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From Suffrage to Representation: A Study of Women's Activism and Political Presence in Japan

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Abstract: *The perspective of women's involvement in global politics. The history of women's involvement in Japanese politics is relatively recent. From the Meiji period, the Japanese started adopting Western civilization in terms of culture, literature, economy, and society. Nevertheless, the proportion of women remains the same, particularly in terms of political rights and participation. Japanese women did not even have the right to vote before World War II. Douglas MacArthur ordered the creation of a new constitution in February 1946 after GHQ conquered Japan during World War II in 1945. To enhance women's political rights, Japanese women are able to cast ballots. After so many decades of suffrage, we found many powerful women leaders who contribute their leadership in Japanese politics, and their efforts give Japanese women numerical political rights such as voting rights, property rights, equal employment rights, abortion rights, etc. In this study, I highlighted some Japanese women leaders whose contributions are unforgettable in the history of the women's suffrage movement. In addition, as a modern nation, Japanese women face various barriers in the path of political empowerment; that is why the women's participation ratio in Japanese politics is not satisfactory. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, Japan ranked 125th out of 146 countries in the political arena because of low female representation in politics.*

Keyword: *Women, Politics, Suffrage, Rights, Empowerment, Japan.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Decision-making or politics is a very important part of any country. Political ups and downs directly or indirectly affect one's country's economic, social, and educational strata. Generally, the political arena is visualized as a male-dominated arena, and women are not considered suitable in this arena. The advanced democratic country, Japan, has also faced an insufficiency of women politicians in Japanese politics. As we know from Japanese history before World War II, Japanese women did not have the right to vote. By 1890, the Association and Political Meetings Law denied women the right to attend, much less speak, at political meetings. Women belong in the home and should obey their male counterparts. In 1921, the Diet voted to overrule this decree, allowing women to attend political meetings. With constraints prohibiting women from actively participating in politics, women's interest groups and other advocates continued to persevere for voting and inclusion rights. After World War II, GHQ occupied Japan, and according to Article 24 of the new constitution in 1947, it was the Gender Equality Law, giving women broad options for their development. According to this law, a marriage cannot exist unless both sexes agree, and the basis of this partnership must be the equality of the husband and wife. When it comes to marriage, the family, property rights, inheritance, domicile choice, and other family-related matters, laws must be passed from the perspective of individual dignity and the fundamental equality between the sexes (THE CONSTITUTION OF JAPAN, n.d.). Japanese women got the right to vote. From that point, Japanese women's political participation had begun. On May 3rd, 1947, the constitution of Japan disclosed that laws must be enacted to determine the qualifications of both House members and voters. There must be no discrimination based on race, creed, sex, social class, family background, education, possessions, or income. Japanese women made up 23.1 percent of the House of Councilors, 9.7 percent of the House of Representatives, 4.3 percent of prefectural governors, and 1.1 percent of mayors in towns and villages in 2021, according to the Statista Research Department (July 19, 2022). After World War II, there were only seven female governors in Japan, and there is still no female prime minister to date. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, Japan ranked 125th out of 146 countries in the political arena because of low female representation in politics. Only 9.7 percent of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) candidates were women. The center-left Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), the

main opposition party, had 18.3 percent women. The Communist Party (JCP) did better with 35.4 percent, and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) had 60 percent, though only nine candidates in total (Levy, 2022).
From the Meiji Restoration, we found many women feminists who fought for women's rights and equality. They formed many women's organizations and provided support and worked for women's social upliftment. In this path, they often faced many problems and criticism, but still, they gave their entire life for it. We cannot forget their contribution to the women's suffrage movement. This study focuses on some women feminist cum political activists who fight against social orthodoxies and traditional viewpoints and contribute to women's liberation in Japanese society.

