



## Is it the Left Wing that Opposes Gender Discrimination?

The government of old-fashioned Japan is dominated by old men. The only way forward is to add more female representatives through constitutional revision.

### Inada Tomomi, Member of the House of Representatives, former Minister of Defense

If you advocate for active roles for women, you are criticized as being part of the liberal left wing. When did Japan become such an intolerant society?

I formed the Josei Giin Hiyaku no Kai (JGHK), a group of female Diet members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), two years ago along with my colleagues upon success in the elections, and we called for a change in awareness, saying that we would take down the old male politicians in the LDP. We have proposed policies to the party headquarters and to the government, from the realization of tax deductions for single, unwed parents to the issue of unpaid child support, sexual violence against children, and emergency COVID aid.

However, since the formation of JGHK and continuing to date, I have received waves of criticisms and abuse, accusing me of failing or converting to the left. I was somewhat prepared for this, but I personally felt shocked at how behind political awareness in Japan is.

I have long been grateful for Mori Yoshiro, who resigned as President of the Tokyo Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games (Tokyo 2020) and who is from the same district as me in the Hokuriku Region, and he is a veteran of the Seiwa Political Analysis Council (Seiwa kai), a faction of the LDP. He is someone who has of course given meticulous attention to his work as a politician.

He took back his words and explained that he did not intend to be misogynistic. However, he was criticized not only in Japan but overseas, as well.

When I went abroad while I was working as the Minister in charge of Administrative Reform and as the Minister of Defense, I witnessed the lack of understanding of Japan. When delivering a speech in Washington, D.C. in January 2014, I was surprised to hear from a resident Japanese female reporter that there were many people in the United States that thought about “Fujiyama” and “Geisha” when thinking of Japan, and many who also thought that not all women received education in Japan.

The parts of Mori’s remarks that were particularly regarded as problematic were when he said, “...board meetings involving many women take a long time,” and, “Women have a strong sense of



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rivalry,” but it was his comments on how knowing their place was a female virtue that felt out of place to me. Comments like this do nothing but establish misunderstandings and prejudice against Japan.

Hashimoto Seiko, who became the new president, has been called “a child born for the Olympics,” as many know, and she also has ample experience and knowledge as a politician. I hope that she will show her true strength as a female politician like Koike Yuriko, Governor of Tokyo, and Marukawa Tamayo, Minister for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, and I hope that she can guide the Tokyo Olympics to success.

## **No Increase in Female Diet Members At All**

What is required of us politicians now is not to end this matter simply with the issue of careless remarks, but instead to advance the promotion of women in politics with great speed on this occasion and bring about diversity in politics.

Previously, it has been pointed out that the social advancement of women in Japan is lagging. In the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 [released in December, 2019] presented by The World Economic Forum in 2019, Japan was ranked 121st out of 153 countries. The main reason for this is the lack of an increase in female members of the Diet. Only about 9.9% of the House of Representatives and 22.9% of the House of Councilors are made up of women, ranking lowest among the G7 at 144th in politics on the Global Gender Gap Index.

Worst of all, the LDP has an extremely low proportion of female members in the House of Representatives, at only 7%. During the postal privatization election [House of Representatives] in 2005 when I was first elected, 16 female members were elected for the first time. At that time, I thought that if one has ability, even females can become members, and at this pace, the number of female employees would increase. I thought it was wrong to establish a maximum number of women. This was optimistic. In 16 years, the number of female LDP members in the House of Representatives has not increased, and in fact, it has decreased by 5.

There has been no change to the male-dominated politics and no increase in female members. This is solely the responsibility of the LDP, which has long remained in power.

Deep within the LDP remains a spirit of emphasizing smooth personal relationships rather than a loud proclamation of one’s own claims. This could be said to be a virtue of conservative politics, but within the LDP, female members have often known their place, as Mori said. As a result, female participation in politics is lagging behind.

In general, when there are scandals, misconduct, and other emergencies, there is a strong trend to appoint female candidates as showpieces to improve the party’s image. But once their role as a pinch hitter is up, local criticism of these women is particularly harsh, and it is not uncommon for public endorsements to become difficult in the next round.

One of the politicians that I respect is the late Nakayama Masa (1891–1976), a veteran of the LDP. She was a trailblazing woman who was active during the postwar period. In 1960, she was

appointed Minister of Health and Welfare in the Ikeda Hayato Cabinet. I have a photo of her in my office at the Diet members' office building.

