve half their husbands pay (Fieldnotes 25/8/00).

Kano-san mentioned that her neighbour asked her (with a straight face) “Why do you have a cold when you are a housewife?” (The implication in this statement is that only people who go out and work hard put their bodies under the stress which leads to colds and such illnesses). All women in the group were amazed at this statement, suggesting that this was an unusual observation. According to Kano-san, this neighbour had also commented that she (Kano-san) “is allowed to stay at home (and relax), because she doesn’t work” (asobasete moratte iru). The causative passive form of the term “to relax”, indicates the control of Kano-san’s husband in the situation as perceived by the neighbour – that is, she is allowed by her husband. Similarly, Tanaka-san observed that it is her husband who is praised for her maintaining a career – because he “lets her work” (yarasete kureru kara), and as a husband is therefore praiseworthy for enduring a less-than-ideal wife (Tanaka-san, Fieldnotes, 3/10/00).

**Mothering and work**

The mothering role represents a long-standing ideal of Japanese femininity (Iwao 1993; Buckley 1997; Jolivet 1997). Iwao notes that the term “mother” (okasanc) popularly evokes feelings of warmth and closeness (1993: 126). In women’s groups however, it is not these stereotyped ideals but the concrete conflict encompassed in the mothering role which takes the foreground in discussion.
When discussing the group’s attraction, several women from Women’s Projects spoke of wanting to escape from the everyday routine of child-care. One member, Nakane-san, laughingly explained her participation in a women’s centre-run course on economic independence as mostly motivated by the free daycare service provided.

...So I got married without any kind of awareness of feminism or women’s economic independence, and it was just because I just happened to take the course and there was daycare...From then on it was like “I want to take this course! There’s daycare! And it’s free!” That was the only reason- it wasn’t that I had any particular interest in feminism, it was just that there was a daycare room and it was free! Free course and free daycare! (laughter) (Nakane-san, Women’s Projects, 25/07/01).

Nakane-san also noted that, inspired by the classes taken, she had ventured into the workplace as a part-time worker, but found the situation too stressful and quit.

Discussions of gender inequality in the workplace and society were often sparked by articles read and translated, but tended to be fed by members relating experiences and stories from other sources. The progression from gendered work demographics to education reflects a process by which abstract social issues are rendered into concrete personal experience. Expressing discomfort or disagreement with an idea by sharing these experiences both mitigates the tension produced, and validates the speaker’s opinion as informed and significant.

The decision to work after marriage and/or while raising children also reflects the previous generation’s decisions and influence. Nakane-san from Women’s Projects made her choice not to work based on what she had observed and experienced as a result of her working mother’s lifestyle.

I didn’t want such a hectic life. I thought if I had to choose between family and career then I would go for family. On the other hand, my older sister, thinking that
she couldn’t do both, chose to go with her career and even now she is single and working (Nakane-san, Women’s Projects, 24/07/01).

Discussions of the gap between ideals and practice of gender equality reflected the group’s particular emphasis on feminist education – if the members themselves were bound by certain gender structures, they worked actively to ensure that their children would escape a similar fate.

Itai-san: But I think Japan and the world, there are half population of voters- we are women but we don’t select women as politicians.

(Laura Dales: Maybe that is because we are not educated to trust women, we trust men).

Tanaka-san: Maybe Japanese are not educated to think that women are equal.

(Someone says: But we are educated equally at school)

Kano-san: But education at home is most important. The other day my daughter said “Men are superior to women!

Itai-san: Did you tell her that?

Kano-san: No I never told her that! Maybe in the home I am stronger…. (The others laugh) 11/5/01

Sone-san observed that her daughters have created conditions for future partners based on negative experiences with their father – they “don’t want a drunk husband”. She related that she had twice been called to pick up her husband from the police station. He “gets mad” when he drinks, but “only verbally”. (6/10/00) While Sone-san herself does not feel able to call herself a feminist (see above) she was nevertheless extremely critical of the status of women in Japanese society, and the extent of discrimination against women.

Sone-san: Sometimes I feel discrimination from men in rural society – (they say) ‘You are a woman so you do the washing up in staff room!’
LD: You said the other day, they ask questions like ‘What colour underwear are you wearing?’

Sone-san: Maybe even now such a question is regarded as sexual harassment maybe is disappearing, but even in villages...male chauvinism is widespread (Women’s Projects, 6/04/01).

Tanaka-san spoke about her grown children and the way she had raised them as she perceived, in the same way, as “an experiment”. Her son once cycled around the world, and has given talks saying that his mother is an “advocate of equal rights between men and women” (danjo dōkenronja). I asked if he is a feminist and Tanaka-san replied “No, he is conservative. But he can cook and clean for himself and no matter how busy he is he does his own washing”. The implication in this case is that his independence is a direct result of his mother’s un-gender-biased education.

Childcare and child-rearing practices represent one of the core aspects of “women’s issues”. Discussions suggested that while the women had similar experiences of childcare difficulties (such as tiredness and frustration at not being able to work), ideals about raising children were not uniform. In these discussions Itai-san was often the voice of dissent, and it is her opinions which most closely reflect “traditional” (that is, socially-accepted) ideals. Discussions held in the Women’s Projects English class, and therefore predominantly in English, seemed to inspire more direct disagreement among members than Japanese discussions. This may have been because of the different atmosphere (members pay to attend the English class, which is not compulsory) or because of the socio-linguistic freedom afforded by discussion in a non-mother tongue language.

48 However, as both son and daughter live at home with Tanaka-san, their independence is incomplete, and their actual capacity to clean and cook for themselves is presumably untested. (Fieldnotes 3/10/00)

49 Of course it must be noted that considerable freedom is also afforded by use of the mother-tongue, as speaking in a foreign language can be very frustrating! All discussions that occurred in the English discussion class have been transcribed word for word, in contrast with interviews and
Nakane-san: I have a question about women who have good education and careers – why do they quit job when marriage?

Itai-san: I have a question... in my days, in old days, the most important thing for women was to build up children, educate children. When women have job, it's very difficult for children's education. So the first thing is for women to stay home and raise children.

Nakane-san: Why during school education is equal? In school boys and girls are equal but..

Itai-san: The surroundings – the old days conditions were not good I think. This is the truth I think – women bear babies, don't you think? So if we want or not want we have to be mothers. But the situation is changing I think. I have one daughter and I hope Japan will become a gender-free society.

Itai-san, in response to Nakane-san's question: Nowadays? Those people need a support system. But how, that's the problem (English Discussion Class, Women's Projects 25/05/01)

In this exchange, Itai-san was critical of perceived changes in mothers' lifestyles and priorities, suggesting that the focus of women's lives has moved from children to work. She acknowledged, however, that society and social demands are inevitably changing, and expresses hope for a gender-equal society – presumably one in which women will share the burdens inherent in childraising.

Koide-san: I read about woman in Malaysia, the president of Jusco. She employs two women to look after her two children. If I could employ such women I would work too!

Tanaka-san: We have another problem. The cost of (raising) kids is ¥40 000 000. (This is the projected cost for one child for, food, clothes, education etc). So young couples calculate about it. So I hear many couples decide not to have a baby, so instead they have a rich life.

Itai-san: 25 years ago in Germany I heard the same thing – people having only one child or two at most (Fieldnotes 25/05/01)
While many of the members expressed concern at the cost of raising children and the lack of childcare support for mothers, their personal experiences suggest that the decision not to work is influenced by a number of factors, not merely financial considerations.

Tanaka-san: (to Koide-san): Did you feel a difference between kids with 1 working parent and 2 working parents?

Koide-san: Not really.

Sone-san: I did.

Itai-san: So children need somebody at home to look after children all times. So in my case my mother was at home until I was 15, and then she went to work for 6 days a week, and when I came home from school I was so lonely. That's why I didn't want to work when I get children.

Kano-san: My daughter used to say 'Why are you always at home? Why don't you work?' Now I come to (Women's Projects) twice week she has to let herself in with key. (Her daughter's after school class was looking for an English teacher and her daughter suggested she do it. But Kano-san declined, saying 'I would have to be with my daughter all the time!'). Now my daughter wants to be with me, but my son doesn't.

Nakane-san: I wanted to work but worried about what kids would do at home alone. I worked for three years but quit.

Itai-san: Why?

Nakane-san: Because of children's problems. (She used to come home to have lunch with her children during holidays).

Sone-san: My eldest daughter was bullied in primary school and younger daughter was bullied in junior high school, so sometimes I would teach her at home, or we would go to town... (So I couldn't work) (Fieldnotes 25/05/01).

For Sone-san and Nakane-san at least, emotional care for their children ultimately prohibited work outside the home. While both women express a desire to work and maintain their careers, their care-giving duties as mothers took priority. Implicit in this is the idea that within their households, it is (only) the mother who can (or should) give such care. One can only speculate on the kind of dialogue that would have preceded these decisions, of course, but given these women’s interest in work it seems clear that
being a full-time housewife was not their ideal lifestyle, but a necessary sacrifice. Furthermore, in other discussions members were critical of such sacrifice, both as an ideal and as practice, and hoped that it would be different for future mothers.

Nakane-san: Japanese women don’t use their education for career.

Itai-san: Women have to choose. It (childcare) is a personal problem not a public problem. I quit work.

Nakane-san: But next generation, maybe she want to have a career, maybe she want a family, what shall she do? (Fieldnotes 23/07/00)

However it is not only children who represent obstacles to career. For some group members, marriage was synonymous with “marriage retirement” (*kekkon taishoku*), reflecting the corporate and social expectations of women in the 1970s and 1980s. For others, the decision to quit work related to low job satisfaction.

Sone-san: I quit working after marriage. (She explains that she was afraid to work because the school in her neighbourhood had a bad reputation: a teacher there had had a miscarriage after being kicked by a student, and although it wasn’t Sone-san’s school she was fearful.)

Itai-san says that after marrying she quit her job.

Tanaka-san: Why?

Itai-san: In those days it was very natural for women to do that. I wanted a quiet calm, happy new life with my husband. When I was working it was very busy.

Koide-san: I didn’t like my job as a pharmacist but I couldn’t quit because my professor introduced the job to me, so it was hard to quit. So I told him I was getting married (and then quit).

The other women are surprised: So you lied!

Itai-san: I’m very sorry, you have a license but you don’t use it – it’s very sorry, I think these license are very hard to get and very expensive.

Koide-san: No.

Itai-san is insistent: No!? I think there is a tendency to insist on women’s rights nowadays (She says this almost regretfully, scoldingly) (Fieldnotes 20/04/01)
Linked to their own experiences of the family, women raised outsider comments as evidence of wider social trends against gender equality in the family. Neighbours, relatives and acquaintances become the mouthpieces for the broader “Japanese society”, expressing the constraints of “Japanese culture”, and it is therefore unsurprising that members discuss these sometimes ostensibly trivial issues as specific challenges to women’s empowerment and equality.

While some of the women encountered family pressure to leave their jobs upon marriage, another Women’s Projects member Sone-san was pressed by her mother to continue working. “She said, ‘You’ve come all this way to become a teacher, you’re not quitting now!’” (Sone-san, Women’s Projects, 13/04/01).

Thus, while certain issues – such as the lack of childcare, socially expected ideals of mothering and the influence of family on career decisions – reflect common experience for the women in the group, there is some diversity in the way these issues are resolved on a concrete, daily basis. Similarly, while recognition of the importance of mothering reflects the personal experience of most of the group, this does not translate to criticism of women who chose not to have children\(^5\). The experiences of these women, as daughters, aunts and observers of the mothering process, are not distinguished from those of women who have given birth. This suggests a recognition of alternative perspectives of mothering, at the same time highlighting the importance of child-rearing as a “women’s issue”.

\(^5\) There are at least three regular members of Women’s Projects who do not have children: Konishi-san, Akagi-san and Haneda-san.
Commonalities in experience of domestic roles, as daughter/ wife/ mother/ daughter-in-law, can thus be seen to link women at a specific locus, without precluding difference in experience of other roles – as student, worker or neighbour (Khor 2000:647) In this way Women’s Projects members seem to feel relatively free to share their experiences of family life, without forcing an homogenous identity or position on the group. This openness between members was such that one of the women spoke openly about her husband as “a drunk”, revealing the difficulties she had experienced as a result of his alcohol-related problems. However, this openness was not uniform among all group members, nor did it cut across the board of topics. Issues of sexuality, for example, were never raised in Women’s Projects meetings, and one woman told me that she would not discuss her own issues (related to sexuality) in that group because the environment was not conducive to that topic, and she felt that the women might react negatively. She felt this to be related to the group’s conservative nature, in turn related to their general age-bracket, and the fact that most members were married.

The group’s reluctance to engage in discussions of sexuality and sex may thus reflect the generational and social backgrounds of the women. I suggest that the group’s avoidance of sexuality in discussion reflects not simply its conservatism or modesty, but also an attention to the accessibility and comfortableness of the group as a space for women of different backgrounds. Silence around issues does not necessarily imply disapproval or repudiation of these issues as significant for women, but it does reflect an awareness that such discussions may isolate and embarrass older and more reserved members. This inclusiveness, however, implicitly involves the exclusion of women such as the member described above, for whom sexuality is central in her engagement with women’s issues. It is in the silence around sexuality that Women’s Projects is most limited and limiting for these members, and its absence as a topic of address both refers
to wider restrictions on the discussion of non-heterosexual sexuality and marks the line by which private and public are demarcated.

While sexuality represents a boundary of the group’s scope, I argue that even within “comfortable” topics there are degrees of inclusiveness. Significant in the English-study focused Women’s Projects, the opportunity for women to participate is dependant on their fluency in the language of discussion. While all three sections of Women’s Projects meetings – study/discussion, lunch and editing – allowed (if not encouraged) Japanese discussion, discussion time reflected differences in members’ participation that were not visible in the lunch and editing times. Throughout the meeting, if one member began a discussion in English, generally the next speaker would continue in English, so that English fluency and confidence determined both who spoke, and of what they spoke, at varying times.

The English conversation classes held after proper meetings allowed a different, sometimes more open forum for the expression of opinions (Yano C. 2003:281). Members could attend these one-hour classes for an extra fee (to cover the hire of the room and the cost of the teacher), and the class discussions would build on issues raised in texts from the meeting, or from material prepared by the teacher especially for the class. I facilitated these classes at the request of Tanaka-san, and was paid half the standard fee on the grounds that I could use the conversation class in my research. Tanaka-san’s decision appeared to be made independently of the group, as participants continued to pay the full amount in fees.51

51 However, given that members of the group acted as unofficial treasurers at other times, it seems that the details of the agreement would in fact have been obvious in the extra money made available for the magazine’s production.
As with the English reading/translating exercises in the proper meetings, participation in the group depended on language ability. In general, the class would comprise five to seven participants, of whom at least two were strong and confident English speakers. Tanaka-san informed me (and any newcomers) that the unofficial motto for the class was “First in, best dressed” (Hayai mono gachi), meaning that those who wanted to speak should do so promptly, rather than wait to be asked. This approach theoretically contrasted with the group meeting, in which all members were encouraged to speak (in turn). However, in effect it was the confident speakers who spoke most frequently in both group meetings and English classes. In the latter I tried to direct questions specifically to the quieter members of the class.

The transcript below indicates the flow of conversation between members

(Tanaka-san shows the group an article about compulsory retirement, in which women must retire ten years earlier than men. The subject of the article is a woman public servant who was forced to retire at age 48 years.)

Tanaka-san: She was asked to quit.

Itai-san (forcefully): But situation is changing!

We start talking about the sheet that Tanaka hands out on the differences between men and women.

Itai-san: I think the number of men in part time is quite large (looking at graph – she thinks it’s unrealistic).

(LD: What do you think about ‘free-ta’, casual workers?)

Tanaka-san: The definition should be decided.

Itai-san: The free-ta works when he or she wants to work, when he or she needs the money.

Sone-san: Doesn’t belong to a special company.

Itai-san: But doesn’t want to.

(LD: So is it like freelance?)

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Tanaka-san: But no qualifications. (Tanaka-san is a freelance writer).

The women agree that it can be the same as a part-time job, but with little responsibility.

Itai-san: They will do the job and if they don’t like it they will quit straight away, easily.

(LD: So it’s not the job, it’s the attitude?)

Itai-san: Parents are rich enough to support free-timers so the problem won’t disappear. If it were me, I would let my daughter out of the house (ie, have her leave).

Tanaka-san: It depends on (who it is) – for other people I say ‘OK’ but if it’s my son I would be (angry) ‘No!’

Sone-san: Company also fires free-tas easily and (there’s) no social insurance (ie no benefits, holiday pay etc).

(LD: So they are disposable?)

Kano-san: But company and free-ta are both happy!

Itai-san: But society isn’t happy. We worry about the future of Japan. As an older generation, it’s very sorry to see.

Koide-san: I don’t think it’s not good for young people to be free-ta. I think it’s important for young people to experience other jobs. If I were young I want to be a free-ta. (Everyone laughs, very surprised). Young people need so much money. When we were young, (even) if we were poor we can live (English discussion class, 11/05/01)

In this discussion Itai-san, a relatively confident speaker, reiterated her belief that social problems such as gender inequality and youth unemployment are overrated, arguing against the grain of the wider group discussion. Members such as Kano-san and Sone-san offered moderated comments, resisting Itai-san’s conservative stance on these issues.

However, it was the quiet and generally unconfident Koide-san who offered the clearest opposition to Itai-san’s argument. The laughter with which the comments were received diffused any tension in the conflicting opinions, but also left Koide-san’s comments as a marker at the end of the discussion. While Koide-san did not always attend the class,
and was one of the quieter members of the group in general, on several occasions she shared experiences and opinions which made her unusual in the group.

During an English discussion on gender inequality in the workplace, Koide-san related her experience:

My husband was classmate at university. After graduation he worked at pharmaceutical company for two yrs – I had worked at hospital after graduating as pharmacist. He made up his mind to quit and enter graduate school, pharmaceutical department. When we married we had no money and I had to work at cram school. Then he graduated. Then he went to medical school for six years (English discussion class, 6/04/01)

Koide-san’s husband studied for ten years in total, after graduation. Koide-san continued working at the cram school until it went bankrupt four years ago.

The women in the class are all very supportive and admiring of Koide-san’s work: ‘You sacrificed your career for him!’

Someone asks, Why did you support him?

Itai-san: You did it because you loved your husband very much, didn’t you?

Koide-san cocks her head, looking less than convinced.

Koide-san chose silence as the best “voice” in this discussion. As a longstanding member of the group, in charge of the newly-developed website, Koide-san could have responded more vociferously without long-lasting negative effects – the examples of members such as Tanaka-san and Akagi-san clearly demonstrated this. However, her decision to refrain ultimately reinforces her ‘correctness’, as her silence indicates a preference for harmony over argument. By contrast Itai-san’s insistence sounds aggressive, highlighting her opposition to some of the group’s themes.
The conversation reveals one of the group's capacities to encourage agency, in allowing space for disagreement and controlled conflict among members. The conflict between Koide-san and Itai-san was always relatively muted, but the nature and topic of the discussion marked it as an unusually open exchange – not the kind of exchange typically heard between Japanese women of similar relationship outside women's groups.

As Parker observes, discussions of agency must address difference the cultural valencies of action and inaction (2005:14). While academic assessments of agency in the West have tended to emphasize activity as indicative of power, this conversation reveals the scope for an agentic inactivity, where assertiveness (or action) is less effective than silence (or inaction) in shaping group dynamics (Du Bois et al. 1985:39; Parker 2005:14). In Japan generally, and in these contexts particularly, silence can indicate “the speaker’s disagreement, discomfort, refusal and even power itself” (Abe 1995: 650).

**Feminist theory and praxis in Benkyō**

While common experiences tend to attract women to Women's Projects, it was a shared criticality which acts as the primary locus of connection for Benkyō members. The group meets over dinner to discuss lectures, seminars and other gender-studies related events in which members have participated over the month. A founding objective of the group was the planning of study field-trips, particularly to facilities associated with women’s services and counselling.

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52 See table 1.3 for biographical details of Benkyō members.
53 Three of the five Benkyō members at the time of writing aspire to a career in counselling, with an explicitly feminist approach. Another member, not present in the period I attended, was working as an advocate at an NPO targeting domestic violence.
One member of the group is married, one member lives with her partner and none of the members are mothers. While issues related to mothering, child-rearing and marriage roles are sometimes discussed, it is invariably in the context of a seminar or text review—members’ personal experiences of mothering are not prioritised in discussion, most probably because these roles are outside their personal experience at present.

This is not to say that the group is not supportive of or concerned for the well-being of its members. The members associate outside of meetings far more frequently than Women’s Projects members, and were friends before starting Benkyō in 2000. Discussion of personal experiences related to study, future job-paths and related decisions is particularly common during meetings and there is an atmosphere of relative openness to personal sharing, particularly outside of the set meeting time.

Questions that stimulate discussion and sharing tend naturally reflect members’ direct interests, and in the context of meetings the boundary between theory talk and practice talk was consistently and significantly blurred – discussion of a theoretical concept would flow on to sharing of personal experience of the concept. Thus, as illustrated in the discussion below, members grounded their academic and theoretical knowledge in lived examples of feminist praxis.

Miyoshi-san: I feel backlash from relatives, after I say what I am studying. My relative who is two years older than me (and is married with child/ren) asked do you plan to continue working after marriage and I say yes and she says ‘Oh you’re good!’ (erai). And then my aunt says ‘I’ll have to cut loose and go a bit crazy at your wedding’ (because she is the last in her family to get married). I haven’t even said I will get married, let alone that I have plans, let alone that she is even invited, and she says that to me! I really hate that, I really feel that as pressure you know?

Hamada-san: Yeah that’s backlash.
Miyoshi-san: 'Cos normal people don’t know what a women’s centre is, they don’t know what the Law for a Gender Equal Society is. They just don’t know. People ask where I work and I say ‘Spring’ and they say what kind of place is it and I explain and they pull back and become cautious about me (youjin ni naru). I want to know what the world (ordinary/other people) think about feminism so as much as possible I try hide my beliefs. Because you don’t know (what they think)

Hamada-san: (agreeing) You don’t know. I use “I” messages as much as possible.54

Miyoshi-san: But with feminism the “I messages” just aren’t heard – the other person just collides with your schema. I want to know what they think, their opinions.

Hamada-san: Sometimes they just don’t have opinions you know. I find that it always starts with conversation about romance- they ask do I have a boyfriend, how long have I been with him, aren’t we going to get married, and so then I have to explain.

Miyoshi-san: I make up a third person, I say ‘well I want to (get married) but my friend doesn’t, because she doesn’t want to change her name’, and then I see what the person thinks.

Hamada-san: But using a third person you’re always just going to end up saying “Oh I wonder why she thinks that”. I don’t mind if our schemas clash. I don’t go out of my way to make up a third person – from the beginning it’s just me and you (conversation partners) (Benkyō, 27/10/01).

As in Women’s Projects, informal exchanges provide insights into women’s family background and life expectations. In discussing her study and career choices, member Miyoshi-san explained that her interest in a counselling career was due to the fact that she could continue working in that profession (even) as she aged (Benkyō, 14/07/01). The concern that this would be impossible in many other jobs is based on the economic reality of increasing unemployment, as well as the resilience of company policies which press women out of the workplace upon marriage or childbirth (Jolivet 1997).

54 The term “s” or “I statements” was coined by Thomas Gordon in 1970. Burr explains that “I messages” refer to declarations of “thought, feeling or experience” that begin with “I”, “emphasising the speaker’s subjectivity, and communicating that “the feelings or reactions are ‘owned’ by the person who is making them” (Burr 1990: 266). These are understood by Hamada-san and Miyoshi-san to minimise aggression and to enable dialogue, although Miyoshi-san here argues that in relation to feminism, the “I messages” are not always effective.
The interplay between feminist theory and practice represents a recurring theme in Benkyō discussions. One member, Miyoshi-san, was particularly conscious in her efforts to practice a feminism that would “make life easier”. As a worker in a women’s centre, she related frustration at the gap between her ideal and actual work environment and demands. Discussing my internship at the Spring Centre, where she herself had been an intern and where she was now employed part-time, Miyoshi-san was critical of the lack of freedom and negativity which she felt the co-ordinators directed at the interns’ plans for a seminar: “Why did they keep saying No! No! No! to everything you suggested? Why not just let you do what you want, and not worry about whether people will come etc.” Her criticism of the internship programme and its facilitation seemed to reflect a specific expectation of the women’s centre, namely that they would empower and encourage the three (female) interns in a feminist manner. Miyoshi-san felt that ultimately the women’s centre co-ordinators guided interns towards a desired result – “(And) actually, it’s not empowering at all!” (Fieldnotes 4/03/01).

Fulfilling a need for intellectual support is a more obvious and significant function of this group than the others studied, because Benkyō members share an explicit interest and (usually) prior experience in gender studies. These women identified their group as a place to exchange information and opinions with similarly-minded peers, suggesting that the group was bound together by its common, and unusual, enthusiasm for critical awareness of women’s issues.

...(B)eing able to see (the need to work towards improving women’s position) and feel that, with the members of (Benkyō), my own generation, I think that’s the best part of (Benkyō)...Because there’s just no-one- there really are so few people who can talk about these kind of things. For me, I think I’m lucky just to have met so many, because at first it was just me, alone, and it was really lonely. (Nakamatsusan, Benkyō, 11/05/01)
The impact of the group on feminist perception of members reflects both the conscious organisation of woman-centred themes and the related but implicit creation of an open and women-centred environment. Individual members bring their own interpretations of feminism, informed by language, cultural background and education to the group, which filters these through exchange and discussion. The women experience their own problems, concerns and desires through hearing and reading other women’s stories, linking the intangible public (“women’s issues”) to the experienced personal.

What feminists do

Interpretations of “feminist” and “feminism” are significantly influenced by an individual’s perception of her own womanhood and life experiences as a woman. Many of the women in Women’s Projects distanced themselves from the word “feminism”, on the grounds that they believed they had not experienced discrimination as a woman.

With feminism, well in my case, I think my life has been all the more easy because I’m a woman. So I haven’t really ever felt abused, or discriminated against...I guess my life until now has been blessed. (Itai-san, Women’s Projects, 30/03/01)

I have never been conscious of the difficulty (of being a woman)...I have never had that awareness of being oppressed or being treated badly by men because I'm a woman. I think I was very lucky” (Sone-san).

(LD: So, do you call yourself ‘feminist’?)

No. I don’t feel like I have fought my way here (Sone-san, Women’s Projects, 30/03/01)

These women identified themselves as fortunate in having had “easy” lives as women, in having happy marriages, and other women spoke similarly. The link between lack of experience of blatant discrimination, and the resistance to the term “feminist”, suggests that these women believe that “feminist” is a label earned by women who have suffered for their sex. Thus a “feminist” is one with a specific awareness of inequality, or of the
“difficulty of being a woman”, which has grown from a tangible, personal experience of hardship. This interpretation overlooks indirect or “insignificant” pressures on and discrimination against women, and may partially explain the reluctance of many Japanese women to identify as feminists.

Related to this interpretation, is the association of “feminism” with a certain non-mainstream lifestyle, such as single career women or lesbians. Accordingly, women who are not involved in subverting social norms may be excluded from use of the term.

I don’t know if I can say I am a feminist or not. Because actually, I don’t work at the moment so I’m living on my husband’s salary, and, well, I’m the one who does most of the housework. Yes...and particularly the cooking, I do most of that. (Sone-san, Women’s Projects, 30/03/01).

Sone-san identifies economic dependence on her husband and the fact that she does all of the housework as un-feminist, but when asked about her interpretation of feminism, this same woman offered a definition unrelated to role expectation and fulfilment: “A feminist is someone who aims for women’s rights, for equality between men and women. That’s what I think.” (Sone-san, Women’s Projects, 30/03/01).

The link between fulfilment of “traditional” domestic roles and anti-feminism supports the reluctance of these women—for whom housework is an inescapable demand—to identify as feminist. Although housework itself is not perceived as “un-feminist”, the unequal division of household chores was often raised as problematic in discussions (particularly in Women’s Projects, where most members are married). While studying an article about a working mother, Notice members were impressed at the woman’s expectations of equal participation in housework and child-raising and sympathetic that these expectations were not met by her journalist husband, with one member
remarking "Oh, he's just a man after all" (Sone-san, Women's Projects, 1/06/01).\textsuperscript{55} While the sharing of household chores is considered to represent a "gender-free" household, this ideal is rarely realised, not least because the long hours expected of workers limit the time that men are even available in their households\textsuperscript{56} (Iwao 1993; Jolivet 1997)

The explicit use of "feminist" in Women's Projects group descriptions represents one of the conflicts arising from the group's ambiguity. Yuki spoke about writing an introduction for the group in an Irish magazine, and explained that members of the group opposed her description of it as a "feminist group" (3/3/01).

Some members of Benkyō adopt a broader interpretation of "feminism", reflecting their academic understanding of feminism as well as their personal critical awareness of social problems. "I think feminism is a principle that first of all defines this as a man's society. And then tries to re-define it from a woman's perspective." (Miyoshi-san, Benkyō 3/07/01).

Hamada-san: I have a friend and he seems to think I'm always fighting or always angry. I tried to explain to him, I hate demonstrations and stuff, I just do things so I can live easier (jibun ga ikiyasui yōni) And I'm not saying there is only discrimination against women, I believe there IS discrimination against men and I'm not particularly a 'women's rights activist' (joseikēn ronja). The reason he thinks all women are attacking is probably cos he has never met a woman like me (ie someone who speaks her mind but isn't aggressive).

Miyoshi-san: Tajima Yoko, everyone knows her right? They have this image of feminism, and so even though you (Hamada-san) aren't angry, he just linked you with her and interpreted it that way (Benkyō, 27/10/01).

\textsuperscript{55} "Female entrepreneur uses Net to speak out for working parents", from Asahi Shinbun, 30/04/01, studied 1/06/01. The role of men in childcare and housework is further discussed in Chapter Eight.

\textsuperscript{56} See Nakamura (1996) for discussion of the role of fathers in child-raising.
Two women, (from Women’s Projects and Benkyō respectively) who do identify as feminists, differentiated between “feminism-as-seen-in-Japan” and the feminism they personally pursued.

LD: How is feminism interpreted in Japan?

Tanaka-san: Hmm...As radical and harsh, attacking men and purposely acting unfemininely, those kinds of things... (But) I think that feminists and feminism are about treating each person as important, men and women alike, moving forward together. That’s what I think real feminism is. Understanding each other. So in that sense I think I am a feminist (Women’s Projects, 24/07/01).

I think it’s seen as a stereotype here in Japan, although maybe not just in Japan. Feminism is a really scary thing to ordinary people- when they hear ‘feminism’ they think it’s some kind of really radical and overpowering thing. But that’s not what I think- I think various kinds of feminism exist, you know. And if you ask whether I am “doing feminism”, I think I am, but if you ask whether I’m doing what is generally known as feminism in Japan, well I think that’s a bit different. (Hamada-san, Benkyō, 12/05/01)

Identifying the popular stereotypes of feminism as a misinterpretation reflects these women’s familiarity with feminist theory, and their experience in feminist-identified circles. 57 This supports Prindeville’s (2000: 642) observation that a woman’s “willingness to identify as feminist is tied to her definition and understanding of feminism”. In distinguishing their own feminist beliefs from these interpretations, these women express a qualified support- they endorse a feminism that they understand to be “real” or “essential”, as opposed to popular stereotype, reserving space for their personal, practical reading of feminism.

Enabling such space for personal interpretation, women’s groups support the de-institutionalisation of feminism, making it more readily available to women outside the

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57 Hamada-san is a 24 yr old university graduate interested in pursuing a career in feminist counselling. Tanaka-san is a free-lance journalist in her 60’s, and the founder of the group, who acknowledged that as a result of her work “there are many, many!” women around her whom she would call feminists (Fieldnotes, 27/07/01).
academic world (Ueno, in Buckley 1997: 284). The subsequent feminist framework allows for the inclusion of a diverse range of experiences, (each woman’s space reflecting her identity, background, sexuality), to the extent that even those who do not identify as feminists may be included. This inclusiveness addresses the need described by Young, for a feminism “which always refers beyond itself, to conditions and experiences not reflected on” (1994: 737).

In offering an area for women to share personal experiences of social expectations, roles and related problems, women’s groups create a socially legitimate forum for woman-centred and woman-driven critique. That they do this without adopting an explicitly feminist identity leads one to question whether sidestepping the plethora of misperceptions to identify as feminist is in fact worth the effort.

**Femi-bashing and (mis)interpretations of feminism**

The negative image of the word “feminist” reflects popular misinterpretation of its objectives. Stereotypes of feminists as “man-hating”, “aggressive”, or “biased”, are frequently held up by women as grounds for distancing themselves from feminism, and by men as grounds for disparaging feminist views and theories. The conflation of Women’s Lib with feminism reflects a distaste for political action by women, while at the same time implying that a specific strand of radical feminism subsumes the whole

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58 Ueno’s efforts in the popularisation of feminism have been furthered by the work of tarento feminist Haruka Yoko, discussed more extensively in Chapter Seven, whose books have made her one of the more popular contemporary feminists. By contrast, Tajima Yoko, the Tokyo university professor who recently became a Diet member, was identified by one of the women in Women’s Projects as “The most well-known feminist in Japan!”, but was also regarded by this woman as “aggressive and radical”. Tajima’s was the name which most frequently arose in discussions of negative perceptions of feminism, ie “Not all feminists are like Tajima Yoko!”
The following exchange occurred at a Benkyō meeting, while discussing an article by a Japanese man, “Feminism leading to fascism” (Fashizumuka suru feminizumu).

Miyoshi-san: Anyone who reads this can see that it’s just rubbish, he just argues emotionally and he doesn’t quote any sources and anyone who read it would just say “Oh it’s just the old men again, just Shokun again” (Shokun rightwing magazine) and no one would take it seriously. So I don’t know why feminism has to address these sorts of articles- they shouldn’t, they shouldn’t even address them. I thought it was strange that we had to consider this article.

Hamada (agreeing): But I agree with some of the ‘dangers’ he talks about (for example, insisting on 50/50 gender representation in institutions). I think feminism has to take some responsibility for making people think this way. What kind of immature feminism led him to that reaction?

Miyoshi-san: Yeah, that’s something to consider. It’s like Koide-san Tadashi said in his new book, ‘Hate ‘manliness’ (otokorashisa), don’t hate men!’ (Benkyō, 27/10/01)

My thesis is therefore that feminist identification is discouraged by the cultural and linguistic interpretations of the word. Parallel to this is the proposition that there are in fact many women who do not identify themselves as “feminist”, yet whose activities can be seen as feminist under a certain definition.

Links may be drawn with the situation in Singapore, Malaysia and other Asian societies, where implications of the word “feminism” render problematic its use by (feminist) women and women’s groups. (Lyons 2000, Ariffin 1999: 422). However, while Lyons (2000: 3) notes that feminist identification in Singapore confronts “the political association of feminism with encroaching ‘western values’”, in Japan the barriers seem less related to the symbolic corruption of Japanese tradition by the West, and more to

59 None of the women interviewed participated in Women’s Liberation. Most in fact distanced themselves from it: “I didn’t participate at all. (laugh) At that time I had absolutely no consciousness of those kind of things”. (Nakane-san, Women’s Projects, 25/07/01)
the concrete social effects of what is perceived as “feminism” – for example, the dropping birthrate.60

Buckley (1997: 187) notes that increased media attention to feminism and feminists has had the negative effect of homogenizing a diverse field of feminist perspectives, reducing the multiplicity of women’s voices to the “images and sound-bites” of a select few feminists. This false representation of uniformity narrows the goal posts for “who can be a feminist” identification, and the word “feminist” itself becomes synonymous with the specific work of certain women.

