Women’s Leverage on Social Policymaking in Japan*

Introduction

Japan’s social policy has been categorized as a “residual” system, not only because of its low public expenditure (Hill 1996, 21) but also because of the weakness of its institutional form, which relies on private measures (Bryson 1992, 106–10). According to Esping-Anderson’s three welfare-state regimes—social democratic, liberal, and conservative, classified by the criteria of de-commodification and cross-class solidarity (1990, 21–29)—the Japanese welfare system “combines—in fairly equal measure—key elements of both the liberal-residual and the conservative-corporatist” models (1997, 187).1 Japan, at the same time, had followed the pattern of “a paternalist welfare state, in which male bureaucrats would administer regulations and social insurance ‘for the good’ of breadwinning industrial workers and their dependants” (Skocpol 1995, 12). Indeed, the Japanese social insurance system is bound by Bismarck’s legacy (which basically qualified male employees as eligible for insurance coverage), and its policymaking has been dominated by males: ruling-party politicians, top bureaucrats, and representatives of pressure groups (See Nakano 1997, 13–63, 81–85, 89–94).

In recent years, however, circumstances surrounding Japanese social policy have changed remarkably. Social policy is now one of the most important issues in Japanese politics,2 and in December 1997, the Japanese government established a new social welfare system for the elderly, the Long-Term Care Insurance Law (LTIC), which has been in effect since April 1, 2000. The LTIC system promises universal coverage for all elderly Japanese in need of care. Half of its financing comes from mandatory insurance premiums paid by those aged 40 or older, and the other half comes from the government, whereas the previous system was financed entirely by tax revenue. Social welfare corporations—which were charitable organizations strictly regulated by the government—formally monopolized the previous welfare service’s provisions to the elderly. In order to fulfill the growing need for care services for the elderly, however, the new system allows all welfare providers, including for-profit companies as well as nonprofit organizations, to offer these services, as long as they meet specific standards. The new system aims both to improve the quality of care for the elderly, and to reduce heavy burdens placed on family caregivers, particularly women, who often have been exclusively responsible for caring for their elderly relatives under the patriarchal notion that women should remain at home. Moreover, women themselves initiated this change to a maternally-oriented welfare system (Skocpol 1992, 30–62), as they recognized that the problem of caring for the elderly was predominantly a women’s issue and thus championed policy reform.3

In this article, I focus on the outstanding leverage of women on social policymaking, and discuss women’s influence from three aspects: the resources, the strategies, and the channels for lobbying. In doing so, I enumerate vivid examples of women’s collective challenges to the patriarchal policy community.4 I base my report on case studies5 of two action groups that exerted their leverage on Japanese policy.

One of these organizations is the Women’s Association for Improving the Welfare of the Elderly (henceforth, the Welfare Association), which is organized on a nationwide scale; the other is the Life Cooperative Society in Kanagawa (henceforth, the Kanagawa Club), which is based in a prefecture. The two groups contributed different perspectives to the establishment of the new system. While the former initiated the concept of “socializing care”—which underpinned the universalist approach of the new system—and succeeded in setting an agenda for policy change, the latter exemplified a model for the new type of service provider engendered by the new system. This model sought to combine the public character of welfare services, grounded in social solidarity, with the market orientation necessary for practical and effective care service management.

The political involvement of these women also provided Japanese people with a lesson in democracy: women’s political actions basically consist of direct participation. In the U.S. and Europe, citizens’ interest groups6 are increasingly seen as political insiders, and scholars regard their direct actions as political institutions in their own right (e.g., Costain and McFarland 1998; McAdam, McCarthy, and
Zald 1996; Parry, Moyser, and Day 1992; Ridley and Jordan 1998). Japanese political scientists, however, have not yet developed an interpretive framework for analyzing citizens’ direct actions. Most Japanese researchers seem reluctant to adopt a positive approach when they examine the impact of citizens’ collective activities on policymaking, and remain doubtful about the feasibility of harmonizing direct political participation and a representative system. Nonetheless, the women’s direct actions have obviously changed the Japanese political scene. Their activities expanded the public sphere and democratized political institutions (Cohen and Arato 1994, 565).