In the world of politics today, there are no role models like Masa and no opportunities for young women to aim to become politicians. This is partially due to the inadequacies of current female politicians, including myself, and I deeply reflect upon this fact. However, I know that while female members may attract attention, we also are easily bashed. We need an attitude of protecting and fostering female members across the entire party.

## **Boosting the Number of Female Candidates through Constitutional Revision**

I think a constitutional revision is necessary to break this status quo in Japan. That said, I am not trying to have the constitution itself define the number of female Diet members.

First, we would implement a “quota system” that allocates a certain number of women candidates. Political parties would be legally obligated to have a female candidate ratio of 30% now and 35% in the future. It is often misunderstood, but this would not be number of Diet members, but would only legally regulate the ratio of candidates. Unsuitable or weak candidates would of course be unsuccessful in the election through ballots. The political world is not so lenient that it would allow incapable women to win consecutive elections. Rather it is no exaggeration to say that women must put in more effort than men to be re-elected.

But under the current constitution, the introduction of a quota system is likely to infringe upon Article 14 of the Japanese Constitution which establishes that “all of the people are equal under the law.” For this reason, in addition to the clause on gender equality in general, items would be written in to Article 14 to promote substantive equality, stating that access to Diet membership and public offices should be granted equally to men and women and that there is a duty to eliminate current gender inequality in politics.

The constitution is both the foundation of the country and something that shows a vision for politicians and society to aim for. There is no mistaking the fact that defining substantive gender equality as a duty of the government in the constitution would dramatically advance policies for women in politics, the business world, and in a variety of fields. I believe that it would suddenly shift the rigid mood of Japanese society.

A quota system has been implemented in Germany, the United Kingdom, South Korea, etc., and the effects are clear. The number of female politicians dramatically increased in France in particular. Up until about 20 years ago, women only made up about 10% of the French Parliament, similar to the current situation in Japan. This has increased to 39.5% as of 2021.

This quota system in France was determined to be unconstitutional, and so the quota system (*loi sur la parité*) was implemented after the constitution was amended in 1999. This is why constitutional revision is necessary in Japan, as well.

How difficult is it to promote active roles for women within the LDP? I myself have confronted the so-called “Wall of Nagatacho,” conventional stubborn politicians, time and time again.

## Backlash Against Support for Single Mothers

As I mentioned before, I formed the JGHK in March 2019 under the banner of increasing the number of women in the Diet. This group first addressed the expanded application of the “tax deductions for widows/widowers” system at the end of the same year. Up until that point, only people who became single parents through divorce or bereavement were eligible with this system, and as it did not recognize unwed single parents, it created disparity in the tax system.

There is nothing but unpleasantness with this from my point of view, as I have two children. It is strange to discriminate based on whether or not a person has been married. I couldn’t understand why equal support was not given, as an unwed single parent was raising children in a difficult situation that was the same as a divorced or bereaved single parent.

First of all, the poverty rate among single parent households in Japan is by far the worst among developed countries. In an OECD study, the relative poverty rate was 54.1% when the parent was employed in a single-parent household—ranked 34th out of the 35 OECD countries. Japan cannot be called a developed country from this statistic. It is a truly embarrassing situation. It is clear that support without discrimination for unwed single parents is an urgent matter.

However, for many years, the LDP has not tried to take on this issue. Behind this were mistaken fixed ideas among some LDP members that resolving this issue would destroy traditional families and increase common law marriages. Under these circumstances, we encountered great resistance among the LDP when we began to advocate that the system also apply to unwed single parents.

To amend the tax system, including deductions, it was necessary to incorporate the amendments into the Outline for Tax Reform [of the ruling parties] for that year after passing a review by the LDP Research Commission on the Tax System (hereinafter Research Commission).

After explaining the situation to then Chief Cabinet Secretariat Suga Yoshihide, about 10 female members asserted that the system should also apply to unwed single parents during discussions with the Research Commission. There were no open objections from the head of the Research Commission or from other members in attendance. Normally, when 10 people in an LDP subcommittee offer the same opinion and there are no objections, it is deemed a party decision. Despite this, however, the head of the Research Commission contradicted this, telling the media, “Behind the scenes is a great trend among the silent majority that values the traditional family.” He also commented that “taxes are not emotions.”