The belief that feminists aspire to take-over men’s roles reflects another side effect of bad publicity. Ueno (in Buckley 1997: 280) notes that “Our primary role is not to be like men but to value what it means to be a woman”, and this perspective was echoed throughout the women’s groups interviewed. Thus, when explaining why she did not identify as a feminist, one of the women interviewed said, “The word ‘feminism’ is what people like Ueno Chizuko do, in the academic sphere. It’s not yet something that ordinary people…(do)” (Ueda-san, Women’s Projects, 27/04/01)

I was reading in the newspaper the other day, feminism is not about women doing the same thing as men, or about catching up with men, it’s about getting men to appreciate the value of women. So when I heard that that was feminism, I was really convinced. (Kano-san, Women’s Projects, 27/04/01)

Anti-feminist sentiment in the mass media emphasizes the role of feminism in the increase in numbers of women deciding to remain in the workforce, or in delaying marriage and childbearing. Constructing feminism as a distinct and unified force

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60 Article in Sankei Newspaper, December 14, 2000
controlling the female population furthermore allows the blame for a broad spectrum of social problems to be shifted from the state and onto women.\footnote{See Koskiaho (1995) for discussion of women’s roles in elderly care, another issue that has attracted the attention of anti-feminist advocates.}

It is interesting not just that “femi-bashers” imbue feminism with this false power- but that they use the terms “feminism” and “feminist” at all, given the reluctance with which the women themselves identify as such.

It is clearly simplistic to lay the blame for a low-birth rate on the increase of feminists or the rise of feminist assertion. More likely is that women’s decisions to focus on a career, delay marriage, and/or to limit the number of children, are an effect of increased opportunity, and also increased awareness of the structural deficiencies in Japanese society, which can make marriage an unattractive prospect and child-raising extremely difficult for working mothers (Fujimura-Fanselow 1995:146, Jolivet 1997).

The lack of super-structure catering to the needs of married women and mothers has arisen frequently in discussions of women’s problems in Japan. As Buckley (1992, 183) notes, Japanese feminists have tended to focus on the family as the “primary site for renegotiation of women’s identity”, suggesting that roles within the family control to a large extent the process of identification- as working mothers, as divorced wives, as single mothers and as carers of the elderly.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the three women’s groups Benkyō, Women’s Projects and WWW, as forums for women to critique the values, expectations and conflicts inherent
in Japanese society. Drawing on the premise that everything affecting women is a women’s issue, these groups do not necessarily organise on explicitly feminist terms. Rather, groups draw on terms such as “josei mondai” and “jendā”, imbuing these with meanings drawn from the reflexive experience of women as members, mothers, wives, scholars and thinkers. “Feminism” in these groups then, can be seen to flow from the critical examination of personal and perceived feminine experience.

Underlying my aim to describe feminist identity in these groups is a consciousness of my own positionality, defining the results as always- and only ever- my understanding of their understanding of feminism and feminist identification. Participating as a researcher and also as a member offered me the potential to shift between observation and active questioning, and I believe this duality was encouraged by the other members of the groups, who often suggested that I attend seminars or speak to acquaintances “to learn about Japanese women”. The implications of my non-Japaneseness (amongst other aspects of my positionality) are reflected in this chapter’s focus on interpretation and perception.

The women in these groups who do choose to identify as feminists, express their feminism quietly and in carefully qualified terms, aware that the word means negative things to many people, while the majority of women distance themselves from the word for the same reasons. Interpreting “feminism” in its negative and narrow mainstream definition will inevitably discourage women from adopting the term, and it is this reasoning which underlies the reluctance of women’s groups to use the word “feminist”. As Prindeville (200: 642) observes, women’s “reluctance to be labelled as feminists (is) understandable when one considers how they believe others define feminism”.
Thus, the upside of non-identification is inclusiveness. Without explicit feminist identification, there is no boundary imposed by narrow or misconstrued definitions of “feminism”. While participation in such groups may presuppose a woman’s interest in traditionally-defined “feminist issues”, more frequently this may be a consequence, rather than motivation, of entry. The social aspect of women’s groups, involving the exchange of information and experience, enables the flow of feminist ideas without demanding subscription to any explicit theory or single perspective (Misciagno 1997: 63).

Most significantly, these groups represent sites for the promotion and implementation of agency among women members. Through sharing, conflict and related intellectual engagement, the members of these groups explore and extend what Ahearn calls “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act”, and what can also be called the capacity not to act (Ahearn 2001: 112). Women’s Projects (and WWW) member Akagi-san observes that the group Women’s Projects is “a kind of bridge”, a point which enables women relate theory to practice, a connection which they might not have made before.

When I started going to the group in 1992, it was an English discussion group (and there was no particular focus on women’s issues). Most of the women were interested in child-raising issues, so these articles were examined. (Akagi-san, Fieldnotes, 23/07/00)\(^62\)

Members of the groups may come to the group for different reasons, and certainly bring with them differing interpretations of concepts such as feminism. However, what is significant from Akagi-san’s perspective, is what the group brings to the women, as participants and as women in broader society. The subtlety of members’ introductions to feminist critique varies between the groups, and is tied to other factors, including the

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\(^62\) According to Akagi-san, the catalyst for change in direction was an article she brought in on sharing family roles, which encouraged the group to look at broader issues.
history and activities of the group and the linguistic abilities of members. However in all three groups there is evidence of a broadening or enabling effect, manifested as learning, critique and discussion. It is this enabling – of action or inaction – that I find particularly interesting, and which most clearly characterises the feminist potential of the women’s groups studied in this thesis.
In the previous chapter I discussed the implementation of feminist praxis by women’s groups, and the potential for groups to engender agency among members. The promotion of the private as public, specifically through discussion, debate and exchange of experiences, encourages critical assessment of the individual’s role in broader social change. Group members, by participating in these groups’ activities, were implicitly and explicitly asked how they contributed to the maintenance and deconstruction of gender stereotypes, and how their experiences of gendered inequalities have shaped their lives. While the group represents a forum for focus on these questions, issues of gender and gender inequality are also examined in the broader society, particularly in connection with issues such as the greying population and the decreased fertility rate. In the dialogue between the Japanese state and its citizens, legislation represents a key expression of the official government stance. However, the enactment of legislation is neither translucent nor exhaustive in its expression, and in its interpretation it can say both more and less than the government intends. In the case of gender-related issues, the development of legislation must be examined alongside its subsequent implementation, to reflect the significance of the law in itself (as a law addressing gender) and also its significance as an effective conduit of change in Japanese society.

In this chapter I address the most recent legislative efforts to address gender inequality in Japan. The development and implementation of the *Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shakai Kihonhō* (officially translated as The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society) represents increased awareness of *jendā* (gender) as a politically significant concept. The
implementation and rejection of the Law therefore relates to the currency of gender in social and political discourse.

The Law aims to “position the realisation of a gender-equal society as a top-priority task in determining the framework of 21st century Japan” (Preamble), and identifies changing social trends such as lower birth rates and the greying population as motivation for this prioritisation.\(^{63}\) Positing these issues as gender-related and central to the concerns of the Japanese state, the Law examines the responsibilities of the state, of local governments and of citizens in striving for the ideal society in which “every citizen is able to fully exercise their individuality and abilities regardless of gender” (Preamble).\(^{64}\) It is worth noting that legislative reform and governmental campaigns addressing these issues are not unique to Japan. Governments in nations such as Singapore and Taiwan have developed public campaigns in response to the implications of delayed marriage, sub-replacement fertility and an aging population, although the approaches of these programmes vary (Jones 2004:14).

My purpose in examining the Law in this thesis firstly relates to its connection with women’s centres, discussed in the following chapter. As a primary means for government promotion of gender issues, the Law forms the legislative and official foundation for much of the work conducted by government-funded women’s centres. The Law thus underpins, at an official level, the operation of these centres at municipal and prefectural centres, legitimising the very issues on which the centres work. The centres play a central role in the promotion of the Law, in producing and disseminating information to the general public and public institutions, as well as within the government itself. For a law which explicitly aims to affect the family and domestic

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63 The preamble can be found in English online at http://www.gender.go.jp/english/basic_law/ Last accessed 17/03/06.

64 http://www.gender.go.jp/english/basic_law/ Last accessed 17/03/06.
functioning, this promotion and education is critical. In addition to their publications, women’s centres have offered (and continue to offer) lectures, seminars and courses on the implications and applications of the Law. In creating a forum for public discussion of the Law, women’s centres represent a bridge between the legislation and those subject to it. To explore the implementation of the Law is therefore to explicate the concrete functioning of women’s centres in this characteristic role.

In addition to this, however, the reception and interpretation of the Law among feminists and women’s centre staff illustrates certain key features of contemporary (popular) Japanese feminist discourse. Although the Law represents the goals of feminists working with and within the administration, it does not necessarily hold the support of feminists or women outside this sphere (Muta 2003:122). Within women’s centres and feminist circles there is debate as to the actual efficacy of the Law, given its ambiguous expression and lack of punitive recourse. However, despite these criticisms, the establishment of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society is regarded as a positive event for Japanese women and feminism. Furthermore, the mixed reviews received by the Law reveal diversity within the scope of Japanese feminism, reflecting the maturity and growth of the feminist movement. In exploring the development and ramifications of the Law, I underscore the increasingly significant connection between feminist organisation and the legislative process in Japan, and the continued and mutual interaction of these two spheres. In this way, while feminism can be seen as an influential factor in the creation of the Law, the Law has in turn informed feminist thought, through the critiques it has provoked among scholars and activists. In this interpretation the potential for the Law as a direct vehicle of social change is immaterial – the potential for change instead flows from the Law’s stimulation of feminist analysis and organisation. Thus whether the Law is policed or not, its existence represents a
challenge to existing gendered inequalities, simply because it draws them into public attention and examination. In this way, it is the organisation of seminars on the Law, the dissemination of newsletters focusing on the Law and women’s centres’ interpretation of the Law in operation, which impacts most obviously, and with the greatest potential, on Japanese society.

Similarly, it is in the conservative backlash to the Law that we can see the growth and spread of feminist critique. Critically depicting feminism and feminists as the generic force behind the Law’s creation, the backlash elucidates popular (mis)conceptions of feminism as radical, anti-family and anti-tradition, simultaneously promoting feminists as a political power to fear. Ironically, it may be that this publicity creates a self-fulfilling prophecy – the wider the knowledge (informed or otherwise) of feminism, the greater the political playing power of the feminist card.

This chapter aims to critically explore the issues entwined in the development and implementation of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society. To this end, I begin by examining some of the explicit aims of the Law, as well as the assumptions implicit in its construction. I then explore potential impacts of the law, its reception among women and particularly the backlash it has provoked in the media and at the local government level. Criticism of the Law has focused on its potentially negative impact on Japanese tradition and the family, and has drawn a causal connection between the concept of jendā furī (gender-free) and social ruin, perceived to underpin the Law. I therefore also aim to explicate the concept of gender-free, its origins and use in the promotion of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society. One of this chapter’s critical aims builds on this explication, to suggest that the potential success of the Law is linked to the language of harmony in which it is couched and promoted. It is, however, also this language which
marks the Law as flawed, in both feminist and non-feminist critique, and thus, paradoxically, it is this which may jeopardise the success expected by the legislation.

The preliminary to the Law

The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shakai Kihonhō) was passed in June 1999, and on December 12 of the following year, the Basic Plan for Gender-Equality Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shakai Kihon Keikaku) was approved by Cabinet decision. The Plan incorporated the findings of reports compiled by the former Council for Gender-Equality, including the “Basic Philosophy behind Formulation of a Basic Plan for Gender-Equality”, “Basic Measures pertaining to Violence against Women”, and “Women 2000”.65

However, the ideal of a gender-equal society and related reform appeared well before the Koizumi government passed the legislation. In 1992 the Government Economic Plan, the “Five-Year Greater National Lifestyle Plan: Aiming for a Coexistent Global Society”, advocated the prioritisation of lifestyle over economic growth (Ōsawa 2002:111). The key terms in this plan were “respect for individuals” and “regard for lifestyle participants”. The implication was that Japanese society would benefit from a shift away from the focus on large-scale business which had allowed the dramatic growth during the (now-deflated) bubble economy. Recognising a need to reform the “business-centred society” meant broadening the scope of social policy, creating facilities for elderly care, improving social resources such as parks and sewerage, and most significantly, recognising the Japanese individual as more than the “company person” (kaisha ningen) upon whose shoulders the economy rested. It is in this plan that

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provision is made for “the maintenance of an environment in which anyone can participate in society” (Article 3, cited by Ōsawa 2002:114). “Participation in society” can arguably be interpreted narrowly as being synonymous with “participation in the family”, including involvement with child-rearing, care of the elderly and household maintenance. In a broader interpretation, the phrase may imply involvement in the community, in local or regional events, such as district sports carnivals, festivals and community group activities. The term kaisha ningen, by contrast, implies a definitive connection between individual and the company – an identification of the person as belonging to the company – to the extent that “participation in society” is precluded.

In 1994, the Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender-Equality, headed by the Prime Minister, was set up within the Cabinet. All members of this group were Diet members, and at this time women occupied only 6.8 per cent of positions in the Diet. The Headquarters undertook activities such as the creation of “Gender-Equality Week” (in December 2000) and promotion of “actions to eliminate violence against women” (NWEC 2001:3).


67 Kyōdō Sankaku Bijon- 21 Seiki no Aratana Kachikan no Sōzō.
The Vision report defines Gender-Equal society as “one in which both women and men shall be given equal opportunities to participate voluntarily in activities at all levels as equal partners and shall be able to enjoy political, economic, social and cultural benefits as well as to take responsibilities equally”. Vision included concrete recommendations on issues affecting women, such as the strict implementation of equal wage laws as defined by the ILO. It represented the first time the word “gender” had been used in government writing, and reflected the growing influence of women’s studies and gender studies on policy in the mid 1990s (Osawa 2002:43).

On June 23 1999, the Basic Law for the Creation of a Gender-Equal Society was launched. The Basic Law contained five “pillars” upon which a gender-equal society might be founded. These were: respect for the human rights of men and women; consideration for (avoiding rigid) social customs and systems; collaborative participation in social policy, planning and decision-making; the compatibility/co-existence of domestic activities and other activities (namely work, study and local community activities); and finally, international co-operation and support, from other countries and international organisations.

As part of the re-structuring of central government which occurred in January 2001, a Cabinet Office, headed by the Prime Minister, was established, and within this the Council for Gender-Equality and a Gender-Equality Bureau operate (see Figure 2). The Prime Minister, Cabinet Secretary, Cabinet Ministers and Coordinators for Gender-Equality comprise the Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender-Equality, which is

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responsible for the "smooth and effective promotion of measures". This body liaises with the Council for Gender-Equality, which investigates, monitors and surveys government measures, and the Gender-Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office. The Gender-Equality Bureau is "mandated with the formulation and overall coordination of plans for matters related to promoting the formation of a gender-equal society, as well as promoting the Basic Plan for Gender-Equality and formulating and implementing plans for matters not falling under the jurisdiction of any particular ministry". In 2001, the Gender-Equality Bureau comprised 22 women and 17 men, a percentage of women far exceeding the corresponding level of female government managers (1.1 percent) (Hashimoto:2001).

Beginning in Tokyo and Saitama prefectures in 2000 and in accordance with Article 14 (Prefectural Plans for Gender-Equality) of the Law, prefectural and municipal government regulations have gradually been implemented throughout Japan. At the municipal level, the establishment of Gender-Equality policies is expected to "take into consideration" the national legislation as well as the prefectural plan. The creation of gender-equal policies thus involves a somewhat time-consuming flow-down process, ensuring that local level plans are shaped by the national legislation, but at the same time allowing for variance in the degree of concession or opposition. This has proven significant in those cities where opposition to the national legislation has been strong.

**Summary of the Law**

The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society consists of a preamble and three chapters. The Preamble acknowledges the Constitutional provision for "respect for individuals and equality", and presents the Law creation of a gender-equal society as a response "to

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the rapid changes occurring in Japan's socioeconomic situation, such as the trend toward fewer children, the aging of the population, and the maturation of domestic economic activities". Chapter One, “General Provisions” (Articles 1-12) defines a gender-equal society as one “where both women and men shall be given equal opportunities to participate voluntarily in activities in all fields as equal partners in the society, and shall be able to enjoy political, economic, social and cultural benefits equally as well as to share responsibilities”. The Chapter outlines the basic principles of the formation of a gender-equal society, with attention to the roles and responsibilities of the family, community, state and international community, in its development and promotion. The Articles of the Chapter address: “Respect for the Human Rights of Women and Men” (Article 3), “Consideration to Social Systems or Practices” (Article 4), “Joint Participation in Planning and Deciding Policies, etc.” (Article 5), “Compatibility of Activities in Family Life and Other Activities” (Article 6), “International Cooperation” (Article 7); “Responsibility of the State” (Article 8), “Responsibility of Local Governments” (Article 9), “Responsibility of Citizens” (Article 10), “Legislative Measures, etc.” (Article 11), and “Annual Reports, etc.” Article 12). 

Chapter Two, entitled “Basic Policies Related to Promotion of Formation of a Gender-Equal Society”, outlines the development and implementation of the “Basic Plan for a Gender-Equal Society”. Comprising Articles 13-20, the chapter delineates the process by which the Plan was drafted by the Prime Minister, in consultation with the Council for Gender-Equality and the Cabinet, and then approved and announced by the Prime Minister. The Chapter also outlines the implementation of the Law at a prefectural level, stating in Article 14.3 that “taking into consideration the Basic Plan for Gender-Equality and Prefectural Plans for Gender-Equality, the municipalities shall make efforts to

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73 http://www.gender.go.jp/english/basic_law/ Last accessed 17/03/06.
74 http://www.gender.go.jp/english/basic_law/ Last accessed 17/03/06.
75 http://www.gender.go.jp/english/basic_law/chapter2.html Last accessed 17/03/06.
establish basic plans with regard to policies related to the promotion of formation of a Gender-equal Society within the areas of the municipalities". Other articles of the Law address “Consideration in Formulation of Policies, etc.” (Article 15), “Measures to Increase Understanding of Citizens” (Article 16), “Handling Complaints, etc.” (Article 17), “Study and Research” (Article 18), “Measures for International Cooperation” (Article 19), and “Support for Local Governments and Private Bodies” (Article 20).

Finally, Chapter Three of the Law delineates the development, roles and composition of The Council for Gender-Equality. The Chapter includes the stipulation that “(e)ach number of women and men members of the Council may not fall below 40 percent of the total number of the members” (Article 23.2).

**Implications of a gender-equal society**

Advocates of the Law focus on the potential economic benefits promised by the Law and a gender-equal society. This approach addresses the specific fear that an open (that is, equal opportunity) workplace will increase unemployment, reduce consumer power and consequentially weaken an already fragile Japanese economy.

Ōsawa identifies two gendered strands to the problem of insufficient consumption – the pattern of male-as-main-wage-earner (“*dansei kasegite*”), and the trend of delayed marriage, interpreted as a reaction against the inequality and pressures of husband and wife roles (2002:10). An increase in the marriage rate is assumed to mean an increase in consumption, as the number of households increase. Implicit in the increase in marriage

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76 http://www.gender.go.jp/english/basic_law/chapter2.html Last accessed 17/03/06.
77 http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/index.html Last accessed 17/03/06
is an assumed increase in fertility rate, because the fertility rate of married women in Japan has remained relatively stable since the late 1970s.

The potential economic benefits of a gender-equal society include increased productivity. Ōsawa argues that in a global and competitive world economy, businesses must adopt a results-based approach, meaning a shift away from the seniority system which has characterised modern Japanese employment (2002:12). A gender-equal society would involve a dissolution of the gendered work patterns which see women bound to short-term, general or assistant positions and men to the managerial, continuous-service track. Similarly, as the burden of financial support for the family is shared between husband and wife, so childcare, care of the elderly and related emotional support can be divided. The point of gender equality, is not simply to encourage women into the workplace, but also to allow men to leave it more easily (Ōsawa 2002:13).

Ōsawa also argues that the concept of a mother completely (physically) devoted to raising children is "untraditional" in Japan, suggesting that increased community networks and child care service will, with the help of the Law, make a comeback this century (2002:16). In promoting the shared division of labour in the household and outside, the Law can thus be seen to represent a reformation of the gender roles which have, since the Meiji era, been constructed and promoted as traditional and normative.

There is an implication, in literature that supports the Law, that the time is at hand for a shift in Japanese social policy. The Law is placed in the prime position to repair the

78 Looking at the men's participation in housework, for example, we can see that in agricultural families surveyed in 1933, the average time per day devoted to housework by men (aged 31-50 years) was 1.1 hours. Women of the same age-group performed an average of 4.3 hours daily (Ōsawa 2002:63). By contrast, recent surveys indicate that Japanese men now do less than 20 minutes a day, while full-time housewives perform over seven hours of housework.
social damage caused by business and growth-centred policies, and to rejuvenate an economy which has borne the brunt of this damage. The establishment of a gender-equal society involves a re-visioning of the gendered conditions on which the economy has been built. According to Ōsawa, these conditions can be broken down into four main assumptions (2002:31). Firstly, there is the assumption that companies and profits will continue to grow. Secondly, it is assumed that company employees will be engaged in life-long employment, under the seniority system of promotion, and that this arrangement will be permitted by the presence of a supportive wife (naijo no kō). Thirdly, old-age care for men is expected to be provided by the wife and children. Finally, it is assumed that the status of the wife will remain secure throughout her lifetime, and that even after her husband’s death, her financial security will be ensured by his inheritance and the widow’s pension.

Erosion of the lifetime employment and seniority systems, the economic downturn and the drop in marriage rates, have rendered the male-earning model untenable. The pressure for men to retain primary responsibility as wage-earners has had a flow-on effect into the social behaviour of men. In this way the weight of the (masculine) gendered role is linked to increased domestic violence, depression and suicide rates among men. In 2001 in Japan, 70 percent of suicide victims were men, and among 40 – 50 year-olds suicide represented a greater proportion of deaths than traffic accidents (Ōsawa 2002:17). The discrepancy between men and women in the incidence of suicide also appears to be most pronounced between the ages of 50 and 59 years. Thus, according to the 2000 Hyogo Plan, in 1999 in Hyogo Prefecture alone, the number of female suicides was 83, in contrast to the male figure of 299 (2002:11). It is these

79 The same source indicates that in 2000 51% of men prioritised work over the family/household. The Law for a Gender-Equal Society aims to problematise the connection between masculinity and work, particularly strong within the baby-boomer generation.
issues which, Ōsawa suggests, expose the need for reform in gender-role expectations and specifically in work patterns.

The Law for a Gender-Equal Society, argues Ōsawa, posits a “mutual support model” (ryōritsu shien gata) in opposition to the traditional (modern) male-earning model, embodied in the sararīman/sengyō shufu binary (Ōsawa 2002:20). Within the latter model, popularised in the high-growth period of the 1960s, the division of labour occurs along a rigid gender division, such that the performance of one is dependant on the other. In this way, without the supportive wife, there can be no sararīman performance, and vice versa. Accordingly, should one half of the combination fail, the whole model becomes untenable. The mutual support model, in which women may work full-time and men may care for the children at home, is arguably better suited to the “risk society” of present-day Japan and its economic instability (Ōsawa 2002:24).

An illustration of this efficacy was shared with me by an interviewee during my field work at the Spring Centre. Nomura-san told me of an acquaintance whose tradesman husband had been laid off, along with other workers from his company. A few weeks later, the man discovered that one of the men who had been laid off had committed suicide. His wife and children had left him because he was unable to provide for them. Breaking down at his workmate’s funeral, the man came home and told his wife, who worked full-time, “I’m so glad that you have a job. I could have ended up like (the dead man)” (Nomura, interview 9/12/01).

There is a real uncertainty in the world, you know I look at it and what with restructuring and whatnot, you don’t know what will happen. And it’s precisely because we’re in these kind of (uncertain) times that we need a Gender-Equal

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80 Ōsawa observes a range of factors that have increased the “risks” or dangers (kiken) facing contemporary Japanese society. These include “war, terrorism, mad cow disease” as well as the economic trends of deflation and company restructuring (2002:23).
society. If it’s not that kind of society we can’t deal with the problems. (Nomura, interview 9/12/01)

It is circumstances such as these which support the interpretation of the Law as positive for men (as well as women).

Ōsawa argues that in dissolving the gendered division of labour within and outside the home, the marriage “threshold” will drop, making marriage more popular and, implicitly, encouraging women to have more children. Herein lies the primary selling-point of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society. It can thus be argued that gender equality has drawn political attention and favour of late, because its aims and potential effects dovetail with recent government discourse on fertility and the economy.

“Equality” and jendā furī

As discussed above, the preliminary legislation avoided direct reference to equality between men and women. The Law for a Gender-Equal Society includes the words taitō and kintō, but not the word byōdō. Although all three of these words are translated into English as “equality”, there are subtly nuanced differences in meaning which are significant to the overall effect of the text. Kintō refers specifically to status, suggesting a comparison between objects without difference – the New Japanese-English Character Dictionary translates the first character kin as “even, same or symmetrical” (Halpern 1990:133). It can be more clearly understood via its negative: fukintō can be translated as “imbalance”, “disparity”, as well as “inequality”. Kintō is the word used in the 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (Danjo Koyō Kikai Kintō Hō). Taitō can be more accurately understood as meaning “equal”, in the sense of comparing two sides. The Chinese character tai means opposite, or facing each other, thus connoting two parties
in contrast. Byōdō is the word closest to the English “equality”, in the broader conceptual sense. Thus when one speaks of the “equality of humankind” (ningen no byōdō), it is this word which is used.81

Ōsawa observes that while Vision included reference to “equality of result” (kekka no byōdō), the Law does not use the grander term byōdō, and its conceptualisation of “equal collaborative participation” (danjo kyōdō sankaku) is implicit (2002:41). Takahashi observes that while the Law itself does not use the term “gender”, attached explanatory notes define the term (Takahashi 2004:11). The use of the term “jendā”, a katakana word unlikely to be known or understood, and therefore likely to be misunderstood and/or rejected, reveals the target audience as well as the aims of the Law and its discourse (Funabashi 2003:44). The nuance of the terminology used, while untranslatable and therefore invisible in the English version of the Law, reflects a narrowing of the terms and aims of planned legislation, in the process of formulating the final legislation.

By contrast, the term jendā furī aims to extend the scope of the Law, importing meaning which is taken up both by supporters and critics of the Law. Jendā furī, is directly translated as “gender-free”, and promoted as a key feature of a gender-equal society. The term is defined by The Women’s Studies Association of Japan (2003:1) as “a complete rejection of ‘manliness’ and ‘womanliness’”.82 Ito states that while it is commonly believed to be a Japanese-English creation, Horiuchi argues the term was used in English-language literature from the 1980s (Ito 2003:11).83 Etymologically, the

81 I am grateful to Tomoko Nakamatsu for her observations on the terms taitō, kintō and byōdō.
82 Otokorashisa/onnarashisa o zen hitei suru mono da
term grew from the English “barrier-free”, a term which denotes accessibility (to services or spaces) for all people. As barrier-free implies “without barriers”, it seems to follow that _jendā furī_ aims for a society “without gender”. The imported aim of abolishing socially constructed notions of sex (that is, gender) reflects this definition, and opponents of the Law have certainly seized on this interpretation in their critique (Funabashi 2003:44). However, I would argue that in the Japanese context, _jendā furī_ can actually be read as an abbreviation, perhaps for “gender-barrier-free”. In this interpretation, the descriptive “free” does not refer to an absence of, but rather a freedom from, the constraints of gender and its related prescriptions.

The definition of a _jendā furī_ society, however, extends beyond the rejection of gender constrictions. In fact the term _jendā furī_ is taken as a gloss for opposition to all discrimination on the grounds of individual difference (Women’s Studies Association of Japan 2003:1). This presumably includes variables such as sexuality, physical and intellectual abilities and age, so that a _jendā furī_ society represents the ultimate “level-playing field”.

### Opposition to “The Worst Law Under the Sun!??”

Yagi, in his opinion article entitled “The Danger Lurking in the Law for a Gender-Equal Society”, contrasts the concept of equality between men and women (_danjo byōdō_) with that of “gender-free”, the concept behind the Law (_danjo kyōdō sankaku_). In equality, the concept of gender difference is taken as a presupposition – so that men and women are equal despite the difference. By contrast, argues Yagi, the concept of gender free

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84 I suggest that the term refers to specifically physical, or ascribed conditions of difference, by which individuals are obviously identifiable and/or inherently affected. It seems to me that differences of affiliation, particularly religious and political, are not encompassed by this definition, perhaps on the grounds that they represent chosen rather than ascribed identities.
rejects the idea of difference between men and women, rendering them "of the same quality" (dōshitsu) and promoting a neuter (chūseiteki) ideal. It is this denial of sexual (danjo) difference that concerns Yagi, who believes that jendā furī is a concept which "damages the family unit, refutes culture, causes social confusion and has been forced on the Japanese public from above" (2000).

Let us look at another newspaper article critical of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society. The anonymous author of an Osaka Gyōsei Shimbun (April 20th 2000) article, subtitled "The Worst Law Under the Sun!?" and "The Danger Inherent in Gender-Free" echoes Yagi’s concerns of a gender-neutral society. This author, like Yagi, emphasises the need for an equality which accepts the "essential, biological and fundamental differences" between men and women. The author argues that the Law attempts to upset the natural condition of gender difference – "(t)hat women enjoy makeup and clothes, while men want to be strong, is biologically determined". Furthermore, asserts the author, the idea of compulsory equality of opportunity and participation is essentially communist, and both unattainable and undesirable in a democratic and meritocratic society.

Critics of the Law argue that the rejection of gender and its associated roles is dangerous because it aims to produce children of neutral gender. This concern is echoed in a Shūkan Shinchō magazine article, entitled "Forcing Male and Female High School Students to Change Clothes in the Same Room: Gender-Free, the Ringleader of Education". The article tells of "shocking" incidents brought about by gender-free education. The titular incident involved the use of a single change-room for boys and girls at a junior-high school level. The anonymous author of the article stresses that the problem is not that the school has refused to create separate change-rooms, but rather that the students choose to use this room – that is to say, that they are unembarrassed by
the exercise of changing in front of the opposite sex. The reason for this lack of concern is that the children have been raised within the gender-free education system, and as such are oblivious (or conditioned to be oblivious) to natural differences between boys and girls.

A second incident highlighted by the article involves sex education classes for first grade primary students. Sex education for children has been promoted by feminist groups since the early 1990s, reflecting a perceived need for increased awareness of contraception, safe sex and related matters of reproductive health. The author highlights the effect of such feminist campaigns: “There is a deep connection between the feminist movement and the kind of sex education which teaches words like ‘intersex’ to grade ones”.

There is some concern that the Law aims to reject innocuous customs related to gender, particularly with respect to children’s education. The Women’s Studies Association of Japan produced a special edition newsletter in March 2003, addressing questions related to the Law for a Gender-Equal Society and its application and particularly devoted to countering backlash. Critical points addressed include whether the Law has destroyed traditional boys’ and girls’ festivals (such as the Koi nobori and Hina matsuri), and why the “blue for boys, pink for girls” custom should be changed. (The argument was that girls usually choose pink and boys usually choose blue anyway, and change to this custom would upset education practices.) While these may seem to be trivial concerns, they reflect deeper fear of a radical and anti-traditional Law that aims to eradicate biological differences and related national custom.

85 The katakana word intāsekusu is a Japanese-English word denoting individuals who possess both male and female sexual organs.
Similarly, some critics argue that the Law belittles or rejects the role of full-time housewives. This criticism reflects concern from and for those whose status (that is, occupation or personal situation) is perceived as conflicting with the ideals guiding the Law. The author of “The Worst Law Under the Sun!??” argues that the contemporary feminist movement “is only for some women – those who work outside the home. (It) rejects motherhood, it rejects the family.” (Osaka Gyōsei Shimbun 2000). It is this rejection of “doing housework, raising children and caring for their husband (a)s many women’s reason for living” that sits at the centre of this author’s critique of contemporary feminism, feminists and by extension, the Law for a Gender-Equal Society.

In addressing private sphere activities and family roles, the Law touches on the personal circumstances of the whole population, in a way particularly reminiscent of Article 24 of the post-war Constitution.86 In light of this perceived intrusion of the government into the private sphere, it is not surprising that the Law has incurred such a vitriolic backlash, particularly among the advocates of a discourse linking the nation with the family. In this nationalist vein, the perceived degradation of the family unit is both symbolically and concretely indicative of the demise of the Japanese nation state. The description of feminists as fascists, communists and Nazis reflects and reinforces this interpretation. This association marks the Law for a Gender-Equal Society as a force of political domination.

86 This article, drafted by American woman Beate Sirota Gordon, states that: Marriage shall be based on mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual co-operation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis. With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes. For discussion of Sirota’s involvement in the drafting of the Constitution, see Gordon (1997).
Opposition has also addressed issues related to, but not explicitly addressed in the Law. Debate around the issue of women retaining their surname after marriage, for example, has provoked considerable backlash among conservative politicians, and opposition within the Liberal Democratic Party has ensured that the issue remains marginal (Okamoto 2002).87 Concern around the issue of surnames echoes fears that the Law – and by implication the government which introduced the law – has loosened the floodgates of legal reform, which could result in the ultimate destruction of the (patriarchal) family system.

The perceived power of the Law extends into the political arena. The anonymous authors of the “Anti-Feminism Site”88 refer to the local government level Basic Law as the “Femi-nazi provision”, supported by femibaba.89 The site contains an article on the implementation of “gender-equality” by local governments, labelling Dōmo Akiko, the female governor of Chiba prefecture, an “ultra-feminist” and concluding with the statement “It would be a happy thing if the femi-nazi provision that should be long dead, does not get revived”.90

The language used in this site is particularly strong, at times colloquial, and evokes nationalistic sentiments through old-fashioned grammar and phrases. Comparison with

87 The issue of differing surnames is grounded in the Civil Code provision which requires married couples to indicate a “head of household” when registering their marriage. The system is based on the principle of one household, one surname. The name adopted can be that of the husband or the wife, as in the case of mukōyōshi, where male successors are “adopted” into their marital family. This practice enables the entry of one partner into the family register (koseki) of the other. Those seeking to avoid the requirement, which impacts on inheritance regulations affecting both the surviving partner and children, may choose de facto marriage (Japan Times 2001).
88 http://homepage2.nifty.com/antifemi/index.html Last accessed 26/03/06.
89 http://homepage2.nifty.com/antifemi/kiji27.html Last accessed 26/03/06. Baba is a derogatory word for middle-aged or old woman. The term femibaba evokes an image of women in their fifties, namely those who were young during the 1970s second wave of Japanese feminism. It is these women who form the majority of grass-roots organisation membership.
90 “The femi-nazi provision avoided by a hairsbreadth: The revisionists used by Governor Dōmo”, http://homepage2.nifty.com/antifemi/kiji27.html, accessed 8/04/03. Dōmo, a 68-year-old independent candidate, was elected to the position in March 2001. She became Japan’s third female governor, and in a prefecture known traditionally for its conservatism.
the formal and rather colourless style of official websites, such as the site for the Office for the Creation of a Gender-Equal Society emphasises the vividness and emotion of opposing rhetoric. The tone of the Anti-Femi site is antagonistic, and therefore contrasts starkly with the language of harmony characteristic of official commentary on the Law, as discussed below.

Yagi suggests that politicians involved in local government-level legislations of the Law are confused by the meaning and aims of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, perhaps allowing them to be hoodwinked. However, given the detailed coverage and critique of the implementation of gender-equal provisions, we could assume that the authors are not only particularly well-informed, but also possibly have inside knowledge of local government workings. In any case, the highly aggressive tone of writing suggests that the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, and its related local provisions, pose (or are perceived to pose) significant threat to some members of the Japanese public.

Criticism of the Law reflects the belief that a fixed masculinity — *otokorashisa* (manliness) — and specifically the role of defending one’s nation, is essential to Japanese identity. Former Democratic Party Diet member Nakayama Taro argues that:

> Men defend their nation, we (should) defend our nation. Generally speaking this concept should be the same in the Constitution and education laws. If Japanese lose their manliness and lose strength, we will not be able to defend this nation... Japanese need to display manliness, bushido, these kinds of things in their identity, their view of history and view of the nation...Married couples should complement each other...and I hold fears about the disappearance of these kinds of identity. (Nakayama, cited in Takahashi 2004:10).

Implicit in this construction of male as warrior is the binary opposite of woman as mother — “women are expected to maintain the family and take care of children and the

91 http://www.gender.go.jp/ Last accessed 11/04/06.
elderly, men are expected to support the country” (Takahashi, cited in Kogure 2005). From this perspective it is not difficult to see how the disintegration of Japanese identity can be linked to the failure of women to mother (or reproduce), and the (constitutional) inability of men to take up arms.