Care for the Elderly and Middle-Class Women

The previous social welfare system for the elderly, established in 1963, was designed for low-income people without kin. Elderly people in need of care were eligible as long as they met the conditions set out in a means test. Elderly applicants from middle-income households received little if any public services, even if they suffered from more serious physical or mental disabilities than the low-income elderly did. The previous system, in other words, operated under a traditional Japanese assumption, specifically the belief that many problems of daily life could be resolved with the aid of extended family or close-knit communities, relying, above all, on the work of women.

By the early 1980s, however, demographic and social changes had led to an erosion of traditional social patterns. As the elderly population grew, urbanization brought an overwhelming increase in middle-income households and the number of nuclear families. At the same time, women’s increasing educational achievements and workforce participation helped transform their collective social role and consciousness. Such changes gave rise to new social welfare demands, with middle-class households pressing the government for assistance in caring for elderly parents and young children. Deciding who should take care of disabled elderly family members, in particular, has been one of the most serious issues that middle-class households have had to face. It was clear that the previous system no longer met the demands of an urbanized society. The Japanese government, however, was not only reluctant to respond to society’s demands, but it also enacted reforms that seemed to be taking social policy in a reverse direction.

In 1981, the Japanese government introduced cutbacks in public service expenditures. The cuts were ideologically based on Japanese neoliberalism (Otake 1999, 373–96), which emphasized economic liberalism combined with traditional Japanese virtues. The government introduced two new directions in social welfare policy: an annual expenditure control within a system of budget ceilings, and a campaign for a “Japanese-style welfare society.” The latter aimed to revive the idea of the extended family and community solidarity in order to use family members and the neighborhood as the primary welfare resources (Campbell 1992, 220). In essence, the government intended to offset the shortage of public welfare services caused by its spending cuts with the hypothetical self-help efforts of families and communities. However, the cutbacks made access to public services much more limited for the middle-class elderly, which middle-class women felt was extremely unfair. The mismatch between the reality of people’s living situations and the party line of public policy spurred women to act.

In 1982, a group of disenfranchised women—forced to leave their work and give up social activities outside the home because of caregiving obligations—held a symposium in Tokyo, hoping to begin a campaign against the notion of a Japanese neoliberal welfare society. The response to the symposium was even more enthusiastic than the organizers had expected, and the sponsoring group thus decided to set up an association with the objective of improving conditions for the aged in society. In 1983, 298 of those women organized the Welfare Association, and by 1998 its membership had grown to 1,500.

Another grievance with the previous system was that it did not meet people’s needs in terms of the quality of care provided. Public service recipients were not allowed to choose the type of services they desired, but had to go along with the programs that the government designated for them. The authorities’ convenience—not users’ needs—dictated how public services were managed. As the social welfare corporations fed entirely off of government subsidies and managed themselves in compliance with government guidance, there was little competition among providers, and welfare corporations had no incentive to improve their services.

Some members of the Kanagawa Club—which was founded in 1971 as a cooperative society (co-op) that purchased organic or nonchemically-treated foods at reasonable prices—were clearly aware of this problem. They were highly sensitive to social problems affecting their daily lives, and their experience in improving their own living standards through co-op activities made it difficult for the club members to tolerate poor-quality social services. Thus in 1985 the members established a welfare service enterprise that would provide high-quality services for the elderly—the kind that they themselves would hope to receive. The club’s network of nonprofit home care services now comprises 39 satellite groups with 2,314 members providing home-help services, day care services, meals-on-wheels, and transport services for the disabled elderly in Kanagawa Prefecture.