We asserted that this issue was not about destroying the traditional family, but was an issue of fairness and equality with taxes. Our assertions were labeled as “emotional” and “hysterical” as we were women, but they were in fact logical. We requested a meeting with the head of the Research Commission to submit a written request, but he wouldn’t meet with us, saying he was “busy.” In the end, we ambushed him and submitted the request, but he wouldn’t listen to our explanations.

As you would expect, this inspired our fighting spirit, telling him to not look down on us because we are women.

The group members then split up and went around to the Diet member offices distributing leaflets, and we intermittently held meetings to increase our circle of supporters. We managed to

get 144 people in support, including men. Our assertion was fully approved in the end, and the range of deductions was fairly expanded to include unwed single parents. Furthermore, the old-fashioned and difficult-to-understand terminology for this system (“tax deductions for widows/widowers”) was changed to “tax deductions for unmarried single-parents.”

Through this experience, I became keenly aware that if the overall number of female Diet members was small, then policies from a female perspective would be cut down and the country would head in a strange direction. This was a negative for Japan. I felt the need not just to increase the number of female members but also to appoint women as ministers and core members involved in policy making.

### **Will the “Traditional Family” be Destroyed?**

I have been advocating for a system providing a legal basis for the use of one's premarital name on my own since 2020 as a policy to promote social advancement for women. Under the current Civil Code, there is a system for maintaining married names after divorce. Normally, when divorcing, one's last name reverts to one's birth name, but with this system, one can continue to use their married name if they submit notification within three months of the divorce. My proposal was to have this apply not only to divorce, but also to marriage.

For example, Man A marries Woman B. If a system providing a legal basis for the use of one's premarital name was approved, even if the couple chose to use the family name of Man A, the wife could notify the city hall within three months that she would continue to use her premarital name, and that would be registered on her family register. For the wife, she would legally use her premarital name for her certificate of residence, health insurance cards, driver's licenses, etc. At the same time, her children would take the family name of her husband.

I fully understand that there is great significance in Japanese society for a surname as a family name. But the current situation cannot be called fair as 96% of women change their surname upon marriage. And as Japan is the only developed country where a premarital name cannot be legally used, it can often cause problems with public documents, procedures, and traveling or moving overseas if the person uses their premarital name as an alias.

The government has a policy to expand uses of premarital names as an alias, but with no legal backing, it means a person can widely use a name that is different from their real name, as in “D, alias C” (where “D” is the family name and “C” is the premarital name), and having multiple names for one person will only lead to social instability.

### **For an LDP that Relies on Minorities**

In light of this situation, I proposed a system providing a legal basis for the use of one's premarital name which has relatively little resistance even among conservatives, as opposed to “a system of optional different surnames for married couples,” but upon proposing this, I encountered unbelievable criticism. Actually, it was more abuse than criticism. Even though I offered a kind,

careful, and thorough explanation, the proposal was labeled as a way for husband and wife to selectively retain separate family names and I was called a traitor. The proposal was pulled into an ideological debate about the destruction of the traditional family and no one tried to listen to what I had to say.

It was the same as when I tried to assert that we needed to promote an understanding of LGBT people.

When I was the Chairperson of the Policy Research Council of the LDP, I founded the “Special Mission Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity” (with Furuya Keiji, member of House of Representatives, as Chairperson at the time) in 2016, and quickly promoted LGBT policies within the party. This was because one of my eldest son’s friends was part of the LGBT community and I had an interest in LGBT issues. At the same time, a comfort women statue was erected in San Francisco, and I became convinced that this issue and ideology were not related as local LGBT groups took objection to this.

As a party, we notified the governmental ministries of 33 requests that sought an understanding of LGBT issues, including zero-tolerance guidance in educational settings against bullying and discrimination, and the prevention of workplace harassment. More than half of these were implemented.

But when I tried to submit the “LGBT Understanding and Enhancement Bill” to prepare a legal system, I encountered opposition within the party. What stood in the way this time, too, was the argument about the destruction of the traditional family. But when I asked what a traditional family was, no one was able to give a clear answer.

I also believe that family is important. But tolerance that accepts diverse families is required, and we shouldn’t exclude something with such a vaguely defined term as “traditional family.”