Summarising the above criticism of the Law, we can see that the essential argument is four-pronged. Firstly, the Law for a Gender-Equal Society has been inflicted on a confused public by the government “above”, both Japanese and international (namely the ILO and UN.) Secondly, the Law is not concerned so much with equality between men and women, so much as the rejection and elimination of difference between the genders. Thirdly, this rejection of (biological, physical, fundamental) differences is dangerous to Japanese families, Japanese identity and Japanese society. And finally, that the instigation and promotion of “gender-free”, and hence the Law, has been the work of the feminist movement, and individual feminists such as Ueno Chizuko and Ōsawa Mari. Given that there has been feminist critique of the Law and its implementation, however, this nexus between feminism and the Law is more complex than perceived.

Feminist critique

While Yagi and other critics draw a causal link between the feminist movement and the promulgation of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, some feminists have themselves criticised the Law as insubstantial and vague. Ehara (2000) observes that the Law’s lack of specific policy means that it is unlikely to effect significant change for women. She also suggests that concrete implementation of the Law would improve the reputation and following of feminism among Japanese women. This suggestion reflects a
perception of the feminism-Law relationship as conflicted, with the Law an impediment rather than aid to the growth of feminism. Hōnoki argues that, although it encompasses the duties of state and community, the Law’s failure to address the role of the business sector in promoting gender equality dramatically limits its efficacy (2002:187). While prefecturally-implemented policies may address business, they do not reflect specific prefectural conditions, and are consequently too vague to be effective.

Similar criticism was levelled at the 1999 revision of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. Sakai argues that the greatest flaw in the revised law is its inability to eliminate gender discrimination in certain job classifications (Sakai ii 2003). The EEOL guidelines divide work according to “type of work, eligibility, type of employment and type of working pattern”, and discrimination between non-full-time workers and full-time workers is not subject to the law (Sakai ii 2003). The EEOL does prohibit indirect discrimination, “where one gender is excluded or disadvantaged as a result of applying different standards, even though separate standards are not stipulated for men and women” (Sakai ii 2003). Accordingly, the Labor Standards Law that protected women-specific needs were eliminated, so female workers are also subject to employer demands for overtime, transfers and late-night work (Sakai ii 2003).

Muta suggests that the efficacy of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society is limited by an absence of the grounding values of gender equality in family and schooling (2002:127). Thus if the Law stipulated an increase in the number of female Diet members, or an increase in the number of women in managerial positions, the concept of gender equality would represent a force for substantive social change.
Some feminist critique echoes the conservative opposition. Ehara argues that, although desperately sought by feminists, the Law was largely born of government concern over low marriage and birth rates, and has been handed down accordingly (2000). Thus, although the Law represented (to some extent at least) the goals of feminists working with and within the administration, it does not necessarily hold the support of feminists or women outside this sphere (Muta 2003:122).

Furthermore, the passing of the legislation and its promotion, from national level down to local government level, does not ensure substantive change to the status of women even in the public service. In my discussions with local government women’s centre staff, this concern was raised as evidence of the tenacity of gender-discriminatory workplace practices.

On the surface, you know, laws have been passed, for example the law promoting an increase in the number of women employed in managerial positions, so there are exterior (tatemae) changes, but the real state of affairs actually has a long way to go, for sure. (Ando, interview 26/01/02)

Ando-san’s comment makes a strong case for the argument that exposure to the Law and its promotion does not necessarily increase the success of its implementation. This is no doubt particularly so where those expected to implement (that is, local government public servants) are critical of or apathetic towards the legislation, and where failure to comply meets no penalty.

From a feminist perspective, then, it seems that the failure of the Law to address specific discrepancies in female/male power is one of its greatest flaws. As with the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, the lack of concrete penalties for violation means that the Law for a Gender-Equal Society is an advisory tool, rather than definitive.
means of promoting change. While the scope of the Law remains to be tested in legal process, it could foreseeably be applied in cases involving sexual discrimination in the workplace, including in the availability of or permission to maternity and paternity leave, and the promotion of women to managerial positions. Recent lawsuits which, had the legislation existed, could have been filed on such grounds, include the cases brought against the Sumitomo company by female employees, claiming wage loss as a result of refused promotion.92

Harmony and heterosexuality: Foundations of the Law

The English translation of the Law's title throws up some interesting etymological issues. Nowhere in the Japanese title do the words “equal” or “gender” appear. In fact, the literal translation of Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shakai Kihonhō would read: “Basic Law for a Male/Female Collaborative Participatory Society”.92 How was this ambiguous and cumbersome Japanese title reduced to the succinct and explicit, officially-sanctioned English title?

The shorthand English title could be seen as a nod to the intended or implicit aims of the Law, that is, equality in society between men and women. However, in specifically avoiding the use of the Japanese word “equal/equality” (either byōdō or kinto), the Law avoids making a direct statement about the relative status of men and women. Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shakai, is more descriptive and arguably more romantic than the English equivalent. In particular, the word kyōdō (collaboration; to work together or

92 Hirano reports that on March 28, 2004, one of the three Sumitomo companies sued (Sumitomo Metal Industries Ltd.), was ordered to pay around 63 million yen in compensation to four plaintiffs. This marks the first time that a court has ruled in favour of the plaintiffs (2005). http://subsite.icu.ac.jp/cgs/article/0504007e.html Last accessed 11/04/06.

93 Sankaku means participation in planning, implying more involvement than the more commonly used term for participation, sanka.
team up) evokes images of a harmonious and mutually engaged relationship. Kyōdō also means “co-operation; joint or united”, and this meaning is imported in the title of the Law.

The ambiguity of the term reflects the conservative resistance to its development, and the opaque English translation of “danjo kyōdō sankaku” as “Gender-Equality” supports this view. Takahashi argues that the translation was tailored for UN reports, and is “just deceitful” (2004:13). In business and bureaucratic implementation, the term “gender collaborative participation” supplants “Gender-Equality”, allowing what Takahashi calls a “sidestepping of the gender inequalities and discriminations deeply entrenched in the workplace, society and the family” (2004:13).

The connotation of danjo kyōdō is one of harmony, and Muta (2003:124) recognises this as an integral component of the Law’s construction. The katakana-ised word hāmoni has even been incorporated into the titles of some prefectural-level interpretations of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society. Thus we have the Yamaguchi Prefectural “Women and Men (People) Harmony 21” (Hito to Hito no Hāmoni 21) plan, the Ibaraki Prefectural “Ibaraki Harmony Plan” (Ibaraki Hāmoni Puran) and the Kumamoto Prefectural “Harmony Kumamoto” (Hāmoni Kumamoto) plans. Similarly, the plan is promoted in government women’s centre publications in particularly soft and affirmative language. The Tokyo Women’s Plaza newsletter features on its cover the statement:

94 The New Japan Women’s Association (of which Takahashi is Vice-President), in their 2004 submission to the Japanese government, argue further that the government has failed to address or curtail backlash against the Law, to the detriment of Japanese women. (English report online at http://www.shinfujin.gr.jp/eng/2_news/files/20041014154420.html

95 The title of the Yamaguchi plan uses furigana, to create dual readings of the Sino-Japanese characters for “woman” and “man” as “person” and “person”. This tool is frequently and effectively employed in discussions of women’s issues and in women-related information, and emphasises the fundamental humanity of people (as being beyond gender). It also implies a state of genderless-ness, in the same way and with the same aim as the words “gender-free”. 179
In order for the formation of a rich and truly harmonious society, it is essential for men and women to participate collaboratively, as equal creators, in all fields of activity in society (Tokyo Women's Plaza News, March 2002).\footnote{This statement uses the Japanese word for harmony (chōwa). I have translated the word taitō as “equal”, following my discussion of the nuances of this word.}

The absence of critical language, the emphatic inclusiveness and the abundance of positive statements characterise government-produced (and/or funded) literature on the Law for a Gender-Equal Society. The connotation of harmony is profitable for the Law and its advocates, because it contrasts with conservative understandings of the feminist agenda as aggressive, radical and, most significantly, as anti-family. As discussed above, backlash against the Law and its proponents has focused on the Law's potential to destroy the family by degrading the gender roles upon which the family is seen to be founded. The use of words such as hāmoni, chōwa (harmony) and nakayoku (being or becoming friends with) dilutes the tone of the legislation, emphasising its potential benefit to men as well as women, and distancing advocates from separatist or radical feminist stances.

Muta observes that the dilution of terms is calculated to promote its acceptance by the general public (2003:126). The current title of the Law works where the more explicit “Sexual Equality Law” (Danjo Byōdō Hö) or the “Law Prohibiting Discrimination Against Women” (Josei Sabetsu Kinshi Hö) would have provoked conservative argument (Muta 2003:123). It follows that opposition to the law becomes more difficult to raise when the actual terms of the Law are couched in ambiguity. Hence the evolution, from “Law Prohibiting Discrimination Against Women”, to “Law for a Gender-Equal Society”, and beyond that to the “Friendship Between Men and Women” interpretation of the legislation.
Inherent in the language of “harmony” is the romantic, domestic and specifically marital relationship between men and women. Article 6 of the Law (Compatibility of Activities in Family Life and other Activities) particularly illustrates the normative ideals grounding the Law as heterosexual. The article aims to de-gender “home-related activities” such as childcare and nursing, anticipating the equal division of these tasks between specifically male and female partners.

There is thus a clear assumption of heterosexuality underpinning the legislation, and the cover of Osawa’s book itself reflects this assumption of heterosexuality, although it must be noted that this is likely to be the work of the publisher rather than the author (Muta 2003:125). The cover features a black and white photo of a smiling man and woman, touching noses in a display of intimacy and affection. It is interesting to note that the couple is non-Japanese – the man being African (or African-American) and the woman Caucasian. The association of multiculturalism or cultural diversity with gender-equality, and the connection between these and the West reflects an idealised perception of gender roles and relationships outside Japan.

In this way, the creation of a gender-equal society is bound to the heterosexual couple exclusively, because by its very definition the Law (and particularly Article 6) cannot be implemented in the relationship of a homosexual or lesbian couple, where gender does not effect a division. Muta argues that the Law’s recommendation that “men and women respect the other’s human rights and share their responsibilities” is not only bound to an assumption of male/ female relationship, but that the “human rights” flowing from or elucidated by such relationships are particularly privileged (2003:125). In this way the male/female relationship is prioritised above, say, that of the company and the individual, or same-sex relationships (including company to employee, parent to child,
and country to citizen). Heterosexual interaction is thus constructed as the primary site at which human rights come into being, manifested in an idealised and mutual male/female respect. In this way, there is little or no potential to explicate human rights beyond the heterosexual division, such that relationships or interaction between same-sex parties (or asexual or multi-sexed, in the case of company and employee, country and citizen) become problematic subjects for the Law.

The ramifications of the Law for same-sex couples are therefore even more ambiguous than for heterosexuals. How can household or paid labour division reflect Gender-Equality when both parties are of the same gender? Is it possible for a same-sex couple to fulfil Article 6? The exclusion of these possibilities speaks of the (popular) perception of gender as heterosexually defined – that is, defined through interaction with the opposite sex – while also indicating the legal invisibility of non-heterosexual relationships.

Similarly, in aiming to redress inequalities within the family, the Law reinforces the understanding of the reproductive family as the core social unit. That “family life” is specifically addressed, and “home-related activities” exemplified by “child-raising”, reflects the inherent assumption that a family is always composed of one male partner, one female partner and their children.97 The performance of such home-related duties is seen to be the responsibility of the reproductive family (albeit requiring social support) implicitly excluding single parent families, couples without children and those who live apart from or outside reproductive families, including divorced people, those who live with friends and those who live alone, as well as same-sex couples.

97 This is supported by Muta (2003:126), who identifies the Law as a policy which aims to produce and reproduce citizens and national wealth, through the protection of the reproductive family unit.
Criticism of the Basic Law frequently echoes criticism levelled at the earlier EEOL. Concerns over the Basic Law’s limitations, particularly its vagueness and lack of penalty, have also been raised in discussions of the EEOL (Sakai ii 2003; Molony 1995). Molony argues that the 1986 EEOL, “while focusing on women’s work lives, was framed within the dominant discourse on gender that naturalises the role of mothers in creating and running a nurturing household” (1995:273). Similarly, the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society, while aiming to challenge “traditional” ideas of fixed gender roles, still frames its discussion in terms of reproduction, family and heterosexual norms.

While the Law aims to facilitate equal opportunity among individuals, its focus on the problems of an ageing population reflect an implicit ideal course of action for such individuals – namely, to marry and reproduce. In this way the Law, while purporting to increase the freedom of men and women from gender roles, inherently promotes certain models as preferable, in light of Japan’s current economic status. Muta suggests that the Law is in fact a strategy to promote marriage and child-bearing as an answer to the dramatic social and economic changes that have come about because of the ageing low-birth rate population (2003:124).

Conclusion

It is important to recognise that the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society, like the EEOL, came about partially because of an increase in pressure on the Japanese government from the international community, particularly through participation in UN initiatives such as the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Bishop 2002). However, in its national form as well as local governmental incarnations, the Law is also the product of efforts to increase awareness of gender as a factor in
social, political and economic activities. The promotion of this cause, the awareness of
gender, through the official avenue of legislation reflects an increase in feminist
presence in political and advisory positions. It also reveals the government’s urgent
need to address issues related to the construction of gender roles – namely, the greying
population and low fertility rate. The explicit inclusion of these issues in the Preamble
reflects a normalised understanding of the connection between Gender-Equality and the
productive and reproductive capacity of the nation.

The socio-economic impetus of the Law is made explicit in the definitive “Purpose” of
Chapter Two Article 1, as being “in consideration of the urgency of realising an affluent
and dynamic society in which the human rights of both men and women are respected
and which can respond to changes in socioeconomic circumstances” (emphasis added).
Interpreting the current economic depression as a factor in the productivity and
reproductivity of citizens, the Law aims to increase the choices available to Japanese
women and men to participate in a range of activities untrammelled by gender bias. I
would argue that underlying this intention is the aim of increasing specifically domestic
(or reproductive) participation.

In promoting the reproductive family, headed by male and female partners, as a central
site for reform, the Law paradoxically reinforces ideals it purports to deconstruct. These
ideals support the construction of heterosexuality and the reproductive family as
normative and integral structures through which a gender-equal society might (or
should) be developed, and are in fact echoed in the conservative polemic of anti-Law
critics. Furthermore, the effect of what Mikanagi calls “gender-rectifying” policies such
as the EEOL and the Law for a Gender-Equal Society must be played against the effects
of “gender-reinforcing” policies, such as changes to tax and social security which discriminate against women (Mikanagi 2001:212).

While the language of harmony, evoked by the Law and its advocates, reflects a conscious effort to minimise conflict and partisanship, the reactive discourse of backlash is antithetical to this aim. The linguistic style of advocators, evoking gender-equality, mutual respect and harmonious relationships thus stands in direct contrast to conservative depictions of fascist feminists, damaged families and social confusion. As support for the Law spreads through state campaigns, often developed and implemented by women’s centres, similarly opposition grows in local government, conservative media and in academia.98

Japanese feminists have argued that backlash against the Law is connected with a broad-scale revival of nationalism (Kogure 2005). This revival is manifested in calls from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party to amend Article 34 of the Constitution. In June 2004 a LDP Constitution revision panel argued that “‘individualism’ has come to mean ‘egoism’ in postwar Japan, leading to the collapse of family and community” (Kogure 2005). Takahashi argues that the push to abolish Article 24 can be linked to discussions of Article 9, the constitutional provision renouncing war (Takahashi, interviewed in Kogure 2005). In this way, backlash against the Law reflects a revival of the patriarchal ideals that underpinned pre-WWII Japanese society, in which sex-roles were fixed and the individual subordinate to the society (Takahashi 2004:10; Kogure 2005).

98 The critics featured in newspapers are frequently middle-aged (or older) university lecturers, and generally male. Although the predictability of such features is in itself fascinating, being tied to a much wider set of variables it unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this study, awaiting further exploration.
However, in considering the backlash launched against the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, it is crucial to also appreciate the positive value of such criticism. As Ueno Chizuko notes, "a head wind is a barometer of real strength" (2002:41). In this sense, femi-bashing and criticism of the Law reflects the extent to which feminism and feminists have become influential in the public and political eye. Certainly the publicity afforded by media, including the internet, to the Law suggests that its development and implementation impact – or are perceived to impact – significantly on issues of importance both for supporters and critics.

It is important to recognise the positive potential of the Law as an aid, if not a vehicle, of social change, and as a step towards a more gender-equitable society. Hashimoto argues that collaborative work between women's groups and "gender-sensitive men" is the key to societal change, and predicts "a slightly bright future" for the younger and future generations of Japanese (Hashimoto 2001). For all its shortcomings, the Law is nonetheless an advance on governmental efforts to redress imbalance in the status of women and men. As a product of collaboration between feminists working within the system and the government administration, the development and passing of the Law can be seen as a feminist achievement in itself (Muta 2003:123). Any criticism that acknowledges or perceives a part played by feminists in the creation of this law, for good or bad, pays tribute to the growth of women-centred organisation in contemporary Japan.

I conclude this chapter by once more quoting Ueno Chizuko, who observes that feminism requires opposition in the same way that a yacht needs wind to push it forward (Ueno 2002:41). To this end, feminists should celebrate backlash as an impetus.
By this logic, if no other, the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society has much to celebrate.
CHAPTER SIX

Women's Centres: Working within and beyond bureaucracy

Well prior to the development of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, the Japanese government targeted women's issues as a political and social concern. The United Nations International Decade of the Woman (1975-85) marked a period of particular growth in reforms geared towards redressing gender inequality. During this decade, the government channelled resources into the promotion of women's issues, most significantly through the development of national, municipal and local women's centres (Mackie 2003:179). The ratification of the 1980 Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) required the Japanese government to make concrete steps towards elimination gender discrimination, including reform of existing legislation (namely, the Nationality Law) and the implementation of equal opportunity legislation (Mackie 2003:179).

In this chapter I focus on government women's centres, their relationship with non-government women's groups and with the state and its policies. This focus reflects the unusual, though not uniquely Japanese, development of women's centres as bridges between the state and citizens/non-government groups engaged in effecting gender-related social change. Bardsley observes that women's centres in Japan perform four main functions, all related to the collation, provision and production of information (Bardsley 1999:136-7).99 Firstly, they gather "information relevant to women's lives, especially by funding studies of gender issues and by building comprehensive data bases" (Bardsley 1999:136). Secondly, women's centres "provide(e) easy access to this

99 Bardsley's study relates directly to the National Women's Education Centre in Saitama and the Korean Women's Development Institute in Seoul. However, I argue that her observations can be extended to larger (national and prefectural) women's centres throughout Japan.
information, through library services and through the internet" (Bardsley 1999:137). Thirdly, women’s centres “build a national computer network of women’s groups”. Finally, the centres “initiate the production, exchange and discussion of information through domestic and international conferences” (Bardsley 1999:137).

While Bardsley’s conceptualisation focuses on the informative capacity of women’s centres, there is arguably significance in the connective function of the construction, collation and dissemination of information. The connective capacity of women’s centres is firstly played out in the physical space of the women’s centre, where women’s groups meet and organise and where individual women participate in seminars and education. In this context the centre is not just the site of production and exchange of information, but also enables this process to be shared by non-government and government bodies – the bureaucracy. While the connection between centre and group may not be consciously or actively sought (at least by the group), it may nonetheless reflect common aims and concerns of the state (via the bureaucracy) and non-government sector.

Secondly, women’s centre websites provide a state-funded cyber-connection between individual women and groups and resources. The websites of women’s centres such as the National Women’s Education Centre (NWEC) feature links to sites on national, prefectural and government bodies (including women’s centres), policy and law, gender-related research and services for women (including child-rearing support and counselling). The website effectively links individual women to the resources of the state, and allows regional non-government groups access to information about related work and groups around the country. In this way women’s centres support the welfare state, providing services that supplement and complement those offered by

100 http://www.nwec.jp/page02.php#l Last accessed 3/08/05.
neighbourhood-based associations such as *jichikai* and *chōnaikai* (Estevez-Abe 2003:161).\(^{101}\)

The connection of state to non-government sector, and, more significantly, connection among non-government groups, enables a critical dialogue on the status of women’s issues, and the forms and features of contemporary feminist action occurring throughout the country. As a form of intermediary between state and society, women’s centres can be seen as a site for both government and civil participation in the provision of services. While a centre may officially operate under government control and/or funding, the input and presence of NPO and NGO groups using the centre’s facilities “improves policy makers’ knowledge”(Estevez-Abe 2003:170).

This chapter examines the connective capacity of Japanese women’s centres, using observations of women’s groups and centres, particularly the Spring Centre, as the foundation for this discussion. It is implicitly these experiences which shape and limit my discussion, as I sketch the wider picture of women’s centres and women’s groups in Japan, informed by the specific details of research conducted in Kansai, from 2000 to 2002.

**Definition of women’s centres**

The first model of a publicly established and operated women’s facility in Japan was the National Women's Education Centre in Saitama (accommodation and training facilities available).\(^{102}\) While it remains the largest women’s centre in Japan, NWEC can be seen

\(^{101}\) In this discussion Estevez-Abe refers to seniors clubs and intermediate associations, but I extend this observation to women’s centres, which operate outside but in conjunction with these administrative partners in welfare.

to represent the tip of a pyramid of women’s centres and services, funded and/or operated by national, prefectural and municipal governments.

In this chapter the term “women’s centres” is used a gloss for the municipal and prefecturally run or funded institutions which specifically target women and women’s issues. There are 772 centres and facilities of this nature throughout Japan, and the National Women’s Education Council breaks these into three categories, based on factors including historical background, establishment and facilities available. *Hataraku Fujin No Ie* (Centres for Women Workers) and *Noson Fujin No Ie* (Centre for Women in Agriculture) comprises 228 and 305 facilities respectively (Yokohama Women’s Forum 1999:4). The third category, Women’s Centres (*josei sentā*), comprises 239 facilities and is the focus of this chapter.

Within this category, the majority of centres (48.3%) are classified as publicly established and publicly operated, meaning that they are founded and run by the had divisions of national or regional governments, or boards of education. Another 31.5% are publicly established and privately operated, meaning that operation costs are paid by corporations and other private organisations (NWEC 1998). “Private organisations” includes foundations (*zaidan hōjin*) which represent the third sector – funded by government grants and often (partly or fully) staffed by public servants, but not strictly government bodies. The Spring Centre and Move, Kitakyūshū are examples of this kind of centre.103

In addition to these types of bodies, I include women’s affairs sections of local government councils in the “women’s centre” category, as these represent the most localized form of official policy regarding women’s issues. In practical terms, these

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103 The Spring Centre is the pseudonym of the women’s centre discussed in greater depth below.
women's affairs sections may involve only two or three full-time staff, all of whom public servants without specialised training or experience, working within the council building. The inclusion of "women's affairs" sections in local government councils reflects the flow-down of policy related to the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society, which has involved the implementation of local ordinances (jōrei).

However, next to the large, custom-designed prefectural women's centres, municipal facilities are generally meagre. As the government at prefectural level is better situated to fund civic projects, the range of facilities, funding and activities among government women's centres is therefore vast. While the scope of the term "women's centres" may invite generalisation, this definition is used to draw together those bodies funded by and ultimately grounded in government policy dealing with women's issues. While variance in size and organisation are significant within the group, there is nonetheless a need to distinguish these bodies from those founded, funded and operated by citizens outside the state and bureaucracy.

The operation and administration of women's centres varies according to the size and funding scope. In the example of the Spring Centre, administration and operation is undertaken by the Prefectural Gender-Equality Foundation (Zaidan Hōjin Naniwafu Danjo Kyōdō Shakai Zukuri Zaidan) (Spring Centre newsletter 1999:56) (See Figure 2). The Prefectural Gender Foundation was established in 1975, and comprises a board of directors, headed by the Chair of the Board. One of the directors is the Managing Director, officially in charge of the overall operation of the Spring Centre. Reporting to this Director is the Spring Centre Management Implementation Committee and the Bureau Director, who is in charge of the daily management and operation of the Centre.

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104 Exceptions to this rule are the more well-off cities, generally those with a larger population and closest to metropolitan centres like Osaka and Tokyo.
Beneath the Bureau Director, the General Affairs Group Director and the Project Promotions Group Director operate. The Project Promotions Group is comprised of three coordinators: Office Co-ordinator, Counselling Co-ordinator and Information Co-ordinator (Spring Centre newsletter 1999:1). Each co-ordinator is in charge of a chief of the respective sections, and it is the chiefs and other workers who oversee and implement the practical operation of the centre. Thus while the Information Co-ordinator may be in charge of proposing and planning a new display for the Information Library, it is likely to be the chief who co-ordinates the display materials, organises staffing and prepares promotional flyers.

While women’s centres focus on the promotion of women’s issues, the degree of women-centredness, or exclusivity, is ambiguous. As a substructure of the Prefectural Gender-Equality Foundation, it is clear that the Spring Centre is expected to present a “gender-equal”, rather than “feminist” presence in the community. In this way, the English language Spring Centre website describes the centre as “an institution dedicated to the promotion of independence and equal opportunity for men and women”. Furthermore, “women and men in all age groups, though most are women, (sic) visit the centre”. Thus while the official aim of the centre is to promote a gender-equal society involving both men and women, the centre’s facilities and seminars effectively tend to target and attract women participants.

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105 The Spring Centre website, English language. Last accessed 3/08/05.
106 The Spring Centre website, English introduction. Last accessed 3/08/05. In my observations, there appeared to be a number of regular, older male visitors to the centre, but they seemed to come predominantly for the purposes of using the centre’s information library – either to read the newspapers or to sleep on the reading couch. While this was informally and unofficially disliked, I did not see or hear of anyone being cautioned or asked to leave on this ground. By contrast, signs on the desks in the information library advised that school students should not use the library as a space to do homework. Rather, the desks were for the study of materials belonging to the library.
Facilities and services

Women's centres offer a variety of services which can be broadly broken down into three categories: counselling and support services, library and information and events (including seminars, festivals and symposia). While free phone and in-person counselling is available from many community centres, the services offered at women's centres specifically target women and women's issues. The centres refer to their service as "feminist counselling" (feminisuto kaunseringu), and conduct courses for counselling professionals who wish to learn the women-centred approach and skills.\textsuperscript{107} Counselling services in women's centres are heavily used and frequently understaffed. In one centre I was told that the number of users has risen consistently in the last few years, and follow-up appointments with counsellors are therefore likely to be spread over months. This is in part testament to the skills of the counsellors, and no doubt partly reflective of an increased awareness of such services among the community.

The collection and supply of information on women's issues represents one of the major roles of women's centres. The inclusion of Information Libraries (jōhō raiburari) into centres reflects this role, and a distinction can be made between the nature of these collections and that of general public libraries (Yokohama City Women's Association 1996:8).\textsuperscript{108} Information contained in Information Libraries is expected to fall within the definition given by the Prime Minister's Office, Section on Women's Issues, as that which "illuminates the actual condition of the various problems pertaining to women, 

\textsuperscript{107} While some centres, such as Yokohama Forum offer counselling to both men and women, the emphasis remains on gender-related issues such as violence and sexual discrimination.

\textsuperscript{108} The Information Libraries stock fiction and non fiction books, videos, CDs, journals and magazines related to women's issues such as childrearing, women in art, women's health and feminism. The libraries of the Spring Centre and the Yokohama Women's Forum, for example, subscribe to women's magazines from the U.K, U.S, France, Germany, Spain and India, in consideration of the large foreign population in their respective prefectures.
and contributes to the formulation of their solutions, in order to raise the position of women”.

In addition to housing information, women’s centres also produce regular newsletters, distributed within the centres and also sent to schools, universities and interested organisations. These newsletters detail the recent activities organised by the centre, such as seminars and symposia. They may advertise performers or professionals who work on women’s issues, and usually contain articles on the current state (locally or nationally) of certain issues pertaining to women. While these newsletters are Japanese language only, larger prefectural women’s centres may publish a less-frequent English edition, for the English-speaking community as well as for international women’s centres.109 These editions may include book reviews, contributions by foreign writers, and updates on local and international events, such as United Nations conferences and international human rights forums.

The Spring Centre also includes in its (Japanese) newsletters an introduction of NGO groups that utilise the Centre – for example, the “Rape Crisis Survivors Network, Kansai”, a group “established in 1998 by the friends and mothers of two survivors of rape incidents”, which offers support and counselling, holds seminars (at the Spring Centre) on surviving sexual assault, and produces four newsletters a year (Spring Centre English newsletter 1999:8).110 The inclusion of these introductory pieces increases public knowledge of the work of NGOs, and supplements the promotional resources and activities of the NGOs themselves.

109 The Spring Centre sends its English-language newsletter around the world, from Iceland to Argentina, Burundi to Bendigo (Fieldnotes 12/09/00).
110 Spring Centre newsletter 1999 no.15
The production and dissemination of regular newsletters thus supports the “informative” limb of government-affiliated women’s centre work. While seminars aim to educate their participants, newsletters and other publications aim to spread women’s issues into the wider community, connecting state-sponsored and non-governmental organisations as well as individual citizens. In addition, newsletters publicise the government’s involvement in issues which affect the women (and often men) in the community. The production of English language newsletters extends this function, promoting the Japanese government’s efforts to domestic English-speaking and international communities.

As Bardsley observes, women’s centres are also sites for the production of knowledge and information about women, primarily through coordination of events such as seminars, festivals and domestic and international conferences (Bardsley 1999:137). The events offered by centres vary range in size and nature, from courses on craft, dance and cooking, to seminars on assertiveness and leadership, business strategies for women and child abuse prevention (Yokohama Women’s Forum 2001:3). In planning and promoting events, the centres appear to aim for a mixture of courses that explicitly challenge gender stereotype, and courses that seem apolitical or “ungendered” – in my observations at the Spring Centre, the term “feminist” was almost never used in naming events, with the prominent exception of feminist counselling courses (feminisuto kaunseringu). In the case of the Spring Centre at least, this balance informally acknowledges the presence of the Prefectural Foundation (and prefectural government), which seeks as broad and non-radical an operational scope as possible. One of the implications of this approach, as observed by Information Co-ordinator Mizutani Noriko, is that while there are many courses focusing on the issue of violence against
women as experienced by victims, there are few which address the issue from the
perspective of offenders (Fieldnotes, 12/09/00).\footnote{111}

As concrete representations of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, the aims of
women’s centres can be traced to the ideals espoused in that Law. Chapter Five contains
in-depth discussion of the Gender-Equal Law; however, it is important to note in this
Chapter the way that women’s centres construe the Law in their organisation and
mission statements. Yokohama Women’s Forum interprets the Law as involving five
areas for address in the planning of seminars: work, body, heart/soul, living, friends and
lifestyle (Forum pamphlet). Similarly, the promotion strategies of women’s centres aim
to address the specific needs highlighted by the Law as essential to the creation of a
gender-equal society. For its first ten years, for example, the Spring Centre (under its
umbrella organisation, the Prefectural Gender-Equality Foundation) worked to promote
a “Three I” philosophy: Identity (focus on independence of women in society);
Information (information network); and Internationalisation (international exchange)
Centre organised seminars to educate and empower, such as “From a Gender
Perspective: Contemporary art, different cultures and organisations”, aiming to consider
“if we re-examine what is considered ‘natural’ in society from a gender perspective”
(Spring Centre newsletter 2002:11). The second “I” is reflected in the production and
dissemination of Centre newsletters, which include articles and statistics on women’s
changing status, and also in the organisation of women’s film festivals and exhibitions
of women artists and photographers (Spring Centre English newsletter 2004). The final
“I”, “Internationalisation” is closely related to the creation of information networks. The

\footnote{111} This observation was made by Information Co-ordinator Mizutani-san, during a discussion on the
centre’s focal themes. Mizutani-san observed that “violence is increasingly an issue of importance to
Japanese women and feminists”. The attention to families and familial relationships in courses also
appears to reflect the importance of these themes in feminist consciousness in contemporary Japan.
international emphasis is reflected in events such as film festivals (which showcase local and foreign films from female directors or featuring strong female characters), but is also evident in the provision of English language newsletters with data on Japanese women. The emphasis on international engagement reflects back to the terms of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society. As the Cabinet Office observes, “to create a gender-equal society, it is important to walk alongside with the international community. Let us co-operate with other countries and tackle (this issue)”\textsuperscript{112}

Women’s centres support the Law’s focus on harmony through their official and unofficial titles. For example, Chiba City Women’s Centre is also known as “Harmony Plaza” (Hāmonī Puraza); East Osaka City Gender-Equality Centre (Danjo kyōdō sentā) is called “Equorum” (Ikōramu)\textsuperscript{113}, combining the English words “equal” and “forum”; while Saitama Prefectural Centre for the Promotion of Gender-Equality (Saitama Ken Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Suishin Sentā) is unofficially known as “With You Saitama”.\textsuperscript{114} The Spring Centre, officially known as the Prefectural Women’s Centre, received its nickname through a public competition. Other katakana-ised women’s centre names reflect themes of empowerment and women-centredness, such as Wings, Kyoto; Move, Kitakyūshū and Musashino Human Network Plaza. The naming and nicknaming of women’s centres reflects the dual functional obligations of centres, in addressing both government and citizen’s expectations and requirements.

As a government-funded or operated body, the centre must reflect relevant government policy – that is, the Law for a Gender-Equal Society – while at the same time appealing to citizens and prospective users of the centre, many of whom may not be pro-feminist.

\textsuperscript{112} http://www.gender.go.jp/ Last accessed 1/02/06.
\textsuperscript{113} http://www.city.higashiosaka.osaka.jp/060/060030/centre/centretop.html Last accessed 31/01/06.
\textsuperscript{114} http://www.nwec.jp/page02.php Last accessed 7/08/05.
Of course with women's centres, amidst all the different kinds of borrowing and lending going on, many of the people who use the centre are ordinary people, the general public. And many people still have that rigid thinking (koteiteki ishiki)...so if there is a problem they are not satisfied if it's dealt with by a woman. If a man comes and says the same thing, if it's a man they will be satisfied (Kishisan, interview 9/12/01).

As Spring Centre worker Kishi Sachiko observes, negotiation with Centre users inevitably involves negotiating conservative mainstream views. Centre workers must therefore deal in the currency of general public views and expectations, as well as the official (Gender-Equal) language of the government.

The Spring Centre

At this point I focus on the Spring Centre and its staff, in exploring the specific functions and limitations of government-funded women's centres. The Prefectural Women's Centre, popularly known as The Spring Centre, was established in 1994, after ten years of campaigning and planning by the women of the prefecture, and particularly those involved in local NGO women's groups. The Centre is funded and administered by the Prefectural Gender-Equality Foundation, established by the Prefectural Government in 1994, with the aim of "achieving a Gender-Equal society in which women and men can cooperate in every field to create a more humane life" (Spring Centre newsletter 1997:12). The Centre building has ten stories above, and one storey below ground level, with a total floor space of 12,760m².¹¹⁵

In 2004, the budget of the Prefectural Gender-Equality Foundation was ¥487,215,000 (approximately AUS$5,525,075.00). Of this sum ¥176,851,861 was used for management of the facilities, ¥99,195,032 on projects and planning, and ¥25,258,584 on counselling services. During the period of my internship, the Centre had 16 part-time

¹¹⁵ The Spring Centre website, English introduction. Last accessed 30/01/06.
(hijōkin) staff and 18 full-time (jōkin) staff, of whom all but four were public servants from the prefectural government. The remaining four were specialist staff, including Yamazaki-san and the Director of Library Information Services, Mizutani-san. There were 15 specialist staff in total, including counsellors. The other two directors (also specialists), Itō-san and Uemura-san were part-time staff (Yamazaki-san, personal correspondence 30/01/06).

The “Three I” philosophy mentioned above was updated in 2004 to the “Three C” plan, which promoted “Continue”, “Collaborate” and “Change”. These “three C’s”, titled in English and explained in Japanese, point to future directions for the Prefectural Gender Foundation. According to the “Women’s Empowerment Forum 2004 Report”, “Continue” refers to the progress of principles of Gender-Equality (danjo kyōdō sankaku); “Collaborate” to working with NPO or citizens’ groups (minkan dantai) and industry; while “Change” implies “expanding projects to reform of customs/traditions (kankō) that impede the creation of a gender-equal society” (Women’s Empowerment Report 2004:67). The creation and promotion of a Gender-Equal society is thus a central focus of the Foundation, with principles based on the Law for a Gender-Equal Society and implemented by the Spring Centre.