Kishida Toshiko- Kishida was not the first Japanese woman in the historical record to speak in public; she was the one who captured the most attention nationwide. Kishida Toshiko was born in Kyoto Prefecture, Japan, in 1863. Kishida grew up in a merchant class family. Kishida grew up during the Meiji-Taishō period, which lasted from 1868 through 1926. During this period, Japanese leaders opened themselves up to new ideas, and reformers called for "new rights and freedoms". The women of this reformist movement are now known as "Japan's first wave feminists". Kishida was one of these feminists. The focus of her movement was to increase the status of young Japanese girls. After demonstrating her calligraphic talents for Imperial Prince Arisugawanomiya Taruhito in 1877, Kashida was identified as a suitable candidate for service in the Meiji Empress's court. Two years later, she became the first woman of non-aristocratic birth to serve as monji goyō gakari (court attendant specializing in classical Chinese) in Empress Haruko's court. She left the court in 1882 to embark on a national lecture tour, sponsored by the Jiyūtō (Liberal Party). On this tour, she also joined the Freedom and People's Rights Movement as a speaker and traveled with the group to various rural areas, educating and presenting the group's critique of the Meiji government's practices and calling for greater participation and opportunities for social citizenship. She seems to confine herself to addressing property rights and rights within the household (I discuss her treatment of political rights below). In her view, the current situation, in which women lack rights, not only renders them unhappy and entirely reliant on men but also deprives men of the potential happiness they would receive from relationships governed by love (airen) rather than by power (kenpei). Though Kishida does not call for voting rights directly—and it is important to stress that voting rights were not a central issue for her or for most Meiji female activists—the way she addresses anti-suffrage arguments suggests that she was sympathetic to calls for female enfranchisement. She suggests that Japan selectively adopt the worthwhile aspects of Western culture, and hints that the issue of women's rights is one area where Japan could surpass the West. Kishida's speech in Okayama in 1882 resulted in the establishment of a women's organization, the Okayama Konshinkai (Okayama Friendship Society). Many of the members were wives of people's rights activists who wanted to form an organization that would promote women's education and social improvement.

Kusunose Kita- Born in Kōchi Prefecture on the island of Shikoku on this day in 1836, Kita married at age 21 and took over as the head of her household after her husband's passing. Denied the right to vote in local elections just because she was a woman, she refused to pay her property tax with the belief that duty and rights should coexist, and sent a letter to the prefectural governor explaining her decision. As the first public petition written by a Japanese woman, Kita's letter caused quite a stir. During the Meiji Era (1868 to 1912), Japanese society was undergoing a period of great transition under Emperor Mutsuhito. Kita's letter sparked a national debate about women's rights that led to changes in voting laws for parts of her home prefecture. Accordingly, only women who were householders became eligible to vote for the first time in Japan. allowing some women to vote for the first time in 1880. Although the rights were denied four years later. She continued the women's liberation movement, and her name was known as 'Minken Basan'(Yu, n.d.). She died in 1920 when Taisho Democracy was booming. She died at the age of 84. Kita is remembered as a pioneer for women's suffrage, which was finally extended nationwide in Japan in 1946.

Takako Doi- she was a prominent Japanese politician from 1980 until her retirement in 2005. She was the first female Lower House Speaker in Japan, the highest position a female politician has ever held in the country's modern history, as well as the country's first female Opposition Leader. graduated from Doshisha University, where she studied law. She was elected to the House of Representatives, the lower house of the Diet, as a member of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) in 1969, representing the 2nd district of Hyōgo. She spent her first ten years in the House on the sidelines, but came to national attention in 1980 when she was highly critical of Japan's unequal treatment of women, specifically about women-only home economics degrees and the father-dominated family registration law. Doi contributed to the growth in political power of Japanese women. Although she had done little to identify with feminist issues at the outset, she helped channel the dissatisfaction of women angered by the money politics and scandals of the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP). Following her "Madonna strategy," a number of women candidates succeeded in winning

office in the summer elections of 1989, and for the first time in three decades, the LDP lost its majority of upper-house seats to the JSP under Doi's leadership.

Mistsu Tanaka- Mitsu Tanaka's short-lived engagement with radical feminism provides an interesting and revealing contrast with other women of her generation, who came of age in the late 1960s. Born in Tokyo at the end of World War II, she grew up in the shadow of the disastrous outcomes of that conflict for Japan, from its imperial genocidal policies in China and alliance with Nazi Germany to the nuclear bombing of two cities at the end of the war. She graduated from high school and went on to work as a copywriter at an advertising company. Within a year, she was engaged in various odd jobs and helping her parents. By 1970, however, Tanaka became a major figure in the radical feminist movement in Japan and one of its most charismatic leaders. She helped establish a group of activists known as the Guruupu Tatakau Onnatachi (Fighting Women Group), who staged many public protests that gained a great deal of media attention in Japan. They forwarded a comprehensive critique of the political, economic, social, and cultural systems of modern Japan due to their patriarchal and capitalist nature. A core element of their critique of Japan's male-dominated society focused on the need for the liberation of sex (sei no kaihō), with an emphasis on the need for women's liberation (onna no kaihō) from the Japanese male-centered family system. The group engaged in a variety of feminist campaigns and direct actions. Tanaka proved to be a controversial figure inside the feminist movement in part also because of her stance on abortion rights. Japan had a complicated eugenicist law that allowed for some forms of birth control via abortion.

