

<特別寄稿>

**Neoliberalism and Feminism: from a Viewpoint of Women's Agency  
Focused on Japan**

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**Abstract**

Austerity as a neo-liberal public policy is argued to have a negative impact on the level of social reproduction owing to its reduction of social welfare costs and social services, and many feminists point out that women's conditions of living are getting worse because reproductive work, both paid and unpaid, has been borne primarily by women.

On the other hand, a series of transnational initiatives of United Nations on women's issues and women's movements of non-governmental organizations have been promoted since the '70s, and the issues of violence against women and women's rights have been especially focused upon since the '90s. It is argued that this trend would not have been realized without neoliberal globalization because it has an inevitable tendency to weaken the national sovereignty. This paper proposes to estimate growth and empowerment of women's agency since the '70s, in the neoliberal trend in Japan, which has a poor level of welfare state coupled with a strong gender bias. An improvement of women's conditions could not have been achieved without the mentioned transnational pressures.

**Introduction**

This paper aims to discuss my view on the ambiguous relation between neoliberalism and feminism focused on the situation in Japan.

First of all I'd like to declare I'm not a neo-liberalist feminist, if a type of such a feminism exists, as Nancy Fraiser says, but I think the neoliberal global transformation of society affected, in a significant way enough to promote gender equal policies, at least in Japan, and I think this aspect cannot be ignored although it gave a negative impact on the reproduction and the quality of life of women.

Austerity as a neoliberal financial policy is criticized to promote not only the cost-cut but the privatization of the social reproduction, constructing an ideology of self-responsibility which considers welfare as an "overprotection" that may injure the autonomy and the free and open competition. So austerity promotes a process to leave social services provided by public sector to the

market, and caused the increase of the unpaid burden borne primarily by women due to the gender norm.

There are many critical discussions on the negative impact of austerity as a neoliberal financial policy on women and reproduction, but I refer here only a few important recent views.

In the symposium held in Japan in 2015, entitled “Neoliberalism, Policy and Labor from a gender perspective”, Susan Himmelweit argued about the gender impact of austerity that undermines social reproduction and said that European welfare states’ contribution to social reproduction were undermined by the growth and increasing dominance of globally mobile financial capital (Himmelweit 2017). She says that in the welfare state capitalists and workers have had a common interest in the reproduction of national labor force. I was inspired very much by her following suggestion. According to her, austerity means that finance capital has no interest in supporting the reproduction of any national working class (Himmelweit 2017). And she says that the growth of the welfare state contributed massively to changing gender relations to equality.

Nancy Fraiser argues the affinity between neo-liberal ideology and 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism and points out the similar key-concepts they have, such as empowerment, self-determination etc. and feminism has to fight against the attack to reproduction (Fraiser 2016).

I totally agree with them. But I’d like to discuss another side of this transformative process, that is the irreversible change of women’s agency.

## **1. Japan’s trend of neoliberalism in 1980s**

The neoliberal trend of deregulation, privatization and cost-cut of social service is also the case with Japan. Competition, ability and achievement have come to be praised especially from the beginning of 1980s not only as discourses but also as the change of social institutions by deregulation and privatization. Workers, one of the essential commodities in capitalism, came to be called “human resource” instead of labor force. This change indicates the “take off” of capitalism into a new stage, in which labor force will no longer be essential nor indispensable for capitalism as Himmelweit suggested. As for Japan, however, the level of the welfare state has been much lower than European welfare states the discussion of Himmelweit is based on, and Japanese women rather have changed themselves and grown up as an agency in the period of neoliberal transformation of society.

The “Equal Employment Opportunity Law” (EEOL) passed in 1985. In the same period de-regulatory changes were introduced especially in the sphere of women and reproduction. The Worker Dispatch Law was approved in 1985, the same year of the approval of the EEOL, and a

revision to the Labor Standards Act that relaxes working hours regulation in addition to the relaxation of the protection of women, which would be abolished completely in 1997 in the 1<sup>st</sup> revision of the EEOL. So in Japan the deregulation of the labor market had begun from the field concerning with women and reproduction.