I became acquainted with the Spring Centre through an internship, which I undertook intending to examine the primary functions and objectives of the centre, and the practical organisation of services offered. The internship, which ran from July 2000 to January 2001, generally involved one full day each week, with occasional participation in special (weekend) events and informal dinners. At the time of my internship course, the third to go through the Centre, there were two other female interns, Horikawa Junko and Kawano Miho. Kawano-san and Horikawa-san were placed in the information

116 Josei Enpawamento Furamu 2004 Hokokusho, p.67
library and counselling sections respectively, while I worked in the project planning section of the Centre.

In the project section I was supervised by Yamazaki Risa, staff member in the planning promotion group (kikaku suishin gurūpu). Yamazaki-san is a woman in her early thirties who has worked at the Spring Centre since its inception and is one of the six staff who are not public servants but specialist employees of the Centre. Prior to working for the Centre, Yamazaki-san was a junior high school teacher, in an area with a high Korean-Japanese population. She credited her experience with these students as increasing her awareness of social issues such as discrimination. She applied for a job at the Spring Centre after reading a newspaper article that mentioned the position, and was chosen from some 200 applicants.

Yamazaki-san’s status and entry to the Centre mark her as unique among the staff. Her considerable interest in issues relating to women, her openness in discussing her lifestyle (as a single woman living alone), and her enthusiasm for travel and intercultural women’s affairs made her an unusual and interesting informant/assistant during my internship and throughout my stay in Kansai.

The Spring Centre’s facilities include a concert hall, health and fitness club and meeting rooms of varied size, available for public hire.117 In addition the Centre contains an audio visual studio and editing suite, in which sessions on film-making and video-journalism are regularly held. The rooms available for hire range from small classrooms to seminar rooms which can seat up to 40, all containing desks, chairs and whiteboards. There is also a multi-purpose room with large tables, guillotine and coin-operated

117 Although in full use during the time of fieldwork, the health and fitness hall, including swimming pool, was closed in 2003 due to lack of revenue.
photocopier, frequently hired (hourly) by groups planning events and projects, collating information or producing newsletters.

The Spring Centre aims to address certain needs in its physical structure. The incorporation of a casual day-care room, for parents attending meetings or lectures, and a sound-proofed parents’ room in the concert hall, reflects both the ideal and actual composition of the Centre’s users. While officially a space for both men and women, the majority of participants in lectures and courses are women, who tend to be more available during the (daytime and early evening) hours when most sessions are conducted.

The attraction of these facilities is not to be underestimated. Casual childcare being an expensive and often inflexible option, the provision of a child-care service may be the deciding factor in women’s participation in courses, as well as groups. This was an issue raised in discussion at a Women’s Projects’ meeting.

I get phone calls from women who want to come (to meetings), and asking if there is a childcare service. It’s a shame but I have to say no. Or else I tell them about the local public childcare service which (another member) uses when she comes (Tanaka-san, 15/06/01).

About ten years ago I went to a lecture at Shiga Women’s Centre and at that time they had a nursery room. I didn’t want to go to the lecture, but I wanted to use the nursery room! (Nakane-san, 15/06/01)

The pull-factor of women’s centres is therefore tied strongly to the facilities on offer, and the promotion of these among women in the community. Providing for childcare increases the usability of the centres, and promotes the government behind the centres as aware of and sympathetic to women’s needs.
This represents one distinction between government and non-government women's organisations. The provision of facilities like child-care is directly linked to funding capacity and therefore generally beyond the resources of self-funded women's groups. In providing support services such as childcare, government-funded women's centres are able to widen their catch-pool of users in a way that exceeds NGO group capacity. While this can be seen as a limitation of NGOs, it is the restrictions of resource and facilities — and therefore members — which allow NGOs to focus their work on select issues, and in accordance with their specific needs. Thus, while government women's centres are required to provide a wide range of services to meet the needs of a large community, they are subsequently precluded from catering to specialised women's issues and needs.

**Criticisms and difficulties**

My interviews with women’s centre staff represent an approach that Roberts terms “studying sideways”, or observing a system from the perspective of workers who use their knowledge to support and “connect (individuals) to levels of power beyond their reach” (Roberts 2003:298). The individuals who stand to benefit from the work of these staff are not only those women who attend seminars, utilise the library or participate in groups that occupy the centre’s space. Rather, women’s centres theoretically target all women within their constituency, prefectural, municipal or local. In actual practice, however, (at least in my observations) the users of centres represent a relatively narrow demographic of middle-aged to older women. The issue of attracting new participants, male and female, and particularly participants from younger age-groups, appeared to be
an ongoing concern for staff at the Spring Centre.\textsuperscript{118} The issue is not simply one of practical access, although timing of courses and events represents one factor in (non)participation. Rather, because of their bureaucratic nature and operation, women's centres may lack the basic appeal to attract young women. This is in part due the fact that women's centres do not utilise the same tools in attracting an audience that other women-focused spaces and organisations might. NGO women's groups and feminist websites such as the Love Piece Club may offer specialist information or focus on issues attractive and pertinent to certain audiences, enabling them to engage with specific age and interest groups. However, to focus on one issue may also mean excluding other issues, particularly where the focal issue is taboo.\textsuperscript{119}

One significant criticism lodged by women's groups at government centres is rigidity and a subsequent inability to deal thoroughly or quickly with certain women's issues.\textsuperscript{120} This may be related to the individual personalities and workloads of workers and also to the processes by which decisions are made in the centre. Staff of women's centres themselves recognise this limitation, and view it as an inherent weakness of the bureaucratic structure.

The image of the administration as inefficient was also reflected in the attitudes of women's group members. The women's group Women's Projects often translates international and national government publications on women’s issues, encouraging members to learn related English vocabulary and also to critique the official perspective.

\textsuperscript{118} Following the intern's seminar, Mizutani-san gave a speech about about its success as the first ever Spring Centre presentation which limited entrance to (that is, focused on) people under 30 years. She then urged all participants in the seminar to make full use of the Centre's resources (Fieldnotes 20/01/01).

\textsuperscript{119} See for example the Chapter Four discussion of sexuality in Women's Projects.

\textsuperscript{120} One illustration of such rigidity may be read from the experience of one woman, who sought counselling at a women's centre for help with sexuality issues. After her first session (for which she had waited some time) she told me that felt that the counsellor was closed-minded about alternative sexuality, and thus she chose not to continue with her counselling.
While reading an article ("Strengthening of the National Machinery in Conjunction with Reforms, Including that of the Central Government") in the Japanese National Women’s Education Council (NWEC) newsletter, Tanaka-san was critical that "you can tell that it’s written by Japanese. It sounds like they are doing a lot but... (it’s just words)" (Tanaka 5/10/01). Similarly, when I discussed attending a conference run by NWEC, members of the group suggested it would not be worth my time, implying that only the polished (read: unrealistic), official line would be put forward in presentations. In these cases it is not bureaucracy in itself that is problematised by the women — rather, it is the response of bureaucracy, perceived as slow and ineffectual, with which the group members take issue. The concern is related to the capability of those in charge of women’s policy. At the opening of one city-level women’s centre, I asked Akagi-san, a member of Women’s Projects, her opinion of the director, a politician. Akagi-san replied, "Well she has a good reputation but some people think she is just a kind of mascot girl" (Fieldnotes, 17/11/00).

Lack of expertise and/or experience was frequently identified as a major weakness of the centres. Women’s centres, like similar facilities for youth and senior citizens, are predominantly staffed by public servants without specialized training or expertise, and who are rotated in triennial cycles. Akagi-san was critical of the "lack of experience of people in charge of public women’s institutions", and suggested that this contributed to the gap between NGO and official perspectives on women’s issues (Akagi, personal communication, 23/07/00).

From my observations, the work performed by public-servant staff (from here on referred to as “general” staff), is largely administrative, related to the operation and promotion of the Centre and its facilities, with some variation according to specific
These tasks appeared to be relatively straightforward and standard, and requiring little specialized knowledge of women’s issues.

Furthermore, within the events-planning section at least, phone reception, filing and other minor tasks were seen as the responsibility of all available staff members, irrespective of rank. This was pointed out to me early in my internship, as an explicit and conscious move made in the aim of creating an equal and comfortable (hatarakiyasui) workplace. Accordingly, the use of keigo (respect language), was less strictly monitored in the Centre than in other workplace environments, where it is standard practice to use honorifics and humble language in addressing superiors. This was highlighted by staff within the events-planning section, as an unusual and positive feature of the Centre, and a point of distinction even within the public service. There is thus a flow-on from “gender-equal” to non-hierarchical, suggesting an effort by those in charge of the Centre to apply the idealised egalitarianism of the grounding official policy.

The environment at the Spring Centre is apparently peculiar even among women’s centres. Minō Yoshie, a public servant who works in the women’s affairs section of a small city council, stressed to me the gender bias in her workplace.

It really is a man’s world. All the bosses are men, and there is not even one female director (būchō) at my workplace. Zero. Last year there was one section chief. In a workplace of 400, she was the only woman in management. Apart from that there are a few middle-level women in charge...there are about 10 or 20 out of 400...In the middle of all of that, if I even propose a seminar, for example, it gets completely crushed. At meetings, if I want to say something, I’ll raise my hand and then – it might be hard to believe – but they’ll say “Women don’t speak! Don’t be so cheeky” (namaiki). (Minō-san, 26/01/02)

121 For example, workers in the information library process books and resources, while staff in the counselling section take appointments for counselling sessions. These tasks and others requiring specialised skills, involved on-the-job training rather than particular specialist knowledge or experience.
While Minō-san’s example may represent one extreme of workplace environments, stories of women who encountered difficulties in their public service position were not uncommon. Furthermore, while the public service is generally perceived as progressive, work in relatively new fields such as women’s affairs may be slowed by the conservative “atmosphere” of the office.

The most exhausting thing is that within the workplace there’s a kind of atmosphere, that even though this has been made a national issue of utmost importance, and the Gender-Equality law has been drafted, there are still people who don’t take it seriously. They don’t say that directly, but there is that sense, I feel that constantly. So after five years I say to myself, ‘Even after I’ve worked this hard, the way they see things hasn’t changed’. Sometimes I just wonder whether there’s any point in the work I do, you know. That’s what’s exhausting. But if you don’t do anything it won’t change. (Kaneda, 26/01/02).

Kaneda Tomoe, who also works in a city-level women’s affairs bureau, suggests that the role of the administration is changing to accommodate an increasingly active NPO/NGO contingent.

In the future, I think it would certainly be a better offer if the administration becomes co-ordinator, and the NPOs the ones who actually put it into effect and offer the services. NPOs are flexible and can work fast…I think that’s definitely their strength. There’s just (the problem of) the source of funding (Kaneda-san, 6/01/02).

The capacity of women’s centres to support NGOs, materially and through the provision of information, represents a key aspect of the Centre’s connective function.

Spring Centre commits to work with nonprofit organisations, women’s groups a lot. We try to educate them, we try to, you know, make them work more. We do have a programme called kyōsai, which means doing together, joint event. So…because coordinator came from non-profit organisation, we know their

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122 One such story involved a woman who had previously worked in the Spring Centre, and who now held a middle-management role in another public sector office. Her difficulties revolve around junior male staff who refuse to accept her seniority, intentionally making mistakes on work for which she is ultimately responsible (Fieldnotes, 9/10/00).
(NGO) needs. And we also know what the government job is. And we still have to make government rules, right, cos...they have tax money. So I think, you know, there is a job for government and also we need to help nonprofit organisations, because they don’t have a history yet. They are lack of manpower, lack of money and lack of everything, so they need to be supported by government (Uemura-san, 11/12/01).

Uemura Shōko, the Office Co-ordinator of the Spring Centre, identifies the experience of those in charge as being one of the strengths of the centre, and recognises the financial limitations of NGOs as an area in which government assistance is essential.

The planning and development of courses – including decisions on themes, speakers and format – involves senior general staff, with significant input by the three directors and the head of project planning. However, while general staff provide plentiful support on practical matters of administration and organisation, the onus appears to be on the specialist staff to ensure the ideological soundness of the Centre’s functions.

The specialist staff (including Yamazaki-san) are considered employees of the Centre rather than the prefectural government. Yamazaki-san liaises with the other groups (such as the centre use promotion group), organises and oversees the Centre activities, and is responsible for coming up with new ideas for events. She identifies the difficult of her job as being related to workload, responsibility and the overlap of work with personal life.

I work through everything – it becomes hard to draw a line between work and what I do at home for fun. And a lot of different strengths are required...Other places have a lot of people, a lot of staff like that, and lately I’ve looked around, widened my perspective and made a network with those people. That’s why I have so many friends. And as of this year, we get together and have little study groups and meetings (Yamazaki-san, 9/12/01)
The interaction between centre staff reflects the need for networks of support. In a relatively new field, the sharing of experiential information between centres strengthens the informal friendship network of staff, but also encourages problem solving within the bureaucratic framework.

There have been times when (another women’s centre staff) are thinking about how to do something...and it’s not going well and they’re not sure what to do, we talk about it. (That centre) and Spring are different, but I’ll say ‘I did it this way or ‘If it were me, I’d do this’...and that can be quite helpful, so then they modify it to suit themselves. (Yamazaki-san, 9/12/01)

My own research was facilitated by this network, as the women I spoke to were introduced to me through my initial contacts within the Spring Centre. While all but three of the women’s centre staff interviewed were public servants, their relationship with the Spring Centre and its staff drew on common approaches to the specific demands of their work, as well as personal experiences as young, mostly single women.

The relationships among women staff in women’s centres can thus be related to those among members of non-government women’s groups. For the staff, as for the group members, the network serves as a source of information and support, and represents a means of increasing feminist knowledge for inside, as well as outside, consumption.

Until the Spring Centre was made there was no place (for groups), so they’d rent meeting rooms in public halls or citizen’s study centres. Or they’d meet at coffee shops to talk. Since the Spring Centre was built, all those people come to have meetings there and the events they organise are held at the Centre. So gradually they get stronger, and then the Spring Centre organises events like the NPO Organisation Development Seminar, to make them even stronger...and then (the groups) start to invite people to give talks and they ask the Centre to support the event – they bring events to us (Yamazaki-san, 9/12/01).

This collaborative relationship was evidenced by numerous symposiums and seminars held over my research period. In November 2000, for example, the group Working
Women’s Network (WWN) held a symposium in the Spring Centre concert hall, at which the chief of the British EOC legal advice spoke on indirect discrimination.\textsuperscript{123}

So I think the Spring Centre is sort of a co-ordination place, between government and nonprofit women’s groups. And fortunately we do have a place, and we do have a programme, and we do have a budget to work together (Uemura-san, 11/12/01).

The relationship between women’s centres and NGO groups or individual activists can also be mutually beneficial. While Bardsley emphasises the provision of information from centres to NGO groups/individuals (flowing in a top-down direction), information may also be passed from groups to centres, in a bottom-up flow (Bardsley 1999:137).

If there’s something that they don’t know something or understand something, we might be able to offer information for example, and then they’ll say ‘Oh right, you can do this kind of thing, thanks’. So in that form we can stimulate each other. And be taught, and teach...I have learnt a lot of different things from the people from those groups, I really feel that there are many aspects in which I’ve been educated (Kishi-san, 9/12/01).

Furthermore, larger women’s centres such as the Spring Centre and NWEC may be expected or seen to play a connective role among smaller or regional women’s centres.

(Spring Centre) become the Centre to lead all women’s centres...And also this is prefectural centre right, so specially provide not only...domestically, nationally but also for all cities in (the) prefecture, right? (Uemura-san, 11/12/01)

Negotiating between government and non-government perspectives, women’s centres operate within twice-drawn guidelines. The expectations of the government sector on women’s centres reflect the broader aims of city, prefectural and national administration and policy, and are underscored by restrictions of budget and bureaucratic red-tape. NGOs and grass-roots organisations ask women’s centres to legitimize women’s issues, through informal and formal (particularly financial) support, and to represent to the greater government the needs and circumstances of women in the community.

\textsuperscript{123} In this case the speaker’s costs (including airfare and accommodation) were borne by the group WWN, while concert hall and publicity costs were shared between the group and the Spring Centre.
It is clear that these expectations are at times brought into conflict in the operation of women's centres. It is such conflict which elucidates the specific nature of roles played by women's centres and, perhaps more interestingly, the ways in which official expectations may be escaped or subverted through individual action. This implication of conflict is illustrated by the following incident which occurred during my time in fieldwork.

**A case study of conflict and agency in government women's centres**

A few weeks into my internship, I was told by Yamazaki-san that one of my usual attendance days would be cancelled. This was because of a proposed protest on that day, planned by a certain right-wing group and involving some 500 cars, which would clog up the area surrounding the Centre, making noise and being generally obnoxious. The protest was due to a recent decision by the Centre to allow a communist group to rent out the performance hall for a conference of sorts. As a public (prefectural) building, the Centre does not discriminate against groups who hire its spaces. It appeared that the nationalistic right-wing group had taken offence at the decision to allow a communist group access to a space funded by the government, and therefore tax-payers. This incident meant that the Centre would be “a bit dangerous”, according to Yamazaki-san.

My next day at the Spring Centre was in the same week as the planned protest. I was told by other workers in the project planning section that people in the section would have to stay at the Centre from nine am to nine pm everyday of this week, for security purposes. I asked whether the police would be involved, but was told that the police cannot do anything unless a law is broken. The plan was simply for the Section Head of
the planning section to stand outside the Centre holding a placard, advising the
protestors to keep away.

Several weeks after this protest occurred, the interns were gathered for a day of training.
The programme for this day involved several presentations, made by senior staff on the
history and function of the Centre. Finally, we were given a talk by one of the Centre
directors, Itō Orie, Co-ordinator of the counselling section. Itō-san is an experienced
counsellor, and worked with the other co-ordinators in the planning and preliminary
stages of the Centre. A bright, friendly and extremely capable woman, she (and the
other two directors) represented the core of the centre, in terms of authority as well as in
its everyday decision-making.

Itō-san discussed the previous week’s protest in relation to an incident which she
regarded as gender bias. She said that on the day of the protest, the Prefectural
Government had asked for the male staff of the centre to stand guard around the
building. The reasoning behind this was that if women were sent out, the protestors
would have been slighted, and the government felt that this would fuel the protestors’
anger. Itō-san argued that “Here, (ie at a women’s centre), of all places that should not
be an issue (that is, that women should be allowed to)”. This argument was apparently
rejected, and Itō-san was thus critical of the bureaucracy and perhaps specifically the
senior male staff of the Prefectural Office for the Planning of a Gender-Equal Society,
for refusing to enforce the ideals it purported to promote.

This incident is telling for a number of reasons. Firstly, because it illustrates the way in
which information sifts through the organisation, so that details initially kept tightly
confidential are gradually released down the chain of authority – from co-ordinators, to
general workers, to interns. The cushion of time enabled this process – it was not considered appropriate for interns to know of an event that had not happened (or was happening) and that was therefore not known by the general public. In this sense, the official duty of the Centre – to safeguard certain political information within set confines – overrode its obligation to its interns. Hence training was cancelled for that day. Later on, however, the incident was processed and presented to the interns in the form of official training, suggesting that the personal initiative of those involved took precedence over official guidelines.

What is of even more interest was the way that the incident reflected the layers of control within the Centre itself. While Itō-san and the other co-ordinators presented themselves, and were spoken of by staff as the core unit of the Centre’s management, they were nonetheless confined by the ultimate authority of the prefectural government, and more specifically, its senior men.

In discussing the incident with the three interns – all university students and clearly outside the official circle – Itō-san condemned the prefectural government for its failure to practice the gender-equal policies for which the Centre stands. Her open criticism of this matter reflected a resistance to align completely with the administrative powers-that-be. This active detachment from the higher bureaucracy indicates confidence in job stability and suggests a conscious effort to keep the Centre (as a space created by women, for women) as independent as possible. Nonetheless, despite Itō-san’s best efforts she failed to achieve her ultimate objective, and male employees were used in what she perceived as an act of hypocrisy for a women’s centre. Her capacity for resistance was therefore limited, insofar as her challenge to the bureaucracy was rebuffed or ignored, but the act retained significance through the recounting and
presentation of the story to interns and presumably her colleagues in the Centre. In this way Ito-san positioned herself both within and outside the prefectural bureaucracy, highlighting both her dedication to applying the principles espoused by the government and the practical implications of the bureaucracy’s residual conservatism.

Conclusion

Built (at least partially) on government resources and within legislative boundaries, women’s centres reflect the official perspective on Japanese women’s issues and needs, and are therefore bound to promote the normative values expressed by the Law for a Gender-Equal Society. However, it is clear that women’s centres do not represent a pure embodiment of government policy. Rather they can be seen as a bridge between this and the NGO sector which promotes the grass-roots provision of women’s services.

Despite their dependence on government support, women’s centres may nonetheless work as spaces for the transgression of gendered norms, through the promotion of women’s assertiveness, leadership and political organisation. Furthermore, it is clear that even within the bureaucracy of women’s centres, staff may create opportunities to assert their independence through acts of subversion and expressions of opposition. While the working atmosphere of women’s centres does not necessarily reflect the ideals of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, my discussions with women’s centre staff indicated at least an effort by female workers to adhere to the principles espoused. The rigidity and inefficiency red-tape constraints on women’s centre work, acknowledged both within and outside the centres, leave a particular niche for NPOs and NGOs to fill in their own functioning, and allow for a symbiotic relationship between the two. Thus it is in their connective capacity, and as markers of official support, that women’s
centres most effectively promote women’s issues and feminist agency among women in Japan.
SECTION THREE

Agency and feminist futures in Japan – The Love Piece Club, Haruka Yōko and “parasite singles”
The first two chapters in this section explore the work of two contemporary Japanese feminists, TV personality and writer Haruka Yōko, and business woman, writer and advocate for women’s erotica Kitahara Minori. While both women have adopted a number of different roles in various media, these chapters focus primarily on Haruka’s most recent non-fiction publications and Kitahara’s Tokyo-based website and sales outlet, the *Love Piece Club* (LPC) which is devoted to sex goods for women. The LPC and Haruka both address contemporary social issues from critical feminist perspectives. While neither the LPC nor Haruka address their work to young women exclusively, I argue that potential impact of these feminisms is most likely to manifest in younger and future generations of Japanese women. Following on the themes of agency, empowerment and self-fulfillment in both LPC and Haruka’s work, in the final chapter of this section I explore the issue of “parasite singles” or adults who live with their parents, with particular focus on the relevance and reading of agency in this phenomenon.

The LPC and Haruka’s works are presented as examples of the theoretical and practical criticality which Saitō suggests “adopts a female perspective rather than the traditional male value system” (cited in Buckley 1997: 263). Haruka and Kitahara are defined as feminists both through their own self-identification, and because they reflect on the positive potential of being female, supporting a feminist discourse whose “primary goal is not to be like men but to value what it means to be a woman” (Ueno, cited in Buckley 1997: 280)

The ongoing diversification of feminist theory and praxis should be seen as evidence of healthy growth and development – as Saitō observes, “the richer the movement, the
richer the range of theories” (cited in Buckley 1997: 265). Despite their wide range of publications, neither Haruka nor Kitahara can be classed as academics, and their stances on issues such as marriage place them at odds with other women who call themselves (and are known as) “feminists.”

The LPC discourse and Haruka’s writing point to new directions in the ongoing development of feminist discourse in Japan. The scope and style of these works may represent a shift toward a more popularised feminism, or perhaps simply a feminism which is more popular among (certain) women. Both Haruka and the LPC address the everyday Japanese woman, employing popular, non-academic themes and styles, thus engaging with feminist issues in everyday life. Both the LPC and Haruka incorporate consumption (of fashion, beauty and sex goods) in their feminist discourse, promoting the gender subversive potential of “buying” and “appearing.”

Kitahara Minori, founder of the LPC and Haruka Yōko are individuals who self-identify as feminist and are publicly and professionally engaged with promoting feminism among Japanese women. For Kitahara, this involves a focus on reclaiming and celebrating women’s sexualities, challenging heterosexist constructions and gaps in knowledge around women’s bodies, sex and sexual orientations. In her writings, Kitahara is clear on the need for identification as feminist, and the significance of silence in the face of criticism.

To summarise, what she was saying, it was ‘I’m not a feminist but I’m interested in women’s issues’ – but that’s a contradiction in terms! Isn’t it? ...You, you are a feminist. That’s what a feminist is – someone who has an interest in problems that confront them as a woman. That’s the foundation of feminism isn’t it? You’re a feminist then, aren’t you? I don’t mind if you don’t identify yourself as a feminist, but why make a point of labelling yourself anti-feminist by saying that? (Kitahara, 11/4/05).124

In contrast to some members of Women’s Projects, Kitahara sees feminism as simply an engagement with issues “that confront...women”. In Kitahara’s evaluation, the qualification “I’m not a feminist, but...” effects a rejection not only of the term “feminist”, but of the critically empowering work done under that name by and for women. For both Haruka and Kitahara, open employment of the term “feminist” is critical to the deconstruction of prescriptive social ideals and morés that delimit women’s agency. As women in the public view, Haruka and Kitahara (along with other members of the LPC) are well-placed to promote this idea, and to encourage re-evaluation of the term “feminist” among Japanese women.

The construction of an attractive, popularly appealing feminism, as exemplified by the works examined here, helps to shape not only future feminist discourse in Japan, but also the wider depiction of women’s issues in the mass media and in popular social perceptions. I argue that a feminist discourse that employs popular media, presented in an accessible style and language is particularly well-placed to attract the young women otherwise excluded from academic and political feminist discussion. The work of Haruka Yōko and the LPC represents a diffusion of feminist critique into mainstream youth culture, creating new spaces and terms through which feminism – and a feminist identity – might be re-interpreted. This section seeks to explicate this potential, suggesting possibilities for future feminist agendas and approaches in Japanese society.

Consumption of and engagement with these feminist texts encourages a diversification of feminist identity beyond academia into mainstream culture and youth subculture. As feminist identification appears as much a result of as a motivation for participation in women’s groups, so a re-conception of feminist identity and theory expands and develops through the media presence of Haruka and the internet activities of the LPC. It
is the potential for feminist critique to inform change that is channeled by popular magazines, TV shows and newspapers when they address, promote or challenge the feminist agenda and identities of women such as Haruka Yōko and Kitahara Minori.

If, as Ueno suggests, feminism is about valuing what it means to be a woman, then it stands to reason that feminist analysis should evaluate practices and ideals associated with femininity for their potential to promote women’s status and agency. For contemporary feminists such as the Kitahara and Haruka, the appropriation of the “feminine” (including fashion, beauty and consumption) is more than a personal response to patriarchal pressure from society, workplace and family. It is also a proposal for a (re-)defined feminism, centered on the problems experienced by Japanese women in their everyday lives and incorporating everyday strategies in its critique. The final chapter of this section raises the possibility of such strategies being both incidental and agentive.

While ideals of mature femininity emphasise marriage, childrearing and the family, women whose lives are not bound to these ideals – by choice or chance – create alternative models of femininity that incorporate strategies for agency. For “parasite singles”, particularly women, the decision to live with parents can be seen as representing (at least for some) an intentional and strategic expression of feminist agency that enables the actor to act, while also challenging ideals of reproductive femininity. Underpinning government and social concerns around this issue are deeper concerns about the implications of unmarried, unreproductive members of the low-birthrate/aging society. For some women, living at home in itself represents a challenge to expectations of mature femininity, and an active transgression of gender norms relating to lifestyle. However, in other cases, living with parents represents no more
than “an act of simple, pragmatic self-preservation” (Parker 2005: 68). I argue that the latter case nonetheless has potential to effect agency by consequence, significant individually and more so en masse as a challenge to the norms that label such behaviour “parasitic” and that tie femininity to marriage and reproductivity. The issue is problematic not only in its implications for Japanese women, but also, significantly, for researchers looking to determine agency, particularly among disempowered or marginalized groups. As an umbrella term, the “parasite single” issue can be seen as encapsulating a range of behaviours and effects, from passive luxury and self-preservation to active agency and empowerment. Thus threaded with ambivalence, the issue is discussed in this thesis as an illustration of the scope of agency, and as a marker of the ways in which personal, daily acts and decisions represent (or can be read as) radical challenges.

The potential for personal responses to become political statements lies at the heart of the feminist discourses of Haruka and the Love Piece Club. If feminism is to engage contemporary and future Japanese women, it clearly has to speak to the issues most deeply felt, and to offer inclusive and accessible strategies for negotiating these issues. It is in this manner that Haruka’s work and the Love Piece Club’s discourse offer much to young Japanese women and to feminist discourse in Japan. Arguably the future of Japanese feminism lies in the popularisation of a “(f)eminism (that) is a beauty treatment” – a way of making oneself stronger and more beautiful (Haruka in Kitahara 2000: 210).
CHAPTER SEVEN

“*We believe in feminism and erotica*”: Feminist agency and the Love Piece Club

The original website for the Love Piece Club bore the credo “*We Believe in Feminism and Erotica*”. The words appeared above a brightly coloured main page listing the sites contents, from shopping to articles. On the right hand side of this lay a small, cute sketch of a long-haired woman, naked with legs apart and eyes closed, and captioned with the flashing advice: “*MASTURBATE!*” The simple and radical message, enjoining a proud auto-sexuality, represents a central tenet of the website and of the LPC’s work, and between the lines of text and photos of sex goods available, this small cartoon stood out markedly. The cartoon is absent from the new and more sophisticated website, but the image and its impact remain for me a kind of touchstone in exploration of the LPC and its work.

The Love Piece Club is a shop devoted to sex goods for women, located in real space in Tokyo and online at [www.lovepiececlub.com](http://www.lovepiececlub.com). As well as online shopping, the website offers regular columns, articles and photo-essays on subjects related to sexuality, feminism and erotica. The site and shop are managed by Kitahara Minori, a writer, businesswoman and advocate for feminist erotica.

This chapter explores the Love Piece Club as discourse – its potential meanings, its positioning within Japanese feminism and its significance as a feminist work in

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125 The old site ([www.ummit.co.jp/love](http://www.ummit.co.jp/love)) shifted in mid-2003, and the current site bears the similar, but somewhat more theoretical, “*The World of Feminisms and Erotica*”. While the design of the site has become more sophisticated I consider that the overall tone of the website (bright, playful and colourful) remains close enough to the former site that separate analysis is unnecessary.
promoting “active sexuality as a strategy” for enabling women (Wilkins 2004:332). I address Kitahara’s writing in the LPC and beyond, examining the possibilities for feminist agency inherent in the creation of space(s) for feminist erotica. Foregrounding this discussion is a brief overview of the conflicted status of pornography in feminist critique, and a discussion of the construction of (and silence around) sexuality in Japanese women’s groups. I argue that the aims and potential impacts LPC website, business and publications expand the scope of feminist praxis and agency as developed in and promoted by government women’s centres and non-government women’s groups.

My aim here is also to tease out and explore the concept of agency, insofar as it can be applied to the work of the LPC and advocates of feminist erotica like Kitahara. I argue that the promotion of women’s conscious and empowered sexuality as symbiotic with feminism extends the possibilities for feminist consciousness among Japanese women, and particularly among women who may not otherwise be engaged in feminist politics or organising.

The LPC website (and to a lesser extent the “Vibe girls” magazines discussed below) represents an avenue for the promotion of experientially-grounded feminist critique, which is generally relegated to less-accessible media such as mini-komi informal publications and academic texts. Similar to the e-zines and fanzines that underpinned the riot grrrl subculture, the LPC website and “Vibe girls” magazines access private space that other (feminist) literature may not reach, while encouraging engagement with issues that straddle the public/private divide (Leonard 1998:106).\(^{126}\) This is particularly significant because the issue of female sexuality and erotica is problematic in much

\(^{126}\) Comparisons with the riot grrrl movement/discourse are useful for the discursive connections that can be drawn when the LPC is located in the broader context of cyberculture. However, significant differences exist between the Vibe Girls magazine and the small-scale, locally distributed and primarily English-language zines – namely, that the Vibe Girls is created by a business, published professionally and is accessible only to Japanese-fluent readers (Leonard 1998:116).
Japanese feminist discourse. The explicit linking of the two can therefore also be read as a challenge to wider constructions of empowerment that obscure or ignore sex and active sexuality.

In this chapter, except where specified, I use “Love Piece Club” as a gloss for the website (www.lovepiececlub.com) on which articles and columns are listed, and the shop which is both virtual (http://www.lovepiececlub.com/shop/index.shtml) and in real space (in Tokyo). I use the term “site” to refer to the physical, imaginary and cyber manifestations of the Love Piece Club. The multiple implications of the term evoke the multiple layers on which the LPC works as a space focused on women’s sexuality that explicitly self-identifies as feminist and locates itself within a critical feminist discourse. Such space can be compared to that created by non-government women’s groups and government women’s centres, but I argue that the aims and approaches of the LPC render it essentially different from other forms of Japanese women’s organisation.

Crucial differences between the LPC and other women’s groups included in this study include the explicitly sexual focus of LPC materials, and also the visual and linguistic presentation of this focus. The cartoon mentioned above and the written text on the website create a cute and casual tone similar to that of young women’s magazines. The fun, brightly-coloured and generally cute (kawaii) website is a stark contrast to the functional but visually unremarkable websites of government women’s centres such as the Prefectural Women’s Centre (Spring Centre). Within the overall landscape of design, the language used differs consistently, and the implications of this will be discussed later in the Chapter.

Spring Centre website. Last accessed 17/04/06.
While it can be argued that the difference in design of web and print information reflects differing target age groups for these two women’s organisations, I would argue that the difference is more significantly reflective of the aims and approaches of the organisations involved. The Spring Centre aims to effect and represent change in the status of women, through the promotion of the Law for a Gender-Equal Society and the provision of information and specialised services for women. The focus is trained on public change, achieved through the official mechanisms of education, legislation and public policy. Implicit is that this public change will effect a flow-on into the domestic or private empowerment of women. Conversely, women’s groups such as Women’s Projects operate with the implicit assumption that enabling women, through active sharing of experience and education, will produce a ripple-effect of change in the domestic sphere and wider society. In both cases empowerment is tied to the broader community, and the individual woman is contextualised by her role as citizen or group member, if not as wife/daughter/mother.

By contrast, the Love Piece Club explicitly encourages women to embrace sexuality and sex as a means to personal fulfilment, primarily through marketing sex goods and toys. The personal consumption (purchase and use) of such goods is linked, through the web columns and LPC publications, to critical analysis of Japanese society as heterosexist and patriarchal. Women are thus encouraged to disrupt social norms of sexuality and femininity through their private behaviour. In aiming to effect social change through personal empowerment, the approach of the LPC can be seen to contrast that of government women’s centres such as the Spring Centre, which promote top-down change.
Operating as a virtual site, the LPC can be interpreted as a cyberfeminist space, incorporating (and contributing) to understandings of the ways that internet technology affects gender and identity (Chatterjee 2002:200). Websites and online chatrooms allow for – even demand – a plasticity of self-representation and identity that offline interaction may preclude or reduce (Leonard 1998:113; Alexander 2002; Wilson and Atkinson 2005; Chatterjee 2003). In this chapter however I do not address the LPC's impact as a site for gender and identity play, purely because an ethnographic analysis of the online community of users stretches beyond this thesis' scope. Rather, I focus on the LPC’s potential as a discursive challenge to hegemonic constructions of women's sexuality and as a potential stimulus for feminist agency and praxis among its readers/users.

The LPC’s presentation of information on women’s sexuality (including photos, creative expression and critical commentary) effects a subversion of mainstream social constructions of women's sexuality, promulgated through mass media and widely visible on billboards, in magazine advertisements and on television shows (Burns 2004:2; Miya, interview in Buckley 1997:161). It also effects subversion of women’s sexuality as purveyed through male pornography (or porn produced for men), such as DVDs and magazines. The LPC online can be seen to operate parallel to the mainstream, that is sometimes visible in different types of spaces at the same time, to these representations. However it can also be seen to traverse the mainstream, competing at times for attention (and yen) with women-targeted publications such as Nikkei Ōman and Elle Japon.128 This competition occurs primarily online, because the LPC

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128 A study of mainstream magazines is not possible in the boundaries of this thesis, but the two magazines selected here represent publications that could be seen as competitors in attracting Japanese women consumers. While Nikkei Ōman (Nikkei Woman) features lifestyle and health articles, Elle Japon focuses on beauty and fashion-related information. These magazines are also accessible (to varying extents) online: Nikkei Ōman website [http://www.nikkeiwoman.net/](http://www.nikkeiwoman.net/); Elle Japon website [http://www.elle.co.jp/home/](http://www.elle.co.jp/home/) Last accessed 11/04/06.
publications are not distributed as widely as mainstream magazines. However, examination of the LPC magazine *Vibe Girls* (produced by Kitahara and a ten-woman editorial team) shows the significance of LPC focus on sex and sexuality.

