The Madonna Boom: The Progress of Japanese Women into Politics in the 1980s

The Scarcity of Female Politicians in Japan

In elections held in April 1946, Japanese women voted for the first time. Due to the old electoral system, voters elected an unprecedented number of women: 39 out of a possible 464 candidates. Since then this record number has never been equaled or broken, and with the establishment in 1947 of the mid-size constituency single-vote system (3–5 seats), the number of women members of the House of Representatives hovered around 10 (2%) until 1986. Although the length of a term of office is set at four years, there are circumstances in which the House may be dissolved.

The House of Councillors, which has less political power than the House of Representatives, originally used an electoral system that combined the national constituency single-vote system (100 seats) and the local constituencies single-vote system (150 seats). Each prefecture was allocated 2–8 seats, and every three years half of the councillors faced re-election. In the first election for the House of Councillors in 1947, 10 women were elected. The number of women councillors wavered between 10 and 22 until 1986. The national constituency system changed in 1983 to the national proportional representative system, which actually advantages women candidates.

Local government—comprising assemblies, mayors, and governors—holds elections every four years. Similar to the House of Representatives, the local assemblies may be dissolved at any time. In the early 1980s, women accounted for only 1.1% of local assembly memberships, and composed only a handful of women mayors. The first female governor was elected in 2000.

Women’s Increasing Participation in Local Assemblies

The results of 1987’s local elections indicated a substantial increase in the number of female assembly members, from 1.1% in the early 1980s to 2.1%. Five factors influenced the outcomes of these elections.

First, in September 1986, Takako Doi became the first female chair of a Japanese political party, the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDP). Her popularity grew because of her unambiguous and direct way of speaking, and her success raised the public profile of female politicians in Japan and attracted the interest of the media and the public.

The abortion issue of the early 1980s was the second factor to have increased women’s political participation. In Japan abortion is still illegal, although the Eugenic Protection Act of 1948 has always allowed certain extenuating circumstances. Ultraconservative factions of the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) tried to amend the Act to make abortions totally illegal. These factions mobilized local assemblies at the grassroots, using methods learned from the United States’ anti-abortion movement. They encouraged local governments to pass resolutions that would press the Diet to change the Act. This behavior inspired Japanese women—including old and new feminists—to take direct action, which resulted in the reform’s defeat.

After experiencing the difficulty of trying to convince male local assembly members (98.9%) of the importance of legal abortions for women, many female activists decided to run for local council.

The era of ‘Administrative Reforms’ was the third determinant in the increase in the number of female politicians. In the mid-1980s, the Nakasone government cut budget expenditure in the areas of education, welfare, and environmental protection. This tide of budget cuts filtered down to local governments, where the male mayors and assembly members instituted severe cuts of their own. Women’s groups objected to decreased spending for day care centers and school lunches. The cutbacks galvanized women into action.

The fourth factor for increased female political activity stemmed from changes in the strategies of the three parties opposed to the LDP and its 40-year domination (from 1955 to 1993). The Komei Party (associated with a Buddhist sect) and the Japan JPC Party (JPC) vied for new supporters in urban areas, especially those with lower-income residents. In the first half of the 1980s, both the Komei Party and the JPC decided to endorse female candidates in local assembly elections.

In the mid-1980s, the SDP—the opposition party most threatening to LDP hegemony—lost much of its nonunionized support base. Compounding this problem was the requirement that union members resign from their respective companies before running in elections. In an attempt to stabilize its unionized male constituency while maintaining its political power, the
SDP recruited nonunionized female candidates and deemed them “Madonnas.”

The dawning of gender consciousness among Japanese female baby boomers is the fifth and final factor. Until the 1950s, Japan was predominantly rural and housewives were relatively rare. Only in the 1970s did being a housewife become a popular career option. Compared to the West, the Japanese “women’s liberation” movement at this time was still unknown. In the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, Japanese female baby boomers women focused on their children’s education and competition for entrance to high school and university. Yet after their children were grown, these women became conscious of their empty lives; their eyes opened to Japan’s awful conditions for women and children—especially in the areas of welfare and education. This sparked a wave of female involvement and activism in the late 1980s.