I once heard from someone in the LGBT community that they often protested in front of LDP headquarters but they never thought the day would come where they would protest at the office of the Secretary-General. Social minorities do not consider relying on the LDP. I became painfully aware that this was the sense of stagnation that the LDP was experiencing.

Tax deductions for unwed single parents, a system providing a legal basis for the use of one’s premarital name, and LGBT issues. Through working on policies around these three issues, I was effectively excluded from the press and groups that called themselves “conservative.”

## **A True Value of Conservatism is Tolerance**

Formerly a lawyer, I became a politician because of the conflict over the “Contest to slash 100 people” trial regarding the so-called Nanjing Massacre. Through my activities, I gained the favor of then acting Secretary-General of the LDP Abe Shinzo, the former Prime Minister, and I was approached about running for office.

After becoming a member of the Diet, I was seen as a conservative politician because I actively spoke about the Yasukuni Shrine issue and an understanding of history, and I took pride in this. I was even labeled as being on the extreme right by the left.

But now, I receive all kinds of criticism from my supporters, saying I have fallen to the left, that they won't support me anymore, and that I am the same as the liberal female American politicians who wore white. Is there a contradiction between the advancement of women and conservatism?

One of conservatism's true values is tolerance. True conservatism acknowledges the lifestyles—that is, diversity—of others with a tolerant mind. A conservative is humble, feeling that they may perhaps be wrong, and therefore bending an ear to the voices of others which allows for a respect of other lifestyles. An attitude of proclaiming one-sided justice and restraining debate can never be called conservatism.

I have not changed any of the principles or claims that I have had about national security, the Imperial Household, foreign policy, historical awareness, the constitution, or any other field.

For example, take the issue of imperial succession. Two years ago, His Royal Highness abdicated, marking the beginning of the Reiwa era. I am opposed to the recognition of a matrilineal emperor. There were eight empresses in Japan throughout history up until now, of course, but they were all patrilineal empresses. The patrilineal imperial succession is itself a core element of Japanese tradition, and active roles for women is a completely separate and different issue.

## **I Want to Be a Woman who Doesn't Know Her Place**

My resignation as the Minister of Defense in 2017 is the reason I came to work on active roles for women and other issues. I left this job after less than a year due to an issue with daily logs from the Self-Defense Forces that were sent to South Sudan. I felt the greatest sense of defeat I have ever felt and I was crushed. Faced with my immaturity as a politician, I became able to empathize with people's pain and the positions of those who are weak.

Luckily there are experienced people who look after me. Former Prime Minister Abe, who resigned in September 2020, is one of those. Seeing how I had becoming involved in the single parent issue, the use of one's premarital name, and other issues, he worried that I might be separating myself from my core conservative supporters or that what I was doing was not good for me as a politician.

From other experienced people, I was also advised that it was better to not actively get involved in the issue of women and active roles, as there were many men among the LDP's supporters. They said that there were many other issues that ought to be tackled and that I ought to prioritize the policies that conservative supporters wanted.

Even so, I have a clumsy personality where I want to achieve whatever it is that I've decided to do. I want to be a woman who doesn't know her place, even if I am said to be oblivious to the situation.

As having women take active roles is a kind of social change that destroys vested rights to some degree, it cannot be achieved when only considered through the framework of factions or political parties. It cannot be achieved if it is not made into a national movement of men and women of all ages with the same determination.

The Japan that I aim for is one that is both strong and kind. My country is one that protects me, respects tradition and is respected globally. It's a country that is rich and sustainable in an economic and cultural sense. And it is a country that is free, fair, and kind to people. The respect of diversity brought about by kindness and tolerance offers a stage for all people.

For quite a while, I have declared that I am aiming to be Prime Minister, and I still have the same desire now to create the country that I aspire to see. There is great opposition to my setting this as a goal, and there are few female members of the Diet who are raising their hands to be Prime Minister, perhaps because it requires courage and resolution as a politician, or perhaps because there are many women who “know their place.”

But in the near future, I hope to show the citizens of Japan the sight of multiple women working hard and vying to become Prime Minister.

*Translated from “Josei-sabetsu Hantai wa Sayoku desuka? (Is it the Left Wing that Opposes Gender Discrimination?),” Bungeishunju, April 2021, pp. 124-131. (Courtesy of Bungeishunju, Ltd.) [July 2021].*

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