The first edition of *Vibe Girls*, entitled “Masturbation! Masturbation! (*Onani! Onani!*’’) was published in 1999, and the four subsequent editions focus on specific themes related to contemporary women’s lives: “Women’s sex industry” (*Onna no jizoku*) (February 2000), “Violence” (*Baiorensu*) (June 2000), “Pregnancy” (*Ninshin*) (2001), and “Marriage” (*Kekkon*) (2003). The magazines feature articles that explore, explain and critique issues central to the theme. In contrast with mass media publications, these magazines are sold exclusively at the LPC shop and through the website, and are therefore able to contravene social and legal proscriptions surrounding sexually explicit images. For example, the “Pregnancy” edition features a photo-essay entitled “Womb Fantasy” (*Shikyū gensō*), which explores women’s perceptions of the womb. The article begins with an introductory passage, describing (inter alia) a study group where women used speculums to examine their vagina and cervical entrance (*Vibe Girls* 2001:10). This is followed by eight frames (over a double page) of an image of a naked female torso, from neck to pubis. On each torso is a hand-drawn picture indicating the perceived shape and location of the womb, with typed words describing the womb, such as “Like a cow’s head. Warm, blood.”, and “A place that only ever gets hurt. But a place that regenerates (saisei suru tokoro)” (*Vibe Girls* 2001:11-13). The non-sexualised (re)presentation of a naked female torso and its reflections on women’s (lack of) knowledge of their bodies feeds into the magazine’s deconstructive discourse on the broader issues of contraception and pregnancy. The introductory passage critiques constructions of the vagina as “the world’s power-point” (*sekai no konsento*) and of the womb as “women’s mystery”, describing the actual womb as “about the size of a
chicken egg” (Vibe Girls 2001:10). This de-mystification of female sexual organs evokes feminist texts such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, stimulating critical attention to the ways that women’s bodies and sexuality are constructed (Our Bodies Ourselves website).129

“Vibe girls” thus represents one facet of the LPC’s critical engagement with heterosexism and phallocentric social constructions of women’s bodies and sexuality. While the promotion of sex goods for women in itself questions constructions of female sexuality as passive, the Love Piece Club extends its enquiry with written and visual challenges to heterosexist norms. I argue that to understand this simply as an incidental effect of a retail business, or more cynically as the product of a convenient niche marketing ploy, is to miss the significant and subversive potential of the LPC and its work. This is illustrated by analysis of the online articles and columns and printed publications, and is supported by Kitahara’s publications (books and newspaper columns) outside the Love Piece Club site.130

Pornography and sexuality in Japanese feminism

The Japanese term *sei* (sex) is sometimes used interchangeably as a gloss for both sex and sexuality. Kanazumi observes that Japanese feminists tend to use the word to imply

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130 Kitahara’s books include: *Hachimitsu no babibureshon* (Honey Vibrations) (1998); *Otoko wa tokidoki ireba ii* (Men are good to have around sometimes) (1999); *Femi no kirawarekata* (The ways feminists are hated) (2000); *Onna naki* (Women’s tears) (2001) and *Busu no hirakinaori* (Ugly girls get serious) (2004). She co-authored the book *Gāruzu sekkusu* (Girls’ sex) (2003), also published a column in the magazine *Gekkan Kazoku*. 

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sexual difference (for example, in contrast with gender) rather than “the awareness by an individual woman of her own sexuality, her own body” (Kanazumi in Buckley 1997:77). Some feminists, such as Kitahara, adopt the *katakana* term *sekkusu*, presumably to avoid this conflation.

As discussed in Chapter Two, sexuality has featured in Japanese feminist critique to varying extents since the Women’s Liberation period. Attitudes towards issues such as pornography among feminists in Japan can be seen to form a similar spectrum to those found outside the country. While it is not my intention in this chapter to explore the Japanese anti-pornography movement in depth, it is necessary to address at least summarily the arguments of those who oppose and have opposed pornography on feminist grounds.

The Women’s Liberation movement (*ūman ribu*, also Women’s Lib henceforth) of the 1960s and 1970s distinguished itself from previous women’s organisation by its focal aim of women’s sexual liberation. Tanaka Kazuko (cited in Mackie 2003:155) notes that the recovery by women of their sexual power represented a central goal of the Women’s Liberation Movement, in recognition of the notion that “sex has existed as a fundamental means of human subordination”.

However, the focus on sexual empowerment has not been adopted uniformly throughout Japanese feminisms. One group which originated in 1975, the Women’s Action Group (*Kōdō suru onnatachi no kai*) has taken as its cause “liberation from all kinds of sexual discrimination through action, in areas such as labour, the law and education.” (*Kōdō suru onnatachi no kai* 1990). Among other projects, the group has criticised the use of pornography and sexually discriminatory images in the media, and published a book.

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131 For discussion of the use of the term *ūman ribu*, see Mackie (2003:156).
with this theme, entitled *Porno watching: Women's sex in media*. The group advocates both organised and individual protest against the media’s use of sex (and specifically objectified, female bodies) in advertising.

In contrast to the Women’s Action Group, the basic aims of the LPC can be seen to parallel those of the Women’s Lib movement. Reacting against feminists who have worked within “the system” (in Lib’s case, those women whose activities were subsumed under left-wing organisations), the strategies of both LPC and Women’s Lib rely on disruption of sexual norms and mores as a means of promoting empowerment. Furthermore, both organisations seek to effect “social reform based upon the reform of individuals” (Tanaka, cited in Mackie 2003:155).

Nonetheless a comparison of the critical approaches of the LPC and Women’s Action Group does show some overlap, most significantly in their critical engagement with mass media constructions and (mis)appropriations of women’s sexuality. Both LPC and Women’s Action Group encourage contextualisation of these constructions, viewing the image as embedded in a broader discourse of (hetero)sexism and hegemony. While the Women’s Action Group argues for censorship or erasure of these images, the LPC promotes subversion of the images, promoting female bodies as sexual for their own sake and enjoyment.

**Sex and sexuality in women’s groups: A case study**

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132 In one successful campaign in 1989 the group targeted a whiskey company over a poster and TV advertisement which, the group argued, suggested a rape/post-rape scene. The TV ad featured a young woman surrounded by cowboys on horses, and the subsequently released poster depicted the woman laying prone, dull-eyed and covered in dirt, with her breast partly uncovered (*Kōdō suru onnatachi no kai* 1990:13).
As discussed in Chapter Four, women’s groups can provide a context for the connection between personal experience and broader social issues and the promotion of feminist agency through this connection. However, the potential of this function is limited by the group’s and individuals’ capacity or desire to engage with issues that may be considered taboo. In the case of Women’s Projects, this manifested in a silence around issues of sexuality which excluded at least one member from the possible benefits of emotional support. In WWW, as in Benkyō, verbal sharing of personal experiences of sexuality tended to occur on the peripheries of the group, at times between or directly before/after meetings, and in informal, individual or small-group discussions. In WWW, as in Benkyo, verbal sharing of personal experiences of sexuality tended to occur on the peripheries of the group, at times between or directly before/after meetings, and in informal, individual or small-group discussions. However, the possibility for engagement with pornography came up several times in WWW. One discussion ultimately brought about a watershed in the group’s development, and spoke not only of the complexities of pornography as an issue, but of the dynamics of women’s organisations in general.

The discussion in question revolved around the abundant presence in social space (such as toilets and phone booths) of what could well be described as soft pornographic material, particularly brochures and stickers for phone-sex hotlines (terekura). Two of the Australian members raised this as a problem with which WWW energy and resources might be engaged, and it was suggested that the group conduct a sticker drive, in which “No Porn” and “No Pink Chirashi” stickers be posted in phone booths around the city. The group had engaged in such a campaign in 1999, but some members had opposed it and remained unsupportive of its revival, citing the size of the issue, its connection with yakuza and inherent danger as reasons for rejecting the campaign. After

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133 In Benkyō I was only party to these discussions with one member with whom I became good friends. It was through these discussions that I was introduced to the Love Piece Club, which Miyoshi-san had herself visited and recommended.

134 Pinku chirashi refers to the semi-pornographic leaflets advertising phone sex-lines and other sex services for men. The leaflets generally feature pictures of young women’s bodies, sometimes with breasts or genitals exposed, and include phone numbers for men (as prospective patrons) and women (as prospective employees) to call.
much discussion, the campaign idea was dropped. Despite the engagement and interest of some members, the boundaries of WWW’s critical focus appeared to fall short of sexuality-related activism, highlighting the significance of the LPC stance and activities even among contemporary women-centred organisations.

**Manko-mochi, chinko-mochi:** Linguistic innovation @ www.lovepiececlub.com

The Love Piece Club website currently contains ten regular (weekly) columns, two monthly columns and four occasional (or “irregular”) columns. Some columns focus on social and sociological critique, such as the now-finished “Correspondence from Maryland” weekly article written by Motoyama Eiko, a Japanese student in the U.S who wrote on the impact of the war against terror and the anti-war movement inter alia. There are “relay” columns such as the weekly “Bitch about the World” (title in *katakana*) column, which takes the form of a letter and is co-written by “Tokyo Bitch” Miyoko and “Seoul Bitch” Kay. This column addresses social and political issues in the two countries, as well as the writers’ own experiences. The title of the column plays on the dual (English) meanings of the word “bitch”, as a verb (“to make malicious or spitefully critical comments) and a noun (“a woman whom one dislikes or considers to be malicious or unpleasant”) (Pearsall 1998:179). Other columns address issues of sexuality, sexual inequality and feminism in tones from playful and bitingly funny to serious and sometimes moving. Column titles include: “Women Power Unequalled”,

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135 This was the breakdown of columns as at 29/11/2005. The number and composition of columns has changed over the period of study, with earlier versions of the website containing fewer columns, and some columns which have since been completed/discontinued. Past columns, including “Bitch About the World” and “photos” by mina eva.N, are archived in the site “library” http://www.lovepiececlub.com/lpclibraryframeset.html Last accessed 2/12/05.
“Dyke @ Kindergarten” (Daiku @ Yōchien), “After Breast Cancer” (a photoessay), and “Do Female Androids Dream of Tampax Tampons?”

Even from the titles of columns, the manipulation of language is a striking characteristic of the LPC website and writings. The name of the organisation itself implies a playful linguistic innovation – it was only through communication with Kitahara that I learned that the “Piece” in Love Piece Club was not a mistaken reference to “peace” meaning harmony, but a “piece”, as in the slang for gun or tool. The appropriation of a phallic trope serves to reinforce an image of the LPC as transgressive, sexually-liberated and challenging to phallocentric norms. It describes a site and message that is playfully subversive of assumptions about the nature of women’s sexuality. Given the homophonic nature of the word “piece” (both in katakana-ised Japanese and English), it also allows a certain cushioning of what could be a joltingly bold title. Evidently, my preconceptions of the shop’s central agenda (as a soft, ambiguous conception of women’s sexuality) were entirely misguided.

A further interesting example of linguistic transgression is seen in the writings of photo-essayist mina eva.N, whose photographs of women in intimate, staged and casual poses featured in the LPC as a regular column called “NOBODY KNOWS I AM A LESBIAN” from April to October 2002. The photographs are captioned with brief reflective prose, often in the form of personal contemplation and generally addressing lesbian and queer sexuality and its implications. Some photographs depict couples, some individual women, and in some photos the subjects are partially or completely naked. What is interesting is that in these reflections, in which mina eva.N refers to

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136 These columns can all be accessed in the site “library” http://www.lovepiececlub.com/lpclibraryframeset.html Last accessed 1/12/05.
137 mina eva.N’s are available in the “library” of the website http://www.lovepiececlub.com/lpclibraryframeset.html Last accessed 2/12/05.
herself and her friends, she consistently uses the masculine first-person pronoun (boku M.) to describe herself. She refers to her friends and subjects as kanojo (she/her F.) or kanojo-tachi (they/them F.), but retains a masculine or non-feminine voice herself. This practice can be read as evidence of conscious transgression of the Japanese socio-linguistic norms by which words such as “I” are gender-coded, and implies a break from the dichotomy of sex as male/female (McLelland 2002:170).

LPC writers including Kitahara freely and frequently describe women – themselves included – as yariman (sluts) and manko-mochi (cunt-owners or people-with-cunts) and men as chinko-mochi (dick-owners or people-with-dicks). The term manko is explained in the English-version of the LPC website: “Manco, as you know, is a ‘dirty word’ like a ‘cunt’. We always respect our ‘cunt’ as a part of women's body”. The appropriation of the term manko in Japanese is comparable to the reclamation of the word “cunt” by feminists writing in English, such as Muscio (2002). The conflation of individuals – and genders – with sexual organs offers several effects. In discussing women, the label manko-mochi implies the reappropriation of a word (manko) generally confined to the world of porn movies (Kitahara, interview 20.01.03). The description of men as chinko-mochi, however, is more critically constructed and implies a

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138 This language may also be interpreted as a reflection of the “butch and femme” opposition used by some lesbians. “Femme” is characterised by displays of “exaggerated signs of traditional femininity”, while “butch” women adopt “a style read by heterosexuals as masculine” (Levitt and Hiestand 2004: 605). The adoption of these polarised roles or styles is criticised by some feminists as replicating heterosexual dichotomies (Raymond 1989; Goodloe 1993).

139 The term yariman prefixes the man-half of manko with the verb “to do”, used to connote sex. Thus the term implies a “cunt that does ‘it’”. As in English, this word is used pejoratively to describe “promiscuous women”.

140 http://www.lovepiececlub.com/e/ Last accessed 1/12/05.

141 “Cunt” is defined in the New Oxford English Dictionary as “women’s genitalia” or “an unpleasant, unkind or stupid person” (1998:448).

142 To clarify the point, the effect of the word manko when used by a woman is comparable to that gained by an English-speaking woman who uses the word “pussy” to describe herself or her vagina. (I use “pussy” here because the word “cunt” would have different connotations when used to describe a woman, comparable to the word “bitch”). The contextual nature of the words is also comparable, such that the import varies according to the circumstances in which the word is used. Unlike “pussy” and “cunt”, however, manko is not used for men, and does not connote effeminate or negative qualities.
conflation of "man" with his "dick". This conflation can be read as essentially reductive – the man is only a "dick" or generalising, suggesting that all men can be seen primarily as dick-owners, rather than individuals. Unlike the English word "dick", chinko does not refer to personal qualities, such as stupidity or contemptibility, nor is it used commonly as an insult (Pearsall 1998:512).

To read the use of chinko-mochi in the same way as that of manko-mochi obscures the particular nuance attached to these words when spoken (written) in the feminine voice. The inherent casualness of the words marks them socially as non-feminine language, such that use by women in any social context would most certainly raise eyebrows. While use by men may not be polite, the contexts in which the words may be forgiven are more numerous for men than for women. Thus a woman's use of words such as yariman, manko and chinko can be read as transgressive of social constructions of femininity in a way that a man's use cannot. The criticality with which chinko-mochi is applied can be seen as reflective of the differing standards by which women and men are tied to their language. It can also be seen as a play on the mainstream phallocentric reduction of woman to her sexual function.

The use of sexualised and generally colourful language marks the LPC website and publications as distinctive among women's groups and government women's centre. Government women's centres use polite and often floral language, and their websites tend to be less visually-stimulating and more text-focused. In embracing and employing words such as manko and chinko, LPC writers tread emphatically on

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143 The use of the term chinko-mochi and manko-mochi can be compared to Muscio's references to "people with cocks" and "people with cunts" (2002:141-2).
144 According to the New Oxford English Dictionary, "dick" can be used to refer to a "stupid or contemptible person" (1998:512).
145 In English the synonymous use of "pussy", or "tail" with "woman" creates the same reduction.
146 See for example the websites of Wings Kyoto (http://www.wings-kyoto.jp/), or Tokyo Women's Plaza (http://www.tokyo-womens-plaza.metro.tokyo.jp/) Last accessed 1/12/05.
constructions of women’s sexuality as delicate, and significantly, as essentially different to that of men, for whom the words have less taboo.

Language can thus be seen as a “tool” for the recovery of women’s sexuality and sexual subjectivity. The flair and fervor with which LPC writers reappropriate and re-cover words related to the female body and sex signifies the centrality of language to the perception of femininity in Japanese society. The use of these words in conjunction with traditional women’s language (such as the feminine personal pronouns atashi and watashi) indicates an easy synthesis of language to suit the agenda.

Kitahara acknowledges the significance of language for herself:

Compared to when I was a teenager, life has become easier, and I think the reason for that is that I’ve become able to use my own words, my own voice. And now I can discuss things and say ‘well, you might say this, but...’ (Kitahara, interview 20/01/03).

Kitahara’s own writing on the LPC site draws on language as a central avenue of critique, and themes of interpretation and reappropriation characterise her column. The nature of the language used by Kitahara, the structure of her prose and her focus on language as used by others sharpen the critical impact of the writing. The combined effect of these features paints a picture of a woman for whom language is both a marker of gendered inequalities and a consciously wielded tool against such inequalities. At this point a brief examination of some of her recent work helps to illustrate these themes and their centrality.

One of the 2004 editions of Kitahara’s column was entitled “Ah, Chastity”. In this column she addresses a comment made by an elderly woman in the audience of a lecture she gave. The woman’s comment, “Ah, an education in chastity certainly is
important, isn’t it” indicated her distaste at having had to listen to talk “of vibrators, of abortion, of desire”. Kitahara reflects that this is “perhaps the first time in (her) life that she has heard the word ‘junketsu’ spoken out loud”. From this point the column explores the meaning and implications of the word “chastity”, and compares its ambiguity with the English term “abstinence” (translated into Japanese as *gaman*).

..(B)ut abstaining from what? Masturbation? Fellatio? Cunnilingus? Fondling breasts? Grasping a dick? Holding hands? Sucking nipples? Anal sex? Inserting dick into pussy? These are worrying days when, as much as the idea of the ‘turbulence of young people’s sex’ is raised, so the volume of voices of ‘chastity’ also rises. What kind of situation exactly are we pointing at when we define the word ‘chastity’ – ambiguous even in English – in Japanese? I’d really like to know.

This is a discussion of the meaning of a word that has been used to define an ideal of Japanese femininity, and it is couched in explicitly sexual terms of reference. Kitahara goes on to describe chastity as “eros – pure eros”, because chastity can be defined as “not having sex”, and as such is aphrodisiac to the sexual being. This “different dimension of chastity” is developed through Kitahara’s personal experience of being attracted to, but not (yet) sexually involved with a person, that is, a temporary chastity.

The re-fashioning of a concept such as ‘chastity’ creates a space within which to (re)claim sexual awareness as feminine. The sexually active woman can recover (or re-visit) purity in the experience of abstinence. To reclaim purity for sexually-active and actively-sexual women is to reclaim the social value attached to virginity for non-virgins. While the word as used by the elderly woman retains its criticality, Kitahara provides an alternative reading, inclusive of sexually active and aware women. This creation of a new meaning within the old word involves taking up space occupied by

147 [http://www.lovepiececlub.com/columnframeset.html](http://www.lovepiececlub.com/columnframeset.html) accessed 16/9/03

148 Kitahara notes that the word *junketsu*, meaning purity or chastity, is rather the kind of word that one reads, rather than speaks or hears, and draws comparison with another relatively archaic (in spoken Japanese) word *sessha*, meaning “I”.

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socially constructed norms, stretching the confines of the word as it is traditionally used. Admittedly, one is unlikely to read ‘chastity’ as inclusive in this way independently – that is outside of Kitahara’s column. But that the reading is put forth in Kitahara’s writing and on the LPC website, means that it has potential to effect subversion among (at least some) Japanese women. I would argue that it is the active promotion of this subversion that marks Kitahara’s work as significant to contemporary and future Japanese feminisms.

In another 2003 column, Kitahara discusses her experience of the perceived negative implications of feminism. Addressing the “femi-allergy” of some friends, she draws two limbs to their critique. The first limb rejects the “victim mentality” (higaisha ishiki) perceived to characterise feminists and feminism, while the second challenges the evangelical or enlightened attitude taken by feminists towards non-feminists. The first of these criticisms is launched in the specific context of a discussion about juvenile sexuality, initiated by Kitahara. The second arose from a discussion about women, work and marriage, in which Kitahara challenged the idea that a woman would (or should) give up work to support her husband’s career.

Kitahara’s response to this “femi-allergy” challenges the connection drawn between these two limbs and feminism as she understands it, describing them as “feminist-ish things” (femippoi mono).

What is strange is that I have an allergy to these 2 things as well. So to have it pointed out that ‘your victim mentality annoys me’ or ‘your enlightenment concepts annoy me’ makes me tremble. Even though there’s no victim with an assailant mentality as strong as mine. Even though there’s no feminist as lacking in confidence as me... If feminist-ish things are ‘victim mentality’ and ‘evangelism’, why do we think of them as feminist? And why has a ‘victim mentality’ come to

149 Femippoi mono 25/8/03 http://www.lovepiececlub.com/columnframeset.html (No longer online)
make us feel so strange? Why do we have such an allergy to the idea of enlightenment? Perhaps we have to start thinking from there.¹⁵⁰

Kitahara’s acknowledgement of her own fallibility and uncertainty here can be seen as characteristic of her writing. Her reluctance to draw a concrete conclusion and her frank recognition of contradictions in her own life between feminist beliefs and practice mark her columns with approachability and pragmatism. Similar to the self-reflective work of mina eva.N, Kitahara’s essays use personal experiences and concerns as a starting point for wider social analysis and critique.

Rosenberger’s conceptualisation of women’s magazines as simultaneously socially grounding and liberating can be extended to apply to the LPC website (1995:146). Engagement with ideas of queer and active sexuality, through the perusal and consumption of erotica and sex goods, can disengage young women from the gendered norms which shape social being. Women are encouraged to embrace and explore (sexual) aspects of their self which are otherwise diminished, tabooed or rendered invisible in the general public performance of everyday life. Furthermore, the virtual component of the LPC, including the bulletin board (BBS), magnifies the (potential) level of engagement of women with issues of sex and sexuality, while also providing space for connection and community with other women that simply reading may not allow (see for example: Wilkins 2000; Munt, Bassett and O’Riordan 2002 and Wilson and Atkinson 2005).

At the same time, however, the women are engaged to interact within the discourse of sexuality as presented. Active sexuality is constructed on the website as a significant strategy for women’s empowerment, particularly when it involves conscious critical

¹⁵⁰ Femippoi mono 25/8/03 http://www.lovepiececlub.com/columnframeset.html (No longer online)
engagement with gender norms (Wilkins 2004:341). This promotion of sexuality and social critique serves to unite the women who view and consume the site, through their very viewing and consumption. As a public space, the ground covered in LPC pieces is accessible to all women who have access to the Internet. In this sense, the promotion of queer and lesbian sexuality, masturbation and sexual self-determination creates a potential foundation for young women’s subversive social engagement – a critical engagement with those forces that shape their identities and life choices.

Sexuality, sex and sexual norms are frequently covered in mainstream women’s magazines such as teen-oriented Cawaii and Egg, as well those attracting an older audience (Rosenberger 1995:152). Articles and cartoons focusing on oral sex techniques, favourite sexual positions and experiences and sexual fantasies are standard in these magazines, though generally buried in the back of the magazine, amid advertisements for cosmetic surgery and weight loss products (Rosenberger 1995:152). In these contexts women’s sexuality shares space with the other discourses of the body, such as beauty and health, and the commodification of the body can be seen to flow over into sexuality (Frühstück 2000:153). Like the LPC shop, these magazines approach sexuality via consumerism, tapping into taboo and curiosity as well as fashion. However, the LPC website and shop differ from the mass media in their scope and explicitness. Without the advertising obligations (and funds) of mass-produced magazines, the LPC can be self-reflexive in its discussions of the female body and sex and as openly critical of sexism as the editors choose. Unlike mass media publications, the LPC maintains an

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151 This point was drawn from the view espoused by Wilkins’ Goth women that “sexuality (is) the strategy for women’s empowerment” (Wilkins 2004:341). However, a distinction can be drawn between the LPC’s consciously and explicitly anti-heterosexist stance, and the largely heterosexual (though polyamorous) romantic ideals of the Goth community.

152 Of course, as public site accessible to all with internet access, there is also the potential for the LPC site to be consumed by heterosexual Japanese men as a turn-on. Given the obvious feminist tone of the site and emphasis (on the front page at least) on text rather than photos it seems unlikely that many men would spend time on the site, particularly in light of the proliferation of porn sites and their abundance of images and sexually explicit articles. Nonetheless, as a site on the World Wide Web the LPC must also be understood as open for public consumption in all its myriad forms.
explicit focus on exploring and celebrating female sexuality and sex, depicting women as sexual actors and linking sex with wider issues of gendered inequality.

The Love Piece Club shop is currently located in the Tokyo suburb of Hongō san-chōme, but relocated three four times between 2003 and 2005. Kitahara explained the move from chic, well-moneyed atmosphere Omotesando to Hongō as partly motivated by her perception that LPC presence had to be kept muted in order to avoid raising the ire of neighbours (Kitahara, personal communication 12/08/05). She felt that Hongō, home of one of the Tokyo University campuses, would have a more welcoming and LPC-friendly feel, although a recent column on the LPC website indicates that neighbourhood reactions continue to be a problem.

The Love Piece Club, virtual and real space, is not exclusively a sex goods shop. In addition to stocking sex toys, aids and accessories, the shop also offers products such as natural (sponge) tampons, candles, badges, books and body care products. Beyond its retail function however, the shop is a site for focus on women’s bodies, erotica and sexuality. The website for the shop advises that it is a women’s space, and that male visitors are to be accompanied by women. I asked about this policy, and Kitahara explained it as a way of ensuring that women could feel comfortable, and beyond the male gaze which marks other “adult goods” shops as masculine space.

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153 When I visited the shop in its 2003 location, I was asked to ring from the train station for directions. The shop was at that time situated on one floor of a nondescript apartment building about five minutes walk from the station, identifiable only by the name on the building letter-box but nonetheless relatively easy to locate. When I visited in 2005 however, the shop was quite difficult to find even with directions. It was located among the stylish boutiques and luxury apartments of Omotesando, about 15 minutes walk into the suburbs from the nearest train station. The only indication that the new-looking, two-storey brick building differed from its neighbours was the rainbow flag hung over the balcony.

154 In her column “Before fostering hatred” (Nikushimi o sodatsu mae ni) (29/11/05), Kitahara discusses contemporary experiences of prejudice, focusing on an incident in which she and a friend were verbally abused and intimidated by a neighbourhood couple – an English man and his Japanese wife – for being “lesbians” and “vibrator-sellers” (and therefore, implicitly, immoral). 
While women's interest in and patronage of the LPC may be grounded in consumerism, the shop and website function to draw attention to women's bodies and sexuality in a positive and empowering way.

I've had women come to the shop and break down, telling me about sexual abuse within their relationships. It's as if they have nowhere else to talk about these things – they're too embarrassed to tell their doctors, or even counsellors. (Kitahara, interview 20/01/03)

Such a leap from sexuality and sexual goods into sexual health and counselling is not surprising, but is nonetheless expressive of both the nature of the LPC and its staff, and of the wider Japanese social context. Women's centres often do provide counselling services for women, and issues of domestic and sexual violence are frequently targeted in public health and education campaigns. That the Love Piece Club substitutes as a space for encouraging and healing women who have suffered assaults reflects the inadequacy of such government services, and more significantly the way that women’s experiences of sex are buried or excluded from mainstream concern.

I should note that Love Piece Club does not represent Kitahara's opinions exclusively. Among the staff of the shop and the Vibe Girls editorial team there are significant differences in background, age and feminist ideology, and these differences are acknowledged by Kitahara as well as the staff. Prior to the meeting I attended, one staff member Uemura-san told me that she was particularly aware of the differences among staff in discussions about men and heterosexuality. She was clear, saying “I like men, I have male friends and I like to have sex with men”, but conscious that her

155 The number and composition of staff at the LPC is fluid, and over the two-year course of my visits there were a number of staff departures and new arrivals. Uemura-san was one who had left by 2005.
opinions were not shared by some members, and thus, she said, she was sometimes reluctant to speak about these issues.

Sex, sexuality and feminist agency

Participation in and promotion of open discussion of sex goods, masturbation and queer sexual activity does not necessarily effect revolution, and could even be seen purely as representative of an uncritical pursuit of pleasure (Parker 2005:3). However, I argue that to address agency in its multiplicity requires that the definition be seen to encompass pragmatic acts of unintentional resistance. This means discarding the view of agency as "a synonym for resistance to relations of domination" (Mahmood 2001:5). Instead, I argue that agency can be seen as including but not limited to resistance – defined by Parker as "actions that actors themselves describe as aiming to defer, subvert, undermine or oppose the power and repression of dominant forces" (2005b:87) In terms of studying women, it also widens the rubric beyond that which is explicitly feminist, and perhaps even includes those acts done with expressly un-feminist intent. While sex workers and "so-called sluts" themselves may interpret their sexual activities differently, there is nonetheless support among some feminists for the definition of these as un-feminist activities which, in Barton's words, "reinforce women's subordinate status by rendering their value dependent on men" (Sutherland 2003; Chapkis 1997; Barton 2002:586).

To evaluate agency according to resistance produces an understanding of agency as means-based (Driscoll 1999:188). In this way the agency of those who act or explicate opposition is privileged over the agency of those who do not act, or who avoid confrontation. While pseudonymous participation in web-publishing, or consumption of
sex goods via online-shopping does not explicitly challenge the heterosexist, hegemonic structure of mainstream erotica, these activities can nonetheless be seen to promote agency among individual women, encouraging real-life and virtual movement beyond hegemonic understandings of female bodies and sexualities.

My examination of the enabling potential of LPC’s work draws on Ortner’s broad and succinct model of agency as double-stranded, although these strands may converge and overlap (2001). According to the model, the first strand of “agency” refers to that (unequal) power which is available in some form or level to all, and whose exercise defines both domination and resistance. Under this rubric of “power agency”, we have both organised demonstrations and those acts described by Scott (1985) as “everyday resistances” – the informal and impromptu delay of compliance or performance of dominant demands (Ortner 2001:78). “Power agency” encompasses the capacity to act (or not act) in a way that speaks to existing power relations, even where this does not involve intention to resist. It therefore includes acts of “unintentional resistance” and acts (or inactions) that achieve agency incidentally.

The examples of “power agency” in the work of the Love Piece Club are abundant, but its establishment as a website and shop is most obvious. The shop’s relocation through four Tokyo suburbs from 2003-2005 reflects its commercial vulnerability and its resilience to neighbourhood criticism. In virtual space, the (Japanese) front page of the Love Piece club shop site announces itself as “a sex goods store for women. We introduce woman-friendly sex goods”. The explicit avoidance of male-centred imagery and promotion of female-centredness represent Love Piece Club’s challenge to the gendered and sexualised inequality in Japanese society. These acts are both pragmatic – a commercial enterprise must be sound if it is to continue, an

accommodating neighbourhood is important for business – and expressive of the power structure in which they are embedded. Thus while business practices and operating environment are factors important to all commercial enterprises, the LPC’s efforts to safeguard these speak specifically to the nature of sex goods provision in a society that obscures active sexuality among women.

The second strand of Ortner’s model refers to the “agency of intention”, featuring intention and planning as integral, though not unencumbered, defining characteristics (Ortner 2001:80). This can also be understood as resistance under Parker’s definition above. The intention, or sense of project, which drives an actor is not “free”, because it is in itself a product of the cultural structures which mark the end result as desirable, the process of attainment as feasible, and which comprise the context of power relations within which this all occurs. Thus, for example, a woman’s plan to increase her wealth (consumer capacity or power) by performing part-time paid work reveals an agency of intentions, insofar as the act of consumption (or simply having money) represents a desirable goal, achieved by means of the project of paid labour. In a capitalist and patriarchal context, the act of increasing financial power is shaped by the status of the actor, drawing on myriad factors such as gender, social class, ethnicity and sexuality. The act is further informed by the nature and process of the goal itself. Thus the act reflects the types of work available to women, as well as the assumptions that an increase in wealth is considered a desirable state, that the process of work is considered acceptable or even possible for women, and that paid labour marks the woman differently in certain (political, social) contexts. The end product of these factors – the act of earning – is not a grand or radical feat, nor does it necessarily have wider, political repercussions for individual woman or society. However, it does reflect the
negotiation of structural inequalities and obstacles by the individual woman, and the
expression of power that results from this act implies an expression of agency.

How does this description of agency address the creation and promotion of feminist
erotica? In the framework described above, we can see that the concept of intention
extends beyond simple desire ("I want to do"), to the application of power and resources
to the goal ("I will do, using..."). The process by which such application achieves the
end goal — namely, the negotiation of power at a social level, manifest in the capacity to
act — distils the resistance implicit the act. It is thus combination of intention and
application that produces intentional agency, allowing a negotiation of power. The LPC
promotes this negotiation of power among readers and consumers of its work/goods,
presenting the means (for example, critical feminist literature and sex goods) by which
women may act and/or enact social change. In this case to "act" might simply be to
understand, to consider or to question: through reading the "Womb Fantasy" article in
*Vibe Girls*, a woman might consider her own understanding of her uterus and its
functions. She might then question her friends on their perceptions and knowledge of
female sexual organs. She might extend this questioning to her partner(s), encouraging a
conversation on sexuality informed by feminist criticality. The ultimate impact of this
criticality, either individually or on a broad-scale, may be impossible to gauge, but it
nonetheless reflects the connective process by which engagement with the LPC can
develop feminist agency more.

To advocate feminist erotica in a context where power need not be negotiated (because
it is already obtained), or where successful performance need not involve application of
individual power or effort (because it is naturalised) does not express resistance or
agency. However, for women in contemporary urban Japanese society, the expression
and exploration of sexuality, particularly woman-centred (or more correctly, non-phallocentric) sexualities, extends desire to political action. This interpretation does not focus on the creators and workers of LPC – their work falls easily and clearly under the interpretations of agency offered above.

Rather, the determinative focus in an agency of intention framework rests particularly on the women whose participation involves less “active” and less explicit acts. Subscription to the online-zine, physical and cyber-visits to the sex goods shop and even perhaps personal use of the goods sold, suggest an extension, an expression of intent that suggests a degree of empowerment that can be understood as agentive. While the repercussions are probably limited to one person, and most likely subtle in appearance, I argue that the exploration of sexuality, and particularly a woman-centred sexuality, represents an expression of agency, whether in the form of resistance or unintentional (for example, purely pleasure-motivated) agency. Furthermore, in a context where such explorations are guided by critical analysis of the heterosexual mainstream, even relatively passive participation may imply intentionality.

Commodification and consumption

With an exclusively female clientele (to the shop at least) and female target market, the LPC relies heavily on the provision of women-centered services – namely consumer goods, creative work and information – which might otherwise be unavailable or inaccessible for Japanese women. This is evidenced by the fact that the women who create, promote and use the LPC choose this over (or at least in addition to) “mainstream” options. Yano Kikuko, the “Netpatrol” reviewer of mainstream women’s
magazine *Oggi* describes the value of the *LPC* website in terms of its relative accessibility:

Among *Oggi* readers, there must be many who baulk at the idea buying condoms themselves...If even buying condoms requires courage, people who can go into so-called “adult toy-shops” must be even fewer. Most adult shops are the world of male-centered sex fantasies, and for me at least are not comfortable places (2003:345).

The Love Piece Club allows access to goods and concepts generally unavailable or considered taboo for the “average woman.” In this sense the LPC represents a safe-space for the exploration and deconstruction of taboo, encouraging women to critically engage with social constructions of (passive, subjective) feminine sexuality. On this level the LPC promotes curiosity and critical engagement with social expectations in relation to familiar experiences of femininity. The diverse themes covered in the written columns promote critical understanding of social constructions of femininity, and encourage engagement with an agenda for feminist change at specific levels.