The demands of the Welfare Association and the Kanagawa Club go beyond the need to maintain a basic standard of living, or aspirations to improve quality of life. Their demands center more around social and cultural issues than material ones (Berry and Schildkraut 1998, 137). The policymaking community, however, is so geared toward pursuit of economic growth that it has scarcely considered social issues. This rigidity in policymaking has forced women to press their claim through collective activities that have developed outside of established political institutions.

Collective Activities of Unemployed Married Women

Middle-class, unemployed married women constitute the majority of the members of these two groups. However, the Welfare Association includes professional women of social influence, such as commentators, journalists and scholars; the Kanagawa Club lacks distinguished female public figures. Most members of the Welfare Association are in their fifties and sixties, while most members of the Kanagawa Club are in their thirties and forties. The two groups share a common pattern of “bottom-up” decision-making.
making that proceeds according to the initiative of a small group. The Welfare Association has prefectoral branches, which are divided into small groups that allow members to discuss subjects of interest comfortably. The conclusions of the small groups’ discussions are then passed on to headquarters. The members of the Kanagawa Club are also divided into small groups of fewer than 10 people. Each small group regularly holds meetings to discuss problems related to its members’ everyday activities. The headquarters staff pools small groups’ opinions and proposals to shape the club’s annual action plan. Their decisions adhere to consensus rule rather than majority rule: members carefully listen to others’ opinions, and every member gets a chance to speak freely.8

The relationship among members of each of the two groups is more horizontal than vertical, as the opinions of leaders and regular members carry equal weight and initiative belongs to the members as a whole rather than an oligarchy of leaders. Although the Welfare Association retains some well-known women among its members, these women do not necessarily steer the decisions of the other members. All members share the responsibility for organizing campaigns and events. The only difference in members’ respective roles might be that well-known women are more concerned than others about the group’s publicity.

The first Japanese example of this kind of women’s movement, in which unemployed married women take initiative, was a mothers’ group set up in Tokyo’s Suginami ward in 1954 to campaign against atomic bombs. By the 1970s, grass roots movements of unemployed married women had become a significant force in Japanese society, and they flourished further in the 1980s (Tanaka 1998, 112; EPA 1997, 6).9 While the unemployed, married women’s grass roots movements are widespread, women’s movements influenced by the second wave of Western feminism—which focused on securing equal rights and opportunities for women—have been less prevalent in Japan than in North America and Europe. “Women’s Lib” movements burst onto the scene in Japan in 1970, but despite a streak of popularity, they lost their potency by the end of the decade. Mikanagi points out that one of the reasons for the stagnation of practical activism in Japanese feminism was that the majority of Japanese women, whose labor-market participation had always lagged far behind that of women in Western countries, were not conscious of the unfairness inherent in the gender division of labor (1999, 69). Many Japanese women, economically dependent on their husbands, had rarely experienced sexism or sexual harassment. As unemployed, married women, in fact, they had not been exposed to the inflexible assumptions and practices of the male-oriented socioeconomic system. Women’s thought processes have allowed them to focus on their everyday concerns. However, they also have found enough time to engage in noneconomic activities, and it is important to note that often they are well educated.10 Their intellectual energy, which cannot be confined to the home, stimulates them into social and political activities, and encourages them to form nonhierarchical relationships with other members of women’s groups. Such well-educated women may no longer be perceived merely as the organizational rank and file, content to follow the leadership of a few key opinion makers.

Women’s Challenges to the Entrenched Policy Community

The collective activities of ordinary people generally “lack the stable resources” (Tarrow 1998, 5) of money, organizational power, and access to political powerbrokers that an established lobby can draw on. Cress and Snow group the resources that mobilize powerless people into “four categories: moral, material, informational, and human” (1998, 81). The women’s groups considered in this study faced a shortage of material resources, but they made very good use of informational and human resources; they employed knowledge and expertise that they had accumulated through their practice in daily lives. How did they develop their intangible resources?