Shidzue Katō: (1897–2001) She was born March 2, 1897, to an affluent, ex-samurai family, but grew up familiar with Western culture. Her first husband, Count Ishimoto Keikichi, was a Christian humanist interested in social reforms who took his young wife to the coal mines in Kyushu, where he was a mining engineer. Living with the poor coal workers – males and females, adults and children – they experienced their unsocial, unhygienic, and unhealthy living conditions. The Count began to turn away from his Christian humanism towards radical Communism based on the Soviet model, and after three years, moved to the USA in order to fight for the workers' movement. Meeting Margaret Sanger at the beginning of the 1920s proved a turning point in Shidzue's life. She realised that her true goal was to bring birth control to Japan, in order to give women control over reproduction and allow them to plan their families responsibly rather than suffer the miseries of unwanted children. She was a Feminist and activist and Founder of Women's Research Institute and Birth Control Consultation Centre, Tokyo, Japan, 1932(*Muvs - Shidzue Ishimoto Kato (1897-2001)*, n.d.). The military regime in Japan during the 1920s and 30s was fiercely hostile to limiting the country's growing population, and in December 1937, she was arrested. After being detained for two weeks, she was forced to close her clinic in Tokyo. elected to the Japanese Diet, 1946, and the House of Councillors (senate), 1950-74. Cofounder and president of Family Planning Federation of Japan, 1954; Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning, president. As a feminist, Shidzue had to fight against the taboo of being a Japanese woman who had stepped out of her traditionally submissive role and who had taken a social initiative. Furthermore, in the circles in which she moved, the subject of birth control was definitely the least mentionable one. In 1946, when Japanese women were given the right to vote, Shidzue Kato (in 1944, she had married the prominent socialist leader Kanju Kato) became a member of the Japanese Parliament. Up to her death at the age of 104, she continued to work tirelessly for women's welfare in Japan, especially for their right to family planning (Kato, Shidzue 1897-2001 | Encyclopedia.com, n.d.).

Fusae Ichikawa: (1893–1981) she was born Ichikawa Fusae on May 15, 1893, in Asahi Village, Aichi Prefecture, Japan; died in Tokyo, Japan, in 1981; daughter of Ichikawa Fujikurō (a farmer) and Ichikawa Tatsu; attended public elementary and higher elementary schools, briefly attended Joshi Gakuin (Girls' Academy) in Tokyo, and graduated from Aichi Prefectural Women's Normal School in 1913. was first woman newspaper reporter in Nagoya, Japan (1917–19); moved to Tokyo to become the secretary of the women's section of the Yūaikai (Friendly Society), Japan's first labor organization (1919); founded Shin Fujin Kyōkai (New Woman's Association, 1919–21); networked with women's rights leaders in the U.S. (1921–23); returned to Tokyo, where she worked for the International Labor Organizations (1924–27); founded the Fusen Kakutoku Dōmei (Women's Suffrage League, 1924–40); appointed to the advisory board of the government's organization, Dai Nihon Fujinkai (Greater Japan Women's Association, 1942–44); organized the Sengo Taisaku Fujin Iinkai (Women's Committee on Postwar Countermeasures) to work for women's suffrage (1945); purged by the American occupation (1947–50); served in the House of Councillors (the upper house of the national legislature, 1953–71 and 1974–81) (Ichikawa Fusae (1893–1981) | Encyclopedia.Com, n.d.). Ichikawa found herself purged by the occupation authorities in 1947 because of her involvement with the prewar regime, and was unable to participate in any political activity until 1950. In the House of Councillors elections of 1955, she entered the Diet. As a nationally recognized politician, Ichikawa was a consistent champion of women's emancipation and political fairness.

During the 1950s, she sponsored legislation that outlawed prostitution, while in the 1970s, she was a leading critic of big business's financial support for the corrupt politics of the Liberal Democratic Party. Viewed by many as an icon of Japanese citizens' movements, Ichikawa was an enduring example of what could be achieved without money in Japanese politics (Ichikawa Fusae, n.d.).