The radical potential of the LPC as a space for resistance and agency is achieved not only through innovation and subversion, but also through manipulation of consumption. Some feminist theorists have endorsed consumption as an expression of self-empowerment, and erotica as “a site of pleasure and play, not of politics” (Sonnet 1999: 176). Radical feminists have critiqued the conflation of consumption with empowerment, and the strategic packaging of difference for the market (Clark 1993). While consumption as a feature of liberal feminism can be seen as conflicting with the sex radical agenda of the LPC, in fact the connection between the two is both functional

157 For example, women are encouraged to offer their opinions through LPC site polls, which raise issues such as methods of masturbation, names for their vagina and whether they would want to be men.
and essential. As Driscoll observes, just as the existence of sub-cultures requires a mainstream, so feminist identities are tied inextricably to patriarchy (1999:188).

The LPC promotion of sexual fulfilment, not least through the consumption of sex and sex goods, squarely addresses the considerable consumer power of Japanese women, and particularly young women. Supporting this approach are post-war associations of consumption (particularly personal consumption) with femininity (Kinsella 1995:249). To extend Kinsella’s observations, I suggest that just as young women’s consumption of cuteness in the 1980s and 1990s reflected resistance to social expectations of (mature, reproductive) femininity, so too may the consumption of sex and erotica be seen as a challenge to contemporary gendered norms (Kinsella 1995:251).

Lying parallel to this feminised consumption is the commodification of women’s bodies to promote male consumption, for example of cars, food and fashion (Clammer 1995:197). In visual advertisements, images of the female body are designed to meet the masculine gaze, to be consumed visually (Clammer 1995:207). The consumption of the image is sexualised by the context within which the image is placed (the site of production, the site of viewing), as well as the wider heterosexual framework of sexual norms and expectations within which the masculine consumer and feminine image are located. Burns argues that in Japan this wider context implicitly and inevitably references women’s bodies with sexual violence (Burns 2005:2).

In the context of the LPC, where heterosexuality is often challenged if not rejected, I argue that consumption and commodification can be differently understood. The difference is wrought firstly by its openly and exclusively female focus, and secondly, by its depiction of feminine sexuality as subjective and agentive. As a sex goods shop
that caters to the desires of female sexuality (and in the case of the real space shop, discourages male customers), its business depends primarily on the consumer power of women. In order to harness this, the LPC must attract the feminine gaze. Not just in the consumption, but through the promotion of sex toys, the LPC challenges the socially defined borders of feminine consumption, encouraging the incorporation of sex as an ordinary feminine (consumer) need. If masturbation is understood or promoted as an everyday activity for women, and consumption of personal items is considered both socially acceptable and characteristically feminine, the market for sex goods is constructed as similar to industries such as cosmetics or homewares. This is not to say that in Japan the consumption of cosmetics is equal or even similar to the consumption of sex goods in transgressive potential. Rather, it is the promotion of sex goods as consumables like or on a par with homewares, that represents transgression.

Conclusion

Agency cannot be collapsed into simple decision-making. The choice to provide and use the service and site of the LPC reflects decision-making at multiple levels, and not all of these necessarily speak of empowerment, consciousness or politically-informed motivation. A focus on active sexuality as inherently and unequivocally indicative of empowerment can obscure the multivalence of sexual acts, which as Barton cautions, "may be liberating on an individual level (while) simultaneously... indicative (and reproductive of) institutionalised constraints" (2002:586). The pursuit of pleasure, though subtly informed by social hegemony, does not necessarily engage with conscious and/or political intention. Just as the act of looking at mainstream porn cannot be entirely disentangled from the wider context of gender relations, neither can the act of looking at/consuming lesbian or queer erotica be extricated from the broader social
conceptualisation of female sexuality. This is because the definition and nature of erotica are contested, even within the relatively narrow arena of feminist discourse. However, while those who look at female erotica do not necessarily see feminist erotica, the process and context in which that erotica is produced and depicted are critical, because it is these factors that make it inherently political, and inherently feminist. If feminist agency demands some political effect, then clearly the work of the Love Piece Club enables and extends women’s agency.

Yet, the perusal of a website such as the LPC does not in itself effect a change in the general or specific status, or the empowerment or the overall well-being of a woman, and I am wary of such easy conflation. If, as I have argued, agency is to be determined as empowering, it must also be acknowledged that the very act specified as empowering may simultaneously exclude and isolate the actor from certain social contexts and in specific relationships. Thus the online publication of female nudes or lesbian erotica has the simultaneous potential to include and empower the actor (as publisher and viewer), while excluding her from certain social spaces – namely, the dominant and socially-sanctioned space of heterosexuality. To be excluded or exclude oneself from this space in turn has impact on the agential capacity of a woman, so that the taking up of certain choices means the negation of others. As adult video actress Nina Hartley observes, the promotion of sex work and sex goods marks a woman as having “crossed the line from ‘good girl’ to ‘bad girl’”, rendering the public performance of mothering and wifely roles conflicted (emphasis added) (in Chapkis 1997:33). To take up (publicly) advocating feminist erotica in Japan excludes a woman from the moral safety associated with idealised middle-class femininity.
In advocating sexual exploration as a means of pleasure and self-empowerment, the LPC promotes sex, in the words of Chapkis, as a "cultural tactic which can be used both to destabilise male power as well as to reinforce it" (1997:29). To promote feminist erotica is to be tied to non-feminist (mainstream, male-centred) erotica, and therefore both to support and oppose. Similarly, to promote queer or lesbian sex and sexuality is to acknowledge the centrality of heterosexism and its status as a discursive source of disempowerment for (some) Japanese women. Inversely, as Chatterjee observes, "heterosexual' tacitly relies on 'homosexual' for authority and coherence" (2002:210). It is in the expression of critically-informed opposition – the creation of specific and general space for women's sexuality and women's work – that agency is most evident, and most radical in its potential to change gender hegemony.

The limitations of this potential agency are Juffer argues that "transgression should not be used as the sole standard of examination", because transgression is neither universally intended, nor uniformly conveyed (1998:18).158 The potential for erotica, like pornography, to transgress the material social realities (including structural inequalities) of its performers, promoters and consumers can be seen as fluid and relative, never fixed to a single or universal set of criteria. Further, emphasis on the transgressive potential or effect of erotica speaks more of the agenda of the viewer – namely, the academic – in seeking new and radical interpretations of a familiar subject. Echoing Abu-Lughod's observations on "romanticising resistance", Juffer is thus critical of what she perceives as the academic tendency to "valorise the production of new interpretations of texts, without regard to their limited circulation" (1998:19) (Abu-Lughod 1990). I am conscious that in constructing my discussion around explorations of agency, this chapter may be perceived in this way.

158 In this case Juffer is referring to pornography, but I have extrapolated on her comments for use in this discussion of erotica and agency.
For the Love Piece Club, erotica and active sexuality represent specific challenges to such hegemony. Through the production and dissemination of images of lesbian sex and intimacy, self-love and sensuality, Love Piece Club rejects the masculine appropriation of women’s bodies and women’s sexuality, successfully negotiating “the feminist dilemma of pleasure and oppression” (Wilkins 2004:337). The LPC uses sex and sexuality as a stimulus for discussion of broader social inequalities and hegemonic ideals which impact on women’s agency (Wilkins 2004:347). The capacity for women to act (or not act) and to engage in feminist praxis is thus illustrated by, but not limited to, the active exploration and celebration of sexuality that LPC aims to engender.

159 On this point the LPC differs from the Goth community in Wilkins’ study (2004).
CHAPTER EIGHT

Haruka Yōko’s Feminism

In the previous chapter I discussed the Love Piece Club as feminist discourse, promoting feminist agency through the celebration of active sexuality. The LPC works from the relative peripheries, using the internet to challenge mainstream and mass media constructions of gender and sexuality. By contrast, feminists such as Haruka Yōko engage in social critique via the mass media, specifically adopting a style and language apposite to mainstream audiences. While Kitahara Minori and the Love Piece Club work to re-appropriate sexual language and promote women’s sexuality, Haruka adopts a broader strategy addressing her feminist writings to those who support her work as a television personality, to women of similar age and interests (including baseball, Takarazuka theatre and ballet) and to those who share her experiences of and perspective on gender issues in contemporary Japan.\(^{160}\) This chapter outlines Haruka’s work as a feminist author and TV personality, identifying themes of marriage, family, age (or youth) and beauty as central to her feminist critique. I then focus on one of Haruka’s most recent works, *Hybrid Woman*, exploring the book’s proposed model of feminist living as strategic, accessible and engaging, but ultimately limited in its potential for radical social change. I conclude with a brief comparison and contrast of the feminisms of Haruka and Kitahara.

With a career as a TV personality established in the 1980s, Haruka Yōko entered the feminist spotlight after studying gender theory at Tokyo University. She published a

\(^{160}\) Haruka’s website profile lists her birthplace (Osaka city), special skills (Japanese dance and piano) and interests (watching baseball, Takarazuka revue, travel and skiing). http://www.haruka-youko.net/oneself/index.html. Last accessed 4/01/06.
book about her experiences – *Tōdai de Ueno Chizuko ni kenka o manabu* (Learning to fight from Ueno Chizuko at Tokyo University). The book became a national best-seller, and Haruka became known as a feminist TV star. Her subsequent books – *I will not marry*, *Working women have nothing but enemies*, *Hybrid woman* and *The unhappiness of beautiful women* – have built on this success, making Haruka one of the more popular and certainly most visible feminists in Japan. Haruka appears a stylish, liberal and modern woman, writing in a down-to-earth, un-academic style about personal experiences of love, discrimination and life choices (see Images 1 and 2, pg 327). Featured in a 2001 Women’s Projects magazine article entitled *Haruka Yoko: A Flag-Bearer of Gender for 21 Century* (sic), Haruka employs her popularly accessible persona to challenge and deconstruct gender and social norms in contemporary Japan (Women’s Projects newsletter no.23:2).

This chapter explores the themes and impact of Haruka’s work, and her incorporation of feminist discourse into her work on television. Working with and through the mainstream media, Haruka promotes feminist critique of the everyday experiences of women, emphasising the possibilities for feminist agency and empowerment at a personal level. Accessible language, familiar themes and self-consciousness mark the potential of Haruka’s work as far-reaching feminist texts, distinct from and yet complementary to academic theory and government discourse. Straddling radical and liberal feminist approaches, Haruka’s critique represents a strand of new, popularly appealing feminism, the development of which will shape not only future feminist discourse, but also the wider depiction of women’s issues in the mass media.

**Haruka and feminism**
Haruka Yōko was born in Osaka, the youngest and only daughter of a working-class family with five sons. She does not give her age, but given her work history is likely to be in her forties. Her work as a television presenter or tarento began with her 1986-8 inclusion as a co-host on Yomiuri Television’s morning chat-show, “Tokimeki Timely”.

In the 1990s Haruka worked in television, radio and print, writing newspaper columns on subjects from working women to baseball. As a tarento she is known for her sense of humour, her connection with the Kansai area (she includes the Kansai dialect in her writing) and her support of the Hanshin Tigers baseball team – illustrated by her book *Baseball is Hanshin, I am Single (Yakyū wa Hanshin, Watashi wa Dokushin)*. She is also known as an outspoken feminist.

While feminism and television may seem unlikely bedfellows, it is clear that Haruka’s particular brand of feminism informs and is informed by her experiences in the media. She is the first to point out that as a tarento, her workplace is rife with sexism and gender inequality, and that even among female work colleagues, “feminism” is a foreign word. Haruka gives a particularly entertaining example of the foreignness of the word “feminism”, illustrated by the efforts of a group of (male) media executives to try to pronounce the word. Feeling embarrassed for the tongue-tied men, Haruka suggests that they use the odd-sounding abbreviation “fe”, at which the men are suddenly able to converse fluently. Haruka presents the situation as ridiculous but nonetheless positive in its implications – the men are familiar with the concepts and issues of feminism, it is simply the word that is difficult for them (Haruka 2001:112). The spread of the word “fe” is illustrated in another context, used by a friend to describe Haruka herself:

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161 Where many Japanese authors (male and female) give their birth year in the biographical blurb of their work, Haruka’s personal information only acknowledges that she was born in Osaka. Her webpage offers the same information. This absence reflects her stance on the significance of age as a marker of status or attractiveness for women, as discussed below.
“Yōko’s a fe whatcha-me-call-it” (2001:113). If shortening the terminology from feminizumu to fe increases the currency of the underlying concept, then it is a positive step for feminists (Haruka 2001:115). Furthermore, Haruka reflects, while the word “feminism” has not gained sufficient currency in Japanese society to reflect its full historical import, there is nonetheless scope for the ideas behind feminism to spread (2001:114).

**Feminism at work and in the home**

Haruka draws on her workplace as evidence of an existing (if obscured) feminist framework, in which feminist praxis can be seen among people “who don’t particularly understand feminism but put it into practice unconsciously” (2001:113). She recounts the story of a full-time working female friend, who apologises to her husband when asking for his help with doing the laundry. The woman, realising that tasks which offer benefits to both husband and wife should be shared labour, “takes back” her apology.

What is interesting about this example is that housework features as the foil for feminist consciousness. The division of domestic labour represents a key theme in Haruka’s critique, emphasising the role of the domestic in the idealised construction of femininity. In an earlier work (*I will not marry*), Haruka observes that the concept of “housework” by definition requires a “housewife”, or at least a wife: single people may clean, but they do not do “housework” (2000b:54). Furthermore, Haruka presents herself as an antithesis to the domestic goddess – she eats instant noodles straight from the pot, she

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162 The Japanese word for housework *kaji* is written with the kanji “house” and “thing(s)”. By contrast, the word *soji*, meaning “cleaning”, uses the kanji “to clean” or “sweep” plus the kanji “remove” or “exclude”. *Kaji* generally refers to broad housekeeping activities, rather than simply cleaning. While the activities performed may be exactly the same, and therefore use of either word grammatically correct, the differing nuance means that unmarried women and men may tend to use the word *soji* (cleaning) instead.

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only washes up once a week and she is awed by the time and effort expended by her mother and sister-in-law in caring for their families (Haruka 2001:240). These characteristics are presented with joking pride, depicting Haruka as a woman liberated from household chores. They may also be designed to surprise the reader, contradicting Haruka’s appearance as a sophisticated and capable woman. Simultaneous to this differentiation, these comments draw Haruka down from her pedestal of fame, presenting her as an individual whose lack of household skills mark her as unfeminine in a social context where domestic labour, and specifically nurturing, is central to idealised femininity (Long 1997).

In her column “Office breeze”, published in the premier Japanese newspaper, Asahi Shinbun from 1995-1996, Haruka takes up issues specifically stemming from her experiences in the workplace. While “feminism” and “feminist” do not appear as keywords at this point, themes of gender discrimination and workplace and domestic inequality are brought into sharp focus. With titles such as “Don’t raise men to be self-conceited”, “Is the woman with the tired face your wife?”, “Pregnancy is not ‘the end’” and “How about doing your job without apologising”, Haruka’s column offers sharp and succinct criticism of mainstream gender discourse which constrain women in work and family.

Throughout her writing, Haruka reflects on the possibilities of women’s equality in Japanese society, and the difficulties of balancing family and career demands. The interrelationship of marriage, career and freedom features as a key issue in official feminist discourse, specifically in government-run women’s centre initiatives. However,

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163 Haruka’s newspaper columns Office breeze (published 1995-6) and Haruka’s feminism (2000-2001) are collected in the volume Hataraku onna wa teki bakari (Working women have nothing But enemies), published 2001.
while government-run initiatives draw on the Law for a Gender-Equal Society as a template for change, Haruka is more radical in her critique of Japanese patriarchy.

Drawing on her own family as illustration, Haruka paints domestic gender inequality as fundamental to Japanese marriage, and is scathing of its impact on women’s lives. Her observations take in both her own experiences as the youngest female, but more frequently address the demands placed on her mother and sisters-in-law, and she is upfront in her assessment: “My family (ie) is a museum of patriarchy and capitalism” (Haruka 2000b:96).164 She describes her older sister-in-law’s unusual outing from the house to a wedding as a Cinderella-like “liberation” from the burden of domestic chores. Her return via the supermarket (to pick up groceries for the family’s dinner) marks a return to the everyday:

My sister(-in-law) knew it. She knew that Cinderella’s midnight deadline had passed. Her carefree youth had moved noisily into a time for labour, and her supermarket bags transformed her into everyday mode (Haruka 2000b:91).

In Haruka’s critique, the implications of marriage and motherhood not only limit women’s career possibilities, they limit women’s potential to develop fully as individuals. Further, the expectation of marriage constrains even women who are not married, binding “woman” to “wife” with implicit potential – even where, as in Haruka’s case, that gloss is consciously and actively rejected. Even the fantasy of romantic love receives short shrift from Haruka, who states: “I think marriage is a taste chosen by people who like to play families” (2003:15). From these and other critical observations of her own family’s experiences, it becomes clear why Haruka chose to title her book “I will not marry”.

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164 On her website notice-board, Haruka is asked by a male reader “Doesn’t your family get mad at the way you write about them?” She reassures the fan, jokingly writing “My parents don’t read my books”, and then clarifies that “Although I make fun of my family, I don’t insult them”. http://www.haruka-youko.net/response/index.html accessed 19/4/03.
Youth and femininity

While the centrality of marriage to femininity is a recurring theme in Haruka’s critique, a related concern is youth, or rather the emphasis on age as a determinant of women’s worth. In popular constructions of the female life cycle it is age, in combination with “achievements” such as marriage and child-rearing, that enables women to perform the ideal femininity (Dales 2005; Sakai 2003). Age is particularly pertinent to Haruka as a woman working in the popular media, which tends to valorise physical characteristics over talent, particularly for women (Darling-Wolf 2004:335). The popular media’s emphasis on youth and youthful beauty helps to perpetuate these characteristics as cultural ideals of physical attractiveness (Darling-Wolf 2004:335). I would suggest that age is less of an issue for women who work in industries other than the media, and for women have taken up wife/mother roles, because these roles encompass alternative feminine ideals that do not necessarily relate to youthfulness or physical beauty. For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, behaviour observed and validated as praiseworthy (or erai) among members of Women’s Projects was behaviour that indicated successful performance of (house)wifely and mothering duties, such as cooking or caring for relatives. Certainly beauty does not appear to factor in the group’s choices of cover models for their magazine, which have included among others Hosokawa Kayoko (involved in the organisation of the Special Olympics), rising politician Noda Seiko and the Yokotas, elderly parents of North Korean abductee Yokota Megumi. While the issue featuring Haruka Yōko offers two pictures, it makes no reference to her physical appearance, focusing instead on her book “I will not marry” and her work promoting gender issues.
In one “Office breeze” essay (“Women’s age, men’s income”), Haruka compares the question of women’s age to the question of men’s income in terms of its sensitivity and implications (2001:222). The implicit social equation of men’s masculinity with their income renders questions around the latter taboo. By contrast, Haruka observes no such taboo around women’s ages, and argues that the obsession with asking or revealing women’s ages reflects a desire to demean or neutralise women’s individuality and value (2001:223). The gender ideals which underlie this desire are manifest in workplace practices such as limiting reception work to women in their twenties or early thirties. Haruka’s reluctance to reveal her age stems from recognition of the limitations on women brought about by age, in the workplace and in society in general.

If in the future, companies employ women in their sixties to sit at reception and have male subordinates who can honestly respect their older female section-chiefs, and there are lots of older women about who make us think ‘I want to be like her’, then perhaps, we will be able to say our ages without feeling sick. (Haruka 2001:224)

In another essay “Isn’t there anything else you can ask?” Haruka addresses the implications of the emphasis on women’s age and marriage, focusing on men in particular as perpetrators of this offence (2001:12-3). Enquiries about age and marital status, argues Haruka, aim to separate women into two categories – “women” and “not-women” (2001:12). As singlehood and youth (presumably until age 30) mark women’s (sexual) availability to men, and therefore femininity, so marriage and age mark women as unavailable to men, and therefore outside the category of “woman”. This categorisation of women according their sexual availability is pinned to the construction of mature femininity as maternal and located within the boundaries of marriage. The conflation of youth with singlehood and sexual availability is backed by the conflation of age with marriage and maternity (and therefore sexual unavailability). Haruka argues that the simplicity of this categorization obscures actual diversity of women’s domestic situations:
What if I were living with someone? What if I were married but had lived apart from my husband for many years? ...What if I were single but had three kids? (Haruka 2001:13)

To contend with this increasing complexity of women’s lives, there is no solution but to increase the categories of femininity – to increase the number (presumably visibility) of women who transgress (Haruka 2001:13). It is the random, inexplicable, all-over-the-place woman (“wake no wakaran onna”) who most challenges rigid ideals of femininity based on marriage and age, and by confusing the categories is therefore enabled to new models of femininity.

The challenge to mainstream ideals of femininity reflects Haruka’s own experience as a single, beyond-twenties woman. However her anger at socially-prescribed expectations of femininity extends beyond purely personal indignation. She sketches a broader picture of the impact of gender norms on various aspects of women’s lives. Haruka’s attention is focused and her message aimed at the promotion of feminist consciousness and criticality at this everyday level, in the households of viewers and readers.

Face (and body) value in Haruka’s feminism

Haruka is particularly well-placed to make assessments of women’s position in the media. She writes frequently of the conflicts between her work-related performance and her feminist sensibilities. As a TV personality she is aware that her value is pinned to appearance, to her decorative (and sometimes humorous) contribution to the screen. In this context it is her bodily presence, her clothes and comportment which mark her femininity, and her intellectual self is obscured or made invisible. In programs where she is invited to contribute to discussions, however, she is forced to “wear plain clothes, cover up completely, dye her hair black” in order to speak – or rather, in order to be
heard (Haruka 2001:165). She is thus bound in her work to a binary of physical/intellectual selves, where the expression of one precludes the expression of the other, and where her femininity is either exploited or denied.

To sell femininity or to deny femininity, in any event there is no choice but to work while holding a self which is neither one nor the other (Haruka 2001:164).

The importance of appearance for Haruka goes beyond clothes. Haruka reflects in a number of her works on the “coolness” (kakkoyosa) of feminism and feminists. More than simply fashionable, Haruka’s description of women such as Ueno Chizuko and Women’s Lib activist Tanaka Mitsu as kakkoī implies an almost awed impressed-ness, an admiration of the physical appearance of the women that stems from knowledge of their achievements and abilities. The women are kakkoī not because of their fashion, but because of their presence. Haruka’s emphasis on the pastel-clad, gently-permed somewhat maternal (that is, non-confrontational, reassuring) bodily appearance of certain feminist theorists only reinforces her admiration – these are women who use words to impress, the way other women use clothes. Haruka’s reaction to these women, perhaps exaggerated in her accounts, evokes comparison with a teenager’s adulation of certain pop-stars. There is something overtly “common” (miha) or unsophisticated about such unmasked admiration, and the effect is to bring Haruka inline with her fans – her enthusiastic approval sees her play fan to the “famous” feminist idols.

Haruka argues that while the entertainment world offers companionship and support in personal and professional issues, her feminist “concerns” cannot be raised or met in a workplace where “(m)ost people don’t even know the word ‘feminism’” (Haruka 2001:185). In these concerns, Haruka seeks the advice of her fellow Tōdai graduates,

165 Kakkoi is a term equally applicable to cars, gangsters and clothes, and always reflects a subjective admiration or aspiration, beyond the subjective appreciation. Thus an ugly man may be kakkoī, because of charm, poise or even aloofness.
most of whom have gone on to further research or academic work. In painting herself as conflicted, confused and in need of theoretical guidance, Haruka reinforces both her own distance from the “ivory tower” of academia, and the accessibility of feminism, which can be learnt even by “just a TV personality” (Haruka 2001:186).

However, as her Tokyo University classmates point out, it is precisely because Haruka is not an academic but a TV personality that her feminist critique is effective – “We research it. We want you to spread it.” (Haruka 2001:190). Haruka’s humorously self-judged intellectual inadequacy in theorising feminism is countered by her ability to evoke and promote feminist praxis as advocated by Misciagno (1997). 166 The realization of her role as a promoter and public ambassador of feminism effects a partial reconciliation of the physical/intellectual conflict, blurring the line between work and ideology without changing Haruka’s material circumstances.

The negotiation of professional development and feminist integrity features significantly in Haruka’s writing, and highlights the “everyday” (as opposed to theoretical) roots of her feminist approach. Balancing social critique with an interest in fashion and beauty, Haruka seems less interested in qualifying her feminism than in promoting awareness of feminism in general. In this sense she represents an attainable model of feminism, advocating a feminism that aims purely to make life easier for women. The incorporation of personal experiences and particularly ideological challenges and conflicts, distinguishes Haruka’s feminism from distant academic feminism, and in combination with her public TV persona, effects an accessible and reassuringly human approach.

166 Misciagno argues that feminist identity can be understood best via a focus on praxis, whereby activity is prioritised over ideology. Borrowing on Hegel’s concept of experience, Misciagno posits that praxis is “a two-fold process where consciousness experiences itself as forming the quality of experience as well as being informed by the self-fame process” (1997: xxiii).
Hybrid Women

The polished and succinct style of Haruka’s latest work, “Hybrid woman” (2003), reflects her development as a writer in the years since “Learning to fight”. Still peppered with self-deprecation and humour, the book refines the more general critical approach of previous works, proposing strategies for feminist living in a way that sometimes evokes the fashion editorials of women’s magazines, with hints, how-tos and biting observations. With chapter titles such as “Theory on romance”, “Theory on body”, “Theory on men” and “Theory on success”, this book focuses less on Haruka’s personal experiences, instead extrapolating on ways of being that will allow Japanese women (implicitly including Haruka) to live easier (ikiyasui) lives and to be more self-fulfilled. As the final chapter reveals, the key is in the “Theory on hybrid survival strategies” (Haruka 2003:207).

Agency and strategy represent key themes in this work. According to Haruka’s discourse, the aim of feminism is to make life easier for women. If women are to live easily (that is, freely, independently and/or without discrimination), they need to develop strategies by which to plan and achieve their life goals. The decisions to marry or remain single, to court or reject men’s attention can be read as examples of such strategies for living (Haruka 2003:212). However, Haruka argues that each of these has limitations in their applicability and value. While women who marry are assured of social respectability (as wives and mothers) and financial security, they are constrained in their independence and career prospects. Women who remain single are free to work and play as they like, but earn pity as “unhappy women who never met the right man” (Haruka 2003:209). Women who play on “feminine weakness” and flirt with men
alienate other women, and are bound by their dependence on men. Women who view men as enemies are stigmatised as aggressive, and constantly face storms of criticism and alienation from men and mainstream (malesteam) society.

The flaws in each of these options lead Haruka to propose a new model – a hybrid which takes the best of all positions while remaining bound to none. In Haruka’s theory, men are quite literally resources (shigen), whose value should be established pragmatically and independent of the fantasy of romantic love. The key is therefore to employ the method which most suits your immediate purpose, while keeping in mind the ultimate goal of “overtaking” (kakenukeru) men. By “overtaking”, however, Haruka does not suggest that women should seek power over men specifically – rather, in a society bound by male-favoring gender-norms, “overtake” means simply to live beyond these norms, or to live freely.

To this end, women must be pragmatic in their lifestyle choices. Fashion, career and romance are the three items on Haruka’s agenda, and the selection of these reflects both their significance as personal concerns, and a popular currency that targets a female audience. In all aspects, the Hybrid Woman must be flexible and adaptable, accessing the best of stereotypes and expectations, without compromising her integrity or sense of self-worth. In fashion, this translates to being “both mannish and feminine...Having no fixed notion of your sex”, and incorporating the possibility of both hard and soft (leather and organza) fashions (Haruka 2003:230-1).

This attention to fashion echoes Haruka’s earlier reflections on the conflict of physical and intellectual selves, and reinforces the importance attached to the expression of self through clothing and appearance. Although this section is strongly reminiscent of a
fashion editorial, the underlying implications are significant. To highlight fashion as one of three aspects of a new mode of womanhood attracts the particular attention of those for whom fashion is already essential to the feminine self. It is for these women that this section is written, and it is for their benefit that the style evokes a fashion magazine. The strategy of this approach is clear – if fashion is central to existing femininity, it also makes a good starting-point for reforming or re-visioning femininity. Haruka’s own interest in fashion, evidenced as much by her glamorous television presence as her previous writing, reinforces the effectiveness of the approach, encouraging the feasibility of feminist fashion.

In career, the Hybrid Woman must firstly know her own place (Haruka 2003:231). Evidently if the Hybrid Woman is to develop her career options, she needs a map of the terrain, and an understanding of the obstacles she may encounter. For women who work in male-dominated workplaces (including, for example, office ladies), it is important to make a few firm allies among the men, to secure a stronghold from which strategic decisions can be made (Haruka 2003:231). The efficiency of this approach is reflected in the power wielded by Ogasawara’s office ladies (OLs) over their male colleagues and superior, who “curry favour” with the women to ensure a harmonious working relationship. The resistance of subordinated women, manifest in “the diversity of ways in which they are able to cause men distress”, exemplifies the Hybrid Woman’s mode of work (Ogasawara 1998:156). This potential “distress”, achieved by the OLs’ refusal to take the initiative in helping, to do favours or cooperate with male colleagues, counters the legitimate authority of male superiors (Ogasawara 1998:156). The Hybrid Woman OL negotiates strategic relationships with her male superiors through the strategic performance of favours and the implicit threat of “distress”, presumably securing benefits that may reduce her workload, yield greater returns (in wages or otherwise) and
potentially increase her career prospects. For Hybrid Women who hold rank in the workplace, the trick is to maintain the respect and co-operation of subordinates, both male and female, and to avoid excessive criticism and blaming (Haruka 2003:231).

The third and arguably most important aspect of Hybrid Womanhood outlined by Haruka is romance, or romantic relationships. Although not explicit until this final section, Haruka’s advice on romance permeates the text, forming an unspoken foundation for the model of the Hybrid Woman. This is no coincidence of course, given that Haruka sees romantic relationships as central to existing models and ideals of femininity, and therefore as the area in most need of feminist reform.

Haruka is pragmatic about the need to form relationships with men. However, she argues that such relationships are only ever beneficial to women temporarily, and furthermore that their success depends on women’s flattery (kobi) of men (Haruka 2003:226). While women who do not flatter lose access to “male resources”, women who flatter too much (that is, act “ditzy” around men) lose access to “female resources”, alienating women and discrediting their own femininity (Haruka 2003:226). Furthermore, women who marry are forced to maintain the flattery indefinitely, as part of the marital contract (Haruka 2003:227).

Hybrid Women, however, know when to flatter and when to fight. They adopt “two (different) faces” for accessing female and male resources (Haruka 2003:227). The Hybrid Woman does not promote feminine weakness as inherent, but neither does she attack men as enemies. Rather, she adopts a strategic “false weakness” when appropriate, and pragmatically utilises men, seeing them as “annoying but cute in their usefulness” (Haruka 2003:227).
Ultimately, Haruka advises women to view romantic relationships not as a fate, but as a hobby, and one which women can live without (Haruka 2003:232). There are no “true” or “pure” or “genuine” romances, only those which appear so, and it is the fantasy of such romance that constrains women, preventing them from self-fulfilment (Haruka 2003:232). In this reading, while marriage and related long-term romantic commitments may be seen as offering security or stability, the viability and reward of such security (and thus such relationships) must be continually re-assessed in critical feminist terms. The benefits, argues Haruka, do not outweigh the risks.

Men are not enemies – they are still viable resources. What you should know are the kind of circumstances in which men can become enemies, and in which they can be allies. Polish your skills at using the resource wisely. And at the same time, remember that as allies they have limitations in their usefulness (Haruka 2003:233)

Limitations of the Hybrid model

If this selective overview of Haruka’s most recent work makes the author sound cold, calculating and cynical, it is in part due to my own difficulty with this theoretical development. The grandness of the Hybrid Woman model, its emotional detachment and its limited applicability for women outside certain social and financial circles, distinguish the final chapter of Haruka’s book from her previous writing. While Haruka’s previous work draws out feminist concerns in everyday places, in this piece the focus on broader women-centred development has skewed, taking on a clinical and often unrealistic world-schema.

While Haruka is clear in her intention of empowering women, her language, style and illustrative hints address a target audience that is less than all-inclusive. Haruka is
critical of the equation by which women’s self-esteem is determined by men’s evaluation, arguing that it is this same equation which makes marriage valuable (Haruka 2003:229). While Haruka makes no explicit assertions about the (natural) physical attractiveness of Hybrid Women, she suggests that in fact this quality is relatively unimportant – the Hybrid Woman recognises that she does not attract men, but does not allow this to affect her own self-worth (Haruka 2003:229). Haruka notes that women who lack the ability to attract men, because they are unattractive or lack charm or simply do not flirt, by definition are denied access to the “male resource”. One of the weaknesses of the Hybrid Model then is its failure to fully explore the implications of this exclusion, and the options which remain for women who cannot appropriate and “over-take” as advised. Most obviously, this group includes women who are precluded by physical attributes that are de-valued by Japanese society, and which detract from their ability to tap into “male resources”.

I would argue that Haruka draws her model around women who can and do attract male attention, simply because she is an attractive and highly-visible woman herself. As witnessed in her earlier writing, Haruka’s career in the media (and specifically television) has benefited from the notion of beauty as commodity, and no doubt reflects the expectations of femininity to which she herself has been subject. If women’s beauty is commodified in and by society in general, the Hybrid Woman model does not attempt to dismantle the structures which keep its price high. While the Hybrid Woman does not allow her self-value to be decided by men, Haruka suggests that for Hybrid Women “Not being popular with men is not self-evaluation. It is simply that one has no resources to use” (2003:229). There is a suggestion here that while there is no fault in being unattractive to men, nonetheless unattractiveness denotes a lack, and the lack is rooted in broad social expectations of femininity as attractive. Thus if the Hybrid
Woman must employ beauty as a means to succeed, then women who lack beauty are precluded from full attainment of Hybrid success. Women who are not interested in beauty or fashion may be similarly precluded. In fulfilling Hybrid criteria then, inability is not differentiated from unwillingness, and women who actively challenge stereotypes of feminine beauty are excluded as are women who strive but fail to employ physical beauty as a means to attract “resources”. More significantly, lesbian women and other women who are not interested in attracting men (for use as “resource” or otherwise) are excluded. In this sense, Haruka’s feminism employs “the tools of the master’s house”, attempting to reform the heterosexist society from within (Lorde 1981). While she argues that the Hybrid tools are new, that the flattery and fighting strategies are unlike those women have used to date, emphasis on bodily appearance and a reliance upon heterosexual norms in the theory detracts from the radical flow of the thesis.

There is, of course, good reason for this approach. Haruka is pragmatic in her estimation of what feminism can hope to achieve in the existing un-gender-free confines of Japanese society. More significantly, the inclusion of popular and familiar feminine ideals is in part what makes Haruka’s theory strong – she attracts women who are not radical, whose interests include beauty and fashion, and who may otherwise avoid (or be excluded from) participating in feminist critique. Significantly, she also potentially attracts women supporters who have already adopted (at least to some extent) these strategies in their lives, through marriage and other romantic relationships.

While the role of housewife and the nature of housework are critically depicted, Haruka’s description of actual housewives is not disparaging. Defining housework as unpaid labour, Haruka quotes feminist theorists such as Ueno Chizuko and Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa in expounding the gendered inequality of the Japanese household
(Haruka 2000b:58-9). She champions full-time housewives as efficient and tireless workers, selfless and modest, drawing a sharp contrast with their arrogant, self-centred male counterparts (Haruka 2001:81). The contrast between arrogance and modesty, self-centredness and solicitude is shown as more than a matter of individual nature – rather it is proof of the binary relationship in which housewives who support are bound to their husbands, who are supported (Haruka 2001:81).

Criticising the role rather than the individual is a tactic which has allowed Haruka considerable popularity. Prior to Hybrid Woman at least, Haruka’s target audience included women of her own age-group and older, and her books are sold in the “women’s issues” sections of most major (popular) bookshops. Given that an overwhelming percentage of Japanese women of this age-group are married, it is clear that Haruka’s critique in some way resonates with the feelings and experiences of middle-aged, married women. While Haruka remains single, she remains essentially different to this component of her audience, and yet it may be precisely because she is single and critical of marriage that her popularity remains. As the Women’s Projects’ article observes, Haruka “evokes the audience’s sympathy talking piquantly about the way of thinking of Japanese women who choose not to marry” (Women’s Projects no.23:2). Haruka’s feminism has potential impact for the women who support her work because she addresses issues that married women cannot address, by drawing attention to the inequalities in family which many women feel. Haruka chooses to highlight women’s problems in the family and workplace, and perhaps because she is both willing and able to do this, women are interested in her critique.