The Welfare Association conducted two nationwide surveys, one on the current state of government-provided welfare services, the other on the actual conditions of caregiving at home. They found that, although the range of available public welfare services for the elderly was fairly extensive, many residents had limited access to these services. The surveys revealed the extent of social isolation that caregivers often experienced, and they indicated that the heavy burdens of care put the families under great strain, and could even lead to abuse of the elderly in their care. These findings were perhaps the first public acknowledgment of the scope of the problem of care for the elderly, and the first time that anyone pinpointed specific defects in the social welfare policy. Using these surveys, the Association proposed that society as a whole—rather than individual families—should support and care for the elderly, a concept they called “socializing care.”

On the other hand, the Kanagawa Club developed its welfare provision model—the “Mutual Support Group”—from the principle underlying its co-op activities: The realization of an improved quality of life through mutual support at the neighborhood level. In order to be as flexible as possible in responding to users’ needs, the Club’s enterprise intended to offer services during both the night and holiday periods, when public service facilities are usually closed. It also introduced a unique working approach, based on cooperative management and derived from the group’s purchasing system, which obtains higher-quality goods at lower prices by eliminating brokers and buying directly from producers. People who want to work as caregivers are required, according to their financial means, to invest money in this enterprise in order to build up its capital funding. These investments give the enterprise’s members the right to be treated as comanagers who not only work for the enterprise but also share responsibility for its management and direction.

The goal of this comanagement system is not to make a profit but to provide necessary and useful services at reasonable prices. The enterprise, however, needs to generate enough income to cover its overhead. If it goes into the red, it must make up deficits with its capital. Any surplus earnings are plowed back into the enterprise. The worker/managers have to be serious about management in order to offer better-quality services at lower prices, and thus compete with rival public service providers. This means that market forces now directly influence welfare services, consequently forming a “social market” (Brown, Kenny, and Turner, with Prince 2000, 98–99). The comanagement system contributed to transforming unpaid mutual aid in caregiving into paid work, and as a result, it created new job opportunities for unemployed married women who had previously performed uncompensated labor.

The Welfare Association and the Kanagawa Club presented their respective systems to the government as viable alternatives to federal policy. Despite their similari-
ties in resource mobilization, the two groups differed in the strategies they used to persuade the government to adopt their alternatives.

The Welfare Association, as part of its campaign to raise public awareness of the crisis in care for the elderly, presented the results of its surveys at a symposium held during the group’s annual meeting. The group’s chairperson was Keiko Higuchi, a leading women’s issues commentator who used her media status to publicize the need for a new policy on care for the elderly. At the same time, several well-known journalists who were members of the group—such as Yukiko Okuma, an editorial writer for the nationwide newspaper Asahi Shimbun, and Sachiko Murata, a social affairs editor for the national television network N.H.K.—decided to publicize the reality of caregiving at home. The plight of family caregivers came into the public eye with headlines like “Nursing Hell.” The campaign for socialized care gradually gained support from the mass media, leading the public to accept the necessity of such a solution.

The ability of the Kanagawa Club to provide better welfare services and a superior performance to that of public providers, on the other hand, drew the attention of some core Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) bureaucrats, the planners of social policy. In 1994, when the Kanagawa Club applied for corporate status for its new welfare service enterprises, it was given the opportunity to initiate discussions with top welfare bureaucrats. Approval of incorporation was normally awarded by the prefectural administration. In this case, the approval procedure became so complicated that the welfare ministry, which reserves the right to intervene in disputes over welfare enterprise incorporation, took the issue away from the prefecture. At this point the government was discussing plans for a new social welfare system, and the Kanagawa Club served as a useful example for the bureaucrats who were exploring new forms of service provision.