On the other hand, in the 1980s social welfare costs such as child allowance, child support allowance for mother-children households, state subsidy of nursery schools, although insufficient till then, indispensable for female-headed households and working women, were cut off furthermore. At the same time so-called “family basis enrichment policy” gave favorable treatment to a family with a couple of male breadwinner and housewife, considered as “standard family type”. It must be defined as a typical austerity policy. Osawa analyses the process as a carrot-and-stick policy against women (Osawa 1993). The target was female-headed mother-children-households, increased in the 1980s because of the increase of divorce. It could be considered as a threat to women who escape from the patriarchal gender role.

As a welfare state, focusing on women and youth, Japan remained (and remains today) at relatively poor level. No sooner the government declared the beginning of a real welfare state, the 1<sup>st</sup> year for welfare society in 1973, than it turned to austerity, after the 1<sup>st</sup> oil shock, named “Japanese style of welfare” reinforcing family norm based on gender-divided roles and women’s unpaid family burden accompanied by the carrot-and-stick policies mentioned above. So certainly austerity attacked reproduction and women but welfare state had never been well enriched before especially on women and so we’ve not experienced sufficient level of social support until today.

## **2. Change of women in Japan after 1970s**

As for women, however, a great and irreversible change had taken place in the beginning of 1970s and the change of women was transnational. Gender equality became one of the important issues discussed in the international organizations such as United Nations. It was the same time of the emergence of globalization and the indication of neoliberal economic trend. As Fraiser points out there seems to be a kind of affinity between neo-liberalism and feminism. The key concept of feminism such as self-determination and empowerment are likely to support neo-liberal “autonomy” as “self-responsibility” of reproduction.

Neoliberal deregulation aimed to cut off the welfare cost, and 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism challenged the patriarchal paternalism of the gender-biased household, unit of the welfare state. “The common interest in social reproduction of capitalist and workers (Himmelweit, 2017) was not shared with women. Feminism revealed and criticized the invisible exclusion of women and their position as

minor citizens protected by and embedded in the patriarchal paternalistic system. Modern national state is based on the strong paternalism represented by a male breadwinner and the wealth had never been redistributed gender-equally.

### **3. Economic interest in women's issues**

International Women's Year and 1<sup>st</sup> World Conference on Women in 1975 followed by United Nations Decade for Women were a series of epoch-making events held by United Nations. With these events gender equality came to be one of the most important issues to be promoted in the world. There worked some strong incentive in UN to promote a world conference, that is, Women In Development approach. In fact strong interest on women's economic contribution clearly existed from the beginning and remains till today. So economic and financial motivation and interest worked and shed light on gender issues, especially on women's paid and unpaid work. Before 1970 women's issue had been excluded from UN conference agendas (Beckman & D'amico 1994). The World Bank has had an Advisor on Women in Development since the early 1970s (Rathgeber 1989). INSTRAW was founded in 1977 to research women's invisible and unpaid work.

The promotion of gender equality was accompanied by economic concern and incentive. In fact international organizations concerning to economic issues such as OECD, World Bank, World Economic Forum have been eager to research and report on gender issues. A message such as "Gender equality and active participation of women promote the economic growth" has been announced over and over by these transnational organizations, and recently by Japanese government, too.

### **4. The impact of "Pressure from abroad" in Japan**

As is known, Japanese government had been rather reluctant to establish the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. Japan was obliged to change some national laws remained gender-inequal to ratify CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women) during UN decade for women, and the enactment of the EEOL was one of the conditions required by the Committee of CEDAW. Other conditions to be realized were gender-neutral revision of the Nationality Law and the coeducation of home economics. Without the "pressure from abroad," such as CEDAW, gender equality policies wouldn't have advanced, and EEOL also would not be established.