However, it must be recognised that her fame, financial status and most significantly her singleness mark Haruka as different from much of her female audience. While numbers
of single women are increasing in Japan, those of Haruka’s age who are single and wealthy are still in the minority. The dropping fertility rate has encouraged government promotion of marriage and family, through the implementation of laws such as the Law for a Gender-Equal Society. Young women are still expected to marry and older single women are still encumbered by their lack of domestic ties. Haruka’s promotion of the Hybrid Woman as an alternative feminine ideal reflects a deep dissatisfaction with the existing models of Japanese femininity. Bold and sharp, the Hybrid Woman takes charge of her life and her femininity, utilising all tools available to achieve her ends. Yet, the Hybrid lifestyle does not promise happiness – Haruka is clear about its limitations. The free-living, free-moving Hybrid Woman cannot expect to be understood by anyone (Haruka 2003:233). If she wants self-fulfilment she must also accept solitude as its price (2003:234).

This is not empty rhetoric for Haruka, who is resignedly clear about her own life-path: “I know that I have to live my life alone” (2003:221). While the Hybrid Woman may represent a brave new future for Japanese feminism, the likelihood of women taking up the mantle is compromised by the social, physical and emotional ties which bind femininity to the performance of certain ideals. In realising these ties, Haruka’s work is a real, accessible and potentially radical feminist text for Japanese women. However it is the implications of cutting these ties that may prove the greatest difficulty in the popularization of Hybrid Womanhood.

Haruka Yōko and Kitahara Minori: Comparisons and connections

167 The stigma of being unmarried is witnessed by epithets such as “loser dog”, a term popularised by Sakai Junko’s look at life for unmarried women over 35 years, Makeinu no toboe (The howl of the loser dog) (Sakai 2004).
Accessible language and familiar themes mark the potential of Haruka’s and Kitahara’s work to become far-reaching feminist texts, distinct from yet complementary to the government discourse and academic theory that represent feminism in media and mainstream constructions. While both women engage with these feminist spheres in their work, it is precisely because they position themselves figuratively and literally outside the “official” spaces that they are popular as feminist critics and as writers. Haruka and Kitahara promote particular versions of feminist identities, sometimes linked to explicit feminist identification and at other times tied to action rather than identity.

The challenges addressed by Kitahara and Haruka to mainstream ideals of femininity reflect their own experience as single, past their twenties (and therefore ostensibly “loser dog”) feminist women. Kitahara’s anger at the patronising attitudes of male doctors and sexist child-rearing practices is more than purely personal indignation, as it sketches a broader picture of the impact of gender norms on everyday aspects of women’s lives (2001:54).168 It is in the promotion of feminist consciousness and criticality at this everyday level, in the households of subscribers and readers, that Kitahara’s feminism has most impact. From everyday criticality, readers are encouraged to challenge broader assumptions of femininity, critically deconstructing gendered roles (such as wife and mother) and their related ideals.

In Haruka’s critique, the implications of marriage and motherhood not only limit women’s career possibilities, they limit women’s potential to develop fully as individuals. Further, the expectation of marriage constrains even women who are not married, binding “woman” to “wife” – even where, as in Haruka’s case, that gloss is consciously and actively rejected. Even the fantasy of romantic love is demolished, 168 http://www.lovepiececlub.com/kitaharaframeset.html Last accessed 31/05/04, no longer online.
Haruka commenting that “I think marriage is a hobby chosen by people who like to play families” (2003:15).

While Kitahara is critical of heterosexual norms within and outside the institution of marriage, Haruka can arguably be seen to promote a dismantling from within. Kitahara’s writing explicitly challenges conservative constructions of women’s sexuality, including taboos around auto-sexuality and queer and lesbian sexualities. Kitahara emphasises the oppressiveness of heterosexist (and male-centred) social norms by promoting women’s active sexuality, and in doing so implicitly promotes a radical deconstruction of feminine ideals centred on marriage and heterosexual romantic relationships.

By contrast, in Haruka’s work it is the inclusion of popular and familiar feminine ideals that underpin her theory – she is likely to attract women who are not radical, whose interests include beauty and fashion, and who may otherwise avoid (or be excluded from) participating in feminist critique. Furthermore, she does not address sex or sexuality explicitly, and her work (in the form of seminars and television programmes as well as writing) is therefore more easily packaged for conservative consumption. Nonetheless, while Kitahara’s audience (online at least) may be generally more radical with respect to sexuality and marriage, the attraction of the website is that it allows women to dip into feminist critique freely, without requiring public exposure or acknowledgement, adherence to a political agenda or knowledge of academic discourse. Contextualising the sale and use of sex-goods within critical discussions of sexuality, Kitahara’s writing encourages broader critical engagement with consumption practices, aimed at an audience of women who are more often targeted as consumers than as critics.
Conclusion

Haruka Yōko’s writing seeks to problematise gender ideals, roles and expectations in Japanese women’s everyday lives. Her popularity is reflected in the frequency of her public appearances, including events organised by major universities and government-run women’s centres. In her most recent work, Haruka proposes a new model for feminist living which seeks to solve some of the conflicts and issues raised in earlier works. The model encourages women to view romance, marriage and ultimately men as means by which to achieve freedom and self-fulfilment. Through taking “the best of all worlds”, Haruka’s Hybrid Woman seeks to redress the gender imbalances which currently constrain women, repudiating ideals which support this inequality and focusing on enjoying fashion, work and independence. Haruka, who “eats what she likes, says what she likes, sleeps when she likes” and who will not marry, represents the embodiment of the Hybrid Woman.

Consumption of and engagement with Haruka and Kitahara’s feminist texts encourages a diversification of feminist identity beyond academia into mainstream culture and youth subculture. As feminist identification appears as much a result of as a motivation for participation in women’s groups, so a re-conception of feminist identity and theory expands and develops through the media presence of Haruka and the internet activities of Kitahara. It is the potential for feminist critique to inform change that is channeled by popular magazines, TV shows and newspapers when they address, promote or challenge the feminist agenda and identities of women such as Haruka Yōko and Kitahara Minori.

169 Her website schedule indicates that Haruka spoke at three public events in the final half of 2005, in addition to her weekly radio show on J-Wave, “Jam the World”, and regular television appearances. http://www.haruka-youko.net/future/index.html Last accessed 6/01/06
CHAPTER NINE

Reading agency in the “parasite single” issue

As discussed in the previous chapter, Haruka Yōko’s *Hybrid Woman* model for feminist living promotes the strategic use of male “resources” as a means of tapping into masculine power and its social and economic advantages. Kitahara’s Love Piece Club advocates active sexuality as both a source and stimulus for women’s empowerment, focusing on women’s bodies as sites for personal feminist activism and challenge to hegemonic gender norms and ideals of femininity. This chapter addresses the issue of “parasite singles” (*parasaito shinguru*), as a further example of the impacts of such hegemonic norms and ideals, and of the ways that everyday decisions that challenge these structures may be seen to engender feminist agency among Japanese women.171

Exploring the origins of the term “parasite single”, its perceived causes and impacts, and the relevance of the notion of agency for its elucidation, I adopt a critical stance on the problematisation of the parasite single issue, aiming to delineate some of the tensions inherent in feminist analysis, specifically those tied to questions of agency in sociological studies of women. Given the relative dominance of feminine ideals of marriage and child-rearing in Japan, does parasite singlehood qualify as an expression of women’s agency? Does agency encompass even those acts motivated by pragmatism, or which lack the intent to challenge? One of the aims of this chapter is therefore to explore the boundaries of “agency”, to determine the measures by which we, as social analysts, gauge the resistance of certain social acts. Underpinning my discussion is an implicit recognition of the forces which shape this assessment, and in particular the

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171 This chapter has been published in a slightly amended form as “Lifestyles of the Rich and Single: Reading agency in the ‘parasite single’ issue”, in Parker (ed.) (2005).
idealistic notions which have led, to paraphrase Lila Abu-Lughod, to the romanticisation of resistance (1990).

The term *parasaito shinguru* was coined by sociologist Yamada Masahiro in 1997, and developed in his 1999 book – *Parasaito shinguru no jidai* (The era of parasite singles) – making Yamada the popular expert on the issue for the foreign and domestic press. Other journalists and social critics have joined the debate and, in 1998, one self-described parasite single, Sarada Tamako, published an anecdotal discussion of the issue (Sarada 1998). I will explore these works in this chapter, but in order to focus on women’s perceptions of the issue, I explore a selection of Japanese women’s experiences. In addition to some women’s group members, the women quoted here are friends and acquaintances who agreed to share their opinions with me through interviews for the purpose of this study, and whose informal contributions have inherently shaped this thesis. In this chapter, all women’s ages and occupations are noted, in recognition of the potential generational and occupational differences in perceptions of this issue. The quotes selected are not intended to represent a comprehensive survey of social views, but to illustrate perceptions among women I worked with, at the time that the term “parasite single” was in popular currency, and for whom the issue was personally pertinent. Significantly, all of the women cited here were themselves (at the time of writing or in the past) “parasite singles” under Yamada’s definition, or had a family member who qualified as such.

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172 For examples of English media discussion of the parasite issue that cite Yamada, see Ashby (2000) [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl?f=20000407a1.htm](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl?f=20000407a1.htm) Last accessed 10/01/06 and Hoffman (2001) [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl?f=200111223tc.htm](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl?f=200111223tc.htm) Last accessed 10/01/06.

173 I follow Patricia Hill Collins’ (1990) approach in blending academic and non-academic authors, and present these women’s experiences as the mainstay of my study on perceptions of the parasite single issue.
As a preface to this study, I would like to clarify my own stance on the creation and use of the term “parasite single” in academic writing. While it has been appropriated by some women, I find the term and its descriptive use generally reductive and under-examined. In a discussion of individual women’s life choices and experiences, the term may be replaced with (admittedly less succinct) alternatives such as “single women living at home”. The decision to focus this chapter on “parasite singles” does not detract from this stance, but rather aims to explore the creation and employment of the term in media and social evaluations. I argue that Japanese women are not “parasite singles” because they live at home with their parents – they are “parasite singles” because their behaviour is challenging to certain assumptions of ideal femininity, and “parasite” is the label designed to censure such behaviour. Furthermore, as Sakai’s work, Make inu no tōboe (The howl of the loser dog) illustrates, the terms employed to describe non-conformist women are rarely positive (Sakai 2003).

Yamada’s Parasites: An overview of the issue

It is difficult to define comprehensively who qualifies as a parasite single. I will start with the picture drawn by Yamada, because it is his work which has become the media’s definitive source, and therefore his polemic which is most widely spread. Parasite singles are defined as young adults (in their twenties and thirties) who remain single and live at home with their parents, often despite having full-time employment. Yamada presents this group – for it is always a group that he describes – as leading charmed lives, characterised by self-centredness and excessive luxury consumption (1999:41). Although they may contribute some money to the household, parasite singles are largely free to use their own money in any way they choose, making them “the most affluent stratum in Japan” (Yamada 1999:10). Indeed, this is the demographic group
whose lavish lifestyle earned them the label *dokushin kizoku* (the single aristocracy), in the economic boom years of the 1980s.

Since the late 1980s, however, the aristocrats have fallen from grace. Youth unemployment has reached record highs, escalating from 2.0 per cent of men aged 25–29 years and 3.7 per cent of women aged 25–29 years in 1990 to 4.9 per cent and 6.9 per cent respectively in 1998 (Yamada 1999:105). In those years the economy was in a slump and the repercussions have been manifest for those entering the job market post-boom. In the midst of this economic gloom, an increasing number of Japanese youth are opting to remain at home and single, at least until their thirties. The number of single women aged 20–25 years who live at home may have dropped slightly during the decade 1992–2002, but the percentage of similarly positioned (single, living at home) women in the next age bracket (30–34 years) jumped from 69.2 per cent to 76.1 per cent in the same period. According to the 2001 White Paper on Women, in 1975 the average age of first marriage for women was 24.7 years for women and 27 years for men. Twenty-five years later, these ages increased to 27 years for women and 28.8 years for men (Associated Union of Japanese Women’s Groups 2001:268). In 1973 the total fertility rate was 2.14, but by 1999 this had dropped to 1.34, and in 2003 dropped further to 1.29 (Associated Union of Japanese Women’s Groups 2001:39).

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174 While youth unemployment reflects the difficulty for graduates in entering the workforce, the effects of *risutora* (corporate restructuring, i.e. downsizing) have also meant increased unemployment for middle-aged men. Although traditionally protected by the permanent employment system, industry bankruptcies and amalgamations caused the unemployment rate for the 39–45 year male bracket to increase from 1.1 per cent in 1990 to 2.4 per cent in 1998 (Yamada 1999:105).


176 5. The 2003 statistic on total fertility was found at the website of the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (*Kokuritsu Shakai Hoshō/ Jinkō Mondai Kenkyūjo*), specifically at http://www.ipss.go.jp/syoushika/tokei/Popular/P_Detail2005.asp?utm_id=04-05.htm&title=%87W%81D%8Fo%90%B6%81E%89%C6%91%B0%8C%89%E6&title2=%95%5C%82S%81C%82T%81%40%8E%E5%97v%90%8D%91%82CC%8D%87%8Cv%93%C1%8E%EA%8Fo%90%B6%97%A6%81F1950%81%602003%94N Last accessed 11/01/06.
Herein lies the key to the slide from “aristocrats” to “parasites”, for women at least. The shifts in reproductive patterns have drawn young people, and particularly women, into critical focus. The average number of children born within marriage has decreased slowly from 2.2 for the last twenty years to 1.79 in 2002, but this decrease is not significant enough to account for the overall drop in fertility (Associated Union of Japanese Women’s Groups 2001:38). Given that the percentage of births out of wedlock constitutes only 1.4 per cent of total births, it can be understood that the drop in fertility is not simply a product of fewer births overall, but particularly fewer marriages to promote births. In light of this situation, it is the unmarried and therefore unproductive young women, particularly those in the 25–29 year bracket, who represent the greatest challenge to expectations and ideals of the feminine life cycle. For this reason, it is precisely these women who have the potential to reform the social and family structures which maintain these gender-based expectations.

The decision to live at home until marriage places the “parasite single” women at the focus of concern around *bankon* (later marriage), and spotlights unmarried women in discussions of the population patterns that have earned Japan the label of a “low birth-rate, greying society” (*shoshikakōreishakai*). While the greying of the Japanese population has demanded reforms in social welfare to cope with the needs of the elderly, the need for youth services (such as unemployment benefits and education allowances) has been overlooked (Yamada 1999:194). Parasite singles, and particularly parasite single women, are therefore problematic both at a social level, in terms of the performance of gendered roles, and at the national level of population and related public policy.
Although the numbers of young people living at home have indeed increased over the last decade, I argue that the parasite singles, particularly women, are in fact adapting existing family structure to accommodate contemporary social and economic pressures. Yamada argues that the essential “luxury” (yutakasa) of parasite singlehood is characterised by the taking of “the best of both worlds” of “child” and “adult” positions (1999:17). From Yamada’s perspective then, at the root of the problem is the failure of young people to perform maturity – specifically, it is not so much that young people are refusing to leave home or become independent, but that they are refusing to marry and reproduce. As this can be directly linked to changes in women’s perceptions of goals, roles, and lifestyle, and stands as a challenge to traditional government policies and social goals, it stands to reason then that women – as prospective wives and mothers – should be specifically targeted in the problematisation of this trend.

“What’s the problem?”: Naming the parasite single issue

There is an unmistakably negative nuance to the English term “parasite single”. Evoking images of noxious bacteria or fungi sucking the lifeblood from their hosts, the word “parasite” by definition implies a one-way relationship in which the host does not benefit, but in fact may be harmed as a result of the association.

Coined in Japanese by linking two English words transliterated in katakana, the phrase “parasaito shinguru” loses this nuance. As the impact of the word “parasaito” is contingent on an understanding of the word “parasite” and its application, the use of “parasaito shinguru” by those unfamiliar with the English term reflects a differently informed perception of the issue than that held by the English speaker. While the katakana-isation of the term can thus be seen to dilute and soften impact, it also
encourages use by the media and in popular discussion. *Katakana* suggests foreign import and can be used on Japanese words to add interest or emphasis to news type. That the literal Japanese translation (*kisei dokushin*) is not used, adds support to the depiction of the *parasaito shinguru* as an imported and, significantly, recently arising issue, masking its origins and history. This effect contradicts the presentation of *parasaito shinguru* as a specifically and exclusively Japanese phenomenon, a view reinforced by deeply-rooted *nihonjinron* theories of Japanese uniqueness and cultural independence.\(^{177}\)

Masaki Hitomi, a full-time housewife in her fifties, suggests that language has played a large part in the problematisation of this pattern. “I think they use too much English, there are all these new words that people use. There wasn’t this word (parasite single) until now and nothing was said about it” (Masaki-san, 53 years, 20/01/02). If nothing else then, the label has packaged the problem for wider consideration, introducing it as a social problem in the same way that DV (domestic violence) and *sekuhara* (sexual harassment) have gained currency. However, the connotations of *katakana* (as non-native, imported or western-originated) may undermine the positive effects of its usage.

Suzuki Maya, a 24-year-old Masters graduate and part-time gallery worker who is financially independent and living alone, describes the parasite single issue as a social phenomenon rather than problem. She states that “It is contemporary Japanese society which is creating parasite singles”, drawing links with the depressed economy, restructuring and gaps created by the seniority system of promotion which characterises labour patterns in Japan. Suzuki-san is critical of the way in which parasite singles have been problematised, suggesting the influence of West-centred perspectives.

\(^{177}\) From this point, translative nuances notwithstanding, the term “parasite single” will be used instead of *parasaito shinguru*.  

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Maybe the word ‘parasite single’, as emphasised by the katakana, maybe it’s just a part of Japanese culture, or one type of family life. Being able to depend and being co-dependent, in one sense this is an aspect of Japanese happiness. But from, say, American or Western independent, individualistic culture, maybe it comes across as ‘parasite’ (Suzuki-san, part-time gallery worker, 24 years, 18/02/02).

Kurata Tomoko, a 28-year-old housewife, supports this view: “In the old days even if when they went out to work everyone lived at home. And that’s what a parasite is right, now?” Both Kurata-san and her mother, Masaki-san, perceive the parasite single issue to be overblown, an issue for the individual rather than society to address.

I don’t think there’s any need to ‘solve’ it. Because it’s what the individual wants isn’t it? So I don’t think there’s any need for society to go fixing anything. It’s an individual thing, it’s private. (Masaki-san, housewife, 53 years, 20/01/02)

Living with parents until marriage, or living with parents even after marriage, I think it’s the individual’s choice and I have no problem with it ... So when a young woman graduates from university and goes out to work, and gets her lunch made or her washing done by her mother, I think—what’s the problem? (laughs) (Ikeda Hikaru, PhD student, 24 years, 19/01/02)

These women’s opinions naturally reflect their personal experiences of living at home. While Kurata-san, Ikeda-san, and Suzuki-san have all at some stage been financially dependent on their parents, Kurata-san and Suzuki-san expressed no particular affinity with the parasite single issue. Ikeda-san, by contrast, spoke of feeling personally “attacked” or “blamed” by the gendered connotations of the term. It is this feminisation of the issue which I will now explore.

178. Although Suzuki-san suggests that she probably fell into this category until graduation in 2002, in fact she has lived apart from her family for seven years now and thus differs from the typical co-habiting pattern of parasite singles. Ikeda-san also has lived alone since entering university and is now financially independent, but nonetheless relates to the issue. In discussion, she spoke of her older sister who fits the typical “parasite single” description.
The gendering of the parasite single issue

In my discussions with Japanese women, I posed the question of whether the parasite single phenomenon can be considered a “women’s problem” (*josei mondai*), with the aim of determining its relevance as a feminist issue. My use of the term “women’s problem” reflected a desire to avoid the term “feminist” (*feminisuto*), because of its generally negative image, discussed in Chapter Four. In Japan, as in Australia, “feminist” is a loaded word, and its implications tend to limit its usefulness in casual dialogue. The term *josei mondai*, “women’s problems”, works around the “f” word, but still hints at the deeper, political, and social implications of issues which affect women. As Sakai notes, the problems of a late-marriage and low-birth rate society are generally constructed as *josei mondai*, evidence of women’s changing attitudes towards the family and career (Sakai 2003:157). In using this particular term, I aimed to draw out any critique informed by feminist consciousness, involving perhaps ideas of gendered persecution or unfairness.

When asking this question, I envisioned answers relating to the roles of mothers and daughters, and perhaps a discussion of the economic and cultural factors which lead women to live with their parents. These expectations were informed by my own perception of the issue and by the underlying agenda of feminist investigation. In emphasising my expectations of this question, I want to draw attention to the inherently conflicted aims of feminist enquiry, in seeking to verify the construction of women as always either empowered or disempowered by the specific social conditions examined. Given the women-centred nature of feminist critique, it is not surprising that we who apply it do so with a strong, if implicit, desire to see our subjects succeed in subverting, overcoming, and resisting the condition of oppression or inequality. It this implicit
idealism which leads to what Marilyn Strathern (1987) calls the “awkward relationship” between feminism and anthropology – awkward partially because the aims of the former do not always gel with the conclusions of the latter.

Understanding the feminist project to be both political and analytical by definition, there is a clear risk that the questions asked by research seek to reinforce certain political positions and theoretical assumptions (Mahmood 2001:14). Thus my question (“Is this a women’s issue?”) was formed and asked with an attached expectation of the answers I would – or more specifically, should – receive.

In fact, the question frequently drew answers such as, “No, I think it’s an issue for both men and women”, obviously suggesting a different interpretation from that which I had in my mind. While the women who responded in this way perceive the problem to be an issue which affects women, it does not necessarily qualify as a “women’s issue”, a genre of social issues linked to feminist consciousness and practice. The prevalence of this answer, even among members of the women’s groups, suggests a reluctance to claim the issue as gender-related or specifically feminine. This reluctance may stem from a stigmatisation of those issues termed “women’s issues”, as subordinate to the greater “social problems” (shakai mondai) and charged with a (negative) feminist tone. To designate a problem as a “women’s issue” may thus marginalise the issue, allowing responsibility to be shifted from the government and wider public sector, and onto those taking up against sexual discrimination, violence against women and other feminised problems.

WWW member Akagi-san defined parasite singlehood as a “gender issue”, because the implications of living at home differ for women and men.
Compared to men, women have more reasons, especially while they’re young (to live at home). They have to stay with their family to get (good image), for the company...For instance when they start working, if they don’t live with parents, when they are single, living alone, then some companies don’t have a good impression to employ these women. Specially some companies which ...keeps the companies images, like big banks or insurance companies (Akagi-san, late thirties, part-time worker, 12/02/02).

Akagi-san’s conceptualisation of the issue reflected the negative connotations for companies of female employees who live alone. While she observed that both men and women can be considered “parasite singles”, the differing implications of living at home for women and men led to her understanding of the issue as gender-nuanced.

Suzuki-san suggested that the parasite single issue is linked to but separate from women’s issues.

First of all the mother does the housework, or the mother is at home, and so for a parasite there’s someone at home to look after them. And that’s why they are parasites, right? ... So if you include that idea of women staying at home doing the housework as a women’s issue then parasite single becomes linked, but the psychological dependence, the fact that young people can’t live alone ... that’s probably something different to women’s issues... (Suzuki-san, Masters student, 24 years, 18/02/02).

Suzuki-san suggests that the parasite single issue extends beyond the rubric of “women’s issues”, insofar as it is linked to a lack of psychological independence. She conceptualises the problem in terms of its impact on mothers, whose caring duties are extended beyond their children’s physical and social maturity.

For Women’s Projects member Konishi Aya, the term “parasite single” points to people who have “reached an age where they have to be independent but are still with their parents”. She finds herself in this position reluctantly, for economic reasons, and contrasts her situation with those who choose to remain at home.
I really want to live alone, so if I found a proper job I would leave I think. But the
thing is I also want to do postgraduate study, so to do that I need to save money.
So thinking that way I really don’t want to be here but I think it’s better to stay.
But especially among my high-school friends there are many girls who are
parasite singles. And even though they’ve all been working two years, and the
longer ones about five years, that sense that they’ll always be (living at home), I
find that on the other hand strange. It’s strange that even though they’re in a
situation where they can leave, they don’t. I just want to leave so much I can’t
believe it... but it seems like I can’t leave. So I’m a parasite single, but I think the
people who can leave but still become parasite singles are really strange (Konishi-
san, furīta, 24 years, 7/03/02).

Konishi-san distinguishes those who remain at home for economic reasons (such as
herself), from those who choose to live with their parents despite (perceived) economic
independence. She does not however define the issue necessarily as a problem.

I don’t think it’s that much, if it doesn’t produce a bad result, I don’t think it’s a
problem. If it’s efficient then I think it’s completely fine. However, if the young
person never has any desire to leave then I think that’s a real problem. If everyone
takes responsibility, living with family... well whoever you live with people come to
have roles, and things that have to be done, and if those are done then I don’t think
you can call that being a parasite single at all (Konishi-san, 7/03/02).

Benkyō member Miyoshi Kaori-san, a “parasite single” (under Yamada’s definition)
who lives with her grandparents, is critical of the oversimplifying connotations of the
term “parasite single”. “It really pisses me off that people assume if you aren’t a full-
time worker or married, then you have it easy!” (Miyoshi-san, part-time worker, 26
years, 2/07/01). For Miyoshi-san, who works as a counsellor and receptionist in two
part-time jobs, the discourse of the “parasite” glosses over the varied and complex
reasons that young women choose to live with family rather than alone.

For Ikeda-san, the term “parasite single” immediately brings to mind a young woman.
She felt that the term was used to condemn those who made pragmatic choices.
So if you think about the quality of life financially, it's staying at home where your father is and your mother who does everything for you is, and you can spend your money as you like, versus living off your husband's salary alone. Or else you have to work. But you won't have a mum there to do the housework and stuff for you. And if after weighing it up, you choose to stay at home, where your father works and there's money and you have a mother who does everything for you, you're called a 'selfish daughter' (Ikeda-san, PhD student, 24 years, 19/01/02).

While women who live at home were perceived by some as more problematic than their male counterparts, other women felt that sons who stay at home represent a more serious issue.

It's not that I think that because men have to be strong or that men have to be socially independent but ... Basically I think a lot of times when women are parasites they are not necessarily dependent on the mother but on the family, right? On the presence of the family ... When men are parasites I think overwhelmingly they're dependent on their mother. And that's the problem. (Suzuki-san, Masters student, 24 years, 18/02/02)

Although Suzuki-san explicitly rejects the sarariman model of socially-defined masculinity, she does focus on the male parasite single's psychological dependence on his mother as problematic. This addresses the problem known in Japan as mazakon (mother complex), in which the mother-son psychological bond retains foremost priority even when the son has matured and committed to a romantic relationship. Sarada supports this, asserting that while daughters can effectively partner up with the "mother-as-wife" model, there is something unpleasant or wrong about sons doing the same (1998:19).

It is helpful at this point to briefly examine some of the other labels which identify problematic youth. There is pûitaro, a generally disparaging term that implies laziness and a general lack of responsibility or endurance (gaman), combining the onomatopoeic
pū (to do nothing) with the male name *taro*. In nuance, it is comparable to the Australian word "bludger". A slightly less negative term is *furīta*, an amalgamation of the English word "free", or "free-time", and the German *arbeiter*, meaning "part-time worker". A close relation of the parasite single, the *furīta* or *pūtarō* works numerous part-time jobs without becoming a full-time or proper employee (*seishain*). This path may be chosen by those concentrating on specific goals, such as travel or study abroad, developing specific skills such as music or performance, and those who enjoy the freedom to socialise afforded by the irregular hours of part-time work. However, in light of record highs in unemployment and increased competition in the full-time job market, there are also those for whom this lifestyle is the only option.

While *furīta* as a term can be construed as non-gender specific, the media representation of *furīta* as a social problem has focused largely on young men. That the archetypal *furīta* is male suggests a gender slant comparable to that cast on the parasite single identity. In this case, the problem is not that young men are refusing to work so much as that they are refusing to conform to certain male role expectations: namely, to join the ranks of productive full-time workers, preparing to support a wife and children. While overseas travel, pursuit of creative learning and rejection of the company managerial track have been accepted – indeed, encouraged – for young women, it is specifically these things which condemn *furīta* and *pūtarō* men as problematic. As with parasite singles, the material circumstances of the individual, and his beliefs, aims, and physical capabilities, are submerged by his non-performance of expected roles and resistance to a specific construct of social maturity. The wide currency of *furīta*, *pūtarō*, and *parasaito* in daily language has encouraged this generalisation, creating an easy handle for youth who challenge social norms, intentionally or implicitly.

179. The inclusion of the male aspect (*taro*) in the word does not technically preclude its use for women.
The *furīta/pūtaro* lifestyle rejects the gendered pressure of corporate work. Women may be discouraged (implicitly or explicitly) from pursuing a fast-track career, but it is the flipside of this very discrimination which exempts them from the pressure of *having* to have such a career. *Karōshi* (death from overwork), alienation from the family and a lack of intimate social connections are some of the prices paid for pursuing the corporate dream life (Renshawe 1999:217). Changing attitudes towards participation in the family, especially in childcare and the taking of paternity leave, reflect men's increased social sensitivity to the lifestyle sacrifices demanded by the *sarariman* model. It is a specifically gendered pressure that has led young men to consider alternative options, including the part-time or non-managerial tracks, in the same way that young women opt for living arrangements which may diverge from anticipated models.

While neither *furīta* nor parasite single are purely gender-specific labels (and in fact are used by women cited here, such as Konishi-san and Miyoshi-san) I would argue that the problematisation of the issues behind these terms draws heavily on gender-based social expectations and a divergence from related roles. Daughters who do not work full-time and sons who continue to live with their parents do not demand the same concern because these aspects do not represent deviation from the popular (gendered) life cycle progression. The implications of these choices do not reflect on the gendered social maturity of the actors, and thus allow the individual to pass as a mature adult. By

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180 According to the “Attitudes towards Participation in a Gender Equal Society” 2000 survey, 67 per cent of men and 69.7 per cent of women believed that men should take paternity leave (Associated Union of Japanese Women’s Groups 2001:288).
181 The *mazākon* phenomenon of emotionally dependent men draws a different—less public and effectively less critical—response than that of the unmarried, parasite single women. I argue that this difference stems from the perceived and potential impacts of the two phenomena. *Mazākon* men may not be ideal men, but they are not precluded from fulfilling ideal masculine roles. In fact, their identity as *mazākon* “sufferers” is arguably defined by their married status—it is a wife or partner who is most able and likely to label a man as overly-mothered, because it is she who must take on the mothering role.
contrast, it is the particular relation between lifestyle and gender which marks parasite singles as feminine and furīta as masculine, and both as problematic. Thus it is the failure of women to marry and reproduce which generates the problem of parasite singles, and the failure of men to become full-time workers and breadwinners, which marks the furīta as a social concern.

Mothers as wives: Role revisioning in the family

What impact does a parasite single living arrangement have on the “host” household? Through changes in role expectations and performance in the family, particularly in mother/daughter relations, the parasite single seems to represent resistance to social and patriarchal ideals. This involves a revisioning of roles – as defined by perceived and expected duties, speech, and behaviour – in which marriage is decentralised or non-existent, and alternative lifestyles are supported.

I frame this discussion in terms of “roles” not because it is the only gauge available to determine the impacts of this issue, but because it is one of the clearest. This is because, as I have argued, it is specifically the performance of the parasite single lifestyle which renders it problematic. I use “role” in this context to mean a set of practices, performed and/or idealised, reflective of the social discourse in which the individual is positioned. In this sense, roles are neither fixed nor ascribed, but constantly modifying and modified by the dialogue between self and society. The significance of role is not merely in its performance or revision, but in the potential power of doing or not-doing. It is in this aspect that agency and resistance are manifest, and through these that new roles may be formed. I choose to focus on role and role revision as a means of exploring
the potential agency of the implicit and explicit dialogue between the individual who lives with her parents and the society that labels this behaviour as parasitic.

Parasite single women pose a threat to the normalised, nuclear family model by redefining role boundaries and subverting femininised ideals of life-style. Exemplifying this subversion is the situation described by Sarada (1998:20), in which the mother plays wife to her daughter's performance of husband. While the daughter adopts a sararīman lifestyle, her mother continues the supporting role of housewife – cooking dinner, washing shirts, and serving tea to guests. For her part, the daughter may act as financial adviser or provider, oversee household maintenance, and deal with official matters pertaining to the family. As the "husband", the daughter assumes an authoritarian role, using less respectful language with her mother than a daughter might generally.

This is more likely to happen where there is no father present, or where he has retired, leaving a gap in demand for the mother's care. The family structure thus shifts, as attention is focused on the most (economically) active member of the household—the child. The effect of retirement on men and their roles within the family is illustrated by the phrases sodai gomi (oversized rubbish) and nure ochiba (wet fallen leaves, hard to sweep out of the house), indicating their uselessness and lack of purpose in the home.

The power relations between economically inactive men and their economically active daughters represent a common source of tension in the parasite single household. The slippage in patriarchal power may be evident even where the daughter's economic strength does not flow on to the household, for example where the daughter provides no board or financial assistance. The problem for such fathers is not necessarily (or
entirely) that they are financially providing for daughters—rather, it is the failure of the
daughter to behave according to daughter-role expectations within the family. Such
expectations may include helping mothers with housework, keeping suitable hours (or
company), or perhaps, as time goes by, making efforts to find and marry an appropriate
husband.

Sarada’s model of the parasite-single life draws on her own experience and economic
capacity as a freelance writer, who is entirely self-sufficient for “food expenses of
course, as well as living costs” (Sarada 1998:18). However, she notes that this is but one
“pattern” of parasite-singlehood. In other cases, the parasite-single lifestyle is tied to the
“identical nature” (ichiransei, literally “single-egg nature”) of the mother-daughter
relationship, and reflects the difficulty of child separation (kobanare) for mothers

An arrangement where the parasite single daughter lives at home while pursuing her
career serves several functions. Firstly, in terms of work potential, it puts the single
woman on par with the married man, freeing up the time and energy otherwise spent on
daily routine (cooking, cleaning, washing) for work and work-related activities. As
discussed in the previous chapter, housework is implicitly the work of “housewives”
(Haruka 2000:54). The significance of housework in performance of the wife role is tied
to the concept of care-giving, an historically developed ideal characteristic of mature
Japanese femininity (Long 1996:158). The expectation that care-giving is an essential
and totalizing task means that housework can be conceptualised as a (time-intensive)
The demands of such ideal care-giving discourage women’s participation in activities beyond the scope of “care.” The single parasite woman, in working wholly outside the home and without wifely duties, is the recipient rather than the giver of such care. Thus, having, rather than being, a wife is a key element in the restructuring of these young women’s roles, and it is this which marks the parasite single issue as particularly feminised in the social eye.

Secondly, it allows the housewife mother to continue her nurturing work. Sarada argues that for baby-boomer mothers, married in the high-expansion era of the 1960s and 1970s, living this role of housewife is “what makes life worth living” (1998:27). This view was echoed by interviewee Ikeda-san, who suggested that her mother would feel lonely (sabishī) if her daughters were to take over household chores. It is in part this care-focused lifestyle which makes it difficult for mothers when children leave home. Thus, if her child remains at home, the housewife mother continues to feel needed and valuable, fulfilling the duty of care for which she has trained her whole married life.

I would note, however, that this argument does little to challenge assumptions or roles, supporting what is certainly a popular, but in no way universal, family structure. Adopting the husband/breadwinner role means compliance with the explicit and tacit demands of work encapsulated in the sarariman model—the physical performance of long hours of work, the encroachment of work and work-related activities into one’s free (“private”) time and acceptance of the hierarchy and associated rules of workplace relations.

182 Long observes, however, that women may justify their participation in activities outside the home as being “an extension of their role as parent” (1996:162). Thus part-time work and participation in school or community organisations may be seen—by the women themselves and those around them—as a form of care-giving.
Furthermore, while the nurturing role of the mother is, in one sense, validated and recognised as necessary by the adult daughter “husband”, there is little to be celebrated for the mother who simply wants a break from her nurturing duties. The suggestion that some mothers encourage their children to leave home arose during a discussion held with middle-aged, married female members of the group Women’s Projects. Most of the women seemed happy to have their children stay at home until marriage (sometimes with provisions, such as that the children help around the house). Nakane-san, a mother of two teenage boys, said that when her elder son turned 20, she “would have him leave” (dete itte morau). While it was not clear whether this decision was based on a desire to enjoy free time or simply to encourage the child’s independence, there is nonetheless an implicit expectation of a separation period.