The bureaucrats, who had already noted the inefficiency of existing social welfare corporations and the decline since the mid-1980s in the standard of care provided by those services (Eto 2000, 28), had been struck by the possibilities offered by the Kanagawa Club. During the lengthy approval procedure, members of the Kanagawa Club held detailed discussions with the bureaucrats to explain their welfare activities, and after their incorporation was authorized, the MHW dispatched a young welfare bureaucrat to monitor the enterprise’s operations for a period. The welfare ministry became increasingly convinced of the merits of the “social market model.”

The difference in approach of the two groups is a reflection of the different characters of their memberships. Because some of its members happened to be journalists, the Welfare Association was able to adopt a strategy of influence, using mass media aimed at raising awareness of its cause among the general public and policymakers (Cobb and Elder 1983, 141–50; Lipsky 1968, 1151–53). According to Higuchi, society at large had gradually accepted the group’s central thesis as a common-sense idea (1993, 1). As for the Kanagawa Club, its “vital sense based on the lifeworld” (Sato 1994, 108–20) was not only endorsed by those who used its welfare services, but it also won respect from government policymakers.

The Japanese social policy formulation process begins with bureaucrats drafting a bill, which they send to an advisory council for deliberation. The advisory council, which comprises representatives only of interest groups that are affected by the bill along with experts in the field, aims to balance differing objectives among the various interest groups. Once the advisory council completes its deliberations, it fleshes out the framework of the bill, then sends the draft to the ruling party, which tries to create compromise agreements between the claims of pressure groups and the agendas of the relevant ministries. Following the ruling party’s approval of the bill, the cabinet submits the bill to the Diet. This process has become formalized, with a fixed lineup of typical participants, and it appears to be an exclusive community. Yet, while the crucial input for policymaking usually comes from the welfare bureaucrats, the advisory council also plays an important role in incorporating alternative opinions in a draft. The two women’s groups made very effective use of this political institution in their lobbying.

In 1989, the welfare ministry appointed scholars and experts to research a proposal for a new social welfare system for the elderly. Three women among the appointees—Higuchi, Okuma, and university professor Takako Sodei—were members of the Welfare Association. Higuchi and Sodei subsequently served on the advisory council, established in 1995, which developed a draft of the new system. In advisory council discussions, these two strongly opposed other committee members’ proposal to award cash benefits to family caregivers. Higuchi and Sodei argued that such cash payments would mitigate against reducing the heavy burdens placed on domestic caregivers. The proposal to offer cash benefits was eventually withdrawn.

In 1996, immediately after the advisory council concluded its deliberations about the proposed new system, the Welfare Minister held a public forum to ask those who were interested in the new system for their opinions concerning the draft, which incorporated the philosophy of the “social market model.” Two members of the Kanagawa Club, Kyoko Matagi and Yasuko Ogawa, were invited to address the forum and they presented the benefits of their welfare enterprise system to the audience. The general public thus gained an even greater awareness of the effectiveness of their model.

Conclusion

The nature of collective activities by citizens in Japan underwent a dramatic change in the 1980s (Kurihara 1999, 339–46). Japanese social movements before that time were characterized by their uncompromising opposition to the established political regime. Subsequent movements, however, have rejected a straightforwardly confrontational stance. Instead, they prefer to propose alternatives to the status quo. One of the factors behind this shift was the government’s 1981 cutback in spending on public services, which forced many people to take steps to improve their situation by themselves. Increasing self-reliance convinced activists that public policy was not always properly conceived to fulfill people’s needs, so they would be better off proposing their own programs. By that time, activists had developed sufficient skills to enable them to develop effective alternatives.