Shigeri Yamataka (1899-1977): She was a Japanese feminist and founder of the League for the Defense of Women's Rights. In 1952, she also participated in Chifuren when it was formed, one of the largest women's organizations in Japan with over 6 million members. She was also the president of Chifuren. She began her career in Japan as a journalist with Fusae Ichikawa. She co-founded the Women's Suffrage Union in Japan in 1924. After the end of World War II, Yamataka continued her political activism. She worked for war pensions to be granted to the widows of war veterans and for children's rights. on august 25, 1945, Yamataka co-founded the women's committee for postwar politics. among the organization's priorities were welcoming returning soldiers, improving food production, increasing household savings, gaining suffrage for women over twenty, establishing the right of women over twenty-five to run for public office, reform local and central governments and allow women to have jobs in public administration. When women won suffrage in Japan in 1945, Yamataka ran for public office and was elected twice (1962-1971) to the upper house of the Diet of Japan, the country's federal government (S, 2021).

Hiratsuka Raichō: (1886–1971) Hiratsuka Raichō was born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1886, the daughter of a government official who had studied constitutional law in Europe. During her youth, she was greatly influenced by Western culture, studying English and reading books on Western philosophy. She was also greatly influenced by Zen Buddhism, however, and practiced Zen meditation throughout her life. In 1911, she was a founder of Seitōsha (Bluestockings) and the first editor of its publication, Seitō. In it, she wrote eloquently on the history and status of women. She was particularly interested in the role of literature in women's self-fulfillment. In 1919, Hiratsuka was one of the founders of the Shin Fujin Kyokai (New Women's Association), which campaigned for an extension of women's legal rights, higher education, and welfare benefits. In particular, the organization sought to repeal legislation (Peace Preservation Law) that prohibited women from participating in political activity. Hiratsuka retired from public activity for a time but re-emerged in the 1930s when she became active in the organization of consumer unions. After World War II, Hiratsuka often participated in women's international peace initiatives. "In the beginning," she wrote, "woman was truly the sun, and a true being. Now, the woman is the moon. She lives by others and shines through the light of others. Her countenance is pale, like a patient. We must now restore the sun, which has been hidden from us." (Hiratsuka Raicho (1886–1971) | Encyclopedia.com, n.d.). In the fall of 1952, she attended a reception in honor of Kora Tomi, a member of the House of Councilors who had visited China and the Soviet Union, two countries with which Japan had yet to establish diplomatic relations. The next year, in April, she formed the Japan Federation of Women's Organizations and became the first president (Nakajimas,2003). As the vice president of the Women's international democratic federation, she addressed an appeal to the women of the world. She also acted as the prime mover of the World Mothers Conference. In her opposition to nuclear weapons, she joined the committee of seven for world peace. In addition to her international activities, Raicho contributed to the expansion of grass-roots movements of Japanese women and strengthened the solidarity of women's organizations. In October 1962, Raicho formed the new Japan Women's Association. It was open to everyone, regardless of religion or ideological persuasion.

2. CONCLUSION:

The journey of women in Japanese politics, while relatively recent in its global context, is marked by a powerful and persistent struggle for equality and representation. Before World War II, Japanese women were largely confined to domestic roles, systematically denied political rights, including the fundamental right to vote. The post-war era, particularly with the 1947 constitution and the Gender Equality Law, marked a pivotal shift, granting women suffrage and laying the legal groundwork for broader societal development. Despite these significant legislative advancements and the tireless efforts of pioneering women leaders, the path to true political empowerment in Japan remains challenging. As evidenced by Japan's 125th ranking out of 146 countries in the political arena in the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, female representation in politics continues to be unsatisfactory. While parties like the Social Democratic Party show higher female candidate percentages (60%), the ruling Liberal Democratic Party lags significantly at just 9.7%, indicating deep-seated structural and cultural barriers. The remarkable women highlighted in this study—from Meiji-era activists like Kishida Toshiko and Kusunose Kita, who challenged prevailing social norms and fought for foundational rights, to post-war figures such as Takako Doi, Mitsu Tanaka, Shidzue Katō, Fusae Ichikawa, Shigeri Yamataka, and Hiratsuka Raichō—have undeniably shaped the landscape of women's rights in Japan. Their unwavering commitment led to crucial gains, including voting rights, property rights, equal employment opportunities, and

advancements in reproductive rights. These women, through their activism, leadership, and willingness to confront orthodoxies, have laid a vital groundwork. However, the continued underrepresentation of women in political decision-making roles underscores that the fight for full political empowerment is ongoing. Overcoming persistent barriers—be they cultural expectations, systemic biases within political parties, or the challenges of balancing traditional roles with political careers—remains a critical endeavor for Japan to achieve true gender parity and fully harness the potential of all its citizens in shaping its future. The legacies of these fighting women serve as both an inspiration and a reminder of the work that still needs to be done.

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