For many women, it is the period after children have grown up and become self-sufficient that offers the greatest freedom, to engage in further learning (languages, arts and crafts, etc.) or travel. Ironically, the housewife mother may compromise this time to allow her daughter to live it before marriage. Sakai presents this pattern as an illustration of the differences between the “winning dog” mothers who have married and reproduced, and their adult “loser dog” daughters (Sakai 2003:136). The generational divergence in life cycle and goals adds a further complexity to the parasite single issue, particularly when viewed from a feminist perspective.

A third potential offered by the parasite single arrangement is the decentring of marriage as an accepted ideal. Given that it is the single status of the daughter which allows this arrangement, the parasite single phenomenon has the potential to promote increased tolerance for alternative lifestyles and sexualities. In resisting social pressure to marry and reproduce, women who live at home live out an alternative life-pattern, in
which marriage and heterosexuality are not central. The normalcy of marriage is therefore challenged by the act of living at home, and particularly so if this arrangement satisfies some of the socially accepted functions of marriage, such as financial stability, companionship, and nurturing.

Young women’s desire to continue with their career after marriage and/or children represents another aspect of changes in role expectations. In light of limited childcare and other support services, these women will look to their husbands for support in child-raising and domestic work. This can be read as an ideal opportunity for the blurring of husband/wife roles, inviting positive changes in family structure and child rearing. This reading hinges, however, on the mutuality of these aims – and on the willingness of the husband to participate in the division of labour, and in care-giving in general.

It is these expectations which create complications for potential husbands, because men who live as parasite singles do not challenge the gendered division of labour in the household. With a mother to cook, clean and take care of housework, the unmarried man has no need to learn these skills himself (Yamada 1999:85). His perceptions of marriage then will be based on this experience, and should he marry he is likely to expect his wife to replace his mother as caregiver and nurturer. He may not anticipate or accept compromise of the lifestyle which allows him to remain unconcerned with household work and maintenance. Sakai divides such “male loser dogs” (osu no make inu) into five categories: men who lack interest in real-life women; men who reject/hate responsibility; men who are completely unattractive; men who are damaged goods; and men who have overly high expectations (Sakai 2003:158). Men who live at home need not – and generally do not – train in housework. According to one survey, this means

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that 73.1 per cent of parasite single men who work do not help at all with housework, compared with 39.1 per cent of working, parasite single women.183

The problem occurs when the women such men seek to marry have similarly high expectations. For these women, raised and encouraged to be career-oriented or simply independent-minded, the performance of the traditional housewife role may be as unfamiliar as it is to men. It is this situation that crystallises the problem of the parasite single. Marriage becomes untenable where role boundaries have blurred for women but not men, requiring compromise and a divergence from the model of marriage learnt from their parents (Renshawe 1999:213).

The sararīman/housewife model is dependent on both parties fulfilling specific duties. Should the woman choose to work full-time outside the home, or the man choose not to, the balance of exchange is upset. This model assumes that the housewife wants a husband to earn a suitably high salary to support the family, and that the sararīman wants a wife who will maintain the house, raise the children and work part-time to supplement the household income where necessary. It is not necessarily the case that parasite singles are refuting marriage per se. Rather, it is that the housewife/sararīman model, the model with which they were raised, has become economically untenable and, increasingly, ideologically undesirable.

The models of marriage and motherhood idealised by the baby-boomer generation have undoubtedly influenced their daughters' perceptions of marriage. Having observed their mothers' sacrifices in performance of the (full-time) housewife role, it is perhaps not

13. These statistics reflect the responses to a national survey entitled "Survey of Unmarried People Living with their Families", conducted in 2000 by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (http://www.ipss.go.jp/English/single/s_cont.html [last accessed 16 Sep 2004]). The survey targeted both households (throughout Japan) with unmarried relatives aged 18 and over, and individuals within the households.
surprising that at least some young women are choosing to “maybe not get married” (Awaya and Phillips 1996:245). Furthermore, young women’s expectations of marriage are shaped by their own experiences of single life. Ogura observes that young women accustomed to high levels of consumer comfort as singles may also expect this material consumption to be continued through married life, without necessarily requiring their engagement in (full-time) paid labour (Ogura 2004:37; Bardsley and Hirakawa 2005:122).

Reluctance to marry into the “old” model may be at the forefront of the perceived problem for both men and women. Okazaki-san, a 49-year-old housewife and worker, views the phenomenon as a result of the drop in the appeal of marriage, and places the issue in a context of social change.

I think marriage just doesn’t have the attraction, maybe that’s it. Or maybe they just haven’t met the right person yet. I think the social situation is definitely part of it. It’s hard times now, people worry whether marriages will work out. And so it’s easier to live at home and work, and that’s definitely part of it, I think. It’s because it’s comfortable to live with your parents (Okazaki, worker in family business, 49 years, 3/02/02).

Sarada observes that people are remaining single not simply because they cannot marry but because they do not want to – they enjoy the single life (1998:15). Marriage offers less than it used to, and particularly so when stacked beside the possibilities of the single lifestyle. If living at home allows greater financial independence than marriage, it is not surprising that more and more young women are choosing the parasite single life (Yamada 1999:120).

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184. This is a reference to the title of Tanimura Shiho’s 1992 book, “Kekkon shinai kamo shirenai shōkōgun” (The maybe-I-won’t-get-married syndrome).
Agency and the parasite single issue

I have argued above that parasite singlehood can be read as a form of resistance, allowing young women to evade or adapt popular expectations and ideals of the feminine lifestyle and life cycle. In this reading, resistance is not necessarily powered by a radical or political agenda. While it may indeed fit Parker’s definition in having a goal “other than (or as well as) self-interest”, parasite singlehood need not aim for radical effect in order to have subversive impact (Parker 2005: 87). This subversion can be read as agency at the causal level – a stimulus or empowerment which promotes opposition to social expectations. It may also be read as agency by consequence – a form or degree of empowerment which results from opposition to social norms.

Women who choose to live with their parents challenge the normalcy of marriage and the male-centred household, subverting popular (familial, societal, or state) expectations of reproduction and heterosexuality. In doing so, they challenge ideal constructions of femininity as based on these expectations. But does this particular form of resistance mark an upsurge in women’s agency overall? What implications does the parasite single phenomenon have for women’s positioning and autonomy in general, and can any/all such change be marked as agency? It is important to acknowledge firstly that analysis of the parasite single phenomenon reflects the positionality of the analyst, and therefore lends itself to multiple and potentially conflicting interpretations. The act of parasite singlehood, like any other act, can be viewed simultaneously in different ways, because the viewing is descriptive and definitive of a specific locality which is itself fluid, transitory and subject to diverse influences (Davies 1991:52). Essentially, the way an act is viewed speaks as much of the locus of viewing–shifting and subjective–as it does the act itself. Thus, attempts to gauge the agency in this act must be referenced to a set
of (shifting, developing) factors which delineate the viewer’s perceptions. My reading of parasite single women as agents of social and structural change must therefore be indexed to the discourse that shapes my own experience and understanding of these women’s positionality, and my perception of such change as positive and feminist.

In aiming to determine agency, the social scholar is essentially mapping their own positionality in a social sphere vis-à-vis that of another. Positionality in this context refers to the mutable locus of self, created through, by, and against participation in social discourses (Davies and Harre n.d.:6). Our engagement with these discourses shapes and is shaped by our positionality, so that our interpretation of other’s experience is constructed in reference to our own experiences. Our own experiences can then be re-interpreted in light of the new knowledge gained (Holland et al.1998:66).

Let us look at the example of the Japanese woman who chooses to live alone. In certain western feminist discourse that emphasises autonomy from the family, and the need for individuals to “take themselves up as knowable, recognizable” and self-determining, this woman’s act can be read as an exercise of agency (Davies 1991:42). In this case, the agency is defined vis-à-vis economic and social pressures, such as low wages, conservative attitudes to sexuality and assumptions of the caregiving and reproductive roles of women. In this way, “non-parasite” but independent women challenge the ideals of feminine care as defined by familial role (wife/mother/daughter) in the patriarchal household. These women present and are presented as independent and self-made women, in contrast to the family-focused and “subdued” (otonashi) daughters who live at home (Anonymous 2001:20).

Resistance may at times involve women appropriating ideals and expectations of femininity, grounding their social critique in the very terms of the celebrated differences
between masculinity and femininity (Basu 1998:10). In this way, engagement in non-management track work, and the pursuit of a lifestyle of consumption, can be read as one path of resistance open to the parasite single woman. This is the lifestyle that epitomises Yamada’s parasite single woman, a twenty-something who probably works as an OL (office lady), performing various basic office duties with little ambition (or prospect) for promotion. Her interests may include fine dining, designer clothes and accessories, luxury holidays and language or hobby classes. The point, however, is not simply that these are her interests, but that these interests are made possible by an unburdened disposable income. This “type” of wagamama (selfish, wilful) parasite single woman does not aim to replicate a masculine lifestyle model—she is simply content to focus on her role as daughter (non-care-giving) until she finds a suitable marriage partner.  

In this reading, it is through feminised traits (namely, lack of independence and appreciation for material consumption) that women challenge the expectations to which they are subject as daughters and potential wives and mothers. To take advantage of “feminine” faults and strengths can be seen as subversion of role expectations and inequalities which underpin them, an example of the “everyday resistances” by which women negotiate multiple systems of power (Scott 1985; Abu-Lughod 1990:53). Thus the consumption of luxury goods may be understood as a challenge to (feminine) ideals of frugality and self-sacrifice, and/or as intrinsic to the cultivation of feminine self-expression and sophistication (Bardsley and Hirakawa 2005:111).

While living at home can clearly be interpreted as an act of agency, it must also be viewed against the backdrop of a shifting economic and social landscape. Simply put, the decision to live at home is qualified by the limited options otherwise available. It is

therefore a limited agency that is exercised, affording autonomy only on the condition of a certain degree of compromise and dependence. This dependence may be contingent on factors such as relations in the family, the employment status of the individual, the health of family members, and the location (urban or rural) of the family (Sarada 1998:15). Furthermore, the living arrangements of women and families should not be read as essential and unchanging markers. A woman may move out and then return to her family home for many reasons, including changes in employment, marital status, and following childbirth. The decision to live at home may also be influenced by the education of the individual and her perceptions of gender roles and ideals.

Thus the span of autonomy is limited where parent or child is ill or incapacitated, where the single woman works in blue-collar or low paid office work, where single accommodation is restricted and/or expensive and where gender roles are conservatively perceived and enforced. In these cases, the decision to live at home is not so much a statement of self-government and expression as a concession to structural inequality in a society which does little to promote economic independence among women (Yamada 1999:145). For women in these circumstances, living at home represents a necessary but nonetheless restrictive compromise. Here agency is bounded, as Hay argues, by “the context and concerns in which it arises and which it shapes” (2005:54).

As Jeffery notes, the question of agency is one of degree rather than possibility, and to read parasite singlehood as pure agency would elide the impact of contingencies, particularly economic, over which the individual has little control (1998:223). In its extreme inverse, this reading suggests that the parasite single phenomenon is the...
product of a sudden explosion of young women’s agency, presenting women as wholly to blame for perceived and potential related problems.\textsuperscript{187}

As Abu-Lughod observes, “[i]f the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels” (1990:53). It is important to note that the multiple systems of power need not be overarching or grand in nature to be significant to women’s lives and their expression of resistance or agency. While non-parasite young women who live alone may have extricated themselves from the influence of parental rules, they are still bound to their parents by expectations of appropriate daughterly conduct, including marriage and reproduction. Furthermore, an individual’s expression of agency, manifest as the decision to live with parents or alone, does not “erase the multiple and interconnected power relations at work in identity construction” (Darling-Wolf 2004:34). Young women engaging in the world (that is, where living arrangements are unknown and invisible) negotiate this process of identity construction in myriad ways including fashion, speech and work. While these may be interconnected, particularly through the economics of consumption, a non-parasite single woman does not necessarily or obviously stand apart from her parasite single sisters in other aspects of lifestyle, beliefs or politics.

While Scott’s “everyday resistances” represent expressions of power in certain circumstances – most notably among the disempowered underclass – the desire and direction of even minimal resistance is dependant on a complex set of factors (Scott

\textsuperscript{187} Yamada argues that in fact the Japanese second wave feminist movement is partly to blame for the increase in numbers of parasite single women (1999:145). This argument asserts that the feminist movement is responsible due to its failure in efforts to encourage women’s financial independence, thus diluting the impact of the 1984 Equal Employment Opportunity Law. This argument supports the reading of women’s economic empowerment as a “women’s issue” rather than a “social issue”, and which should therefore be addressed primarily within the feminist domain. This assumption elides the role of wider societal structures such as public policy, education and welfare provisions in providing the concrete infrastructure needed to encourage women to achieve economic independence.
1985). These include the nature and relation of the multiple systems of power, the actor’s investment in those relations, and the type of moral conceptualisations which underpin social action. As discussed in Chapter Eight, agency may involve appropriation of popular ideals of beauty and fashion (Haruka 2003). For women in Japanese workplaces, resistance may be manifest as flexibility or accommodation (Ogasawara 1998:161). Similarly, the choice to live at home may be read as informed by awareness of the ways in which young women are seen in the workplace, by the power relations imposed by capitalism, as well as by social and familial expectations of lifestyle and life goals.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the parasite single issue with an eye to determining the potential agency encompassed within the act of parasite singlehood. Underpinning this analysis is the implication that agency may be tied significantly to women’s actions at both causal and consequential levels. Thus, if agency is the impetus, it may also be the product of the act of parasite singlehood. What has not been established, however, is the source of the agency central to this circular discussion. There is much to be said about the impact of certain changes upon the choices made and lifestyles lived by Japanese women. Consideration in this sense could be given to shifts in education (curricula, method, and span); to increased intercultural exchange at all levels, and specifically with countries such as the U.S. and the U.K.; and to the ways that economic restructuring and gender-related legislation have altered the reality and ideals of women’s paid labour. The pinpointing of agency’s origin in this case demands an extensive survey of contemporary Japanese society and an analysis of the extent to which societal change has influenced individual lifestyles and levels of self-
determination. Clearly this is a project unto itself, and beyond the scope of this particular study. My brief discussion of this question is intended as a nod to the need for greater analysis of the essential nature of agency and its integral relationship with various (socio-economic, cultural, and historical) factors. Perhaps more significantly, I see the silence as a reflection of the way that agency has come to occupy an implicitly central yet unmapped place in the sphere of feminist studies.

The parasite single issue can be read in multiple ways, as representing women’s agency and pragmatism and as indicative of specific and gender-based pressures. The ambiguity of parasite singlehood is reflected in the combination of foreign sensationalism and Japanese uniqueness that marks its discussion. Parasaito shinguru are neither “parasites” (as in English), nor kisei (in Japanese), yet their existence is tied to both Japanese and non-Japanese constructions of independence, lifestyle, and gender ideals. The definition of the term “parasite-single” as employed by Yamada and sensationalised by the mass-media, conflates the concept of “living with one’s parents” with social immaturity, selfishness, and materialism. In popular use, the term acts as a gloss both for those like Sarada who contribute financially to the household, and those who contribute little or nothing financially (for whatever reason); those, like Konishi-san above, who desire to be independent but cannot financially manage, and those who choose to live with their parents despite being financial self-sufficient.

The inherent ambiguity in the term itself suggests that any judgement of agency in turn reveals at least a degree of ambiguity. If there is agency in the parasite single life, it should be read as agency imbricated in local and international discourses. Clearly the choice to live at home must be seen in the wider context of economic constraints and social expectations which specifically disadvantage women.
Allowing agency to encompass pragmatic acts of unintentional resistance means discarding the view of agency as “a synonym for resistance to relations of domination” (Mahmood 2001:5). In terms of studying women, it also widens the rubric beyond that which is explicitly feminist, and perhaps even including those acts done with expressly un-feminist intent (the parasite single who remains at home until marriage because she believes it inappropriate for a woman to live alone). As Parker observes, agency reflects conflicted subjectivities, and may therefore be ambivalent to wider political discourse (2005:87). The question remains, however, whether an expansion of the concept renders agency a more useful tool for feminist analysis, or if, by stretching the definition, the analysis becomes irrelevant – if agency is everywhere, there is no reason to seek or celebrate it, nor to claim it as feminist triumph.

As Parker notes, agency and victimhood should not be viewed as binary opposites, where the realisation of one precludes the other (2001:12). Rather, these two should be seen as acting in combination, in a fluid and malleable social context and influenced implicitly by the subjectivity of the onlooker (Jeffery 1998:223). Determining agency in the case of parasite singles then can be understood as speaking equally of the status and lifestyles of young Japanese women, and of the nature and aims of we who engage in feminist social studies.
CHAPTER TEN

Conclusion

This thesis has examined feminist agency and praxis in contemporary Japan, focusing on three NGO women's groups, recent legislation, government-run women's centres and the work of two feminist activists (including a website and business). This discussion is presented in the framework of "Other" feminist discourses in Asia and in the context of post-war Japanese feminist theory and activism. By examining a range of loci, from government to private sector and the non-government "third sector", I have endeavoured to present the connections and dissimilarities between the roles, methods and aims of each site in its engagement with women and women's issues. Extending my examination to the website of the Love Piece Club, the literature of Haruka Yōko and the social phenomenon of the "parasite single", I have aimed to tease out the ways in which feminist agency is developed and promoted by and among Japanese women. Contextualised within mainstream social ideals of gender, femininity and female sexuality, I have argued that feminisms offering diverse, accessible and inclusive approaches to social problems can increase the critical awareness and engagement of contemporary and future Japanese women. Backed by the implementation of formal measures to address inequalities, such as the Law for a Gender-Equal Society, feminist agency and praxis facilitate the negotiation of gendered issues in work, family, sexuality and living arrangements, enabling Japanese women to act (and not act), and potentially moulding ideals both individually and societally.

Implications of this thesis
From a sociological perspective, one of the most obvious restrictions of this analysis is the small and explicitly unrepresentative sample of women involved in the study. The decision to focus on a small number of women in a small number of groups relates to an interest in the implications of feminist agency on individuals, and of the ways that individuals benefit from and contribute to women's groups. To apply this qualitative approach uniformly to groups across Japan would reduce the space available for deeper analysis of the theoretical issues, and more significantly, reduce the space for individual women's voices to be heard through direct quotations. Nonetheless, a wider geographical scope, and greater exploration of urban and rural differences in women's groups would probably have produced a wider diversity of outcomes.

Similarly, differences in ages and class backgrounds of group members impacts on the operation of women's group, and on the production of feminist discourse. While both WWW and Women's Projects have members in their twenties, thirties, forties and fifties, and Benkyō women in their twenties and thirties, study of a group more focused on a single generation might have produced different findings. In particular, I think it would be interesting to extend this study to include a "child-rearing" group, or a group for young mothers, where motherhood, its construction and experience, feature explicitly in the group aims and activities. Targeting lower socio-economic groups and/or areas would reveal the extent to which ideals of femininity are challenged and absorbed differently across Japanese society, particularly where issues of ethnicity and identity intersect with "women's issues".

The inclusion of "parasite singles" into this discussion has posed a number of challenges, outlined earlier, to my conceptualisation of resistance and agency and my own understanding of what it means to be feminist. The identification of "parasite
singlehood” as a distinct new social phenomenon provokes discussion and questioning of roles and function within family, and in this work I have aimed to contribute to an awareness of diversity within Japanese society. In critically examining this phenomenon, I have sought to problematise the construction and use of the label “parasite single” as a gloss for a diverse range of living arrangements. However, I remain ambivalent about the categorisation of all such arrangements as expressions of feminist agency, and am wary of celebrating the rise or effects of agency without due cause.

Furthermore, it must be noted that women who live with their parents are economically privileged, when compared to single women from non-urban areas, working and living in cities without parental support. The absence of public discourse to praise women’s independence (except to a relatively superficial extent) throws the “parasite single” debate into even greater relief. In a low-birth rate/aging society, where extramarital births are few, the problem thus rests not so much with “parasites”, but rather with “singles”. It should also be noted that the demographic trends of delayed marriage and non-marriage are apparent in other prosperous Asian countries, particularly Singapore, and in some less prosperous nations such as Thailand (Jones 2004:14). Similarly, the trend and implications of sub-replacement fertility have raised concerns throughout East Asia, manifest in government campaigns aimed at encouraging child-rearing, promoting family life and facilitating a better work-life balance (Jones 2004:16).

While the aim of this thesis was not to produce an exhaustive survey of Japanese feminisms, discussion of the work of Haruka Yōko and the Love Piece Club should be understood as a nod to the breadth of contemporary feminist discourse in Japan. Further discussion of academic feminist works, NGO women’s groups and women’s centres would no doubt extend the themes and approaches of the discourses examined in this
thesis, deepening understanding of the ways in which feminism can address Japanese women's needs and increase critical awareness on a broad scale.

The potential implications of this research extend beyond the specific scope of contemporary Japanese society. Understanding why women join groups or utilise women's centres reveals the ways that such groups or centres can contribute to women's lives and affect the issues experienced by women in society. Understanding how the groups encourage feminism reveals the significance of everyday activity in combating gender inequality and related problems such as violence and discrimination against women. Understanding the arguments and tactics of contemporary popular feminists encourages a new look at the possibilities for feminist discourse outside academia and the government. This is valuable to scholars of Japanese culture and gender studies, but it is also valuable to feminist activists and members of groups and organisations who seek to change society through their work.

Feminist agency and praxis

In this thesis I have focused on the ways that feminism can be practised, in women's groups and government-run women's centres, and by individuals in these organisations. I argue in this work that identifying as "feminist" is sometimes not an exhaustive measure of feminist work, because the term holds negative connotations for some women. The groups examined in this thesis encourage feminist praxis and agency among members, even when the term "feminist" is not employed. Through sharing experiences of womanhood, enabling critical discussion, promoting education and encouraging agency among members, the groups and centres support women, both as group members and as mothers, wives, daughters and social actors.
Central to my discussion then is the proposition that feminism generates agency, insofar as agency can be understood as a capacity to act (or not act). I have argued that the identification of resistance and agency by feminist academics and theorists speaks not only of the act and actors witnessed, but “also requires the investment of our desires and the acknowledgement of our politics as women/feminists reading” (Rajan 1993:3). Even for those working outside of (or against) feminist frameworks, analysis of social phenomena such as the delay of marriage and the decline in decreasing birth rate must address the diversity of women’s experiences and situations. This is particularly true if the aim of analysis is to develop strategies to slow or shift these trends. At a micro level, change to birth rates or marriage rates requires individuals to act. If action is seen as an outcome of agency, then the promotion of agency can be understood as one avenue of approach to problems resulting from these trends. As Miller and Bardsley observe in their study of “Bad Girls”, it is worth questioning “whether resistance always merits approval” (2005:5). Thus the question posed is not simply “is there agency?”, but also “to what extent, and to what end?”. Divergence between feminist and anti or non-feminist research appears in the approach and answers to these questions. In any case, an exploration of (women’s) agency should acknowledge the stakes, real or potential, of its discovery or absence.

Furthermore, as argued in the discussion of “parasite singlehood”, the definition of agency should not be limited to grand displays of revolution, nor should it be conflated with resistance, which can be understood as a subset of agency, and as “actions that actors themselves describe as aiming to defy, subvert, undermine or oppose the power and oppression of dominant forces” (Parker 2005b:87). Understanding agency as “enabled by cooperation and sharing”, I suggest that the women’s groups studied can be
both the product and source of agency, though this definition is not uniformly or universally applicable for all groups or all members (Parker 2005b:87).

Comaroff suggests that it is ethnocentric to dismiss the "creative human project" of resistance in its more marginal and less radical forms, because resistance is bound to specific historical process (1985:263). A similar argument could be made for definitions of agency – that is to say, that acts of empowerment must be assessed and addressed within a specific historical and cultural context, and with attention to the social process in which the act is located.

Let me illustrate: From a certain perspective, a single meeting of the group Women's Projects can be viewed as a simple succession of activities in which members participate to varying degrees – arrival of members, translation exercises, discussion, lunch. Even the individual activities offer little evidence of empowerment – the members are all women and articles translated may be about women, the discussion may be about women, but in this perspective these are of little consequence. Effectively – from a positivist perspective which aims to quantify empowerment – the members could be anyone, having a discussion on any topic, because there is little evidence that members emerge from the meeting different (empowered) in any particular way. In terms of agency then, this is a barren field.

However, when certain details are added to the scene, there emerges evidence of agency (and resistance) and particularly the seeds of agency, in several parts of the meeting. It is in the context of Japan's historical experience that this kind of women's group has meaning (for example, as a group of housewives looking to educate themselves). It is in the context of contemporary Japanese society that the language of the articles (English)
is significant, that the themes of the articles and the resultant discussions offer insight into the factors affecting Japanese women's lives, and into the meaning of the group for members. The space offered by the group to choose, to challenge and to discuss only opens to view in light of the other fora in which the members move daily – the family, the neighbourhood and the broader community.

This space allows NGO women's groups to work in ways that government-run women's centres such as the Spring Centre cannot. While NGOs promote change from the individual, the Spring Centre implements the official government view, as enshrined in the Law for a Gender-Equal Society. Women's centre workers, working within the boundaries of bureaucratic red-tape, negotiate the demands and limitations of government and the needs and requests of the (largely female) users of the centre. In this negotiation and as bridges between individuals and NGOs, and NGOs and government funds, women's centre workers operate both within and beyond bureaucracy to promote awareness of women's issues and to foster feminist agency.

In offering space – both physical and symbolic or psychological – for women to share personal experiences, women's centres and women's groups create a socially legitimate (and in the case of women's centres, government-sanctioned) forum for woman-centred and woman-driven critique. While not all women's centre workers and women in groups identify as feminist, and while the group or centre itself may avoid the term in self-promotion, the groups studied in this thesis may nonetheless be understood as promoting feminist agency and praxis.

The feminist capacity of groups relates in part to their construction and promotion of women – inside and outside the group – as “social actors”, and of issues affecting
women's as socially significant, beyond the small circle of the group (Strathern 1988:70). Women (members) are constructed by themselves as independent actors as they exchange their personal experiences of family, work and social expectations, creating narratives of choice which are supported, clarified and challenged by other members. Women (in society) are the subjects of study, the focus of attention both directly – through the explicit naming and description of the group – and indirectly, through the wholly female membership and organisation of the group.

Nonetheless, as John observes, “being and knowing have never been immediately connected” (1996:19). Thus, as evidenced in the discussion above, the experience of discrimination, subjugation and/or oppressive gender norms does not uniformly or universally predict a feminist consciousness. Presenting particular (feminist) knowledges does not necessarily result in empowerment, unless it is the presentation of these knowledges that is defined as a feminist exercise. If the emphasis is on education, rather than empowerment, I would argue that the groups examined here match the definition of “feminist”, because each aims (in their respective ways and degrees) to increase members’ knowledge and critical understanding of issues related to women and gender.

The group Women's Projects offers a particularly clear illustration of the capacities and limitations for feminist potential. From my perspective, it is clear that for some of the women the group is educative and empowering, a forum allowing free expression of opinions that may otherwise be stifled. For others, the group is as bound as any other social forum, and expression of opinion is fraught with fears of embarrassment, condemnation and/or exclusion. Thus within one group at any one time, inclusiveness
can be understood to be both fluid and subjective, and moderated by factors such as the interconnected relationships of members.

If a group’s agency-promoting capacity is related to its openness, the group Benkyō rates highly. Benkyō members, few in number and closely connected outside the group, engage in active critical discussion of gender issues. For these women, the group is a space for sympathetic intellectual exchange, as well as personal sharing of experience. The commonalities of members in age, education and career aspirations enable the group to speak directly to each other’s experiences, in a dialogue that feeds the personal directly into the political. As in the group WWW, Benkyō meetings followed a rough agenda which allowed members space to raise non-group-related business. In both Benkyō and WWW this facility led to a blurring of what could be understood as the group’s business and individual members’ business. In WWW, however, this blurring was minimal, confined by factors such as members’ limited time, language (interpretation) difficulties and a relative lack of cohesion among members at the time of study. Thus while WWW had an explicitly critical and activist agenda, its capacity for promoting feminist agency among members was relatively limited by the transient membership base of the group, and by linguistic differences and interpersonal difficulties of members.

The aim of this thesis has been to extend academic conceptualisations of feminism and agency. In doing so I have argued for a framework that allows for – indeed, encourages – a diversity of approaches through which to address the social, economic and political questions that are defined as “women’s issues”. The logic of such a framework is straightforward: the greater the number of tools, the more creative and efficient the creation of solutions and structures to address these and future issues, in a critically-
aware and feminist informed manner. And if feminist agency, as developed by individuals, groups or organisations, can be understood as having an ultimate outcome, then surely it is the creation of such a feminist future.

A feminist flight of fancy

To conclude this thesis I propose a quick exercise of imagination: to explore the discussions that might arise if all the women involved in this thesis, the informants or “subjects”, were gathered in one room together. Given the interconnected networks of these women, their geographic location and the field, of course, this is not entirely a fantastic idea.

I imagine Women’s Projects members might approach WWW to organise a seminar on differences in foreign women’s experiences in Japan. Haruka might engage with the women’s centre workers on their experiences in working for change within the bureaucracy, and the women’s centre workers could no doubt offer hints on effective techniques. Kitahara might challenge the more conservative members of Women’s Projects to write a piece on women’s sexuality in their next magazine, inviting them to visit the Love Piece Club for fieldwork and research. Members of Benkyō might discuss strategies of maintaining work and family balance with the more senior members of WWW, who have already negotiated the perils of workplace discrimination and housework imbalances. The “parasite singles” among the women present might organise a seminar for all women present to share their stories of independence outside (and within) marriage, and a workshop to develop strategies for coping with social and financial pressures. The whole proceedings might be held, symposium-style, in one of the rooms of the Spring Centre. Those who engaged in and/or remember the women’s
movement of the 1970s might relate their experiences, prompting those who did not participate to reflect on the changing approaches of feminism and feminists in Japan. The group might discuss parallels between First Wave feminist groups such as Seito and contemporary NGOs promoting women’s issues, and trace the historical flow and features of feminist discourse on sexuality, perhaps focusing on the works of early twentieth century poet Yosano Akiko, 1970s activist Tanaka Mitsu and Kitahara Minori and the LPC.

I can only imagine the discussions, debates and disagreements that would occur during these conversations, among women of varying ages, occupations, interests and perspectives on feminism and women’s issues. With such a diverse pool of opinions, there would no doubt be considerable divergences on the “big issues” for Japanese women, and on the ways that these issues might best be addressed. However, I imagine that the point of such a meeting would not be in the production of an end outcome that exhaustively defines “the issues” for contemporary Japanese feminism. It would not manifest in the triumph of any one individual’s opinions over another, nor in the agreement on a single approach for tackling the problems included under the umbrella of “women’s issues” in Japan.

Rather, I suggest that the optimal outcome of such a meeting would manifest during, rather than after the event, in the dialogue between the women. The capacity for open exchange, engagement and compromise arguably represents the most significant potential product of a meeting of Japanese feminists, because it is this capacity in which feminist agency and praxis are most likely to manifest. As Kuppers observes:

(F)eminism means unity in diversity, the power to be many and different, to be separate and separately organised and politically active. It is like a landscape in a state of permanent change (1994:5)
In this thesis I have argued that feminist scholarship inherently rejects unbending definitions and concrete boundaries. This work therefore represents an effort to disturb the binary of researcher/researched, to challenge the possibility of unconstructed knowledge, and ultimately to take up the call to acknowledge the inherent diversity of women and women’s lived experiences.
APPENDICES

Table 1.1 Non-group interviewees This shows the biographical information given by interviewees not involved in women’s group. The information was recorded on the permission form signed by interviewees at the time of interview. “Living arrangement” is noted in light of the interview focus on “parasite singles”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (yrs)</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Level of schooling</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>No. Children</th>
<th>Living arrangement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minō Yoshie</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Osaka</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Public servant</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okazaki Nobue</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Niigata</td>
<td>Junior college (tandai) graduate</td>
<td>Employed in the family business</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Lives with mother, father, husband and daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masaki Hitomi</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Kyoto</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Lives with one daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurata Tomoko</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Kyoto</td>
<td>Junior college graduate</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Lives with husband, daughter younger sister and mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzuki Maya</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>Masters degree</td>
<td>Gallery assistant, interpreter/ translator</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ikeda Hikaru</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Fukuoka</td>
<td>PhD student</td>
<td>University tutor</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Lives alone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.2 Details of interviewed Women’ Projects members

This shows the biographical information given by interviewees involved in Women’ Projects (not all members were interviewed). The information was recorded on the permission form signed by interviewees at the time of interview. Boxes marked with X indicate where information was not provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (yrs)</th>
<th>Level of schooling</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>No. Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tanaka Mariko</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Journalist, university lecturer</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akagi Kaori</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Tour planning, lecture coordination, interpreting/ translating</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konishi Aya</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Part-time worker</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakane Yukie</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sone Kazue</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Former junior-high school English teacher</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taguchi Chieko</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Itai Hanako</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haneda Satomi</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Junior college graduate</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kano Yōko</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koide Mami</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nomura Tokiko</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Teacher at cram-school</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.3 Details of interviewed Benkyō members
This shows the biographical information given by interviewees from the group Benkyō. The information was recorded on the permission form signed by interviewees at the time of interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (yrs)</th>
<th>Level of schooling</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>No. Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miyoshi Kaori</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Part-time worker at womens centre; Counsellor at junior-high school</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamada Yuki</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>University student</td>
<td>Student, part-time worker</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakamatsu Mayako</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Worker at womens centre</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horikawa Junko</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>University student</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 1.4 WWW members**

This shows the biographical information given by interviewees from the group WWW (all regular members). The information was recorded on the permission form signed by interviewees at the time of interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (yrs)</th>
<th>Level of schooling</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>No. Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akagi Kaori</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Tour planning, lecture coordination, interpreting/ translating</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakanishi Haruko</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>English teaching (currently on leave)</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Weller</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>University student, Postgraduate student</td>
<td>English teacher</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Tanaka</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>University graduate, postgraduate student</td>
<td>Full-time student, part-time English teacher</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takahashi Akiko</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>Administrative worker</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohara Kimiko</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>Trading company worker</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.5 Womens centre interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (yrs)</th>
<th>Level of schooling</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>No. Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yamazaki Risa</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Events planning and promotions at Spring Centre</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uemura Shōko</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Information programme Chief at Spring Centre</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minō Yoshie</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Public servant</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaneda Tomoe</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Regional public servant</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirano Chigusa</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Public servant</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kishi Sachiko</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Spring Centre manager of use promotion</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Women protest sexual discrimination ruling

Daily Yomiuri

OSAKA—Hundreds of people, mostly women, formed a human chain around the Osaka District Court building in Kita Ward, Osaka, on Thursday afternoon to protest the court’s dismissal in July of a sexual discrimination suit filed by two female employees of Sumitomo Electric Industries, Ltd.

In their suit, Katsuni Nishimura and Eiko Shirafuji claimed the company had passed them over for promotion and wage raises simply because of their sexes.

Although the court acknowledged that the employment system the firm used when the women were hired in the 1960s violated the Constitution because it differentiated between jobs for men and women, it rejected the suit, saying that the firm’s policy was typical of the corporate world at the time.

The women have appealed the ruling.

About 330 people listened to speeches made by the plaintiffs and their lawyer before joining hands and encircling the court building.

Nishimura said, “I am sure the protest will make people all over the country aware of the importance of equal rights for men and women.”

Laura Dales, an Australian graduate student at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, said, “Women in Japan and across the world need to demonstrate against this kind of discrimination.”

Adriane Richter, a German student at the university, described the court’s ruling as “unjust.”
Figure 2: National Machinery for the Promotion of Gender Equality.
From the Gender Equality Bureau, http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/index.html Last accessed 17/03/06.
Images of Haruka Yōko

All images included with the kind permission of Haruka Yōko and the Haruka Yōko Network.

Image 1
Haruka Yōko, photo from website.

http://www.haruka-youko.net/oneself/index.html Last accessed 7/02/06.

Image 2
Haruka Yōko, photo from website

http://www.haruka-youko.net/index.html Last accessed 7/02/06.
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