These obligations are the intervention in the domestic affairs of a nation-state. But Japanese

Government was obliged to change national laws to ratify an international agreement such as CEDAW. It shows the power of transnational organizations came to be superior to the national sovereignty.

And it suggests that globalization of economic activity, developed over the border, gradually influenced and changed the concept of human rights, which was guaranteed by the law system of the nation state.

Since the 1970s international issues such as ecology, human rights of refugees, children, women, and minorities have come to be discussed on the international table, which is likely to be a result of the globalization and the relative power-down of the national sovereignty. Deregulation can reduce the authority of the state and replace private organizations. Austerity is also the reduction of the national public finance, called “small government”.

Optional protocol of CEDAW gives permission to the individual citizens to file a complaint with respect to the nation state. Japan has not ratified it yet, but it does work substantially as Working Women’s Network, a non-governmental organization, private voluntary network of women founded in 1995, claimed to CEDAW in the cases of Sumitomo Companies on gender discrimination on wage.

## **5. Globalization and women’s rights**

As for the impact of the globalization on women’s rights, Saskia Sassen’s argument gives significant suggestions (Sassen 1998). She discusses that globalization of the labor force produced the privatizing of transnational legal regimes by the transformation of the immigrant policy, which shed light on minorities including women, who were hidden in the nation state. She says,

“In the classical liberal tradition, the state does not intervene in home and family. Similarly, according to international law, States do not intervene in the internal affairs of other states.” (ibid: 93)

“globalization is creating new operational and formal openings for the participation of non-State actors and subjects. Once the sovereign State is no longer viewed as the exclusive representative of its population in the international arena, women and other non-State actors can gain more representation in international law; contribute to the making of international law; ”(ibid. 94)

In fact Women’s rights and elimination of violence against women became international issues in

the 1990s along with the rights of the child and campaign against child abuse. Women and children, who had been represented by male head of household, have made themselves visible as agency. From my point of view this can be considered as another impact of the globalization and neoliberal economic transformation.

## **6. Dual impacts of neoliberalism on women**

As is argued by many feminists, neoliberal financial policy such as austerity has a negative impact on social reproduction and women, and it is true also in Japan. On the other hand, a certain degree of progress on gender equal policies achieved in Japan would not be realized without the political “pressure” by the transnational convention such as CEDAW, which is also a result of the neoliberal transformation of state sovereignty.

In Japan, as is insisted by feminists such as Chizuko Ueno(2017), EEOL didn't work and rather made worse the labor conditions of women. But EEOL brought an important impact to deter from open discriminative discourses. I think the EEOL has had an impact on women's agency in the ideological way and many women must have been encouraged by its presence. Since 1980s number of divorce and female-headed households is increasing. More than 70% of the divorce conciliation is filed by the side of wife in spite of the threat of severe poverty risk (and sometimes violence risk) after the divorce.

## **7. Successful results of women's struggles and legal fights**

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 1980s, unions of women workers got organized in Osaka and Tokyo. and in 1990s successive court cases filed by women on wage discrimination won the epoch-making judgments such as the court cases of Sumitomo groups, Kanematsu Trading company, Kyogas (an affiliate company of Osaka Gas Company), Maruko-horn Manufacturing Company, and the 1<sup>st</sup> sexual harassment case in Fukuoka, Cases of Yano, filed by the side of harasser, a professor of university, all of these cases ended with the victory of women.

## **8. Women's agency and 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism**

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 1990s, the laws came to be changed. An article concerning sexual harassment was added in EEOL in 1997, which followed by the enactment of Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (1999), Child Abuse Prevention Law (2000), Domestic Violence Law (2001). This trend would arrive at the very recent revision of the crime Law to toughen sexual violence. To win these results the impact of women's agency did work and it mustn't be underestimated.

To challenge the neoliberal ideology such as self-responsibility that defines and justifies poverty and inequality as a private matter caused by personal affairs, the famous slogan of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism, “personal is political” remains persuasive and powerful even today.

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