The “Madonna Boom”

Takako Doi’s arrival on the political scene gave birth to a widespread enthusiasm for female politicians. Her stomping tour prior to the 1987 local elections saw thousands of women come out in support of her drive to recruit more female candidates. Everywhere she went, the media followed, reporting on her clothes and her voice. There is a story of an aged woman grasping the hands of a female SDP candidate and praying to her “You and Ms Doi will make a wonderful society for women.” Between the 1987 elections and the regular election of the House of Councillors in July 1989, there were a number of by-elections of councillors. Of the three SDP candidates who won, one was a woman candidate dubbed the “Madonna of Niigata.” Thus the Madonna Boom began.

The Madonna Boom peaked during the elections for the House of Councillors in July 1989, due to myriad catalysts. The Japanese government had, a few months earlier, introduced a consumption tax; a stock scandal resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Takeshita; the liberalization of US agricultural imports caused a backlash against the LDP; and a Geisha fiasco tarnished the inauguration of the incoming prime minister. All these factors affected female voters, but none was as grievous as the consumption tax. Although females who bore children ran the risk of incurring the consumption tax, neither abortion nor contraception was covered by Japan’s social health insurance. While Japan would, in 1991, repeal the consumption tax against childbirth, Japanese women in 1989 had license to be concerned.

In July 1989, the SDP submitted 55 candidates—12 of whom were women—for 126 councillors’ seats. They won a total of 41 seats: 31 men and 10 women. A new opposition organization, Rengo, won 11 seats, but only two went to women. The total number of women councillors elected was 33 out of 252 seats, a new record. The opposition won 75 seats in that election, and combined with the opposition councillors who had not stood (only half face re-election each time), the total was 128, thus transforming the opposition into the majority. In the vote for the Prime Minister, the

House of Representatives supported Kaifu—their child and two years younger than Doi—while the House of Councillors supported Doi. This was only the second time in Japanese history that the two houses had differed in their nominations. Because of the accepted superiority of the Lower House, Kaifu was elected Prime Minister.

The Kaifu government pushed for reform of the consumption tax and called a snap election of the House of Representatives in February 1990. The Socialist party tried to increase its stable of candidates, but could only put up 148, eight of whom were women, for the 512 seats. They could not overcome the entrenched convention of running only one candidate in each mid-sized constituency, and consequently the LDP regained power. The number of SDP representatives increased to 136, but at the expense of other opposition parties. Female winners in this election numbered only 12. Perceiving her own failure in realizing her dream of “Women Changing Politics in Japan,” Doi resigned the Chair of the SDP in June 1991.

After the Madonna Boom

Due to lack of preparation, experience and training, some of the Dietwomen elected in the 1989 Councillors’ election and the 1990 Representatives’ election failed in their subsequent bids for re-election. There are currently 43 female councilors. The number of women local assembly members has grown slowly but steadily, with women now constituting nearly 6% of local assemblies. In 2000, for the first time in Japanese history, two women governors were elected.

In 1996, a combination of small constituencies (300 seats) and 11 blocks of proportional representation (once 200 seats, now 180 seats) replaced the mid-size single-vote system of the House of Representatives. In 1996, there were 14 women representatives; after the general election in June 2000, there were 35—the second highest number in history.

In Japan, grassroots patriarchy is still strong. Female challengers face many obstacles—most notably the aged male gatekeepers who select candidates in almost all the districts. Members of the House of Representatives are the most powerful. Male incumbents, especially from the LDP, strongly resist the participation of women candidates. However, the new electoral system, with its proportional representation and increased potential for party competition, has sparked a public desire for more women candidates. Some pundits believe that the House of Councillors is composed largely of out-of-touch figureheads and for that reason alone women might find it easier to attain positions in the Upper House.

Because of the unions’ shifting support from the SDP to the new Democratic Party, the SDP’s ranks decreased in size through the regrouping of parties between 1996 and 1998. Doi is the chair again. Since the 1998 Councillors’ election and the 2000 Representatives’ election, slightly more than half of the socialist party’s Diet members are women (seven out of 14 councillors and 10 out of 19 representatives). This new phenomenon compels other political parties to work towards sponsoring more female candidates and Diet members. Perhaps the second stage of Japanese women’s advancement into politics is now beginning.

Notes

1. For more information on the ways that Japanese women have been inconspicuously yet systematically excluded from political decision making see: Misako Iwamoto. 1997. “Onna no Inai Seijikai” (The Political Process without Women). Josetsu (Journal of Women’s Studies Association of Japan) 5:8–39.


4. The films of the popular Japanese cinema series Toro-san, the title character falls in and out of love with a Madonna (a different actress from film to film).


6. He offered 300 thousand Yen per month to a Geisha, who was angered at being treated as a trivial prostitute, and thus exposed the scandal.