The two women’s groups provide characteristic illustrations of this broader post-1980s trend. Cutbacks in social services led them to become involved in the creation of new policy. They drew attention to paternalistic defects in social policy, which male policymakers had overlooked. Women not only pressed the government to find a solu-
tion, but also offered their own alternatives, which had been shaped out of their everyday experiences. They succeeded in building their alternatives into the framework of new social policies. But their approach is much more pragmatic than the ideological style of male activists. The women’s groups used the Japanese political apparatus in order to achieve their goals. In addition, the key to their success lay in their “feminine” thinking and “the resource of time and money that their status offers them” (Ueno 1997, 276) sustains their activities. The extent of their impact on society and politics, therefore, has been underestimated by orthodox feminists in Japan. Yet their activities obviously have feminist implications, insofar as they widened the political influence of women and improved the conditions of women’s lives. Their direct actions corrected some of the inadequacies of a representational democracy that did not—and does not—always function on behalf of politically powerless people (Suzuta 1997, 181–91). We are confident that this female leverage has contributed to the revitalization of Japanese politics.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Patricia Boling, Eileen H. Richardson, Zoe S. Morris, Jeremy Stolorow, and Beth Katzoff for their useful comments on this article.

2. Thirty-three percent of the general annual expenditure, with the exception of government debt-related spending and spending by local governments, consists of social service expenditure for health care, public pensions, and social welfare (“White Paper of the Prime Minister’s Office” 1999).

3. Two other factors contributed to this policy change: demographic and socio-economic changes (see Peng 2000, 87–114), and changes in government rule that led to the destabilization of the established policy community. The fundamental policy underlying the new system originated during a period that saw the initiation of anti-LDP coalition governments in 1993, and three-party coalition government— including the LDP—in 1996 (See Eto 2000, 21–50). These “power shuffles” (Onake 1999, 11) encouraged women to become more involved in policymaking.

4. The percentage of female policymakers in the Diet remains low, with women accounting for 17.1 percent of Upper House members and 7.35 percent of Lower House members as of June 2000. Mikanagi accounts for the obstacles to Japanese female participation in policymaking (1999, 123–68). Iwamoto also describes how the male-dominated bureaucracy, which strongly influences policymaking in Japan, has excluded women from participation in its higher ranks (1997, 8–39).

5. The case studies are based on interviews conducted by the author with these groups’ members. I have also drawn on the groups’ materials, including bulletins and newsletters, which are unlisted in the references. Regarding the Welfare Association, see Eto 2001.

6. Political scientists tend to observe citizens’ action groups in terms of “interest groups,” while sociologists generally view these as “social movements.” According to Burstein, however, there is “no fundamental discontinuity” between the roles and functions of citizens’ interest groups and those of social movements (1998, 45).

7. When citizens’ mass protest groups first gained prominence in the U.S. in the 1960s, and in Western Europe in the 1970s, they were also “seen as lying outside the bounds of normal politics” (Dalton 1993, 8).

8. This decision making pattern is common to community volunteer groups’ activities in Japan (Nawata 1998, 115–18).

9. The main concerns of these groups are lifestyle issues, such as welfare, health care, education, environmental protection, and community revitalization.

10. The percentage of female high school graduates who advance to junior colleges or four-year colleges has risen to a record high of 47.6 percent, while the corresponding figure for male students is 37.2 percent. This upward trend began in 1989. However, approximately 40 percent of women with higher education later resign their jobs due to marriage or childbirth. The corresponding percentage among college-educated women in the U.S., France, and Germany is roughly 20 percent (the Cabinet Office in Japan, in 1998).

11. Most social welfare corporations are generally founded by religious, educational, and health care organizations. This was the first time that a citizens’ group had applied for this status.

12. This shift in orientation corresponds to the shift that occurred in the United States. As Berry explains, protest-oriented movements decline in power after “achieving their immediate goals,” whereas citizens’ groups that “were never protest oriented,” such as consumers’ groups, environmental groups, and many other kinds of citizens’ lobbies, “have enjoyed unprecedented prosperity in the last 25 years.” He adds that, “never before have they been so firmly institutionalized into the policymaking process” (1993, 31).

13. How feminists regard the unemployed married women’s movements varies according to their ideological viewpoints. For example, so-called “ecological feminists” are rather in favor of them.

References


